

Video recording for speaking development: A Google Classroom case study

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Introduction

The academic year of 2020–21 brought numerous challenges for universities, teachers, and students. The global COVID–19 pandemic was declared on 12 March 2020, which led to the sudden closure of schools and universities in Japan in order to reduce the spread of the coronavirus. The transition to online classes required the redesign of teaching methods and assessment as well as learning how to use many new technologies. With regards to speaking, pair and group work are core elements of the second–language classroom, giving students the opportunity to develop their speaking skills with each other. As an English teacher, traditional, in–person classes focus on communication and interaction, and trying to recreate this online was a daunting prospect.

Problem

In the early stages of the pandemic, there were concerns regarding how students would have equal access to online classes. In terms of technology, it was explained that teachers should assume that not all students had access to computers or highspeed Internet, as some students rely on the university’s computer laboratories in order to conduct research and complete assignments, and this resource would not be available while the university was closed. Classes had to be planned under the assumption that students only had access to a smartphone, did not have Wi–Fi access, and had a limited data plan. This meant that teachers had to carefully consider how classes would be delivered and how assignments would be submitted; all students had to be able to participate in class. For example, streaming long video lectures was deemed unacceptable due the amount of data that a student would be required to use to view the lecture. As a result, the problem of how to deliver a communicative class asynchronously became the challenge for language teachers.

While it is tempting to refer this mode of instruction ‘online learning,’ a more appropriate term would be emergency remote teaching, also referred to as ERT. This can be understood as a temporary shift in how class material is delivered due to a crisis. This includes the use of fully remote teaching solutions for classes that would normally be delivered face–to–face and will return to that format once the crisis has passed (Educause, 2020). What can be delivered during a period of ERT should not be compared to what could be delivered through online teaching, which may involve months or even years of planning.

Having used audio recordings for asynchronous speaking practice for many years (Macleod & Sanchez, 2018), I have experience in such assignments, but during ERT, these were to be a core

part of class assessment. While the audio recordings I had used in the past been effective in teaching speaking skills, I wanted more details about how well the students were speaking, so I chose to ask students to make short video recordings. In this article, I will outline the learning management system that I used, explain the methods of instruction and assessment, share some feedback I received from the students, and reflect on how I would improve this type of instruction in the future.

Solution – Google Classroom

To successfully transition to remote teaching required institutions to make a clear decision about which learning management system they would use. Consistency across the university's courses was crucial in order to reduce the demand being placed on students. If teachers were to use a wide variety of tools to deliver their classes, it would place excessive demands on the students, as they would need to learn how to use each of these tools. The university I will be writing about in this article required all teachers to use Classroom, by Google.

Created by Google, Classroom allows teachers to create classes, communicate with students, and share resources such as documents, videos, and links. An integrated grading system enables teachers to easily grade and track the work submitted by students. Classroom can be accessed from a computer, smartphone, or tablet PC, and has a clean and intuitive interface. While I was familiar with how to use Google products, such Drive, Docs, Sheets, and Forms, I had never used Classroom to teach a university-level class. Classroom provides a lot of flexibility in terms of the types of assignments and quizzes that can shared with students, but for the purposes of this article, I will be focusing on how I used the *Assignment* feature to provide my students with structured, asynchronous speaking practice.

Setting-up Classroom

To use Classroom to teach at a university, the institution must sign-up for the Google Workspace, known as the G-Suite until it was rebranded in October, 2020 (Google Workspace, 2021). This is a paid platform that provides features such as Gmail email addresses for users, increased storage, and the integration of tools such as Google Drive and Google Meet. As of April 2020, Classroom was being used by more than 100 million students and teachers at thousands of schools worldwide (Bloomberg, 2020).

Getting started with Classroom is straightforward. To create a class, visit classroom.google.com, click the plus icon at the top-right of the page, and selecting Create class (see figure 1).

