9 Incorporating D2L and Google Docs in language teaching and learning

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Abstract

The present paper discusses ways of incorporating two digital tools, Desire2Learn (D2L) and Google Docs, in language teaching and learning. Data were collected from four French language modules offered at the University of Calgary. Through the analysis of the tutor's observations and module evaluations, this paper explores the effectiveness of these tools in helping learners and instructors to move beyond the walls of the classrooms, and to work towards creating an active and learner-oriented environment. Results obtained reveal that both tools contributed to creating an inclusive learning environment and facilitated student participation and instructor's feedback. The author suggests that some pedagogical interventions could be applied to enhance the effectiveness of these tools.

Keywords: D2L, Google Docs, inclusive, active, learner-oriented.

1.   Introduction

Teaching French language modules in a multicultural university in Canada presents challenges due to the relatively large size of the beginner-level classes and the various cultural and learning backgrounds of students. In order to increase student participation and to create a tailored and active learning experience, this

paper proposes the incorporation of the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) platform D2L and Google Docs in French language classes offered at the University of Calgary, in line with current pedagogical approaches (Hockings, 2010; McGuire, 2015) that promote innovative language teaching and learning practices. The modules align with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) levels as follows: A1-A2, A2, B2, and C1.

2. D2L, Google Docs, and language learning

2.1. Creating an inclusive, synchronized, and collaborative learning environment

When we walk into a classroom, we often notice a tapestry of cultural and social backgrounds that anticipates the same level of inclusiveness. Critical pedagogues like Hockings (2010, p. 2) maintain that as a tutor, being inclusive means actively acknowledging students, being mindful of their academic needs, and adequately guiding and supporting them on their academic journeys, regardless of their backgrounds, prior knowledge, and more. Hockings (2010) highlights practices that support an inclusive teaching environment. For instance, learning about individual students, creating a safe, respectful, and open-minded learning environment, addressing individual needs, and challenging existing policies, practices, and systems that exclude certain students (Hockings, 2010, pp. 46-47). Digital tools such as VLEs like D2L and Google Docs may facilitate the application of these pedagogical strategies.

D2L (https://www.d2l.com/) is a virtual learning management system widely used in Canadian universities. Like all VLEs, this online platform creates a virtual space where the instructor can manage students' grades, post news, and learning materials, design online quizzes and assignments, and engage with students in the discussion forums. Depending on tutors' teaching styles and their familiarity with technology, these functions are used unevenly in classes, and especially in the modules here analysed. To tackle this issue, I embarked on a more active use of D2L. For instance, in module C1, to encourage more participation and use of

D2L, I started by building a rapport with students prior to the first class of the module. As an icebreaker, I sent a welcome message in the discussion forum and invited students to introduce their study programme(s), hobbies, and expectations of the module. It helped me to get to know students on an individual basis, and to slightly adjust teaching style and module content in order to meet their needs and expectations. According to Glazer (2016), this established rapport between tutor and students also allows to foster a learning environment beneficial for students' collaboration in and outside the class. During the semester, I used D2L to engage in a consistent dialogue with students, for instance about assignments and module content, in order to explore and add new dimensions to the module-related topics (see supplementary material, part 1).

Figure 1.   Using Google Docs for an in-class grammar activity (A2)

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Groupe 1: Jacques Cartier (1491-1557) est l'un des grands explorateurs français. Il naquit (est né) à Saint-Malo en 1491. Dans sa jeunesse, il alla (est allé) au Portugal, au Brésil et probablement dans la région de Terre-Neuve. En 1534, le roi de France lui donna (a donné) la mission d'explorer les côtes de l'Amérique du Nord. Cartier et ses hommes partirent (sont partis) de Saint-Malo le 20 avril et arrivèrent (sont arrivés) dans la région de Gaspé au Canada le 25 juillet.

Groupe 2: Cartier descendit (est descendu) à terre, planta (a planté) une croix dans le sol et prit (a pris   ) possession de la région au nom du roi de France. L'expédition revint (est revenue) en France où elle fut (a été) reçue en triomphe. Jacques Cartier fit (a fait) un second voyage en 1535 avec la mission cette fois de chercher de l'or et des pierres précieuses.

Groupe 3: Il n' trouva (a   pas trouvé   ) d'or mais il découvrit (a découvert   ) un immense fleuve qu'il nomma (a nommé) Saint-Laurent. Cartier remonta (est remonté) le fleuve jusqu'au site d'un village indien, Hochelaga, aujourd'hui Montréal. Les premiers colons français s'installèrent (se sont installés) au Canada 70 ans plus tards. C'est ainsi que le Canada devint (est devenu   ) un territoire français.

Pour plus d'informations sur le passé simple, lisez:
https://www.podcastfrancaisfacile.com/cours/passe-simple-lecon-francais-facile.html
http://www.alloprof.qc.ca/BV/pages/f1191.aspx

To provide a synchronized and collaborative learning environment, in A1-A2 and A2, I created a shared Google Docs for each class to use throughout the semester. Through this tool, I had instant access to students' input during the in-class group activities (see Figure 1 above). Therefore, I was able to target and approach the group(s) or individuals in need of guidance in a timely manner. These informal and frequent assessments allowed me to provide feedback and adjust teaching practices when necessary.

2.2.   Fostering an active learning environment through task-based activities and learner-oriented discussions

As Ambrose et al. (2010) and McGuire (2015) argue, active learning encourages student engagement in contrast to a more passive environment that can be found in a lecture-based classroom. Research has clearly shown that active learning techniques, such as concept maps, debates, discussions, games, peer instruction and/or reviews, pooling, and role playing can be more effective than other teaching techniques as they contribute to the generation of comprehension and retention of concepts (Handelsman, Miller, & Pfund, 2007). Using digital tools, the tutor may find it easier to employ the above learning techniques in larger size classes, or to propose active learning outside the classroom.

