Google Drive for Homework Submission and Essay Feedback

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1. Introduction

In order for students to learn to write effectively, it is essential to provide them with supportive and timely feedback on their writing assignments（Leki, 1990）. However, the logistics of receiving work from students and returning it to them quickly can be challenging for several reasons. For example, if an assignment is hand–written or printed, a teacher will receive the assignment in class and then return it to the student with feedback the following week at the earliest. Also, the feedback will be hand–written in the page margins, which may be difficult to understand due to the lack of space. Furthermore, should the teacher require the student to revise their writing and provide a second draft, it could take two more weeks before the student receives the final feed-back on their work.

Email and word–processing programs offer modern solutions to these problems. Writing assign-ments can be completed using Microsoft Word and emailed directly to the teacher. Comments and suggestions can easily marked on the assignment using the program's *Review* tools. Further-more, the teacher does not have to wait until the following class in order to return the writing to the student. However, even this system has its problems. While students have access to Microsoft Word at the university campus, not every student has access to it at home as it is an expensive program. So, even though a student may receive assignment feedback by email, they are unable to amend the file until they visit the university again. Also, files can be named incorrectly and as-signments can lack titles or even the name of the author. On a practical level, both the teacher and the student have to have systems in place to manage multiple versions of the same file and to ensure that it is always the latest version of the document that is being worked on. The back–and–forth by email alone can be time–consuming and sometimes result in emails being missed, espe-cially when dealing with a large class of students.

Another key issue is that many students still rely on USB drives to store documents, particularly when using university computers; however, these can break or be misplaced, resulting in lost as-signments. Even personal computers the can break or crash, resulting in lost data. Google Drive not only provides solutions to all of these problems but also offers exciting potential in terms of communication and collaboration on assignments. In this paper I will outline how I have used Google Drive effectively with my students.

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2. What is Google Drive?

Google Drive is a file storage and synchronisation service developed by Google. It was launched in April 2012 and had over 1 billion users as of December 2018 (TechCrunch, 2018). The service allows users to create, store and synchronise files online across devices, and share files with other users. It is free to use and users can store up to 15 gigabytes of files in their account. Google Drive is comprised of a number of tools which mirror the suite of programs offered by Microsoft: Google Docs (word–processing), Google Slides (presentations), Google Sheets (spreadsheets), and Google Forms (surveys and quizzes). Google Drive is available online and no software needs to be bought or downloaded. A free Google Drive extension is available to allow files to be created offline. In Google Drive, files are accessed through the internet and any changes made to the files are automatically updated without the need to manually save the changes. This system prevents work being lost.

Google Drive also allows collaboration to take place very easily. Access to a file can be shared with multiple users allowing them to view and edit the same file. This can even happen simultaneously if the users are using different devices (including mobile devices). Any edits, suggestions or comments being made can be seen in real–time, with the cursor of each user being identified by a different colour.

3. Using Google Drive

Creating a Google account
In order to access Google Drive, all users must create a Google account. Google has been a popular email service provider for many years and many of the students already have personal Google accounts. However, requiring students to create a new Google account specifically for university work is recommended. For example, the following format could be followed: [first initial ＋ surname]. atomi@gmail.com; a number could be added to the email address should their email combination already be in use. Once registered, each student will have 15 gigabytes of online storage in Google Drive, which is more than enough for their university work.

