Google Classroom as a Learning Management System (LMS) for Teaching English

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ABSTRACT

In order to cater to the changing needs of the 21st century learners, a paradigm shift in the methodology of teaching English is required. One such innovative methodology is the use of learning management systems (LMS), which provide a blended learning experience. Google Classroom is a freely available LMS and is part of Google Apps for Education. The purpose of this study is to report the overall experience of using Google Classroom in formal, face-to-face English teaching/learning at an undergraduate level. Through the paper, I will explore the reasons for adopting Google Classroom, how the teacher/learners used it, and its effectiveness and limitations from a teacher's perspective.

Key Words: Google Classroom, Learning Management System, blended learning

INTRODUCTION

The idea of a classroom has evolved over time and ever since the advent of online classrooms, the transformations have been fast-paced. The number of available tools, platforms and programmes, and the possibilities they present can at the same time be challenging and rewarding for a teacher. In this paper, I will discuss Google Classroom, a free web service that can be used as a Learning Management System (LMS). I will look at the different ways in which it was used by an English teacher in an undergraduate course and how it can be used as a blended

learning tool for teaching and learning English.

Learning Management System (LMS)

Watson & Watson (2007), describe LMS as:

> the infrastructure that delivers and manages instructional content, identifies and assesses individual and organizational learning or training goals, tracks the progress towards meeting those goals, and collects and presents data for supervising the learning process of an organization as a whole. (p. 28)

An LMS allows an instructor to keep track of the learners registered for the course, distribute learning material, create platforms for discussion of ideas, assign and evaluate tasks, provide feedback and grade learners. In short, an LMS provides the teacher with a space to closely monitor and facilitate the learning progress of the students. The students on the other hand can benefit as they are allowed the space and time to learn at their own pace. An LMS allows a teacher to create an online learning environment in which the student can engage in a range of learning-related activities. Depending on how it is used, an LMS can become a repository of instructional material, a tool for administrative purposes, or even evolve into a virtual classroom. According to Palloff and Pratt (2002), "*The online classroom is a potentially powerful* teaching and learning arena in which new practices and new relationships can make significant contributions to learning" (p.26).

A good LMS should be able to support collaborative learning inside and outside the physical classroom, allow learners to control the pace of their learning goals and learning, allow tracking and reporting the progress of the learners and provide a platform for all stakeholders to interact and collaborate (Watson & Watson, 2007; Wang, Woo, Quek, Yang & Liu, 2012). In today's world, educational intuitions are aware of the potential of an LMS in making learning more effective and collaborative, and they make use of popular commercial LMS tools such Blackboard, WebCT, and Desire2Learnor and open source platforms such as Moodle to bring in a blended learning approach to their courses (Beatty & Ulasewicz, 2006; Schoonenboom, 2014).

According to (Wang et al., 2012; Black, Beck, Dawson, Jinks & Dipietro, 2007), existing commercial LMSes have their own limitations. To begin with, most of them are very expensive and not all educational institutions can afford them. From the perspective of a teacher, if one leaves the institution, one will lose access to the content created and uploaded on the LMS. If one moves to a new institution, the LMS, its interface and features may be entirely different from the one which the teacher is familiar with. Google Classroom provides teachers with a viable alternative—it is free, accessible from anywhere and allows collaboration between

teachers and learners. It can also be used as an add-on for classroom teaching and thus allows for a blended learning approach.
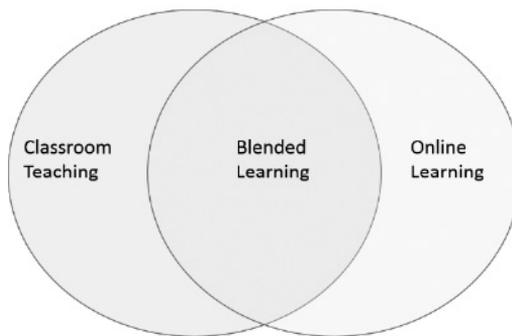
Blended Learning (BL)