In A2, Google Docs was used to propose a more creative activity (Figure 2). I generated a shopping list with a Google Doc, divided students in groups of four and asked them to shop on the French version of the Canadian Walmart website (https://www.walmart.ca/fr). At the end of this activity, I selected two winners amongst the groups, under the following criteria: one for being the fastest to add all the products in the shopping cart, and the other for finding the products with the lowest total estimate. Defining the winners using two different criteria kept students motivated and engaged even when some groups had already completed their task. This activity helped learners to reflect on how module content may fit into their daily life, and offered a new way to act in their enhancement of new vocabulary and expressions.

Figure 2. Using Google Docs for a task-based learning activity (A2)

In B2, Google Docs allowed to keep track of all activities completed outside of class. For instance, in this course where after-class readings are frequently involved, I assigned paragraphs to each student, with a content table to be completed (vocabulary, summary, grammar) in Google Docs (see supplementary material, part 2). Each student was also asked to propose a discussion topic derived from their reading. For those who were less fluent in French, having access to the discussion topics allowed them to prepare ahead and to feel more confident when engaging in discussions in class. Furthermore, I could easily correct and comment on students' answers in the document, and highlight important content for them to review. D2L discussion forums were used in C1 for graded reading assignments (see supplementary material, part 3). Students asked and answered questions of each other to generate new ideas and enhance their comprehension of the text. Through this task, they took an active role in their learning, developed their critical thinking, and learned from each other.

In language classrooms, students are likely to have different preferred activities, a challenge addressed by the universal design for learning (Rose et al., 2006). The universal design for learning provides significant guidance supporting "multiple means of representation, […] expression, and […] engagement" (Rose et al.,

2006, pp. 3-4). Such an approach finds an ideal application in the digital context. For example, when teaching pronouns, I proposed two types of practice (see supplementary material, part 4): (1) a rather traditional exercise, where students rewrite a sentence by replacing underlined elements with a pronoun, and (2) another that prompts students to use grammar in real-life contexts. Either activity allows them to review a grammatical point. However, proposing two options increases the flexibility and variety in students' learning experiences, allowing them to choose the activity that suits their level and interest, thus taking a more active role in their learning. Completing such activities in Google Docs enables students to access classmates' answers, providing them with opportunities for peer correction and positive competition.

3. Results and discussion

The outcomes of these digitally enhanced learning strategies are based on the observations of the students in class, as well as on module evaluations at the end of the semester (Table 1).

Table 1. Students' evaluation on the overall instruction in three modules, compared with the average rating of the Faculty of Arts (evaluation of C1 fall 2018 is not available yet)

	Faculty (Winter 2018)	**A1-A2 (Winter 2018)**	**B2 (Winter 2018)**	**Faculty (Spring 2018)**	**A2 (Spring 2018)**
Rating (out of 7)	5.97	6.53	6.11	6.11	6.50
Enrolment	N/A	34	10	N/A	16
Valid instruments received	N/A	31	9	N/A	12
Response rate	N/A	90.18%	90%	N/A	75%

As there are no specific questions regarding students' experience of using D2L and Google Docs in the module evaluations, the above ratings do not necessarily reflect students' feedback regarding these tools. However, from their verbal and

written comments cited below, some included in the open comments on the official module evaluations, it has become apparent that students appreciated (1) the learning environment ("comfortable learning environment", "class is engaged and interactive", "D2L is organized and D2L notes are very helpful"), and (2) the learning activities ("[the tutor] spends time and provides a lot of ways to know students' competences and weaknesses, offers many helpful resources", "[the tutor proposes] various activities, games, group work and speaking practices that facilitate learning and encourage participation", "[the tutor] uses technology", "group work on Google Docs is great for answering questions anonymously").

Out of a total of fifty-two students who submitted the module evaluations, four students provided negative feedback on Google Docs. In A1-A2, two students considered it to be ineffective and slow, another student found the simultaneous use of Google Docs in class to be anxiety inducing. In B2, one student pointed out the inconvenience of browsing information on Google Docs when the content is growing. This has led me to consider the differences of students' familiarity with technology, which may affect the use of digital tools in larger classes.

In C1, eighteen out of the twenty-four students participated in the D2L self-presentation, and almost everyone participated in the forum discussions. The slight increase showed that setting forum discussions as graded assignments (each 2%) slightly affects participation. Providing individual feedback to students' posts could have also encouraged their contribution, although it is time-consuming and could be unfeasible for larger classes. Finally, it is evident that the length and quality of students' input varied and were associated with their language proficiency, familiarity with the topic, and time to participate.

4.   Conclusion

This paper underlined the role of D2L in providing an interactive learning space outside class, and the usefulness of Google Docs in fostering a synchronous and collaborative learning environment. Both tools facilitated efficient feedback and adjustments in teaching. The practice outcomes correspond largely with

the literature presented in this paper in creating an active and learner-centred environment. Based on students' feedback and my self-reflection, the following changes will be implemented in my future pedagogical practice:

- for lengthy Google Docs, using a table of contents to facilitate students' viewing and retrieving of information;

- using only those functions that are in line with learning outcomes;

- explaining verbally and/or in writing the reasons and benefits of using these tools; and

- giving students time to familiarise themselves with these tools.

These changes should contribute towards students' better understanding of how digital tools are linked to the learning objectives. In the future, it would be helpful to investigate whether such changes will increase the effectiveness of these digital tools and how much further they improve students' academic performances.

Supplementary material

https://research-publishing.box.com/s/ntum021u8unzudctmgw7wbvycwfh1jia

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