Google Drive dashboard and organisation
To start using Google Drive, students visit https：//www.google.com/drive and log in using their Google account. They will be presented with the dashboard from where they can create and organise their files (see figure 1). It is also possible to import and store non–Google files such as MS Word documents, PDF documents, and JPEG files.
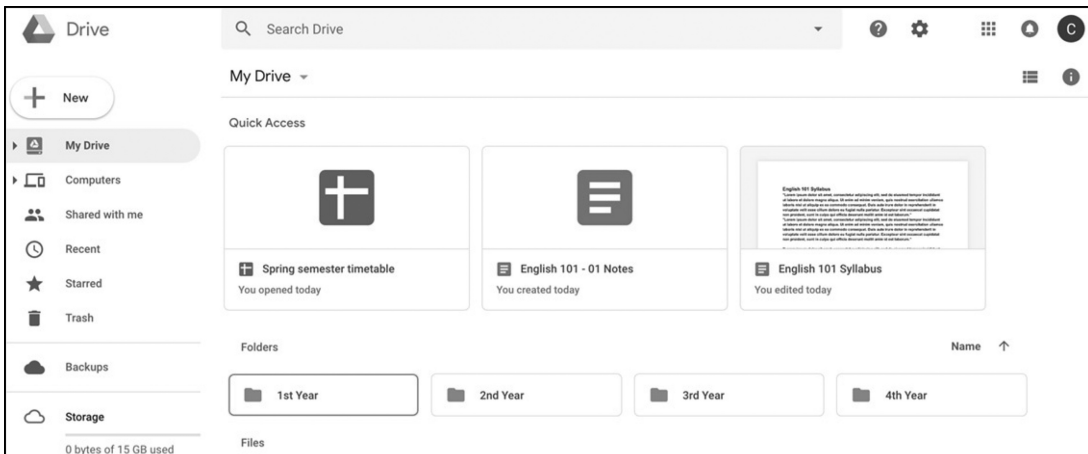
Figure 1: The Google Drive Dashboard

Before creating any documents, students need to be clear about how they will organize their files. It is as important for students to know how to keep their digital workspace organised as it is for them to keep their physical workspace organised. Without putting a system in place at the beginning, the files in a user's Google Drive account may become unmanageable. A simple system could have a top level folder for each academic year and a folder within each of these for each class the student is taking. Within those folders, more folders can be created for reference materials (such as a course syllabus or assignment schedule), and folders for class notes, handouts, homework, etc. As a basic rule, all files should exist within folders and both files and folders should be given clear, systematic and meaningful names. Having meaningful names enables the user to understand what the contents of a file or folder is without the need to open it, thus saving time when looking for files. It is important to start with a complete system in mind so that all new files can be stored appropriately and that they can be retrieved easily. Students can even use their smartphones to scan paper documents and save them directly into their Google Drive. The students are already in the habit of taking photographs of documents that they want to refer to later, but these images are not named or organised and are simply added to the photograph stream on their smartphone; therefore, files cannot be retrieved or searched for easily. By digitising paper documents, students can stay more organised and all of their important information is available from the Google Drive cloud at all times.

Creating documents

To create a new document from the dashboard, click *New > Google Docs > Blank document*. This creates a blank, untitled document. To name the document, click the words *Untitled Document* in the top left of the page and rename the document accordingly. Next to the file name there are two icons: a star and a folder (see figure 2). The star allows the user to highlight the document they are currently working on so that it can be accessed quickly from the *Starred* section of the left–hand menu (see figure 1); this is useful for important or regularly used files. Clicking on the folder icon allows the user to move a document to a new location. The user can

also create a new document from within the folder that they wish it to be saved in, thus avoiding the need to relocate the document later.
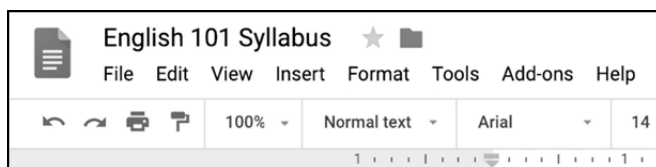

Figure 2: File name with Star and Folder icons

Looking at an open Google Doc, the first thing to notice is that the layout of the tools is similar to Microsoft Word (see figure 3). While Microsoft Word has more features, the ribbon in Google Docs is less crowded and focuses on frequently–used operations. The menu above the ribbon provides access to the more advanced operations. Google has an extensive online support network and how–to videos, which makes learning how to use Google Docs very straightforward.
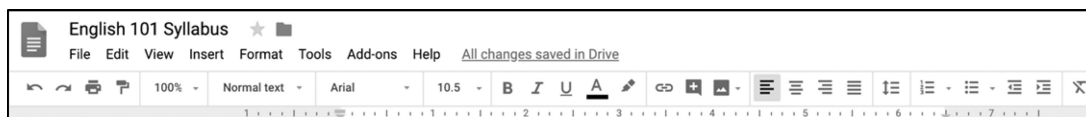

Figure 3: The Google Docs tool ribbon

Once the user starts inputting text into the document, the it will automatically save and update to its online location. Providing there is an internet connection, the file is automatically updated every 3 seconds; users are never required to manually save a Google Doc. When a change is made to a document, the message *Saving...* will display momentarily at the top of the screen, followed by *All changes saved in Drive*. It is always possible to revisit a previous version of a document by looking at the *File > Version History*.