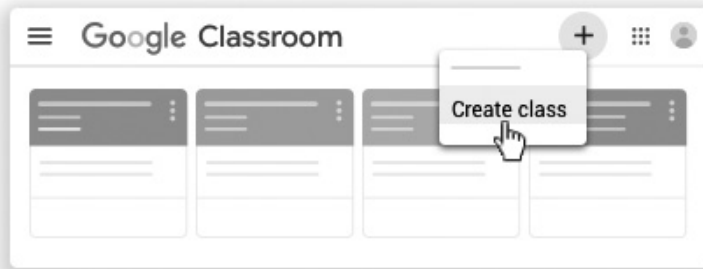


Figure 1: Creating a class

Next, the teacher enters the class name and other details such as section, subject and room number (if applicable). Classroom then provides a unique class code that can be shared with the students. The students log into Classroom using their university email accounts and join the class using this code. Alternatively, the teacher can send a class invitation link by email to the students.

Creating class topics

In Classroom, classes are organised by topics, which can be given descriptive titles, or they can simply be numbered according to textbook unit numbers or the weeks of the semester. To create a topic, select the class, click on *Classwork* tab at the top of the page, click *Create* and select *Topic* at the bottom of the dropdown menu (see figure 2). Then, write the name of the topic and click *Add*.



Figure 2: Creating a topic

A topic is not visible to the students until it contains a published post such as an assignment or a shared file. The benefit of this is that teachers can input class material in advance and then publish it on the day of the class. It is also possible to schedule the publication of posts. Topics, and posts within topics, can be rearranged at any time by dragging and dropping them wherever necessary.

How to create an assignment

Assignments are the basic delivery method for providing work for students to complete. It is possible to attach files and links as part of an assignment, but in the case of this research, only written instructions were provided. To create an assignment, select the *Classwork* tab, then *Create*, and then select *Assignment* from the dropdown menu (see figure 3). A title for the assignment can then be added as well as instructions. Select the class that the assignment is for, the grade category that this assignment is part of, and how many points will be assigned to it (see figure 4). Categories can be weighted or grades can be calculated based on a total points; in both cases, Classroom calculates overall grades automatically.



Figure 3: Creating an assignment

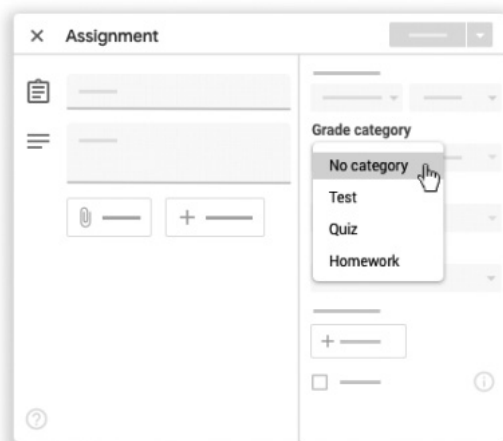


Figure 4: Assigning a grading category

Setting a due date for an assignment helped to keep students on track (see figure 5). This was particularly important during ERT, as students would often complete an assignment at the last minute rather than during class time. If a student failed to submit their assignment on time, their work was marked as 'Missing' or 'Turned in late' as soon as the due date and time arrived.

The final step is to select the topic that the assignment is related to, which places the assignment within the correct section of the course material (see figure 6). Assignments can be published immediately, or they can be scheduled to be published at a later date. Nothing is assigned until the *Assign* button is clicked, so any information entered by the teacher is saved as a draft for publication at a later date. This allows the teacher to batch their assignment creation.

