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GOOGLE MEET AS A VIDEO CONFERENCING TOOL DURING COVID-19 IN ONLINE FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Corona Virus Disease or known as COVID-19 has had a profound impact that has spread among every cycle of educational context in a short period of time. In the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak, foreign language education, which was one of those affected cycles of educational context, had to be conducted by quitting physical settings, and the new normal was changed into working or studying from home. In the emergency circumstances in the pandemic, failure of education and losing social relationships were the most common types of threat experienced by all stakeholders such as students, teachers and educators. However, with the help of video conferencing tools, those threats were easily overcome. Thus, in foreign language education online synchronous lessons, classes and meetings became the new routine. This means in the age of lockdowns due to COVID-19, video conferencing tools helped people stay connected. One of those platforms used for foreign language teaching and learning was Google Meet. Driven by this perspective, the objective of the present study is to document the positive aspects of Google Meet by thematically analyzing the related literature. For the data collection phase of this qualitative descriptive study, the three words - “Google Meet”, “language education” and “COVID”- were searched by using Google Scholar, and among the results, the three studies indexed in Web of Science were selected for analysis. The following seven themes were generated by the thematic analysis of the three studies on Google Meet in foreign language education context: Google Meet (1) is easy to access, (2) aids the transition from face to face to online teaching, (3) acts an effective and efficient synchronous tool for online foreign language education, (4) is user-friendly, (5) reduces the fear factor during the pandemic, (6) provides a safe environment, and (7) mediates real-time communication and interaction. The results of this study are thought to provide contributions for efficient and effective use of video conferencing tools for online foreign language education.

Keywords: Google Meet, Online foreign language education, Video conferencing tools, COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

With the rapid spread of COVID-19, the colleges and universities found themselves trying to ensure a safe educational environment in which the internet was the major facilitator. In this chaotic process, finding the best e-learning platform where efficient online education can be realized was a real challenge for both institutions and educators. In online/distance education, teachers and students are separated by physical distance and technology is benefitted from in order to close that distance in the instruction (Willis, 1993). To close that distance, institutions directed their attention to video conferencing tools which emerged to be significant assistants

during the pandemic, which is why “video conferencing saw a huge boost amid the global COVID-19 pandemic” (Kagan, 2021). Defined as “a type of teleconference conducted among more than two participants who transmit and receive both audio and video data via computer, smartphone, etc.” (Dictionary.com, 2021), video conferencing is a powerful tool in joining people who cannot actualize a face-to-face connection. Potential of broadband video conferencing for distance education lies in their ability to:

- improve teachers’ and students’ access to other teachers and students, thereby reducing the isolation of remote learners by facilitating the development of support networks;
- enhance the experiences of full-time students by providing them with opportunities to interact with peers or experts working professionally in the field;
- empower students by increasing the flexibility of learning situations so that students can choose to participate in real-time, archived or face-to-face activities as their needs and finances allow;
- engage remote students more fully, intellectually and emotionally, in their learning by combining videoconferencing with traditional learning activities and information communication technologies;
- become more inclusive for students with disabilities or limiting geographical/familial circumstances. (Smyth, 2005, p. 817)

With this potential, video conferencing “has seen a 535% rise in daily traffic in 2020” (Digital in the Round, 2021). There are various video conferencing tools such as Google Meet, Zoom, Skype etc., and Google Meet (GM) is Google’s video conferencing software which allows its users to stay connected within such chaotic atmospheres. Investigating the impacts of such softwares on educational contexts has been receiving much attention nowadays; however, because of the time limitation, studies about the use of video conferencing tools during the COVID-19 pandemic are scarce. Therefore, this study is an attempt to fill this gap by presenting a wider lens on technology integration into education. In this respect, the present study concentrates on GM and how it is used for online foreign language education during the pandemic.

THE STUDY

Aim of the Study

This qualitative descriptive study aims to document the positive aspects of Google Meet as a video conferencing tool used in online foreign language education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Considering this, the study is driven by the following two sub-aims:

1. to scrutinize and portray how the positive sides of GM have been described so far in the online foreign language education context during COVID-19,
2. to uncover main themes associated with the positive aspects of GM.

Selection and Analysis Process

With the aim of documenting the positive aspects of GM in this qualitative descriptive study, the following steps were realized for selecting the studies. Firstly, the existing literature on positive aspects of Google Meet for foreign language education during the COVID-19 pandemic was searched by using the three keywords “Google Meet”, “language education” and “COVID” via Google Scholar. The selection criterion for those is that they should be published

only in 2020 and 2021. Secondly, among the studies those focusing on foreign language education at tertiary level were chosen. The studies the researchers did not have full access to were not included in the selection phase. As the last step for limiting studies, the researchers wanted to limit the studies to the ones indexed in Web of Science. A total of three studies (Al-Marroof et al., 2020; Ironsi, 2021; Rigo & Mikuš, 2021) were collected and inductively analyzed. All selected studies included empirical accounts published as research articles.