Sharing documents

What sets Google Drive apart from Microsoft Office is the ability to easily share files, especially for the purpose of collaboration. In an academic context, collaboration would be between a teacher and a student working together to develop the student's writing, or between students collaborating on a group assignment. To share a file, the creator of the file clicks on the *Share* button at the top of the open document, or right–clicks on a file name and selects Share from the menu (entire folders can also be shared in this way). This opens the *Share with others* dialogue box (see figure 4). The user then types the Google email address of the person they wish to share the file with. That person will receive an email notifying them that the file has been shared with them. When they visit their Google Drive account (directly, or via a link in the email), they can click on *Shared with me* in the left–hand menu and see the all the shared files that they have access to. The user should then right–click on a file and click *Add to My Drive* so they can then save it in the appropriate location within their Drive(see figure 5).
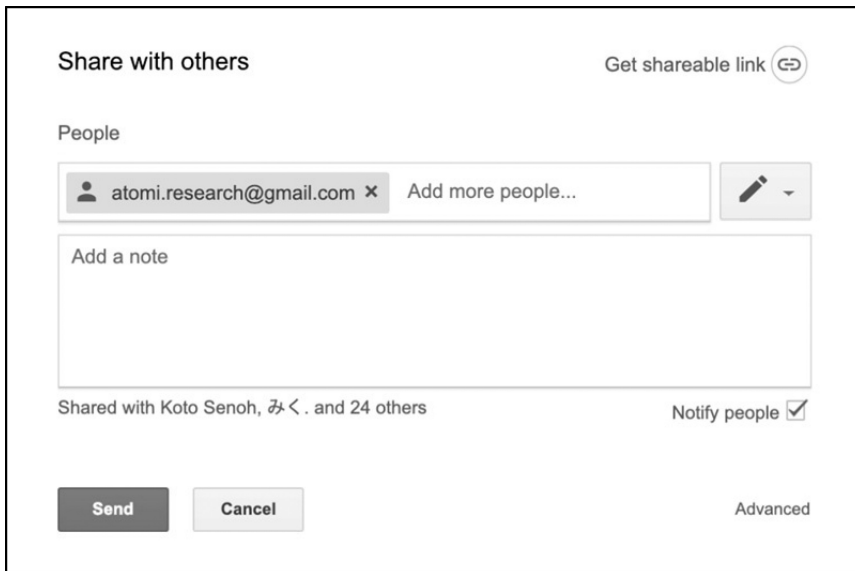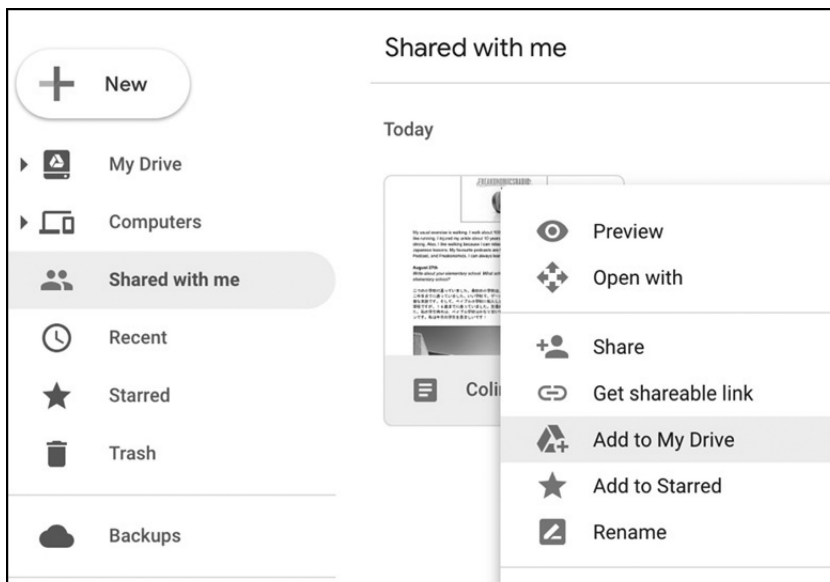
Figure 4: Sharing a document

