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THE EFFECTIVENESS OF GOOGLE CLASSROOM FOR ONLINE DISCUSSIONS

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ABSTRACT

Covid-19 pandemic brings massive impacts to many life sectors, especially education. Schools and colleges are closed temporarily so that online learning is the only way to continue the education. Of many online platforms and media found on internet, Google Classroom provides features to support the online active learning activities. Therefore, this study is aimed at investigating the effectiveness of Google Classroom for online discussions. By involving 39 sixth-semester students of English Education Program – Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Surabaya (UNUSA), this descriptive qualitative study captured the comment threads on Google Classroom as the data to describe the number of comments and participants in online discussions. Those data were collected and interpreted to prove that the platform supported written online discussions. The results found that the total number of comments found in 14 meetings was 457 comments which were mostly dominated by the students. The findings showed the students' increasing participation in online discussions. Google Classroom with its features enables them to minimize the psychological barriers, provide attention, support and motivation in sharing ideas in written comments. Furthermore, notifications sent automatically to the students' Gmail account is an advantage. In conclusion, Google Classroom is effective to increase the students' participation in online discussions. With the features provided in the online platform, the students build up more enthusiasm, motivation, attention and support to share comments and ideas during online discussions. Thus, the use of this platform should be taken as a consideration when oral discussions do not work as expected.

Keywords: *Google Classroom, online discussions, Covid-19*

INTRODUCTION

Covid-19 pandemic brings massive impacts to many life sectors, especially education. Both formal and informal educational institutions cannot operate temporarily since March 2010 due to social distancing policy issued by the government to put all people, especially teachers/lecturers and students, at minimal risk for the viral infections. As the consequence, all classroom activities are stopped during the pandemic to prevent more serious impacts on the national health.

As the viral outbreak goes on, the government's campaign forcing people to stay at home and work from home emerges a new phenomenon to continue the academic activities at home through online learning. Before the pandemic occurred, Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama (Unusa) has applied a blended learning program, which is "a natural development to the growing accessibility of eLearning, online resources and the continued need for a human component in

the learning experience” (Teach Thought, 2020). This method enables the lecturers to combine classical classroom learning and online learning, which is not limited in space and time. Despite the weakness, online learning has been perceived to be the best alternative for education in the future because of the flexibility, borderless, and time limitless features that enable us to study at anytime and anyplace.

A blended learning platform for schools, named Google Classroom, which was introduced as a feature of Google Apps for Education was invented “to simplify creating, distributing and grading assignments in an entirely electronic format” (Ashton College, 2020). Of many online platforms and media found on internet, Google Classroom provides many features to support the online active learning activities based on student-centered learning approach. One of those activities is discussion.

Discussion is a technique to which most teachers prefer to transfer their knowledge. Through well-managed discussion, the students will be able to construct their own knowledge and solve problems by sharing and responding to ideas. However, this technique sometimes does not work maximally for some reasons, such as the students’ passive participation due to anxiety and the limited time. To solve the problem, this study is aimed at investigating the effectiveness of Google Classroom as an instructional media in online discussions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As this study is purposed to explore the effectiveness of Google Classroom in e-learning, especially for online discussions, reviewing prior studies discussing the blended learning platform will be an advantage. Introduced in 2014 as one of the features of Google Apps, this platform has been widely used to support education. This phenomenon also makes the researchers interested to conduct studies. Therefore, the following two previous studies are expected to provide the supplemental background of knowledge and information for conducting this study.

Nur Alim, Wa Linda, Fahmi Gunawan, and Mohd Shamsuri Md Saad conducted a study of *The Effectiveness of Google Classroom as an Instructional Media: A Case of State Islamic Institute of Kendari, Indonesia* in 2019. The findings showed that the use of Google Classroom was effective with various limitations: (1) not all students got an account what was provided by the lecturers because they

did not have any smart phones, (2) Wi-Fi availability in the campus was limited and (3) the students did not have enough mobile data plan during the time of online discussion and even some students submitted their assignments using their friends' account. In short, this study focused on the problems occurring when using Google Classroom in e-learning.

Another similar study was conducted to describe *Teachers' Experiences on the Use of Google Classroom* by Almio Susetyo Harjanto and Sri Sumarni from State University of Jakarta. The findings showed that teachers use it as a facilitation tool for managing students' tasks, organizing classroom and accommodating students' interaction. In general, teachers perceived the use of Google Classroom was very helpful to conduct their virtual classroom. However, the teachers stated that they needed to maximize other features of Google Classroom as they hadn't explored all which would surely bring benefits for their professional development.

