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Evaluating Google Classroom in Teaching and Learning Writing at Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology

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Abstract: The Internet, a revolutionary invention of mankind, has evidently played an indispensable role in this 4.0 Technology era. Recent years have witnessed the adoption of the Internet-based technology in Language teaching and learning, which has brought both unprecedented benefits and challenges to teachers and learners. Released in August 2014, Google Classroom, a kind of virtual classroom, is relatively new to many Vietnamese teachers of English. Therefore, this research aimed to introduce this technology to fellow teachers and to evaluate its effects on teaching writing. A variety of previous studies into the same area were reviewed carefully before the research commenced. The research was designed using Post-test Only Experimental method. The writer taught TOEIC Writing to seniors at Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology (HCMUT) in total 48 hours in eight weeks. 63 seniors were randomly assigned into two classes, one with 30 students and the other with 33. Without any pre-test, the control group was chosen randomly to study writing with the teacher in a traditional way. The experimental group, in addition to normal classes with teachers, participated in a virtual class on Google Classroom. After eight weeks, both groups did a mock test of TOEIC Writing and were marked on a 200-point scale of TOEIC. The data were analyzed using T-test, and a questionnaire was spread out for students to fill in. Also, some students took part in voluntary interviews about the effects of Google Classroom on their interest and outcomes in TOEIC Writing skills. Regarding the findings, the experimental group had higher average points in their writing test compared to the control group although the difference was not remarkably big. However, questionnaires and interviews showed that students' eagerness in Writing improved noticeably with the support of Google Class. Therefore, these findings are hoped to contribute to modern teaching and learning.

Introduction

Together with reading, writing skills are most crucial for students, according to the Peter D. Hart Association (1994). They allow students to express their understanding and opinions on different matters, in the form of written texts. Not only are they vital when students are at universities, but they open doors to better opportunities for graduates. In all businesses, employees are expected to be competent at writing skills to handle business correspondence such as emails, letters and memorandums.

To prepare students for future careers and to standardize education and training programs, Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training has compiled and enforced “The foreign language teaching and learning proposal towards 2020”, which requires university students to get at least B1 level in Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). Hence, students should get a minimum score of 200 in TOEIC Writing and Speaking.

Although writing skills play such key roles, a majority of students do not have the necessary skills to communicate effectively in written format (Flaherty & Choi, 2010). This puts pressure on universities and teachers to enhance the quality of teaching and learning writing. However, this effort is hindered by numerous problems such as large classes (Van, 2008), the traditional teacher-centered approaches (Tuyet, 2013a) and the low average English level of learners when entering university (Van, 2007). This last problem, at HCMUT is tremendous. Some students cannot even write a correct basic simple sentence because of their bad grammar. Another stumbling block is the course length. The total duration of each course is 48 hours over a period of two months. This is challenging for teachers and frustrating for the struggling ones, to handle a heavy load of knowledge and skills in writing, from grammar, vocabulary to the organization of ideas.

As a result, there is a growing need for extra support and activities outside the classroom. Technology, thus, has been employed to facilitate traditional classes. Like what Valdez (2005) said in his report, teachers must take into consideration how to intergrate technology into instructions and use it to supplement teaching and learning. Recently, internet-based classes have come as potential solutions to the mentioned problems. Some universities, including HCMUT, have applied e-learning for mainstream students learning general English. One platform that has been used in HCMUT is the ELT online course developed by National Geographic and Cengage Learning. Students when purchasing their book are given a code to access a course set by teachers. Teacher can select from a list of available exercises and assign them to students. Nonetheless, one drawback is that it does not allow much interaction between teacher and students. Only teachers can send students email, and teachers cannot mark or comment on students' performance since all the marking is automated. Consequently, students find almost no motivation in attending this course.

On the contrary, Google Classroom offers many more benefits. Firstly, it is free for anyone. Secondly, it supports two-way interactions between teachers and learners, and among learners. All parties can share and access the sources of materials, and more importantly, contribute to the content of the documents. All notifications are sent to users' email addresses, so there is no message or announcement being missed. Furthermore, it is user-friendly, so teachers assuming themselves “low-tech” can easily create and operate their own Google Classroom.

