
USING GOOGLE HANGOUTS FOR TEACHING ENGLISH ONLINE

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Abstract

In the last five years or so, as part of its Google For Education program Google has released many applications which can be used by teachers to enhance their information technology (IT) based teaching and learning. Google hangout is one of popular applications which is now available for free, in addition to Gmail, Google Doc, Google Drive, and Google Talk. This paper introduces the use of this Google Hangouts as an alternative application for an online learning, including for delivering a virtual English classroom. Better internet networks around schools and campuses today have made this online learning more possible to happen. This paper will specifically discuss some theoretical and practical reasons why English teachers need to be more familiar with an online mode of learning. The distinctive features of the Google Hangouts which make it more promising for an online learning compared to other chat applications such as Skype and Yahoo Messengers will be addressed. Few samples of learning activities as well as possible challenges using the Google Hangouts will also be discussed. Although it requires more research on the effectiveness of this application to enhance students' learning, it is believed that the use of this technology into a teaching process in many ways can fundamentally transform a traditional classroom.

Keywords: *English teaching, Google for education, Google Hangouts, online learning, blended learning*

1. INTRODUCTION

As the world develops and changes rapidly, it is important for (English) teachers to keep updated and familiar with any development in the information and communication technology (ICT). This familiarity would enable the teachers to make use of the technology to enhance their teaching in the classroom. This is also because challenges faced by today's teachers may be totally different from teachers in the past. Students' needs and behavior regarding the use of technology, for instance, are different from what the teachers used to see many years ago. Referring to a term which was first coined and popularized by education consultant, Prensky (2001), majority of students today are considered as 'digital native'. This refers to the fact that they have been familiar with any electronic devices, including the use of mobile phones and the internet since they were little kids. Therefore, teachers are supposed not to be left behind their students in using this technology.

Google Hangout is one of applications teachers need to be familiar with. This application is developed by Google Inc. as part of its Google for Education initiative in addition to other applications such as Gmail, Google Drive, Google Doc, or Google Calendar. Like other chat applications such as Skype or Yahoo Messengers, Google Hangouts is an excellent service that enables both one-on-one and group chats at a time. Some particular features from Google Hangouts are not only good for general chat purposes; I think that would also an interesting application to use by teachers to have a virtual classroom. The Google Hangouts allow teachers to interact virtually with learners in real time. This paper introduces step by step guidance on how to use this Google Hangout to teach (English) online.

2. REASONS BEHIND VIRTUAL CLASSROOMS

There are at least two reasons why using Google Hangouts is an interesting alternative for teaching English online. First, from a practicality point of view, there are some conditions when teachers can not physically attend at their traditional classrooms. It may because of their high mobility, their duty outside of town or natural disasters. Some university lecturers may be so active outside campus like attending conferences overseas, or doing other academic duty or activities out of the town. For this reason they have

to leave their classes and the students have to wait until they return to campus. This is definitely not fair for the students, especially if the lecturers have to be away for quite a long time.

Regarding the practicality reasons, some unexpected situations such as natural disaster may also have hindered the traditional classroom. When haze issues attacked Sumatera Island last year, for instance, all schools and university in Riau province were closed for more than two months. Practically there were no teaching and learning process at schools and universities as the students mainly stayed at home. The students only came to their schools once in a week to pick up some homework's and did them at home. The teaching and learning process was definitely ineffective. In this context, I would argue that if the schools, universities, teachers, and lecturers had been familiar with how to use this Google Hangouts, they would have been able to keep their class going through virtual classrooms regardless all the constraints.

Furthermore, from theoretical perspectives, introducing an online classroom would bring some advantages for the teaching and learning process. Some studies suggest that a virtual learning environment can be conducive to language learning as online learning appears to reduce student self-awareness and social anxiety which, in turn, results in increased language production (e.g. Bradley & Lomicka, 2000; Wallace, 1999; Carnevale, 2003; Roed, 2003 quoted in Lewandowski, 2015).