Figure 5: Adding a shared document to one's own Google Drive

The creator of the file can also decide the level of access that the other users have to that file （see figure 6）. For example, they can allow them to *edit* the file, which means that they can make changes, accept or reject suggestions, and share the file with others; all those changes will be saved. It is also possible to only allow the other user to post *comments* on the file, which means that they can make comments and suggestions, but cannot change or share the file with others. Lastly, the other users can be allowed to only *view* a document and not make any changes, comments or share the file with others, which is useful for files that have fixed informa-
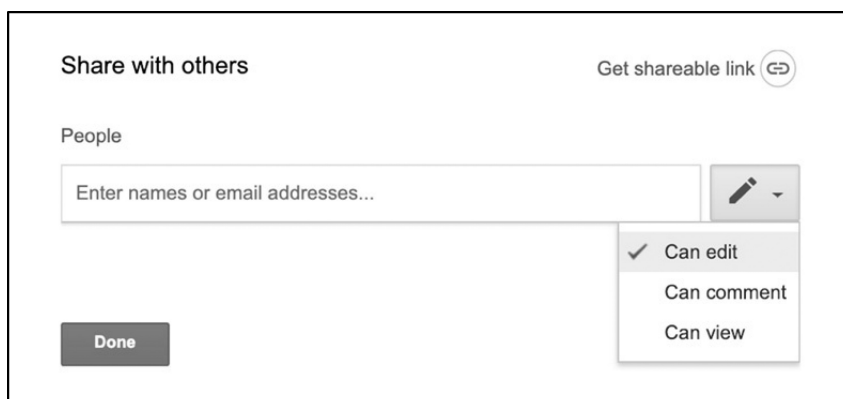
tion like a syllabus or other reference materials.

Figure 6: Assigning access status

It is recommended that student assignment documents are created by the teacher so that the teacher is the owner of the document and can change access status. This can be useful in the case of an assignment with a fixed deadline; once the deadline has passed, the teacher can change the student's status for that document, thus preserving the final version of that document for grading. As each document is created and shared, the teacher files it into the appropriate folder in their Google Drive. The teacher is then able to see everything that the student does in their assignment, even monitoring progress before the official due date has arrived.

4. Using Google Drive with Students

The ability to share documents with students opens up many possibilities when it comes to assignments. Not only can a teacher easily see the work that their students complete, but it is possible to share a single document with multiple students, and for students to share documents with each other. This means that group work can be conducted more efficiently, without the need of meeting face–to–face or worrying about emailing files. In the following sections I will outline how I have used Google Docs with my students for both individual and group work.

Individual Work

Writing homework
I provide feedback for all writing assignments and ask students to edit their work and submit a second draft. This ensures that students reflect on the comments and feedback that they have received and attempt to develop their writing. It is only by dealing with the issues in their writing that students can develop that skill. It is important to allow students the opportunity to think through their work and decide what changes need to be made. If I simply correct their mistakes, my feedback is merely proofreading, and the chance for the students to solve their own problems is lost. Comments in Google Docs are placed to the side of the text, so there is no need to hand-

write comments in the margins of a page. Also, by working with a digital document, it is possible to share links to online resources such as an explanation of a grammar point or a dictionary definition, which is not easily done when working with a hand-written or printed essay.

Summer homework

The first time I used Google Docs with students was for the summer homework in my seminar class. I wanted to provide the students with the opportunity to write regularly and freely in order to increase their writing confidence. Only by experimenting with the language can they truly see where their limits are; they can discover the words and phrases that they are lacking and need to add to their linguistic repertoire. For the summer homework I created a Google Doc for each student named [*student name*] ＋ *Summer Journal*. In each document I provided the students with a list of writing prompts from which they could choose, and I challenged them to write as often as they could during the vacation. When a student wanted to write an entry in their journal, they would go to through the list of writing prompts and select a prompt that they found interesting. They were free to create their own topics, but by offering a list of prompts lowered the barrier for participation for students as they did not have to worry about whether their chosen topic was suitable or not. The students were instructed to take 5 to 10 minutes to plan what they were going to write so that they could write coherently and smoothly. When they were ready to write, they wrote the date at the top of the document and then a title for the piece of writing. This could simply be the prompt that I gave them or they could create their own title. They would then try to write two or three paragraphs on the topic that they had chosen. I also encouraged the students to add images and links to further explain their ideas and add some colour and interest. On the next day that they decided to write in their journal, they would follow the same procedure, but they would add their new writing at the top of the page, thus pushing the previous text down towards the bottom of the document; I found this to be more convenient than scrolling down several pages each time the student wanted to add a new piece of writing.