Therefore, this study into the use of Google Classroom in teaching and learning writing at HCMUT was expected to give: 1) an introduction to Google classroom and 2) an in-depth evaluation of this new technology.

Using Post-test only experimental research, there lied many limitations. Firstly, the lack of pre- test might result in the assignment bias as two groups might not be equivalent. Moreover, the sample size for each group was not big enough (33 and 30, for control group and experimental group respectively); and thus, this might negatively affect the validity of the research. Finally, only five students joined the interview, which was a small number.

However, the post-test only method was employed because at the beginning of the writing course, it was hard for students with no experience in TOEIC writing test to do a standard test. Furthermore, at the time of the experiment, there were only two writing classes assigned to the writer and the class size was

fixed. Therefore, the sample size was quite small and it was impossible to administer a pre-test. Time is also a problem with the interview session. It is hoped that in the future, there will be more research in this field, and all these limitations will be eliminated.

This research was conducted with the following hypothesis: “After students in experimental group attend a virtual classroom on Google besides normal class, their outcomes and engagement in writing will be higher than students in control group who only study in physical class with teacher”.

Literature Review

About Google Classroom

History

Google first announced its Google Classroom in May 2014, yet only those who owned G Suite for Education account could gain access to this platform. From March 2017, anyone with a personal Google account has been able to create or join Google Classroom. (Etherington, 2014). Google Classroom now becomes a free web service for anyone.

Features

Creating a class with Google Classroom is fast and easy. Teachers can go to www.classroom.google.com after signing in their Google account. By simply clicking on “Create” button, they then can name the class and add descriptions of the class. Teachers can invite students to their classes either by adding students’ email addresses or by sending them a class code.

On the Stream page, when hitting a plus button in the bottom right corner, four options appear, including creating new announcement, creating assignment, creating question or reuse post. Any of these allows teachers to insert links to Google Drive, websites, or upload existing files from their computer. Interestingly, with any kind of material, teachers can create a copy for each student instead of allowing them to modify on the same file. (“Create and manage class”, n.d.)

Students can do assignment on Google Docs or attach Word documents. However, Google Classroom is meant to work perfectly with other Google products in its ecosystem; hence, Docs is highly recommended than an attached Word document. This way, teachers can easily add comments on students’ work, give grades and return it to students. (“Grade and return an assignment”, n.d.)

Students can gain access to all resources shared by teachers, especially the Class Drive folder. They can create post themselves or comment on others’ posts.

Google Classroom in language learning

Google Classroom has proved its superiorities over old-school methods. Firstly, Google Classroom has a responsive design and hence can run on any device resolutions such as desktop, tablet or mobile phone. According to Janzen (2014), “mobile access to learning materials that are attractive and easy to interact with is critical in today’s web connected learning environments”.

Iftakhar (2016) listed in her research some other benefits of this technology, one of which was flexibility. When used either parallel with physical class or as a merely virtual class, this app was accessible and easily used by both instructors and learners anywhere anytime, even during national holidays.

In a recent research conducted by Randy, Karen, Jasmine, Christian, and Nieva (2018), Google Classroom was evaluated using ISO, and the results revealed that this app was extremely useful in <http://www.gentefl.org/gen-tefl-journal.html>

collaborative learning. Likewise, teachers in Iftakhar's research (2016) who let their students work in groups and submit their project via Google Classroom reported that it promoted collaborative learning. This method of learning, according to what MacArthur found in his research in 2009, motivated and encouraged students in writing because they could reach a wider audience. A case study by Mitchell's (2014) also showed that as peers can see their writing, students tended to produce well-developed writing. Marjan and Seyed (2012) reported a similar result when students engaged in this learning method had higher achievement and greater productivity and self-esteem.

Furthermore, MacArthur's (2009) Google Classroom encouraged writing and editing since students did not have to recopy their work. For example, these tools provide free spelling and punctuation checkers and suggest correction and thus, they are beneficial for struggling students having problems with punctuation, spelling and grammar.