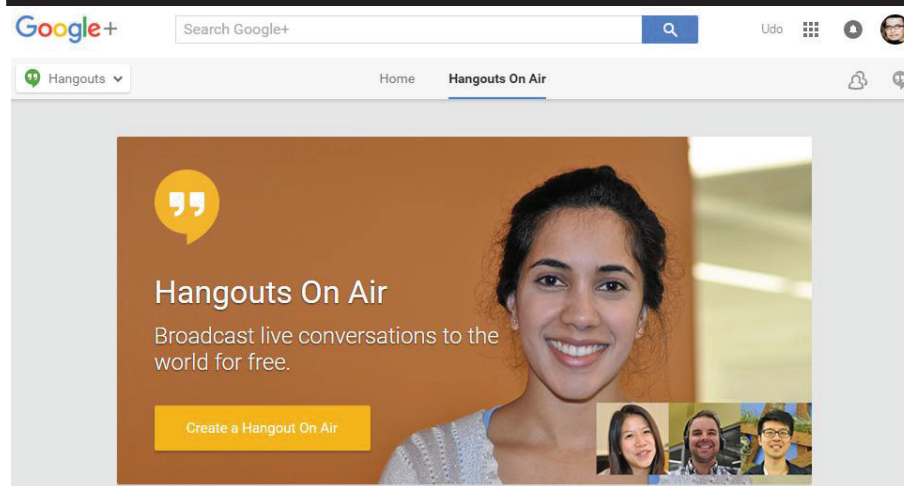
This virtual classroom activity can be also considered as a way for teachers to have a blended learning (Whittaker, C. and B. Tomlinson, 2013). In the context of English Language Teaching (ELT), 'blended learning' is the term most commonly used to refer to any combination of face-to-face teaching with computer technology (online and offline activities/materials). Therefore, it will be a good idea for teachers to have a virtual classroom as an addition or variation to their traditional teaching mode during their academic calendar. In practice, apart from some practical reasons as aforementioned, to do this blended learning, teachers should plan in advance to have some virtual classroom by using the Google Hangouts. A variation is indeed a good idea in terms of maintaining students' interests and enables them to have a new learning experience.

3. GOOGLE HANGOUTS FOR TEACHING ENGLISH ONLINE

As previously mentioned, Google Hangouts is an excellent service that enables both one-on-one and group chats with several people at a time (Lander, 2014). This is one of the services that would enable teachers, including English teachers, to have a virtual classroom. Apart from its feature for video based communication, users can also still hold a communication through this app using only the textual chat functionality, like texting features or they can add voice.

Lander (2014) further describes that there are two kinds of Google Hangouts. One is just Hangouts which are more of an engagement tool with friends, very much like Google chat and Skype. There is also another great feature called Hangouts on Air. This is the feature that would enable people to broadcast their communication or presentation both on YouTube and through your Google+ page. It is a great way to have a "public" event or get more people involved in the conversation.

For educational purposes, many people think that the Google Hangouts on Air is a great alternative to expensive webinar solutions where you and up to 9 guests can hangout and discuss whatever topic takes your fancy and broadcast that conversation to the rest of the world. However, you definitely can also set it up to be a 'private' event when you do not want your broadcast seen by public.



To make the best use of this Google Hangouts, the following section will guide you with step by step procedures on how to use the Google Hangouts, starting how to create a Hangout to how to manage the setting of Hangout and how can you use all the features for your teaching. Although not only limited to, this section will focus and discuss in more details on how to use Google Hangouts on Air for teaching English online.

Step 1: Setting Up and Promoting a Hangout

Before getting started, there are some technical issues you need to make sure. Apart from having computers with the latest configurations, you also need to have a high speed internet connection at each node. Your internet connection should work even without power supply. A reliable internet connection and power provision are extremely important for the maximum use of this Google Hangouts. In addition, you need to have an alternate source of power to ensure continuous transmission even during power outages. A black out may stop your hangout activity when you do not have an alternative power source. To be able to use Google Hangouts, the first important thing you need to do is that you must have a Google account or Gmail. You may use your personal Gmail or your business account to sign in. If you do not have it yet, you can sign up one for free. Signing up is an easy process. Once you have a Google account, you can use Hangouts on your Smartphone or tablet. Therefore, you can download the appropriate app for your device in the app store. Otherwise, you certainly can also use Hangouts on a computer. If you are using a Chrome browser, get the extension in the Chrome Store. If you prefer Safari, Firefox or Internet Explorer, download and install the plug-in.

