Use of Google Classroom as a Tool to Improve Listening Skills in an EAP Classroom

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ABSTRACT

In this small-scale study, I have tried to examine the impact of Google Classroom on the development of listening skills across a cohort of EAP course participants. The cohort comprised of 33 students from different discipline majors—psychology, economics, sociology, and literature—of the second semester BA programme in different universities. Over a period of two months, the students were taught listening skills via Google Classroom, using online material adapted from UEfAP (Using English for Academic Purposes for Students in Higher Education), TED talks, and IELTS academic listening tests. Following this, data was collected through interviews, assessment of student performance in the classroom tasks and the final test, teacher's observations after each class, and a questionnaire after the final test. This data was analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively. The findings showed that although the students found the Google Classroom platform engaging and useful, they needed more time to complete the given tasks and assignments. Further, they also wanted more Google Forms to trace their improvement in listening. They showed a clear improvement in many aspects of listening such as locating or drawing key information from lectures.

Keywords: Google Classroom, listening skills, tertiary education, online tools

INTRODUCTION

Online tools are increasingly being used for teaching and learning purposes. Tertiary level education is no exception to this change and has witnessed an

increase in the use of blended learning in the form of online tools such as Apps, Moodle, Pixton, ReadWriteThink, Google Classroom, etc. These tools help students to improve their study skills and thereby enhance their learning. They also help learners to become more independent and make learning collaborative and meaningful for them (Chapelle, 2003). Kenning (2007), adds that online learning tools help learners to develop their speaking skills during interactions with others and they are better able to integrate audio, text and visual inputs.

With so many advantages, such apps have now become an integral part of learning. In my paper, I will look at one such recent addition in the field of teaching-learning—Google Classroom. Google Classroom is a virtual extension of the face-to-face classroom. It was introduced by Google on 6 May 2014, as a feature of the G Suite Education. Since it is freely available online, and is easy to use in terms of its functions such as uploading materials (links, videos and audios) and creating assignments, more and more teachers are using it in their classrooms.

There are various studies which have looked at how Google Classroom can be used at different levels of education. One such study by Heggart & Yoo (2018) showed that the use of Google Classroom helped to improve dynamics in the class, and improve the participation of students and their learning of new concepts related to their discipline In another study, DiCicco (2016) analysed the impact of Google Classroom on Grade 7 Social Studies students with learning disabilities; the results showed that their marks had increased in vocabulary due to the use of Google Classroom as compared with their content knowledge which was taught through textbooks. This was corroborated by a survey which indicated that both the Social Studies teachers and the students benefitted from the use of Google Classroom in the teaching-learning process. It is clear that Google Classroom can used to teach subjects both at the secondary and tertiary level. In another study, Rabbi, Zakaria & Tonmoy (2017), looked at how listening skills can be taught through Google Classroom. They suggested that listening skills can be taught, but proper instructions need to be given to the students, accompanied by sample activities. Although there aren't too many studies on the subject of language skills, the importance of listening in the process of language acquisition has been stressed by many studies. Rubin (2011), Smidt & Hegelheimer (2004) and Vandergrift (1999) state that listening skill is essential for language learning and is linked with all the other skills in language acquisition. Further, good listening skills encourage the development of interaction skills among the learners.

The question then remains as to why this important skill is being neglected in language teaching. Also, how this skill can be taught has been a concern for many teachers over the years. Despite the fact that technology has advanced and

can now provide a platform for enhancing learning and teaching, the teaching of listening skills remains a challenge for teachers at all levels of education, primary, secondary and tertiary.

TEACHING OF LISTENING SKILLS IN INDIA

How can listening skills be taught? This is a question that every teacher in India struggles with. The reasons for this include: priority given to the completion of syllabus within a stipulated time, continuous assessments/tests, absence of proper facilities to conduct listening activities, dearth of motivation and interest shown by the students and to some extent by teachers also (Pavithra, 2017). This has created barriers in the minds of teachers at primary, secondary and tertiary levels with regard to teaching listening skills.