Moreover, along with being able to give instructions and share writing prompts as well as other additional resources, teachers can send their students' comments and feedbacks through Google Classroom promptly, which may significantly contribute to the outcomes of their writing classes. (Izenstark & Leahy, 2015)

Therefore, despite being new in education and not being extensively researched, Google Classroom receives many positive reviews from educators and specialists. It is believed to greatly support language teaching and learning.

Research Methodology

Participants

There were 22 female and 41 male participants. They were all seniors from 11 different faculties at HCMUT, and got a minimum of 450 in TOEIC Listening and Reading Test. They needed a minimum score of 200 in TOEIC Writing and Speaking. Participants voluntarily attended this extra Writing class in total 48 hours, each class lasted two hours every Monday-Wednesday-Friday or every Tuesday-Thursday-Saturday, over eight weeks. Students themselves chose the class that suited their schedule. All had experience with technology, owned a laptop and/or a desktop computer with access to the Internet.

The Mon-Wed-Fri class was chosen to be the experimental group, with 10 females and 20 males. The other one on Tue-Thur-Sat, with 12 females and 21 males was the control group. 30 samples were chosen randomly without any pre-test.

Materials

A TOEIC Writing class was created on Google Classroom, and students in experimental group were enrolled in this class. A mock TOEIC Writing test with all 11 questions was given to both groups at the end of the course. Then, a questionnaire using Google Form was sent to students to fill in. Interviews followed up the findings of the experimental research.

Design

Initially, one method of quantitative research, experimental design, was employed. In this design, four variables were taken into consideration. Firstly, independent variable was the use of Google Classroom. Dependent variable, on the other hand, was the scores of students on the mock test. Thirdly, control variables were the textbook, the time and duration of classes, and the mock test. Finally, an extraneous variable, the various students' English proficiency, might exist. Afterwards, a quantitative

questionnaire among all students, and qualitative interviews with some voluntary students were conducted. Therefore, this research was a mix of quantitative and qualitative design.

Procedures

In the first class, experimental group was informed of attending Google Classroom, using a code provided. They were instructed how to access to the site, get materials, work with Google Docs and turn in their assignments. Those instructions were given in class and via email from the teacher later.

In the next classes, announcements of what students should prepare in advance were posted on Google Classroom before any physical class as reminders. Supplementary materials such as sentence structure exercises, pictures for picture description tasks, sample emails and essays were uploaded so that students could access to and download. After each physical class, practice exercises were assigned to students, requiring them to use either Word processor or Google Docs to write and submit. After they turned in, they got comments and feedbacks from the teacher through Google Docs.

Control group was provided with the same supplementary materials in form of handouts, and was asked to do the same exercises and assignments on paper.

Data sources

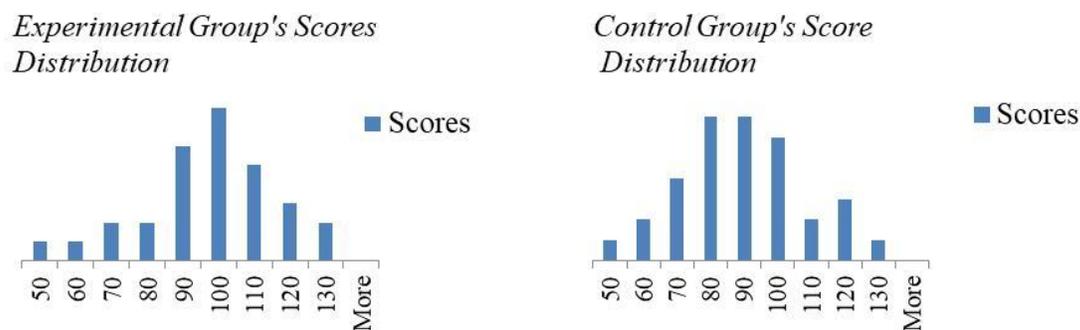
At the end of the course, both classes did the same mock test with all 8 questions of TOEIC Writing, including five picture description questions, two emails, and one opinion essay in one hour, and were marked using the same criteria on a 200-point grading scale.