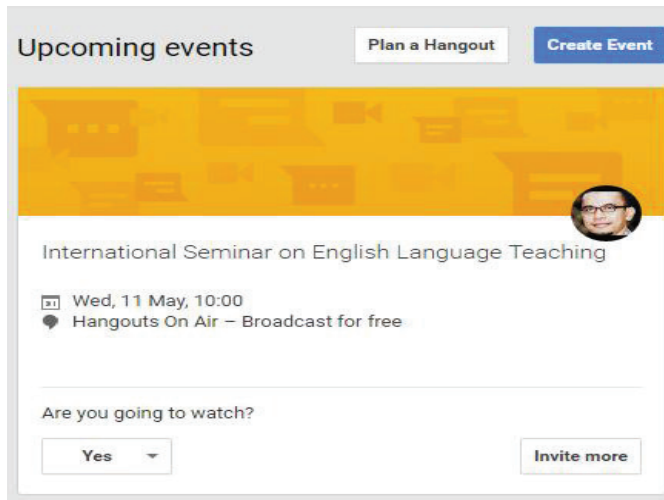
Chrome is more recommended browser by Google to when running a Hangout on Air. However, all other popular web browsers will also work well with no degradation of service. You will also need to link a YouTube channel with your Google+ account before starting a Hangout on Air. If you are not sure how to do this, you do not need to worry as this is quite straightforward and you will be prompted to do this when you first start testing with Hangout on Air.

To be able to use this Google Hangouts for teaching purposes, you also need to ask your students to have a Google account and install the necessary applications in their laptops or other devices. Once you and your students are ready with the installed app, you can now invite your students to your Google Hangouts on air. Before that, you need to create an event on the Google event page as described in the next step.

Step 2: Create and Event on the Google+ Event Page

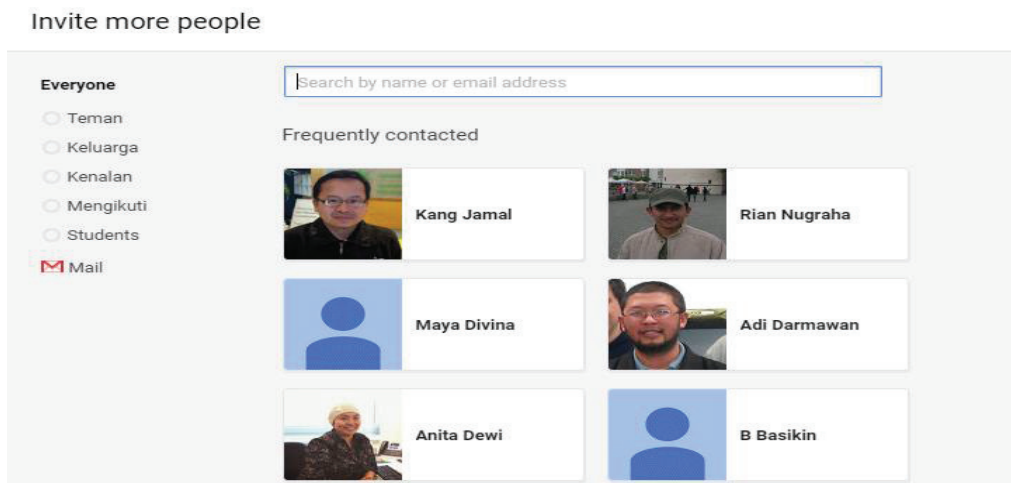
In order to be able to invite people or your students to join your class by using the Hangouts on Air you need to create an event. You can do this through clicking feature events on the left hand side drop down box under 'events' and work on it. This is where you place all of the important information about the event/Hangout/class, time, date, class description, and other important information (see the image below as a sample). You also need to give the event a title, try and make this as inviting and specific as possible to intrigue and encourage people to attend the event, if you deliberately plan to invite as many people as

possible to watch your presentation. To make your event look more interesting, you can upload your own banner promoting the event. An eye catching and unique banner is better.