Figure 1 Blended learning

Blended Learning can be defined as learning practices that provide variation in the learning experience of the student. This variation is made possible by the assimilation of various instructional strategies and modes of content delivery like text-based or computer-based learning programmes. (Oliver & Trigwell, 2005). Blended learning addresses the challenge of meeting the specific learning needs of an individual by integrating the capabilities of internet communication technology with traditional face-to-face classroom teaching. BL is different from both traditional classrooms that use technology to enhance the learning experience and completely online learning.
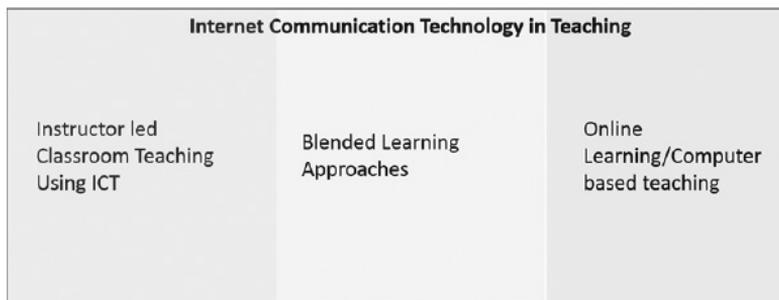

Figure 2 ICT in teaching

What makes BL unique is that:

When we have solid understandings of the properties of the Internet, as well as knowledge of how to effectively integrate Internet technology

with the most desirable and valued characteristics of face-to-face learning experiences, a quantum shift occurs in terms of the nature and quality of the educational experience". (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004, p. 97)

It is also important to note that BL is a combination of different modes of instruction (instructor-led, computer based), content delivery (classroom lectures, study material uploaded online, text books), platforms for interaction (classrooms, online spaces such as chats and blogs) and modes of learning (self-paced learning, learning through communities) (Ali & Sofa, 2018). This means each blended learning design will be different based on the aptitude, experience and style of the teacher, needs of the learners and availability of resources. Tselios, Daskalakis and Papadopoulou (2011) argued that providing learners with the opportunity to learn anytime anywhere through BL will have a favourable impact on learners taking control and responsibility of their learning.

Google Classroom

Google Classroom is a free service that allows teachers to connect with learners online. Anyone with a Google account can use this service. Teachers can create and manage online classes, upload study material, create and grade assignments, and share feedback and grades. Students can use this service to access and use learning material, interact with the teacher and other learners, submit their assignments and receive feedback and grades. Administrators can create multiple classes in their domain, assign teachers and students to these classes and keep track of the work in the classes their domain. Iftakhar (2016) mentions the following benefits of Google Classroom:

- A single access point to discussion threads and assigned work.

- A single programme to store all students' work in a paperless format.

- A tracking mechanism to identify students struggling with assigned tasks.

- Simplified grading features.

Since it is free and accessible to anyone with a Google account, Google Classroom is an easily available resource for teachers who want to follow a blended learning approach in their teaching. In this paper, we will discuss how Google Classroom as an LMS supports blended learning approach in an English Language Teaching (ELT) course.

Background of the Study

This study was conducted at a public university over two semesters, with a group of twenty-six undergraduate students. These students were from all across India

and had varying levels of English proficiency. The students had four contact hours per week with the teacher in the class, outside of which interaction happened over Google Classroom. All the teaching and learning activities were stored in Google Classroom and this served as the primary data to understand how the platform was used for teaching/learning English. The data was analysed qualitatively from the teacher's perspective. A descriptive approach has been used to illustrate the actual situation in the field. The descriptive approach thus does not need any preliminary hypothesis prior to the study (Lichtman, 2010).

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Google Classroom was kept active from 19 September 2017 to 28 May 2018. The posts on it during the course of these eight months fell under twelve topics: Android apps, announcements, competitions, internal assessment, notes, reading, results, survey, test, vocabulary, writing and YouTube. These topics were drawn from the labels the teacher had assigned to each post on Google Classroom. The following discussion of the data from Google Classroom records reveals how the platform was used to offer a blended learning approach in the teaching and learning of English.