After the test, experimental group took part in an online questionnaire with six close-ended questions posted on their Google Writing classroom. Moreover, five students voluntarily participated in an interview with three open-ended questions, each lasted five minutes. Audio responses were recorded for further analysis.

Data Analysis

Post-test scores

Figure 1



As can be seen from figure 1, both groups showed a normal distribution of the post-test scores. Since two groups were observed independently and had no connection, an independent sample t-test was conducted to check the hypothesis.

Because the experimental group was hypothesized to have higher average test score, and the sample sizes (n) and variances of two groups were unequal, one-tailed t-test with unequal variances was ideal for the research. Moreover, it is better to mention that in this case, the null hypothesis was that the experimental group had either the same or lower average test score compared to the control group.

Table 1

Results of T-test and Descriptive Statistics for Writing Scores between Experimental Group and Control Group

	Experimental Group	Control Group
Sample size (n)	30	33
Mean (M)	95.166	83.672
Variance (s ²)	362.902	365.672
Standard Deviation (s)	19.049	19.122
	t Statistic	t Critical one-tailed
	1.671	1.670
	Calculated Probability (p)	Confidence Interval
	0.049	0.05

Table 1 shows the results in Microsoft Excel. Firstly, if t Statistic is bigger than t Critical one-tailed, the null hypothesis will be rejected, which is exactly this case (1.671>1.670) although the difference was not big.

Furthermore, compared to the common Confidence Interval 0.05, the p value of this test was marginally smaller (0.049). Once again, the null hypothesis was eliminated. It revealed that the difference between the experimental group's scores and those of the control group did exist.

Online questionnaire results

Table 2

Results of Online Questionnaire

Question	Results
1. Do you feel comfortable working with Google Classroom?	1. Yes  80% 2. No  20%
2. Choose the feature of Google Classroom that is most beneficial to you.	1. Create and receive announcements  10% 2. Access to links shared by teacher  25% 3. Do assignment and get teacher's comments on Google Docs  60% 4. Communicate with other students in the class  5%
3. Are you willing to share your writing with your classmates?	1. Yes  60% 2. No  40%

Question	Results
4. How often do you comment on teacher's or classmates' posts?	1. Always  10% 2. Sometimes  30% 3. Never  60%
5. Do you feel encouraged in your writing learning with the support of Google Classroom?	1. Yes  75% 2. No  25%
6. Do you want to continue using Google Classroom to receive teacher's supports after the course ends?	1. Yes  83% 2. No  17%

Table 2 shows most students did not have problems with Google Classroom. Among four listed features, the use of Google Docs to write assignment and receive comments from teacher seemed most commonly be used by students, 60%. Coming second in this list was accessing to the subordinating materials shared by teacher, 25%. More than half of students never commented on other’s posts. Although students did not interact much with teacher and classmates by comments, respectively 75% and 83% of them claimed that Google Classroom encouraged their writing learning and hoped to continue benefiting from this platform even when the physical class ended.

Summary of interviews

Question 1. How did Google Classroom benefit your writing learning?

Student 1 said Google classroom made the access to the various materials on the internet easier by clicking on the links. He was too lazy to find those materials himself. Meanwhile, student 2 thought writing on paper was frustrating for him since he usually had difficulties with spelling. Writing an essay by Word processor or Google Docs was much easier because there was auto spell check. According to student 3, because Google Classroom automatically sent all notifications to his email address, and the Calendar feature showed all the upcoming events and duties that he needed to fulfill, he was notified of important announcements and deadlines and could stay disciplined in his learning. Student 4 and 5 both said that they worked with their computer all the time, so a virtual classroom with cloud storage was more practical and convenient for them to access to, keep and manage all the files in the long run.

Question 2. Why didn’t you post comments on Google Classroom?

Interestingly, four out of five students said that they were so busy with their dissertations that they did not want to waste their time on anything except for teacher’s comments and suggestions, which could help improve their writing skills. One student said he did not know his classmates well, so he did not feel comfortable chatting to them.

Questions 3. What function of Google Classroom do you want to use more?

Student 1, 2 and 4 wanted teacher to share more videos of writing instructions, in addition to Word and PDF documents. Student 3 said that classmates did not actually connect to each other, and hoped to more pair work and group work using Google Classroom to create a more constructive learning community. Student 5 gave no response to this question.