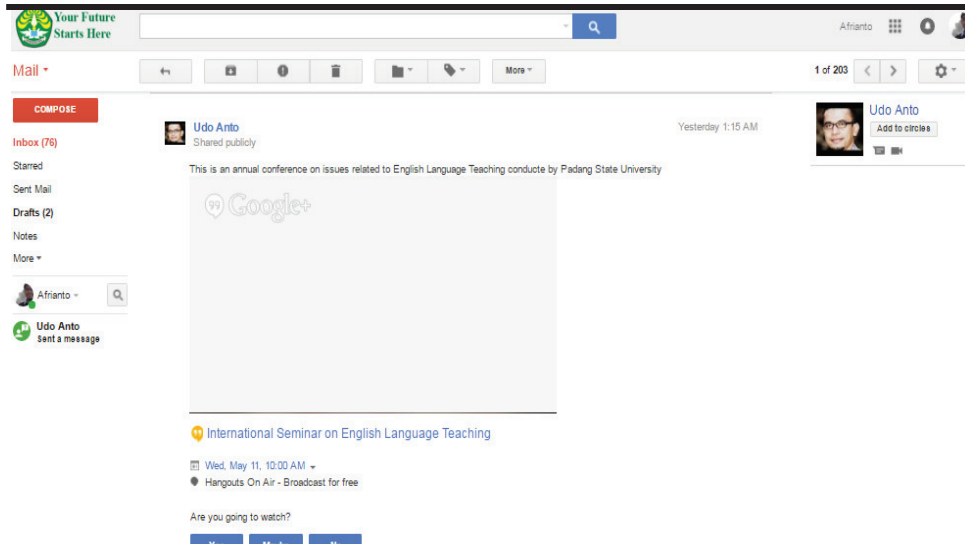
Step 3: Invite Students to Attend Your Event or Your Virtual Class

It is time for you now to invite your students to your virtual class. If you are already connected with your students in Google+ under particular circle, you can simply add that circle into the invitation box. Otherwise you have to invite them by typing their email addresses to the invitation box and then send the invitations. Please double check if their email addresses are correct to make sure they receive your invitation.



By inviting people in this way, those accepting the invite will be sent an email reminder shortly before the Hangout is due to air with a link taking them to your YouTube channel where the Hangout will be streaming live.

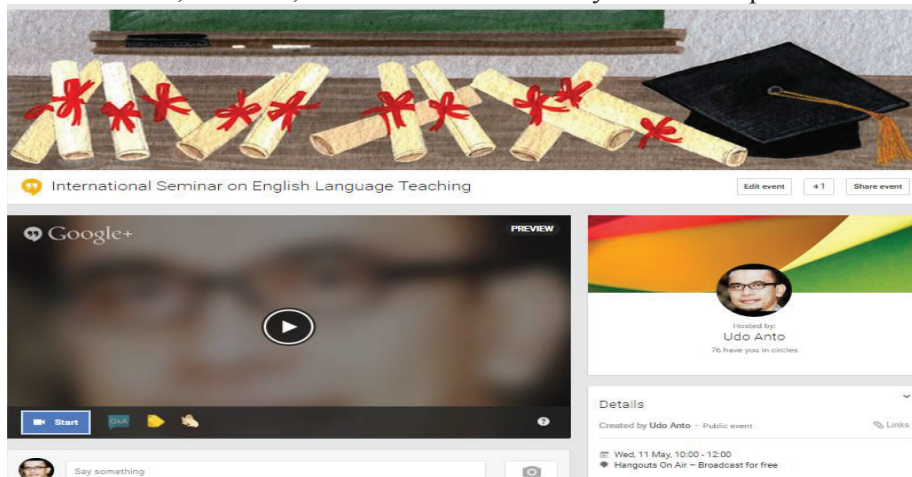
For the students invited, to accept the invitation, you simply need to check your email inbox. Go and click on the invitation email and answer 'yes' for the question to indicate that you are going to attend the event/the class.