PREPARING AND SHARING LEARNING MATERIALS

The very first post on Google Classroom in the first semester was to invite the students to introduce themselves. Since the teacher was meeting them for a very limited time during the week and that too after the semester was well underway, it was difficult to spend time in the classroom to learn more about each student. Hence the post invited the students to write about themselves. Twenty-five out of the twenty-six students posted their introductions. The length of the write-up varied from person to person and gave the teacher an indication of their writing abilities. While most of the students used the questions given by the teacher to organize their writing, not all of them addressed all the questions given by the teacher. The basics of writing mechanics were also missing in many of the writings. Some students did not start their sentences with a capital letter or did not punctuate the sentences properly. However, since the objective of the task was to know the students better, such lack of nuances in writing was not penalized.

During the course of the second semester, the teacher observed that even the students who were proficient in English were not scoring well in their written assignments, even though they seemed to be independent thinkers. Many students knew the answers to the questions, but were not able to express them in writing. The teacher interacted with some students over Classroom and did some introspection, and was able to identify the root of the problem. According to the

teacher, writing in English was the skill that was least employed by the students. They were used to copying assignments from the internet and none of the other subject teachers regarded this as a problem. They were happy about the fact that these students were writing something from different sources and believed that they will learn in the process. The subject teachers on campus never encouraged the practice of typed assignments in order to prevent the students copying the text from various sources. There was no need for the students to develop their independent writing and there were no good writing models available to them. Consequently, the overall development of their writing skill was compromised.

The teacher used Google Classroom to provide sample answers for the questions at the end of the lesson. Students were encouraged to write their own answers keeping the sample answers in mind and share them through Classroom. The teacher used Google Classroom to provide feedback for the answers that had been submitted via Classroom. This open feedback was shared with everyone through Classroom and it clearly showed both, examples of good writing as well as writing where improvement was required. This type of feedback loop in a blended learning environment, where students got help, both face-to-face and online, facilitated the development of their written skills over time. In addition to this, by sharing written samples and answers from their peers as well, the teacher presented the linguistically weak students with an opportunity to learn in a non-threatening environment. It was observed that writing in the blended model where students and their teacher spend both online and face-to-face time in learning to write better, became a community activity where each and every individual could write and get it read by others in the classroom.

SHARING RESOURCES

Another way in which the teacher used the Google Classroom was to share learning English resources. This included the PPTs or learning materials used in the classroom. The Google Classroom was used as a platform to share learning English resources with the students. This gave a new dimension to the course-book that is already available and being used in the face-to-face class. The online resources that were added to the Google Classroom added sound and motion to the print texts and helped to reinforce the leaning that was already getting transacted in the class. The slow learners found the multimedia resources in the blended environment a helpful way to learn and bridge the gap in their understanding.

The literature-based textbook had many world famous short stories, poems and drama, many of which were available as adaptations on YouTube. In a participatory blended learning model the learners were also give the option to

post videos and other relevant content they found online through the Classroom. The fast learners embraced this idea because they had the opportunity to go beyond the class and showcase their findings with the rest of the class. This kind of peer-to-peer networks complemented the teacher's existing request to proficient learners in the class to help and assist the less proficient ones.

The Google Classroom was also used to share classroom resources generated by other students. For example, after group presentations the students were encouraged to re-work on their presentations based on the feedback that they had received during the presentation and then upload the edited presentations so that their peers can also access such resources. During the course of the class lessons, the background materials which got referred during the discussion were also shared through Classroom. For example, in one of the lessons, there was a discussion on the advertisement which stated that money cannot buy everything but for what it can buy there is Mastercard. None of the students had heard of this advertisement. Instead of utilizing classroom time for searching it online, the teacher made a web quest and asked the students to post their findings on Classroom. Students searched for the advertisement on YouTube and posted several versions of the advertisement. In doing so, the teacher researchers observed that the teacher had made the students collaborators in the learning process and Google Classroom served as the stage where this partnership was forged.

SHARING ADDITIONAL RESOURCES INCLUDING RESOURCES TO LEARN ENGLISH

Google Classroom was utilised by the teacher to share English-learning resources, which could be independently accessed and used by the learners. These resources included online dictionaries, English-learning websites, YouTube channels and mobile apps for learning. This was done with a view to making the students independent in their language learning in particular and learning in general.