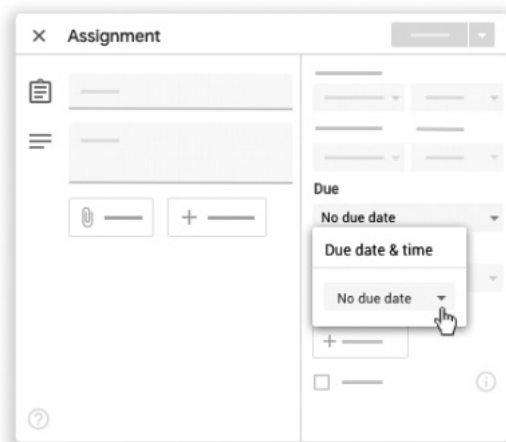


Figure 5: Setting a due date

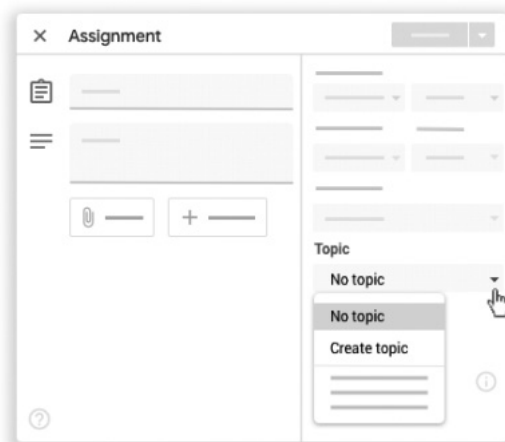


Figure 6: Selecting the topic for an assignment

While this may seem like an excessive number of steps, once one becomes accustomed to the Classroom system it takes just a few seconds to enter this information. It is also possible to post assignments to multiple classes at the same time, which is very convenient when using the same assignments with different groups of students.

Reusing posts

One way that assignment creation can be streamlined is to reuse posts and batch assignment creation. By clicking the *Reuse* post option, assignments from previous weeks can be copied and then updated with new material or instructions as necessary, rather than creating posts from scratch each time. Assignments for a whole semester can be entered into the system at the same time and saved as drafts. Removing friction during the assignment creation process can result in a significant time-saving over several courses during a semester.

Methodology

The participants in this research (27: 13 male, 14 female) were enrolled in a pre-intermediate level international communication course at a Japanese university. The textbook used was *What foreigners really want to know about Japanese culture and history* (Lockley, 2019). The book contains chapters on different aspects of Japanese culture from kimono, manga, and samurai, to Mt. Fuji, Kyoto, and the Imperial Palace. Latter chapters in the book cover some Japanese who had an important role in history, particularly in terms of Japan's international relations. The students were already familiar with many of these topics, so they had confidence when discussing them. While it is hoped that students will be comfortable discussing any topic in English, utilizing the schema of familiar topics can be helpful when teaching lower-level students (Eysenck & Keane, 2010).

The speaking assignment that this research focusses on was the final assignment in a five-part class. The first part was a pre-reading task in which the students were asked to write about their understanding of the week's chapter topic before they had read the chapter. The second part was to answer ten comprehension questions based on the chapter. The third part was to participate in a written online-discussion in which they had to give their response to a question asked by the teacher and then participate in a discussion with other students. The fifth and final part was the speaking assignment, which I will explain in detail below.

In the speaking assignment, the students were asked to speak for two minutes about what they had learned from the current chapter of the book. Rather than there being a specific correct answer, the students were encouraged to express their personal thoughts in any format that they wished. Typically, the students highlighted three or four points that they had learned from the textbook and provided some context about why they found that information interesting or surprising. In order to help them plan and remember what they wanted to say, the students were instructed to make bulleted list of points that they wanted to talk about. However, they were explicitly instructed not to write a script, as the aim of this assignment was speaking, not reading or delivering a speech.

Recording and submitting speaking practice

To submit a recording, students opened the Classroom application on their smartphone and tapped on the current week's speaking assignment. They then read the assignment instructions and tapped *Your work* at the bottom of the screen. Tapping *Add attachment* revealed a number of options, from which they selected *Use camera*, activating their smartphone's main camera. The students then tap the switch camera button to activate the front-facing 'selfie' camera. By default, the still camera option is selected, so the students have to select video. The steps in the process can be seen in figures 7 and 8 below.