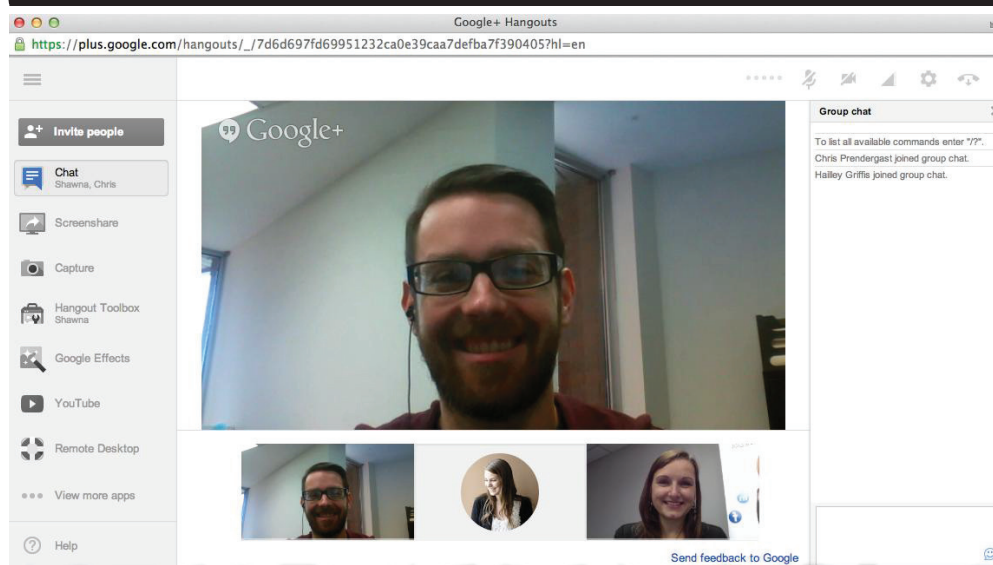
Please remember that people do not have to be on Google+ to join your Hangouts. They can simply click the YouTube link you send to view your presentation. Therefore, it is also important to share the link of your presentation/class to more and more people to let them know and listen to your online class/presentation.

Step 4: Starting the Hangout

It is important for you and your students to get familiar with all features of Google Hangouts before you go on air and broadcast your class. Therefore, it is imperative that you do some practices first with your students. The more you practice, the more comfortable you are going to feel before the live Hangout takes place. For the rehearsal purpose, you can also work with friends, family and colleagues to test the invites, software, features and functionality as much as possible before the Hangout date.