Another reason why the teaching of listening skills is neglected in India is that there is more emphasis on reading and writing as these are productive skills and marks can be easily achieved through these skills. Further, since marks are considered as an indicator of intelligence, the focus is more on marks rather than on the individual learning capabilities of the leaners. Though the CCE[1] curriculum has tried to emphasize the importance of speaking and listening skills, it has not been very successful. Therefore, teachers are now trying to look for various methods for teaching listening skills. In the present study, I will focus on one such method of teaching— Google Classroom—that was used to improve listening skills in a tertiary level course in a college in Delhi, India.

Background of the Study

This study was conducted in Ambedkar University Delhi, India where the course "English for Academic Purposes (EAP)", is offered to 2nd semester students of undergraduate studies. The objective of this course is to help these students improve their English language skills, especially their academic reading and writing skills. Further, it also focuses on their ability to read and respond to specialized (subject/discipline-based) materials in English, both in written and oral form. With blended learning approach now getting importance in the education sphere, the university is also encouraging its faculty members to blend online platforms with face-to face teaching, to help students become more independent and technology-friendly. Therefore, Google Classroom has been introduced to the students as an online platform where they can listen to texts from different sources, check their listening level and complete the given activities.

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[1] CCE, known as Continuous Comprehensive Evaluation was an assessment process proposed and made it compulsory to all the schools by Right to Education Act, 2009. It had been introduced to help to monitor and improve the performance of a student regarding his/her problems in learning from the first day of the academic year.

The research questions investigated in the paper are:

a.   Does Google Classroom help students to improve their listening skills in EAP?

b.   Can Google Classroom be used as a tool to teach listening skills?

c.   Can Google Classroom be considered as a teaching tool for EAP?

Subjects

The subjects of the study included 33 students in their 2nd semester of undergraduate course; the students were between the ages 18 to 20 years and from various disciplines such as Psychology, Economics, Sociology and Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH). These students were at an advanced level based on the scores of Language Proficiency Test (LPT) conducted at the beginning of the 1st semester.

Materials Used in the Study

Most of the materials used the study were adapted from the websites of ELanguages-APILL listening tasks, UEfAP (Using English for Academic Purposes for Students in Higher Education), TED Talks and academic lectures available on the IELTS academic listening test. In the APILL listening tasks, the activities focused on introducing the lecture, and identifying the signpost expressions used in the lecture as well as different parts of the lecture (i.e. introduction, background to the topic and outline of the lecture). These activities not only helped the students to understand the different parts in a lecture, but also how to identify them. In UEfAP, the listening tasks included introduction to different listening texts- purpose and its genre, lectures on different subjects and the students had to complete the notes through fill in the blanks, recognising lecture structure and understanding of the use of reference in the lecture. In both the TED talks and IELTS academic lectures, the students were asked to listen to the lectures and identify the signpost expressions and the difference between talks and lectures. The IELTS academic lectures were used as a form of test in which the students had to make notes of the lectures they had heard. The final test was based on an academic lecture and the students were asked to answer the comprehension questions based on the lecture. The questions were of three types - factual, inferential and extrapolative. These types of questions were introduced in the final test as the students did not have enough practice on the comprehension-based questions. The earlier tests focused on identifying signpost expressions, main idea of the lecture and the students performed well over a period of time. So, the question occurred whether they are able to solve

comprehension based questions or not. The questions focused were factual, inferential and extrapolative. These comprehension based questions were known to the students and they practiced these questions but few in the listening tasks in the Google classroom. Therefore in the final test comprehension based questions were included to check whether the students are able to answer these questions even when enough practice was not given to them.

Procedure

The study was conducted over a period of two months during which listening skills were taught specifically through Google Classroom. Classes were held twice a week (2 hours each) and the students were asked to complete some of the exercises in the virtual classroom. After completing these exercises, similar exercises were given to them to reinforce the signpost expressions used in the lecture and note-making techniques.

Data for the study was collected under four different formats:

informal interviews with the students during the two months of the study

assessment of the performance of the students in the classroom activities as well as the final listening test

teacher's observation after each classroom

questionnaire provided after the final test.

Analysis

Analysis of the data was done in a qualitative as well as quantitative manner. Qualitative data was collected in the form of interviews and teacher's observations after each class. Quantitative data included the marks of the students in the classroom tasks and the final listening test, as well as their responses from the questionnaire collated as percentages.

