A practical use of cloud-based technologies in an intensive English classroom

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A practical use of cloud-based technologies in an intensive English classroom

Aeric WONG*

Important Note

At the time of writing, Google has stopped technical support of the Google Wave platform. The platform itself is still available online but may be shut down at any moment. However, the functions described in this paper are also available in the Google Docs platform and can be used instead of Google Wave. It is the author’s primary intention to demonstrate the utility of existing internet-based technologies in language classrooms as a whole and not focus on any one particular platform.

Background

Every year, the School of Science and Technology at Kwansei Gakuin University holds an Intensive English Summer Camp for selected 3rd year science students. The students are divided into groups of about ten and each group is assigned one of the English Instructors from the department. The objective of the camp is for each group of students to produce a final piece of work and to use as much English as possible in every step of the process over the course of the camp.

All camp participants meet for two days at the beginning of August for orientation, decide on a group project, and to be assigned their own individual duties over the summer break. There is homework that is to be done individually in addition to the collective group project work. After a month, everyone meets at the Sengari Camp Site for the final five days of camp. Essentially, this means that for about a month, they have no contact time with the rest of their group. They have to work together without being able to speak to each other.

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Schedule for Sengari Intensive English Summer Camp 2011
August 8–9  On-campus orientation and introduction to project
September 10–14  Final preparation of project work at Sengari Camp Site

The students who go to the camp are low-to-mid-intermediate English speakers and are selected from the previous year’s enrolment. Only the top 7% get chosen and this probably but not necessarily means that they are highly motivated.

Group work! But no talking.

The nature of the project work coupled with only seven contact days means that the students must collaborate and work toward a common objective despite being apart for a substantial period of time. Depending on the instructor, the group may have one big project involving all group members, or several smaller projects with a shared theme. However, all groups must give a final group presentation at the end of the course. Regardless of the project a group may have, the fact remains that distance or other commitments may make it hard or impossible for the students to meet. In addition they still have to worry about sharing information with each other and keeping materials up to date. The final five days at the camp site is only enough time to collate their research data and prepare for the final presentation. Thus, the smooth and efficient sharing of information before that is crucial.

Previously (Sengari 2009), the students used email as their main method of communication to discuss ideas, delegate tasks, forward research material to each other, and complete a written report. To check on their progress, the instructor set up a blog where the students were instructed to post regular progress updates. In this manner, feedback could be given and the students could more or less remain on schedule.

The main failing of this choice of communication is that email is not a very good way to work collaboratively. Several media formats must be dealt with by all those concerned which can lead to compatibility issues. In this particular case, emails for communication, MS Word for the final report, PowerPoint for the group presentation, and a blog for the progress updates. For example, if a report template was emailed to the students to place their research results, they would need to remember to add their information and send on the most up-to-date version. The situation was such that there typically would be several versions of the same document at any one time. Clearly, that one month period where the group cannot meet is a big problem for group work. Of course, it is not impossible for the project to be completed so rather than asking if the students can work together without speaking, the question should be if they can work together well without speaking.
Why Google Wave (how it solves the problems)

Google Wave can be described as a combination of the several media formats mentioned above. Add to that the fact it is cloud-based, meaning that it is an online resource, means that at any time, only the most up-to-date version of a document is available. This immediately eliminates the problem of redundant files and having to deal with multiple document formats. As an added bonus, this also removes the need for storage media like USB flash drives. The students have one object less to lose.

Google Wave also has built in chat-like functionality so the contributors to a Wave (the platform document standard) can communicate and edit or add new information at any time. In this manner, the students can give comments or ask questions anywhere in the Wave just as the educator can provide feedback and guidance when necessary. The Wave can be further enhanced by including video or audio files, translation and map plugins, and even a polling feature to quickly gauge the groups opinions should they be required.

All of this can be done either in real-time or asynchronously. If several students are online at the same time, they can all simultaneously edit a Wave and each participant can see what changes are being made in real-time as it is typed. If only one contributor is editing, those changes will be reflected the next time another group member logs in.