Periodically, I checked each student's work, offering encouragement and trying to engage with the students on the topics that they had written about. Rather than focussing on the mistakes that the students had made, I wanted the students to see that I could understand the ideas that they were sharing and that they were able to communicate with me using English. For the students who had the time and motivation to write on a number of topics, they were able to look back with satisfaction on their summer writing assignment and see that they had improved both the length of their writing and the complexity of the ideas they shared. Such regular writing tasks can be more effective than the longer, infrequent writing practice（Orem, 2001）. Also, as a teacher, seeing so many examples of writing from my students helped me to gain a better understanding of which aspects of English they struggled with and what vocabulary and grammatical structures they relied on too much.

Accountability and setting an example

As part of my own Japanese development, I challenged myself to complete the same task as the

students, but in Japanese. I wrote daily on the same list of topics that they could choose from. I decided to share that document with the students so that they could see that my writing was not perfect, but that I was willing to try. I also added some images to make the writing more interesting. As I was in Scotland for part of the summer vacation, it was an opportunity to share my experience in Scotland with them and show them aspects of life where I am from. Placing myself in this position meant that the students were holding me accountable in my Japanese studies and I was able to use this to set an example for the students of what could be achieved with consistent, daily effort. I was pleased that many of the students took the time to read what I had written, even commenting on the text and asking me for more details.

Semester assignments

During the semester, I developed the routine of giving the students weekly writing homework based on the topics that we were covering in class. These were typically descriptive or opinion–based essays. As part of the preparation for writing, I would allow 10 minutes at the end of each class for the students to discuss the essay question together and try to generate some ideas. This was useful as speaking practice, but it was also valuable for the weaker students who sometimes struggled to produce ideas of their own. Again, I created and shared a Google Doc with each student and instructed them to put all of their writing homework in this one document. This acted as a portfolio representing their work during the semester, with new assignments being added at the top of the document as had been done in the summer. As a teacher, being able to see all of the work that each student had submitted throughout the semester in a single file was very convenient.

Unlike the summer homework, I did provide feedback for the semester–time writing assignments. Although I never directly corrected their work, I highlighted problematic areas of their essays, particularly where meaning was not clear, and I offered comments or suggestions. Issues regarding grammar, vocabulary, or structure could be easily highlighted using the *Comment* function. The relevant piece of text is selected and then the teacher clicks *Insert* > *Comment*. Alternatively, the ＋ symbol on the right of the screen can be clicked, and there are also keyboard quick keys (*command ＋ option ＋ m* on a Mac, and *Ctrl ＋ Alt ＋ m* on a PC). The students were able to reply to these comments, providing answers or asking for a more detailed explanation of what the problem was.

When the students click on a comment, the corresponding piece of text is highlighted, making it easy to see what needs to be addressed. Students can reply to comments if they need more information about the problem or want to propose a solution. If the student has adequately dealt with the problem, it can be resolved by clicking the *Resolve* button, which removes the comment (see figure 7). It is important that the teacher takes responsibility for marking comments as "resolved", rather than the student. The teacher must be the one who decides when an issue has been adequately dealt with.
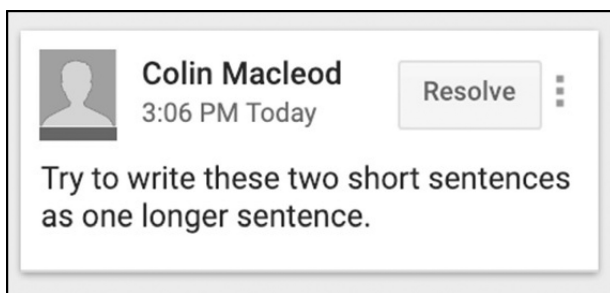
Figure 7: An example comment with Resolve button

At the end of each piece of writing, I would create a small two–column table: one column was marked "Done well" and the other "Need to work on". I would choose at least three things that a student had done well and three things that needed to be improved on. I would usually focus on aspects of language that prevented ideas from being effectively communicated, or systematics error that a student was making, such as subject–verb agreement or writing exclusively in simple sentences. I found that by giving a small number of specific areas to work on allowed the students to focus on those errors and take action rather than being overwhelmed by seeing a long list of every single mistake they had made. If the students can concentrate on fixing a small number of important points (for example, the language items that are preventing clear communication) then this will have a much bigger impact than if we focus on a large number of minor issues. Over time, this "need to work on" list become a personal checklist for each student of what they need to concentrate on before submitting a piece of writing.