This descriptive study tries to fill the gap between the two studies by focusing the discussion on the use of Google Classroom for online discussions. Indeed, most discussions are generally carried out face to face by directly sharing ideas orally. However, this platform can also function well to support the activity of discussion conducted by the teachers or lecturers and their students by making use of its beneficial features. Therefore, it is perceived that this platform supports the Student-Centered Learning (SCL) approach.

Nowadays, the Student-Centered Learning is believed to be the most relevant approach with the student's holistic development involving all aspects, such as cognitive, psychological, and social aspects that correlate and affect to one another. In line with the claim made by Motschnig-Pitrik and Holzinger (2002) that "the Student-Centered approach is based on the hypothesis that students who are given the freedom to explore areas based on their personal interests, and who are accompanied in their striving for solutions by a supportive, understanding facilitator not only achieve higher academic results but also experience an increase in personal values, such as flexibility, self-confidence and social skills." Under the monitoring of the lecturer, this approach enables the students to experience learning as a whole person, also referred to experiential learning. The students are given freedom to explore knowledge and information, involve feelings and combine them with their

own ideas. This process gives them more chances to construct the knowledge by themselves.

With the rapid advancements in science and technology, the student-centered e-learning (SCL) is now developing into a more specific approach by involving internet in learning, called student-centered e-learning (SCeL). It is a modern phenomenon in learning which combines the student-centered learning and e-learning approach which is believed to be much more effective to result in better learning outcomes. The combination of the two approaches is expected to enhance the quality of teaching and learning.

To ensure the success when using this approach, Motschnig-Pitrik and Holzinger (2020) listed three factors that should be available in online learning: “(1) Sufficient amounts of material are electronically available (eContent), (2) Instructors, preferably facilitators hold the personal attitudes necessary for providing a constructive learning climate, can communicate these attitudes (Rogers, 1961) and have advanced social - and communicative skills, and (3) All participants succeed in employing the computer as a resource for significant parts of knowledge transfer as well as for some aspects of communication and organization.” Besides the students’ active participation in learning, the roles played by the lecturers are also important to create a supportive learning environment that provides sufficient online materials that have free and easy access via internet and maintains the flow of communication between the lecturers and the students and among the students themselves.

One of the most vital features of the Student-Centered eLearning (SCeL) is the availability of discussion forum as the media of communication between lecturers - students and students – students. Discussion is classified into synchronous and a synchronous discussion. As stated in The Glossary of Education Reform (2013), “Synchronous learning is a general term used to describe forms of education, instruction, and learning that occur at the same time, but not in the same place.” Therefore, online discussion belongs to synchronous discussion because it does not require the participants to meet face to face at real time.

Synchronous online discussion requires the lecturers and the participants conduct a discussion at the same time, but in different locations. Currently, being in different places does not limit the activity of discussion because of the

availability of internet services and supportive media that have many features to contribute online discussions in real time. This type of discussion needs an electronic platform well-known as Google Classroom that is accessible online free of charge for all participants of discussion.

In the era of digital technology, internet has brought great impacts to many aspects of life. Google, as the leading company focusing on information technology, has designed and developed many internet-based media that are beneficial and helpful to support our lives, especially in education. One of them is Google Classroom which is “an internet-based service provided by Google as an e-learning system (Martínez-Monés et al., 2017).” This media is designed to hold up digital learning which has become a trend in modern education system. It is not only effective, but also efficient because it is paperless.

Designing and managing a classroom using Google Classroom supports flexibility. Teaching and learning seem to be borderless and limitless because it does not require the lecturers and the students to be in the same place and at the same time. Those activities can be done at home in free time by making use of many useful features to share materials in different formats, to have online discussions, to give quizzes, and so forth.

DATA AND METHODS

Playing an important role in conducting a research, research methodology outlines the way in which this study is to be undertaken. It provides the description of the methods used in this study to provide explanation about the methods of collecting, describing, analyzing, and interpreting data. “Research method is the strategy, process or technique utilized in the collection of data or evidence for analysis in order to uncover new information or create better understanding of a topic” (Research Guides, 2019, Sept 4). This descriptive qualitative study is aimed at describing the effectiveness of Google Classroom as an instructional media for online discussions. This method enables the writer to describe the features of Google Classroom and interpret the data obtained from the discussions conducted by the lecturer and the students of Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Surabaya (UNUSA) when using the media.

The data used in this study were in the form of words, phrases, sentences and expressions obtained from the online discussions in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) course taken by the subject of this study, that is to say 39 sixth-semester students of English Education Program – Admission Year of 2017 – Faculty of Teacher Training and Education – Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Surabaya. The primary data for analysis were collected by capturing the comment threads and presenting in a table to show the number of comments and participants during online discussions in SLA course. Moreover, to collect the secondary data needed in the process of analyzing the primary data, library research was done for collecting any data discussing the effectiveness of Google Classroom for online discussions. Those data were collected through reading books, journals, articles, and other printed sources, note taking and selecting the data which described the features found on the media.