From an administration perspective, the educator can take advantage of the ‘playback’ function of Google Wave. This function allows any of the participants to view how the Wave has evolved since its creation. It shows what was changed or added to a Wave and who performed that action. By using ‘playback’, the educator can more accurately and fairly assign a grade. Something that cannot be done by only looking at the finished product.

From the above, it can be seen how using one single platform can help make a group project more efficient by reducing the amount of to-and-fro required between collaborators and also in managing the course.

Task-based Learning

The format and scheduling of the course also fit very well in the Task Based Learning Framework (see Diag. 1). The first two days on campus correspond to the Pre-task Cycle where the students are introduced to the group project, shown examples of previous years’ projects, and prepared for their individual duties over the summer.

In the month-long period when they cannot meet, they are in the Task and
Planning stages of the Task Cycle. This is where they do the bulk of the research and prepare a report to present their findings to the rest of the group. The Report stage is the first thing they do when everyone meets again at the camp site. Here, they share their information and, as a group, decide on what is to be presented and the way it is to be presented. This preliminary presentation is also a dry-run for the final presentation and is part of the Task Cycle.

Upon finalization of the presentation and related materials, the students begin practicing and are shown video recordings of their presentation for peer review and error-correction. The Analysis and Practice stages in the Language Focus Cycle are repeated as necessary and observations of other groups’ presentations also provide opportunities to notice and later practice specific presentation skills and target phrases and patterns.

In keeping with TBL principles, the students are using their target language in a closed environment and they don’t have to worry about making mistakes or being wrong. They can use the language that they know in a safe environment. Unlike
typical TBL classes which tend to be communication classes, the chat functionality simulates the immediacy of real-time communication but gives the learner more time to formulate phrases and units of meaning. Particularly useful for mid-intermediate level English students as the urgency of replying is greatly reduced. Also beneficial is the opportunity to practice turn-taking strategies which is similar to face-to-face communication and this in turn helps them initiate and respond to questions. Finally, by working together toward a shared objective, the learners notice how their peers express similar meaning which is likely to provide corrective feedback.

**Things to bear in mind**

Being completely cloud-based, all the participants need Internet-connected computers running reasonably recent browsers. That said, it also has to be noted that there are some issues in using Internet Explorer to access Google Wave. As such, the students were told to install a portable version of Mozilla Firefox on their USB flash drives in order to ensure access on virtually any computer they use. As they were working mainly from home, this did not prove to be a major inconvenience. However, it bears mentioning that many universities only have Internet Explorer installed and students may not be able to install other Internet browsers thus affecting their work.

Other problems were unavoidable although they were expected. Getting all the students signed up for the service and making sure everyone was up to speed on the basic functions took a substantial amount of time and once they had been familiarized with Google Wave, they had to make a conscious decision to use it exclusively for the duration of the camp. There is always the temptation to return to the familiar if given the choice and in some students’ cases, they fell back to contacting each other using cell phone SMS as they were behind in some of their work.

**Did it work?**

In summary, the author achieved what he set out to do. By replacing email, MS Word, PowerPoint, and blogs, Google Wave streamlined the entire project work making it much more efficient. Feedback from the students was largely positive and they also agreed that, for their purposes, Google Wave was a much better alternative. Their only complaint was that there should have been more time to acclimatise with the platform. All in all, the project was more coordinated and the amount contributed by the students was more balanced.
This study was conducted in Summer 2009 and since then, even more alternatives have become mainstream. Dropbox now allows file-sharing with multiple users, Google has integrated all the features which made Wave great into their Docs platform, and Microsoft has their own Office Suite with online collaboration features. These barely begin to scratch the surface of what’s currently available but it is hoped that by showing how Google Wave made group work better, the same principles can be used regardless of the platform.

To be clear, it is not the author’s intention for the reader to adopt an already obsolete technology. Rather, the author hopes that the ideas expressed in this paper may show how similar technologies can help both the educator and the learner.

References