Google Classroom was effectively used by the teacher to make the students aware of other avenues for learning and practising their English. The posts were about online courses and videos, which the learners could access during their free time, including their semester break. The resources that were mentioned during face-to-face lessons also found their way into Google Classroom. Since students knew that there would be additional opportunities for them to learn, they were motivated to check Classroom from home. The teacher also shared announcements about both academic and cultural competitions with the students.

Google Classroom was used to keep the students abreast of recent developments and trends in the specialization that they were pursuing. This was done by the

teacher who shared PDF copies of relevant reading materials. For instance, the teacher posted several articles from the special issue of a current affairs magazine on a specialisation which the students were pursuing and encouraged them to read the posts and share their thoughts. Even though not all the students made an effort to read the articles, the ones who did, posted their thoughts via the discussion option in Classroom. The teacher believed that by providing subject-related materials in English, she could motivate the students to take up reading in English.

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

Google Classroom was used to help manage the classroom. It was used extensively as a communication tool between the teacher and the students, as well as among students. Classroom instructions, reminders, internal assignments, examination feedback, etc., were sent out via the Google Classroom interface. Over a period of time, most of the students learned to turn on the notifications for Classroom in order to get updates either as email or as a notification from the app.

Google Classroom also acted as a backchannel and made interaction between the teacher and the students possible at any time. Initially, the teacher had to remind the students to check their phone for notifications. However, after a while, the students learned to do this on their own, and in fact, even helped other students who were not able to check and respond to the notifications on their own. Learning how to use the blended classroom tool and helping others to learn it encouraged a community of learning and learners, which went beyond the scope of just learning a language. Students also were allowed to post on Classroom and many of them used this technological affordance to share classroom and course-related information and questions.

While analysing the data, the researcher observed that even though the facility to use Classroom as a tool for communication was available to all students, the teacher was the one who used it the most. This could be due to the fact that the students met each other more frequently than the teacher. Contact hours with the teacher were limited to four to five hours a week over two to three days, whereas the students met as a class for about eight to ten hours a day, five days a week. The teacher therefore used Google Classroom as a means to remain in touch with the students. This constant interaction helped the teacher to build a rapport with the students and understand them closely over the two semesters.

A Digital Record of the Class Work

The researchers observed that some of the entries made by the teacher in Google Classroom were reports of their contact sessions with the students. These reports

served many functions. First of all, they helped students who were absent by helping them catch up on what they had missed. Secondly, they reinforced the learning that took place in the class as they presented the lesson in a different format. These reports also served as a reminder for any follow up work that the students were expected to do for the next class. The teacher as well as the learners had a record of class work to fall back on through the Google Classroom entries.

LIMITATIONS

The idea of using Google Classroom to provide a blended learning experience in learning English was an accidental one. However, the teacher decided to exploit it to the maximum. The following limitations were observed by the researchers when they went through the data. The teacher assumed that the technologically savvy students of this generation would easily warm up to the idea of embracing technology for learning English. However, experience proved that the learners needed some digital training in order to help them effectively use Google Classroom and its allied applications such as Google Drive, Google Docs, etc. Another limitation was the lack of active participation from all students. The interaction records from Classroom reveal that the same set of students were regularly interacting with the teacher and the peers. An interaction with the teacher revealed that many of these students were active contributors in the face-to-face class as well. In terms of the Wi-Fi network, although the campus had free Wi-Fi, it did not always work. As a result, the teacher had to make use of personal mobile data to access the online resources for the blended classroom. This connectivity issue was faced by the students as well. Also, mobile signals in the classroom were not very reliable, which mandated that the use of Google Classroom was largely limited to outside school hours. This meant that the male students were more actively involved in Google Classroom than the female students as female students were staying in the hostels on campus, where the Wi-Fi signals as well as mobile signals were weak.

CONCLUSION

The study was largely experimental in nature since neither the teacher nor the students had any previous experience in blended learning through Google Classroom. Nevertheless, it revealed that even independent English teachers with no school affiliation and limited technological know-how and experience can effectively set up Google Classroom in blended mode and use it for teaching/learning. This study however does not report on the experience of the students.

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