This study used descriptive analytic technique to explore the texts collected from the participants. The selected data containing their comments were collected to describe the effectiveness of Google Classroom for online discussions. This study is done by not only describing the effectiveness of Google Classroom as the instructional media for online discussions, but also analyzing the media for a better understanding with reasonable explanation. It is in line with the argument made by Tesch stating that "descriptive/interpretive approaches are oriented to providing thorough descriptions and interpretations of social phenomena, including its meaning to those who experience it" (Dey, 2005). By combining descriptive and analytic techniques in the process of analysis, this study illustrates the effectiveness of Google Classroom as the instructional media for online discussions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data obtained from this study showed the total number of comments and participants involved in online discussions conducted in SLA course for 14 meetings on Google Classroom. Nearly all learning activities in this course were conducted in two ways. First, the lecturer provided the students with online oral presentation using Zoom application which facilitates video communication. Second, the students were invited to participate in online written discussions as the focus of this study. The total number of comments found in 14 meetings was 457

comments which were mostly dominated by the students as shown in the following details.

Table 1. The total number of comments and participants in written online discussions in SLA course

Meeting	Total Number of Comments	Total Number of Participants
1	10	3
2	49	10
3	62	24
4	71	24
5	16	4
6	23	9
7	51	11
8	2	1
9	0	0
10	43	32
11	51	19
12	0	0
13	5	1
14	74	21
Total	457	159

Source: <https://classroom.google.com/c/Njk1MTU5NjQzMTRa>

Table 1 which was composed by recapitulating the results of screen-capturing of the comment threads on Google Classroom (attached in appendices) described the fluctuated number of comments and participants in each meeting. Yet, there were increasing comments from the first to the fourth meeting of the course. In the first meeting, 10 comments were given by only 3 students. In the second meeting, the comments increased up to 49 made by 10 students. 62 comments from 24 students were found in the third meeting. Furthermore, the number also experienced an increased in the fourth meeting with the total number of 71 comments from 24 students.

The absence of comments found in the ninth and twelfth meeting does not portray the passiveness of the students in the discussion. In fact, the lecturer did not continue the lecture to discussion session because the oral presentation did not need further discussion to support the students' understanding about the given topics. In other words, when the understanding is achieved by the students, the class is dismissed.

Despite the decreasing number of comments found in the eighth meeting (2 comments from 1 student) and in the thirteenth meeting (5 comments from 1 student), this study finds enthusiasm from the students to actively participate in the discussion using Google Classroom because the increasing number of comments and participants are clearly significant for several reasons.

First, Google Classroom minimizes the psychological barriers, such as anxiety and stress when sharing ideas in written form. Obviously, speaking, among other language skills, is the hardest for some reasons. In spite of the low competence in vocabulary and grammar, the psychological problem still become the major cause of the students' inactiveness in sharing ideas in discussions. Park and Lee (2005) analyzed the correlation between anxiety, self-confidence, and speaking performance. Students with low self-confidence often find that participating in oral discussions causes stress that disturbs the transfer of ideas. Similarly, transferring ideas orally is not easy for such students. Therefore, using this platform for online discussions is an alternative way to facilitate them to make up their minds by writing their ideas in the forum.

Second, this application enables the lecturer to give attention personally to each student. Receiving personal attention proves the lecturer's support. Learners have different inhibiting conditions when speaking English to share ideas. Performance conditions impact speaking performance and these conditions involve time pressure, planning, the quality of performance, and the amount of support (Nation & Newton, 2009). By using Google Classroom, the lecturer and the students can mention each other in a comment to give support that promotes communication during discussions. It means that the lecturer can give comments directed personally to certain students so that care and attention received by the students may increase their motivation to join in the discussion actively. Besides, when a student's name is mentioned by the lecturer, a challenge appears and motivates him/her to give a response so that the discussion will run actively. In short, the lecturer's will get responses from the students after giving personal feedbacks.

Finally, notifications will be sent automatically to the students' Gmail account when they are mentioned by the lecturer or the classmates. In addition, they will receive messages via Gmail each time a new comment appears in the forum.

Hence, they will keep following the discussions without missing any comments from all participants. This feature is obviously an advantage to maintain the effectiveness of Google Classroom in online discussions.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Google Classroom is highly effective to increase the participation of the sixth-semester students of English Education Program – Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Surabaya in online discussions. With the features provided in the online platform, the students build up more enthusiasm, motivation, attention and support to share comments and ideas during online discussions in each meeting. Thus, the use of this platform should be taken as a consideration when oral discussions do not work as expected.

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