Reviewing changes

To see all the changes that have been made to a document, the *Version History* tool can be found in the *File* menu. However, sometimes it is only necessary to see the most recent changes that have been made. Recent changes can be seen by clicking on the words *See new changes* at the top of a newly–opened document. This opens a version of the document which highlights all the parts that have been edited since the user last viewed it. This is particularly helpful when working on longer pieces of writing as attention can be immediately drawn to the parts of the text that have been edited, rather than having to review the entire text anew each time.

Group Work

Google Docs can also be a powerful tool for group work. As mentioned earlier, students can work on an assignment without having to be in the same physical space. For example, if students are researching different topics for their group assignment, they can write their findings in the same Google Doc. This makes it very easy for everyone to see what each member of the group is working on and ensures that everyone is working towards the same goal. It is also possible to use Google Hangouts to video chat as a group so that all group members can share their ideas without needing to meet in person. Being able to take advantage of these modern forms of communi-

cation and collaboration are important 21st century skills.

Presentations

Group presentations are a common task in seminar classes, and most students will use Microsoft PowerPoint to create slides. However, this can be problematic as it is not easy to merge slides together if students have created separate PowerPoint presentations. However, Google Slides allows students to collaborate on the same file (even work on it simultaneously), seeing the changes that other students have made or are making. It is a way to spread the work a little more evenly, as no single student is responsible for making it coherent.

Assessment

Grading group work can be challenging as it is not always clear whether students contributed to an assignment equally. In Google Docs and Google Slides, this can be done by checking the *Version History*, which shows what changes were made when each group member was logged into the document. Also, because the students know that the teacher and other group members have access to this data, it may actually encourage them to contribute more as they know that the effort that they put in is as important as the final product presented by the group. By having their work open and available for all the group members to see, each student is being held accountable by the other members in their group, which could potentially result in a more equal division of labour.

5. Future Use

The ability to easily share files and collaborate effortlessly online creates a lot of possibilities for assignments and activities. Furthermore, the Google Drive ecosystem is constantly evolving and offering new and improved tools for users. In this section, I would like to look ahead and propose ways in which Google Drive could be used with students.

Graduation thesis research

I intend to use Google Docs with my seminar students as a way of tracking their research over the spring vacation. My students will begin their literature review reading during this period, and by asking them to put their research notes online in Google Drive will allow me to see what they have done. I will provide the students a basic template for note taking so that they learn how to think critically about the information that they are reading. They will then fill in one of these templates for each of the resources that they read. This ensures that the students have a structure for collecting, organising and evaluating their research. For the teacher, the main purpose of this level of monitoring is to identify early those students who are not working effectively or who are using inappropriate sources for their research. By detecting these issues early, the teacher can intervene and provide the necessary support to help the students regain their focus.