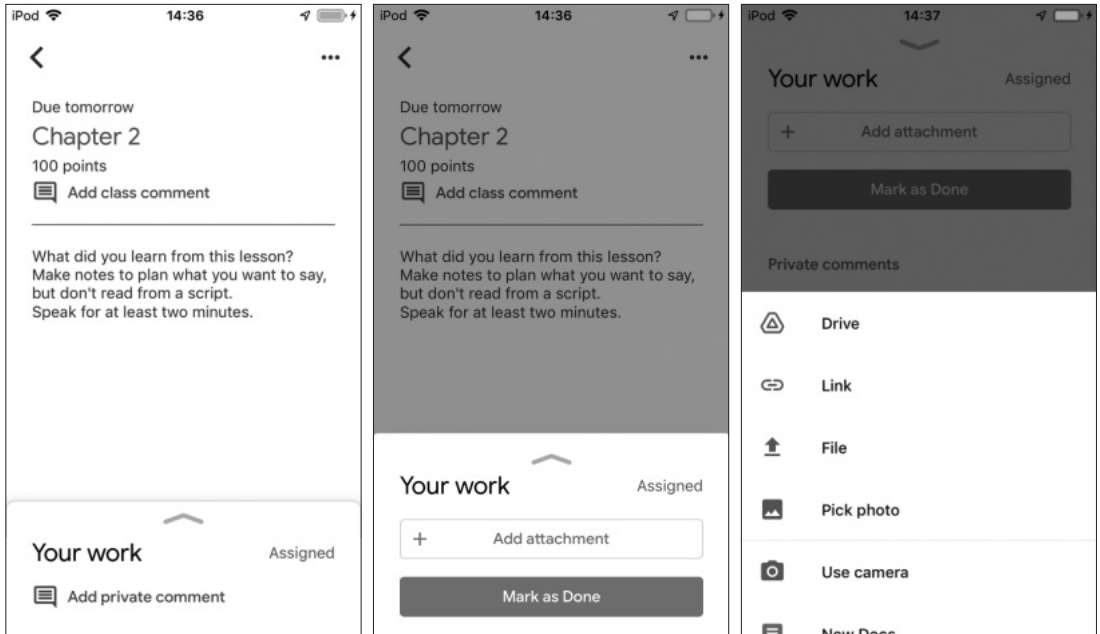


Figure 7: Recording a speaking assignment response

To ensure that students recorded high quality videos, they were asked to find a quiet location with good lighting to record in. Also, they were asked to rotate their smartphone and record in landscape mode, setting their smartphone on a desk so that they could speak without having to worry about holding the camera and framing themselves while they spoke. This allowed them to move more freely and to use gestures to express themselves when speaking.

Once the students had recorded their video, they could review it and tap *Re-take* to record the video again. Once they were satisfied with their recording, they tapped *Use video*. The video took a few seconds to upload and was then displayed on the screen as an attachment. The students then tapped *Hand in* and waited a few seconds for a confirmation message that their video had been submitted.