The interview questions, which formed part of the qualitative data, focused on the tasks that were used to assess the listening skills: the difficulty level of the tasks, additional types of activities that could be included along with the existing tasks and suggestions to improve the overall listening tasks. The students were satisfied with the level of the tasks, but most of them mentioned that the lectures should not exceed fifteen minutes as they became tedious and monotonous to listen to after fifteen minutes. They added that in real life, they could listen to lectures for one hour but they get breaks in between the lectures and they would know who the speaker/lecturer was. Some students stated that a fifteen-minute lecture task could be easily completed in the university and hence they preferred it. Lastly,

their parents did not like them to spend too much time on the laptop at home, even though the students explained to them that these were graded tasks.

With regard to additional activities, the students asked for different types of listening activities ranging from simple to complex and different genres of listening texts such as radio talks, weather forecasts, etc., to be included. Also the students stressed upon the need to introduce more activities on Google Classroom and asked that extra time be given to complete them. They also suggested that Google forms be included as a form of task as it would give them access to their marks in each task and hence help them track their progress.

As mentioned earlier, the interviews were supplemented with teacher observations after each class for qualitative data. The teachers observed that before the introduction of Google Classroom, students were not aware of the signpost expressions, parts of a lecture (introduction of a lecture, background to the topic, outline of the lecture, examples used, main points stated in the lecture and conclusion). They were also unaware of the strategies they could use to improve their academic listening such as analysing the information given in the lecture, evaluating the information presented and bringing it to together to make sense of the entire lecture. However, once they started working on the listening tasks uploaded on Google Classroom, which focused on these strategies, there was a noticeable change was in the performance of the students. They were able to make notes clearly and this clarity was manifested in being able to identify important information in a lecture, the key points, and signpost expressions, to mark the beginning of a lecture, example, and the end of a lecture/conclusion.

 As far as quantitative data was concerned, the performance of the students was assessed on the basis of their in scores in the listening tasks and the test which was conducted at the end of the two-month period. Before Google Classroom was introduced to the students, some listening tasks had been done in the class in which the focus was on identifying the structure of the presentation and the signpost expressions used in the lecture. In these tests, the students scored in the range of 4-5 out of 10 marks, the reasons being that they were not so sure what indicates the beginning of the lecture, signpost expressions, etc. This was despite the fact that a session had been conducted on these very points before the listening task was given to them. To help the students understand these concepts, Google Classroom was introduced to the students. Through Google Classroom they had to do online listening tasks, which included step-by-step instructions pertaining specifically to the structure of the lecture. These activities were adapted from websites such ASPiLL and UEfAP. Once the students had completed these activities, they were once again given some listening tasks. This time the marks

scored by the students were in the range of 9-10, and even in the final test which comprised of comprehension-based questions, the students scored in the range of 9-10 marks. This indicated that there was an improvement in their listening skills as compared to their earlier tasks in the face-to face classroom.

The students were given a questionnaire around the use of Google Classroom as a teaching method. The questionnaire focused on different skills taught through the use of Google Classroom; two questions were based specifically on the teaching of listening skills through Google Classroom. These questions were:

a.   Do you think that you are able to improve your listening skills with the help of the activities done in Google Classroom?

       never ( )   rarely ( )   sometimes ( )   often ( )   always ( )

b.   Do you think that listening skills should be taught with the help of Google Classroom?

       never ( )   rarely ( )   sometimes ( )   often ( )   always ( )

A 5-scale Likert scale was used to record the responses of the students. The students were asked to tick the relevant option. The responses were calculated in the form of percentage and discussed with the help of figures 1 and 2.
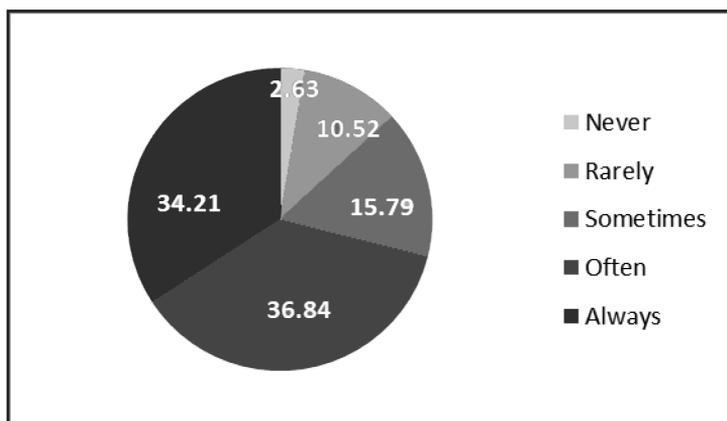

Figure 1 Percentage improvement in listening skills

In response to question (a), 36.84 per cent of the students chosen "often" as their first choice and "always" as their second choice; only 2.63 per cent of the students chose "never". This indicates that the students believe that Google Classroom "often" helps them in improving their listening skills.