Explore panel for research and referencing

For work requiring research and references, the *Explore Panel* in Google Docs is very helpful （see figure 8）. When in a Google Doc, a student can click the Explore button at the bottom right of the document, which opens a side panel in which they can search the internet while also having the document that that they are working on open. If they click a link within their search results, that webpage will open in a new tab.
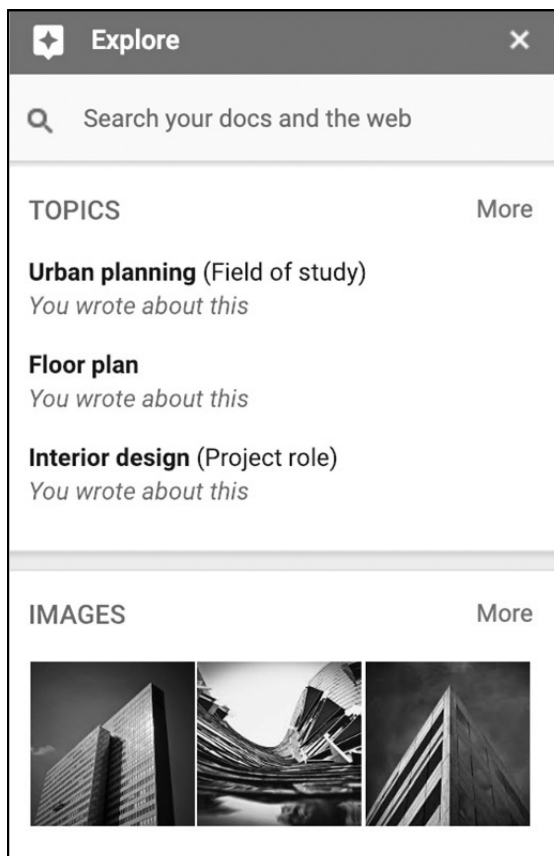

Figure 8: The Explore Panel

If they use information from that webpage, they can easily add the reference by clicking the inverted commas symbol, which creates a footnote in their Google Doc （see figure 9）. Users can select from MLA, APA, or Chicago referencing styles.

Figure 9: How to cite a source using the Explore Panel

The integration of these features helps students to learn the importance of appropriate referencing when navigating online content. The Explore Panel also allows users to drag and drop images into a text, allowing them to easily create interesting and attractive assignments.

Online peer review

I would also like to explore the effectiveness of online peer review. In Google Drive, a shared folder could be created into which students can submit their writing. In small groups, students could read each other's essays and provide feedback for each other. Being able to see work by other students can be inspiring for students as they can see the quality of work that other students are producing. Furthermore, being able to see a large number of essays by their classmates allows them to see different ideas, useful phrases and grammatical structures that they could learn from. Also, by viewing a piece of writing as a "teacher" and being required to give feedback allows the students to see their own work differently as they need to take a step back and think about what does and does not work well (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009). Finally, the thought that your work will be viewed by your classmates also creates a little bit of pressure such that students are more likely to put in the effort to produce a high quality piece of work and complete it on time.

Essay correction tasks

Essay correction tasks can also be conducted using Google Docs. An essay with errors could be uploaded and students would be challenged to correct it. This could be done in pairs with students required to discuss and justify the changes that they were making or it could be set as individual homework.

Student portfolios

The Google Drive could be used to create a comprehensive portfolio of a student's work. If all of their work was created and shared in Google Drive, it would be possible for a teacher to organize and record all of their work, from individual and group presentations to essay assignments and graduation thesis work. A portfolio like this would also allow the students to easily see the progress that they have made throughout studies, from their earliest work to final drafts and presentations.

Spoken feedback

It is often easier to explain what the problem with a piece of writing is through spoken words than in writing (Nortcliffe & Middleton, 2010). In spoken feedback, certain points can be emphasised, which would be more challenging in written feedback. A free Google Docs plug-in called *Kaizena* (2019) allows a teacher to highlight text and then record a spoken comment. Not only is this a very fast way to give detailed feedback, but also the students are more likely to *listen* to the spoken feedback than to *read* the equivalent amount of written feedback (Lunt & Curran, 2010). Similarly, the students can reply with audio, if they wish, thus giving them speaking practice. Both the teacher and the student need to have the Kaizena plug-in in order to make or listen to an audio recording.

6. Conclusion

The benefits of switching to a fully online system such as Google Drive are considerable. The ease with which teacher-student and student-student collaboration can take place is remarkable. Also, being able to revise their assignments allows students to create work that they can be justifiably proud of. Beyond language learning, becoming familiar with the Google Drive ecosystem helps the students to learn and use online tools to create, organize and share their work. This is not just an academic skill, but a skill that is valuable in the modern workplace. More and more jobs are in creative industries that involve collaborative and remote work, so being able to confidently work with files collaboratively online is important. Furthermore, file security is something that has become an increased concern recent years, so knowing exactly who has access to a file and how to protect one's work is an essential part of being digitally literate. The students need time to experiment with these modern tools and learn how to use them to create attractive and professional content. Giving the students practical tasks that require them to utilise the various tools at their disposal in Google Drive allows them to learn these fundamental, modern skills.

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