Conclusion and Implications

Conclusion of the research hypothesis

As mentioned in the introduction, the researcher hypothesized that after students in experimental group attend a virtual classroom on Google besides normal class, their outcomes and engagement in writing will be higher than students in control group who only study in normal class with teacher. Following are the conclusions of this hypothesis.

Firstly, as seen in the quantitative analysis, when comparing the mock test results between two groups using independent samples t-test, the parameters proved that the scores of the experimental group were statistically higher than those of the control group.

Secondly, the quantitative close-ended questionnaire indicated that Google Classroom engaged a majority of students in learning writing. Furthermore, the qualitative analysis of the interview sessions strengthened this conclusion when all participants easily gave their explanations of how Google Classroom facilitated their writing.

Implications

Implications for teachers

To start with, the employment of such internet-based class as Google Classroom is perfectly feasible. University students, the millennials, have been familiar with technology, the internet and a wide variety of devices. Also, Google Classroom is very user-friendly, so both teachers and students do not have difficulty getting used to it.

Secondly, technology just plays a supportive part, and teachers should be responsive to students' activities. The most favorable feature of Google Classroom among students is the use of Google Docs for writing assignments, giving and receiving comments and feedbacks. What students expect most when attending a writing class seems to be teachers' remarks and suggestions. In a traditional class, students have to wait until the next class to get their papers back. In contrast, through Google Classroom, teachers can return students' writing immediately after finishing evaluating it.

Thirdly, the interactions on Google Classroom should not be restricted to teachers and students. The most common reason students gave for not interacting much with their classmates was being busy, and the other was not knowing their classmates well. However, if students do not work individually but in pairs or groups right at the beginning, there will be more interactions among them, and hence, collaborative learning will be promoted. Thus, teachers should assign students in groups, and encourage peer review or peer edit on Google Classroom. These collaborative activities promise to bring many benefits to students learning and save time and effort for teachers in grading phase.

Finally, there are still other features of Google Classroom that teachers should make use of. They can invite other teachers to conduct co-teaching. This approach may be very rewarding if they can collaborate well with each other, and it suits the physical classes run by two or three teachers.

Furthermore, teachers should diversify the materials shared on Google Classroom, for example, they can upload videos and pictures, not just word and pdf documents.

Implications for students

Firstly, being born and living in the era of technology is both an opportunity and a challenge for students. The availability and accessibility of the Internet and various technological devices only bring advantages if students use them critically. Instead of wasting time surfing the Internet or playing online games, learners should make use of technology to serve their language learning, especially when it is free like Google Classroom.

Furthermore, students' autonomy still plays an indispensable role in the effects of Google Classroom, or any other internet-based classes. Teachers only empower students by giving general guidelines, providing links to materials, and setting the assignments. It is the students' choice to download and study those materials, to invest time and effort in writing those assignments or not. While Google Classroom is a contributing factor, students' autonomy is a decisive one that determines the outcomes of their learning.

Lastly, students should change their mindset about learning. Not only are teachers those who give support, classmates are also potential facilitators. Students should feel free to create posts when they have questions or useful materials, and the whole class can join to discuss and get the links. Furthermore, students can make use of peer review by sharing their writing to classmates. In this research, students are not from the same major and are not close to each other, but in other contexts where students know each other well, peer review and peer edit are more feasible.

Implications for future research

Google Classroom is a relatively new technology in Vietnam, and there is not much research into its applications in language teaching and learning. This research, therefore, lays a foundation for further investigations into this field.

There still exist certain limits in this research, from the small sample size, the lack of a pre-test and the short duration of experiments. These factors may create chances for uncontrollable variables and other possible threats to the research validity. Thus, future research can be conducted with a bigger quantity of samples. A pre-test is also necessary to ensure the equivalence of control group and experimental group.

Finally, future research can also look into the effects of Google Classroom on not just university students, but a wider range of learners. For example, if those future studies prove that the employment of Google Classroom works for junior and high school students, they will substantially contribute to enhancing writing skills from an earlier age.

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