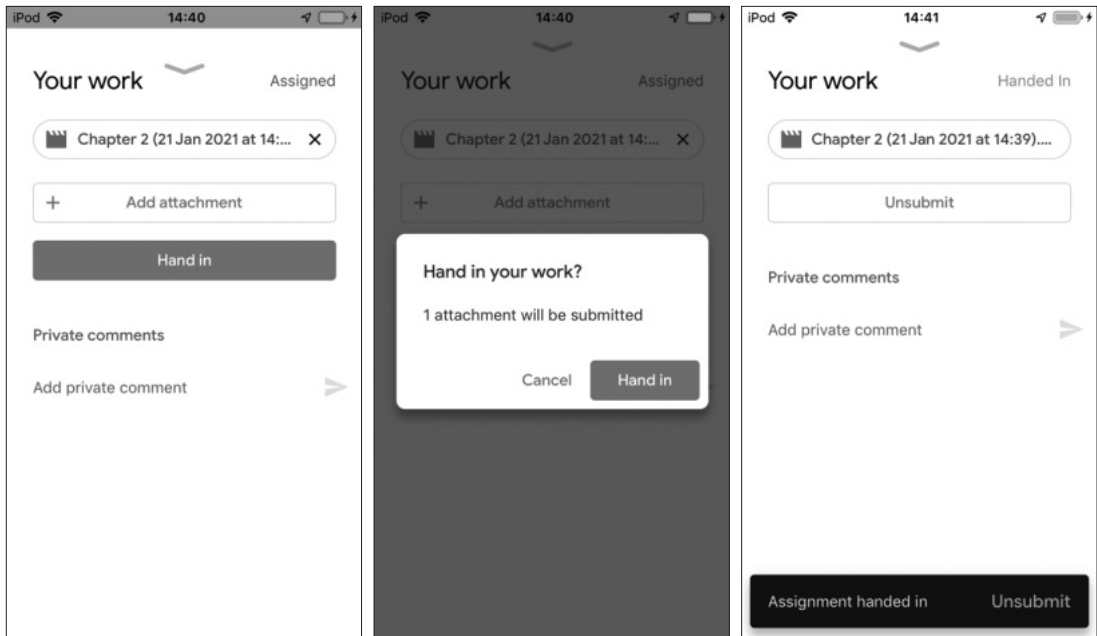


Figure 8: Submitting a speaking assignment response

Grading and feedback

The process of grading assignments was simplified by the fact that student videos could be streamed from the Internet, meaning that I did not have to receive or manage large video files. To grade the assignments, I opened the assignment in Classroom and click *Handed in*, which displayed thumbnails of all recordings that had been submitted. By clicking on a student’s thumbnail, I was taken to a page with a YouTube-style video player, a box where I could enter the student’s grade, and a box where I could write private feedback for the student. I found it useful to have the previous week’s speaking assignment open in another window at the same time to remind me what grade and feedback I had provided that student with in the previous class. This enabled me to check whether the student had incorporated the different feedback I had given in the previous week in their current submission. After watching the video, entering a grade, and providing some private feedback, I clicked the right arrow next to the student’s name, which took me to the next student’s submission.

Class-wide feedback

Having provided private feedback for each student, I summarised those points to provide class-wide feedback in a short video that I uploaded to the class YouTube channel. All the videos were categorised as unlisted, so only those with the URL were able to watch them. I offered advice on how to improve in each of the five class assignments, but I found that the most beneficial use of the video was to give feedback on speaking. The contents of the videos varied from week-to-week, but I often gave advice on fluency, pronunciation, stress, as well as general encouragement.

Evaluation

The teacher's perspective

As a teacher, being able to listen to each student speak individually was the main pedagogical advantage of this method. Speaking done in a classroom setting is fleeting and students often feel uncomfortable, which makes measuring speaking ability problematic (McNamara, 1996). Moreover, providing on-the-spot personal feedback during a face-to-face class is not only challenging for a teacher, but also embarrassing for students.

Being able to listen to my students speak uninterrupted for an extended period of time revealed numerous aspects of their speech that I would not have been able to identify in a traditional classroom setting in which most speaking practice is conducted in pairs. Some of these issues were common among all students in the class, but some were idiosyncratic aspects of speech displayed by individual students. These insights have helped me to re-think the contents of my speaking classes, bringing them more in line with what my students actually struggle with. Also, being able to actually see the students speaking in videos (rather than just hearing them) allowed me to identify pronunciation issues in a way that would have been impossible with audio-only recordings (Davidson & Leung, 2009).

From a practical, course-delivery point of view, Classroom provided a workflow that enabled me to be more efficient in my assignment creation and grading by batching my work. This was the first time that I have been able to work with video recordings of students, and the power of Google's online infrastructure meant that these could be managed in the cloud; neither teachers nor students had to worry about handling large video files.