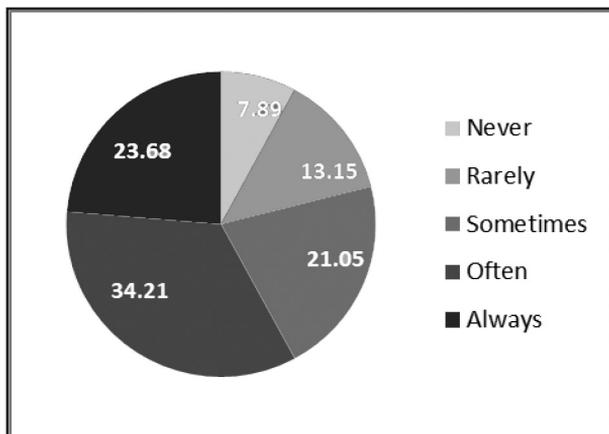The responses to the second question are represented by figure 2 as follows.

Figure 2 Percentage representing whether listening skills should be taught or not

In response to question (b), 34.21 per cent of the students chose "often" as their first choice with "always" as their second choice; only 7.89 per cent of the students chose "never". This indicates that students think that listening skills should "often" be taught with the help of Google Classroom. It is clear from these responses that not only do the students think that Google Classroom should be used to teach listening skills, but they also believe that it has helped them to improve their listening skills.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The limitations of the study are that it is small-scale study conducted across 33 students, and hence the findings cannot be generalized for a larger population. To overcome this limitation, the study has to be conducted across different disciplines with larger classes, to study the impact of Google Classroom on productive and receptive skills. Also a comparative study needs to be done with other similar online tools to study the effectiveness of Google Classroom. Further, the study should evaluate whether critical thinking skills can be taught effectively using Google Classroom. Lastly, ICT apps should form an important component of teaching and learning at the tertiary level.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

There are very interesting implications of this study, and if this study is conducted with a large cohort over a period of time, then it can be beneficial both for students and teachers. Firstly, there should be an orientation session for the students and teachers on the use of ICT in education in terms of the different apps that could

be used for teaching and learning. This could resolve the problem of unfamiliarity in terms of using and doing tasks on Google Classroom. Secondly, both teachers and students need to reassess the time taken for uploading and completing the assignments and tasks. Thirdly, there has to be continuous monitoring by the teachers to evaluate how much the students have understood and whether they have any queries or doubts which could be solved by the teacher. Lastly, all the stakeholders must use Google Classroom in these courses; this will reduce the burden on the students of justifying the use of these apps to their parents. Involvement of the parents will ensure that they understand the changes in the field of education to make learning more meaningful.

CONCLUSION

In this study, I tried to investigate whether Google Classroom can be used to not only improve the listening skills of students but to also teach this skill. I also looked into whether Google Classroom can be used to teach EAP. It is clear that Google Classroom helped the students to improve their listening skills by helping them to identify the signpost expressions, the outline and the structure of the lectures. Further, the observations of the teacher after each class indicated that there was a gradual increase in the performance of the students. Also, according to the questionnaire, more than 60 per cent of the students stated that it should be used "often" as a classroom tool.

Thus it can be concluded that Google Classroom can be used as teaching tool, but the students need to be given time to understand how it works and how they can benefit from it. Further they have to be technologically sound to work with this tool and manage it without any support. Also, it should not be left to them to complete these assignments, the teachers need to monitor their work. The teachers on their part should make the activities more student friendly. Moreover to check the progress of the students regularly, Google Forms should be introduced as a means of assessment to indicate their growth in learning. Finally, the parents should be made aware either through a mail or through personal interaction with the teachers that Google Classroom is a part of assessment. This will help them to understand the importance of ICT in education.

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