After selecting the three studies, the researchers commenced on the analysis phase with no predefined themes. So as to analyze the selected studies, the two researchers first analyzed the studies on their own, and then they held nine Google Meet sessions in order to discuss emerging themes and arrive at common labels for those themes. The study analysis phase revealed the following seven major themes describing the positive aspects of Google Meet: Google Meet (1) is easy to access, (2) aids the transition from face to face to online teaching, (3) acts an effective and efficient synchronous tool for online foreign language education, (4) is user-friendly, (5) reduces the fear factor during the pandemic, (6) provides a safe environment, and (7) mediates real-time communication and interaction.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The boom of various videoconferencing tools has been triggered during the COVID-19 pandemic. GM is one of those video conferencing tools widely used to make online foreign language education effective and interactive in these emergency circumstances. So as to uncover the positive aspects of GM for online foreign language education in detail, this qualitative study revealed the following seven themes.

Theme 1: Google Meet is easy to access

The first theme related to the benefits of GM during the COVID-19 pandemic is that *Google Meet is easy to access*. This theme refers to the availability of GM which can be accessed easily by teachers and students. It is a video conferencing tool that can be uploaded to smartphones and laptops and easily updated (Al-Marroof et al., 2020). As Ismail et al. (2021) state, “Google Meet is a free Google product with an easy setup and one of the best tools for group video conferencing.” (p. 7). Additionally, it is possible to say that it is convenient and free for both teachers and students to upload and use for online foreign language education effortlessly in the emergency conditions of the pandemic.

Theme 2: Google Meet aids the transition from face to face to online teaching

All studies analyzed highlight the role GM serves to switch from face-to-face education to online teaching in foreign language education context. Thus, the second theme is that *Google Meet aids the transition from face to face to online teaching*. This theme is associated with the fact that the unprecedented switch to online education has enhanced the use of GM to sustain foreign language education. In accordance with this, GM becomes “one of the influential approaches to replace the face to face teaching environment within the breakdown period” (Al-Marroof et al., 2020, p. 5). Therefore, it can be regarded as an aid for the replacement of face to face education to online settings for the construction of common and certain routines for online foreign language education.

Theme 3: Google Meet acts an effective and efficient synchronous tool for online foreign language education

The third theme is that *Google Meet acts as an effective and efficient synchronous tool for online foreign language education*, which is related to efficient use of GM as a videoconferencing tool for synchronous foreign language learning and teaching. This means that because “the use of GM was somewhat effective as a language learning tool for the online

distant program” (Ironsi, 2020, p. 1) during the COVID-19 pandemic, GM improves interaction and communication between teacher and students and between students and students. In fact, GM enhances actual learning in real time online settings. Rosalina et al. (2021) explain that “Google Meet can be used as an alternative medium for direct interaction during the learning and teaching process virtually” (p. 2). Thus, it means GM acts as a communicative tool to pave the way for students to experience maximum online foreign language learning.

Theme 4: Google Meet is user-friendly

The fourth theme the analysis reveals is that *Google Meet is user-friendly*. It highlights the usefulness of GM and refers to the fact that GM is easy to use as it gives the students and teachers the opportunity to be connected with each other any time they want during the day. Thus, Rigo and Mikuš (2021) express this positive side of GM by stating that students “also appreciated the possibility of taking the classes from the comfort of their homes and they also positively commented on the modernity, effectiveness and speed of communication” (p. 103). What it means is that GM is easy and flexible to sustain real time interaction and communication during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Theme 5: Google Meet reduces the fear factor during the pandemic

Long duration of the lockdown period caused by the Coronavirus pandemic resulted in many types of fear such as fear of failure in education, fear of losing the ties within social relationships, fear of death etc. This increasing level of fear was investigated in the literature as well (Rahman et al., 2020; Sakib et al., 2021). For those parties involved in the educational sector, being unprepared for distance education and being technologically illiterate can easily be labeled as some of the factors triggering feelings of distress and fear, too. A recent study conducted on GM (Al-Marroof et al., 2020) looked into fear issues and technology acceptance by using the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). The outcome of their study showed that “the Perceived Fear is evident during the pandemic period, but the fact that Google Meet has a high degree of Perceived Ease of Use and Perceived Usefulness has reduced the fear factor and encourages students to attend the scheduled classes” (p.12). It is acknowledged that when and if feelings of fear decrease, there is a room for improvement, and GM has proven itself as a successful tool for this very purpose.