The student's perspective

In terms of the speaking assignment itself, the fact that the videos being recorded were private was an important factor for the students. All 27 students said that they would not have wanted their videos to be available for their classmates to view. Creating a safe space in which students could speak freely was crucial and I found that they were able to share their opinions with less restraint and possibly even try harder than they would have if they knew that their efforts were going to be seen by their classmates. I also feel that the students were more relaxed talking directly to a camera than they would have been talking to someone in person. Being able to make a mistake and try again was important for the students as they typically made two or three recordings before submitting their work. When talking to someone face-to-face, students have one attempt to convey their ideas, during which they will make mistakes and have to self-correct. Giving the students the opportunity to try and try again in order to produce speech that they were happy with helped the students to discover that they could speak smoothly, rather than having only one experience of fumbling through a conversation with a classmate and feeling embarrassed about it.

Receiving individual feedback was a key benefit for the students. Rather than having to rely on generic advice from the teacher, they could receive feedback about how they personally could improve their speaking. Having a teacher analyse and provide feedback on 30 minutes of speaking in a single semester would not be possible in a traditional, face-to-face class setting. Also, the students could watch their recordings from earlier in the semester, enabling them to see for themselves how much they had improved. Again, this would have been impossible in a traditional classroom, so the video recordings were a valuable resource.

Post-course questionnaire

There were 27 students taking this course and none of them had recorded video of themselves speaking English before. Eighty percent (22 students) said that they enjoyed or very much enjoyed the speaking assignments, with other students claiming that they found the assignments stressful or too challenging. Seventy-five percent (20 students) said that they would like to do this type of assignment in other classes, and all 27 students believed that they had improved their speaking ability as a result of taking this course. The main areas in which they felt that they had made progress included: pronunciation, confidence and attitude towards English, their range of vocabulary, and being able to speak without a script.

One concern related to online learning is that students may become overloaded with assignments, but most students (85 percent) responded that they spent between 15 and 20 minutes completing the speaking assignment each week, which I feel is an acceptable amount of time given that there were four other assignments to complete. The minimum length of time that students were asked to speak for was two minutes, but some students spoke for as long as four minutes, which suggests that they were enjoying the assignment and gaining value from it.

Conclusion and future work

While time-consuming for the teacher, I felt that this assignment provided a good return on investment. Under normal teaching circumstances, listening to each student and giving individual feedback would have been a significant amount of work for a teacher, but as classes were asynchronous, I felt it was a necessary and valuable addition to the course. When face-to-face classes return, I will continue to use this assignment, but only every second week throughout the semester.

Although this assignment does not provide conversation practice, it became clear that conversation and speaking can and perhaps should be taught separately. Being able to speak for an extended period of time without a script is a skill in its own right, and something that can be developed without a conversation partner. Students can benefit from having the time and freedom to express their ideas without the pressure of having to participate in a conversation, which demands a different set of skills, such as active listening and turn-taking. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, assigning individual speaking practice every second week and alternating with live Zoom classes in which students could practice their conversation skills would allow students to

develop both their extended speaking skills and conversation skills.

Having taught the course for two semesters, I am now familiar with what the students struggle with and the kind of progress that I can expect by the end of a course. For that reason, I would like to develop a rubric to help me remain consistent with my grading and help the students to understand what is required of them.

As mentioned earlier, all students said that they would not have wanted their videos to be viewable by other students. The main reason for this was embarrassment, but some students said that they did not see any value in watching other students speak and that they were only interested in receiving feedback from the teacher. However, social comparison theory suggests that we need to know how others are performing to have a true understanding of our own performance (Thornton & Arrowood, 1966).

The enforced transition to ERT during the COVID-19 crisis helped to advance the field of digital learning by many years. Institutions, teachers, and students have become familiar with the mechanism of online learning and there are now communities of teachers online who help and support each other in order to provide quality online learning experiences for their students. This research has shown the benefit of teaching speaking online and in future research I hope to explore utilizing this in a blended approach, allowing online learning and face-to-face classes to complement each other.

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