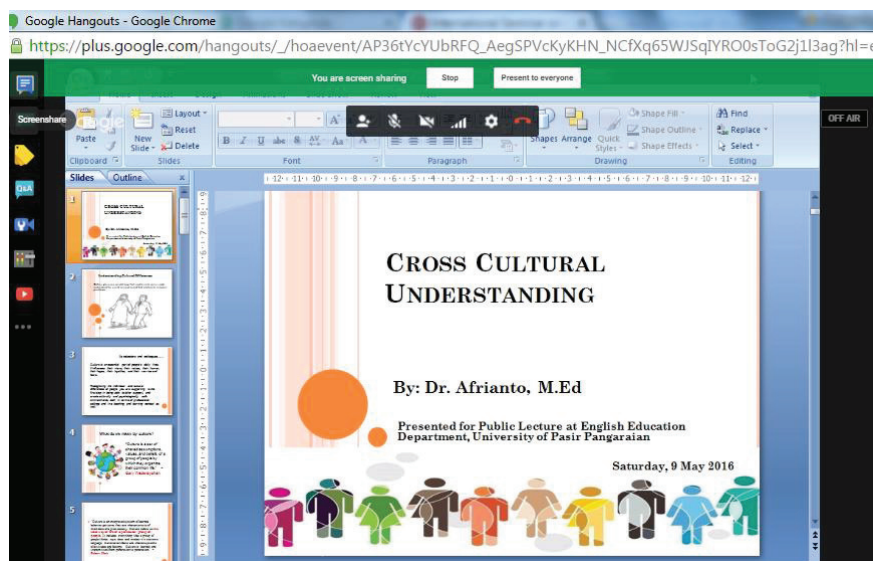


To start a Hangout, click start button on the bottom left side of your event. It will lead you to the interface of Google Hangouts as seen below:



Before you start broadcasting, again it is important for you to be familiar with some features on the Google Hangouts. Look at some icons on the top side of the Google Hangouts interface where you can invite a new student, mute your microphone, disable your video, set up volume, and make a call. While the icons on left side bar are place where you can share your screen to your viewers, exchange messages with audience, screenshot particular moment, and start question and answer session.

In particular, share screen feature is one of the distinctive and most important features Google Hangouts has in comparison to other chat applications like Skype and Face time. This feature is very important as teachers can use it for displaying their teaching materials on Google Hangouts and visible to all viewers (students). To do this, before clicking the screenshare bottom on the left side bar, you have to make sure that all materials to display have already opened in your computer screen. After that, clicking the screen share button will lead you to a place where you can choose the materials you want to display. It can be in the form of power point presentation, word document, images, or videos (see screen shot sample below).



Another important feature is question and answer (Q&A) facility in the Google Hangouts. The Q&A app allows those people watching from your Google+ home page or YouTube channel to type a question to you and your guests. This is a great way to interact with your viewers, people like nothing more than a 'shout out' during a live broadcast and this helps to encourage engagement.

Before broadcasting, you can also grab your video URL and share it somewhere like in social media to let people know about your event, if you want it viewed by as many people as possible. Otherwise just share the link to particular people or your students only. In addition, you also need to ensure that your camera, sound and lighting work correctly. All of these will affect the quality of your Hangouts via Google.

Step 5: Get ready to go ‘on air’ – smile and hit the start broadcast button.

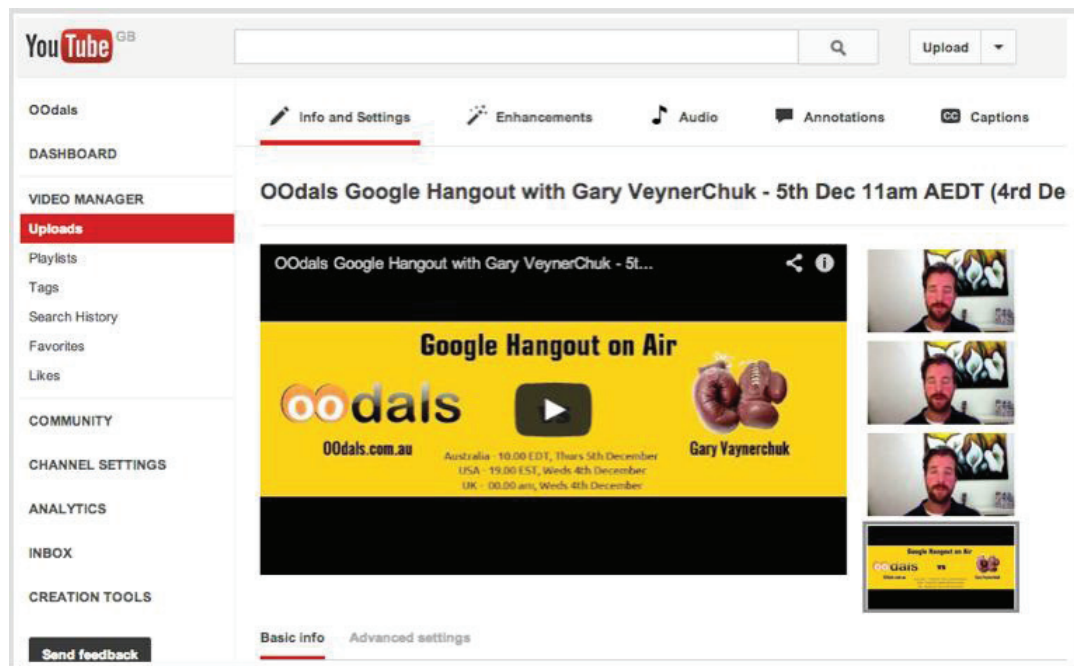
During the Hangouts, it is important to remember that you as teachers play multi roles at the same time. You are the host, the key note speaker, the cameraman, the sound technician and production assistant of your event/ class. Therefore, it is highly important that you are confident on how to control these features before you go into your Hangouts on Air and again, the best way to do this is to play around and experiment beforehand.