Theme 6: Google Meet provides a safe environment

During the transition from face to face education to distance education, institutions and educators tried hard to find not only a suitable platform but also a safe one for them and their students. Security and privacy were top most priorities underneath the safety label. There are some measures of GM for safe video conferences (Google Meet Help, 2021). To give some examples of those measures, firstly, each meeting has a code that is 10 characters long and with 25 characters, which makes guessing the code difficult. Secondly, meeting details can easily be changed in the invite. Thirdly, users without Google accounts are not allowed to join meetings. Lastly, users can report abusive behavior in meetings. The availability of GM together with its aforementioned features have “given all teachers and peers the self-sensing of security” (Al-Marroof et al., 2020, p. 13). Based upon these, GM can be considered a safe environment for distance education.

Theme 7: Google Meet mediates real-time communication and interaction

The sudden switch from traditional classroom to emergency remote online education affected not only in-class communication and interaction but also outside of the classroom since physical distancing catalyzed social distancing as well. Real-time communication and interaction are fundamental for foreign language classrooms where non-verbal signals also carry a significant amount of importance. Communicative approach is quite crucial in foreign language education

and this approach is based on the idea that “learning language successfully comes through having to communicate real meaning. When learners are involved in real communication, their natural strategies for language acquisition will be used, and this will allow them to learn to use the language” (British Council, 2021). Within this frame, Google Meet mediates real-time communication and interaction between the teacher and the students and also among students since students can be easily "encouraged to interact and produce language in real time, either via speaking on their microphones or using Google Meet’s comment section" (Rigo & Mikuš, 2021). The study by Ironsi (2021) confirmed GM's mediating role in fostering real-time communication and interaction since the instructors in his study “perceived the use of GM as an effective tool for language teaching and learning as it bridges the distance created as a result of online distant learning” (p. 13). English course students are of the same opinion in the study of Rigo and Mikuš (2021) since they stated that “the platform of Google Meet provided enough space for interactivity between the teacher and the students” (p. 98).

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused challenges, but at the same time new avenues for improving online foreign language education contexts. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, video conferencing users in foreign language education are seeing an exponential growth as a great number of people are attending online classes. In fact, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the new normal in foreign language education has become the virtual settings supported by video conferencing tools. Indeed, video conferencing has become a crucial tool in foreign language education rather than an optional innovation. One of those video- conferencing tools is Google Meet.

Coined on this, the findings of this study lead the researchers to draw some conclusions about the positive sides of GM for online foreign language education during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first positive side of GM lies in its being easy to access (Al-Marroof, 2020) when compared with the other video conferencing tools. Thus, the easy availability of GM makes it used widely by teachers and students. Thus, its second benefit is that GM acts as an aid to swift from face to face to online teaching. Thirdly, because GM enhances actual learning in real time online settings, it is regarded as an effective and efficient synchronous tool for online foreign language education. As stated by Ironsi (2020), “using online resources and tools like GM for effective and efficient lesson delivery in an emergency scenario” (p. 3) is vital to sustain education. During the COVID-19 pandemic, GM was easy and flexible to sustain real-time interaction and communication. As Rigo and Mikuš (2021) stated, “Google Meet allowed for real time communication” (p. 103). The fourth positive side of GM is related to its being user friendly, and the fifth one is about the positive impact on GM reducing the negative feelings evoked in people due to the emergency lockdown circumstances. In addition to this, GM provides a safe online environment for foreign language education, which is the sixth. Last theme is about the mediating role GM serves for real-time communication and interaction in foreign language education context.

In conclusion, documenting all these positive sides of GM will surely pave the way for facilitating online foreign language education contexts by moving beyond the emergency practices in terms of online learning via GM. Additionally, this study does not support the use of only GM as a video conferencing tool for the construction of synchronous settings. What drives this study is the idea that regardless of the videoconferencing tool used, “videoconferencing not only provided L2 learners with a platform to become engaged with content outside of the classroom and mediate language skill development, but also a tool to assume responsibility for their own learning and to collaborate with others” (Lenkaitis, 2020, p. 504). As this study shows, an efficient video conferencing tool like GM can enhance online

foreign language education settings during emergency situations to promote real time communication and interaction. It is hoped that the findings demonstrate various crucial implications about the positive sides of GM for online foreign language education for both crisis moments and afterwards.

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