Once you hit the broadcast button, you are already ‘on the show’. In the context of teaching English online, this is the time for a teacher to deliver his or her lesson. After greeting everyone like what happens in a traditional classroom, the teacher can start explaining the topic s/he has prepared. Assuming that the teacher has prepared a power point slide presentation, s/he can now share the slide by using screenshare button, so his or her students can see the points presented from their own screens. At this stage, it might be appropriate to mute their students’ microphones until the teacher finishes his or her presentation. We can call this part as *listening* activity when the students listen to their teachers and try to comprehend the presentation.

After the presentation, it is the time for the students to speak. The students can raise some questions or answer questions from the teacher related to the topic presented (*speaking* activity). At this time, the teacher needs to be a moderator allowing particular students to speak and ask other students to listen. If some students want to raise questions, they can also do it by writing the questions on the chat or message board (*writing* activity). Teachers can display certain reading text on the screen ask the students to read from their own screen and discuss some questions provided after the text (*reading* activity). Kinds of learning activities in a particular session will be much depending on the teachers’ teaching objective for that particular meeting. For most cases, Google Hangout may be used to facilitate many kinds of learning activities, including for sharing and reading further references related to the topic discussed. The teacher can do this by sharing certain links on the screen and the students can see and read the content of the link. You can also choose some of your students to be visible from other viewers/students on the screen. This is done on the bottom of the screen in the area called the ‘film strip’ that shows the video image of your guests. Simply click on the guest you want the viewers to see.

Step 6: After the Hangout

As mentioned before, one of the powerful features of Google Hangouts is that it automatically records your event/class and linked to your Youtube account. Therefore, after the class you can save the video for your future purpose and share the link to other people. You can also take the opportunity to optimize and edit your video through the YouTube video editor on your YouTube Channel. Add appropriate keywords for SEO purposes ensuring the most relevant are used first. Add annotations and edit the Hangouts as necessary.



4. CHALLENGES

As a virtual classroom will much rely on the availability of the internet connection, the provision of reliable internet network will be the most crucial challenge faced by teachers to use this Google Hangouts. A bad network will definitely make the communication among teachers and students not working really well. To deal with this, it is important for the teachers, lecturers, schools, or university to make sure that their internet capacity is sufficient for a smooth connection. Culture shock may be another challenge faced by both teachers and students in attending the virtual class. Some students may feel uncomfortable or confused at the beginning. Some others might think that the virtual class is not that important compared to conventional classroom where they can have a face to face interaction. To deal with this, teachers need to make sure that the students understand the importance of this virtual class from the beginning. In most cases, I believe that time will heal.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper has introduced the use of Google Hangouts for educational purposes. It has discussed some reasons why this application can be an alternative for conducting a virtual classroom. The detailed information on how to use this app for teaching (English) online has also been described. Yet, as the aim of this paper is to introduce this app for teachers, more descriptive online English learning activities have not been well addressed yet. In different occasions or another conference, it will be interesting to discuss more on what kind of specific learning activities teachers can do in teaching English online by using this Google Hangouts.

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