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Googleable or Non-Googleable Topics for Writing Assignments?

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Abstract

Writing is one of the two major productive skills in language learning; and just like its oral equivalent 'speaking', it involves text production. Considering the development of writing skill from an educational point of view, it can be said that producing written text is generally based on the regular writing assignments given to students in language classes. While studying on the assignments, one of the most important responsibilities of the students is to avoid copy-paste and therefore plagiarism. However, in some cases students may tend to copy-paste availing themselves of the vast opportunities offered by Google. This all-knowing database appears as one of the most ground-breaking innovations of the late 20th and early 21st century and has recently been the number-one destination for people with any kind of question in their minds. Nevertheless, asking everything to Google and using the readily available answer directly in writings is not something desirable in terms of developing writing skill, let alone concerns about copyright and ethics. Therefore, the assigned topic should orient students to employ their imagination, creativity, and critical thinking skills at utmost level while leaving them an acceptable amount of space to consult Google. Under this framework, this study aims to compare googleable and non-googleable writing topics with a focus on their pros and cons. To this end, sample writing topics covered in writing books taught at university level in Turkey will be investigated in terms of the extent to which they appear googleable or non-googleable.

Key words: writing skill, googleable, non-googleable, technology

Introduction

Language skills are developed by practicing them meaningfully. Listening can be improved by listening, speaking can be fostered by speaking, reading can be enhanced by reading, and writing can be developed by writing. Furthermore, just like speaking, writing is a productive skill. Beginning with the early sentence-writing phase, the development of writing skills goes on with paragraphs and then essays. At high levels students are assigned writing topics at regular intervals and are asked to submit their writings till a pre-set deadline by following the steps of process writing. Doubtlessly, there are a number of factors that affect the efficacy level of this writing practice process. However, one of the major factors here is the assigned writing topic. The topic should be worth searching information and writing about it. That is, learners are expected to study on the given topic and following the construction of

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a certain degree of infrastructure they are expected to construct a written product through the filter of their minds and perspectives. At this point, the positive-negative interferences of the developing technology should be touched on considering the originality of the writings produced by the students. The Internet ushered in a completely new era in human life and transformed many things into advanced forms. Perhaps the most striking thing about the Internet technologies that touched people from all walks of life has been Google.

The search engine Google was founded by Larry Page and Sergey Brin in 1998 in California (<https://www.google.com/about/company/history/>). The word Google was derived from a symbolic term Googol (10¹⁰⁰) in mathematics. The greatness of this special number clearly shows that Google was intended to become an all-knowing system at the very beginning. Actually, today it is. It has some rivals like Bing, Yahoo, Yandex, etc. but it is the number one search engine used widely all around the world. Google has reached such a point that people now think that it can provide answer to anything they ask. The popular quotation “The more questions you have, the more you know ... and the more you know, the more questions you have” has its reflections in the way people use Google everyday. This popularity has eventually led to the emergence of words like googleable, non-googleable, and google-proof.

Here is another question: Is there something non-googleable or google-proof? Maybe there are things that are partly googleable. These partly googleable things are termed as non-googleable. While googleable questions are easily answered through a click on Google, non-googleable questions do not have readily available answers on Google; and from an educational perspective they;

- stimulate curiosity, different ways of thinking and problem-solving
- encourage students to critically analyse information
- can be guiding questions for integrating learning areas
(http://www.aclleadersresource.sa.edu.au/features/pilot/DECD_TfEL%20PILOT_Non-googleable%20questions_download_web.pdf).

There are different views on the role of Google in terms of human learning. Some regard it as an invaluable tool while others hold that it should be employed to a limited degree. For instance, Carr (2008) questions whether Google is making us stupid or not and shares the findings of a study conducted at tertiary level:

It is clear that users are not reading online in the traditional sense; indeed there are signs that new forms of “reading” are emerging as users “power browse” horizontally through titles, contents pages and abstracts going for quick wins. It almost seems that they go online to avoid reading in the traditional sense. (paragraph 8)

On the other hand, Pinker (2010) claims: “Far from making us stupid, these technologies are the only things that will keep us smart (paragraph 11).” However, according to Mergendoller (2012), “non-googleable driving questions, deliberative cognitive tasks, support and scaffolding – these all combine to create projects that help students become critical thinkers” (paragraph 8). Non-googleableness of questions in the educational realms is closely associated with enhancing critical thinking skills of learners. Likewise, Terry Heick (as cited in Tan, 2015) states:

"Google really lubricates that access to information and while that is fantastic, it makes us have to change a bit the way we think about things. Because we're so busy, we have this false security that we understand something because we Googled it. Now

we're moving on to the next thing instead of really rolling around with this idea and trying to understand it." (paragraph 32)

He recommends that the questions be made google-proof. Ewan McIntosh (2012) approaches the issue from a partly different perspective and suggests that precious class time should be allocated to the non-googleable aspects of subjects:

Every topic, every bit of learning has content that can be Googled, and we don't want teachers wasting precious enquiry time lecturing that content. We want students, instead, to be using class time to collaborate and debate around the questions that are Not Googleable, the rich higher order thinking to which neither the textbook nor the teacher know the answers (paragraph 1).

Again from an educational perspective, googleable things are questioned in terms of smartphones in 2015 PISA report released by OECD:

If students use smartphones to copy and paste prefabricated answers to questions, it is unlikely to help them to become smarter. If we want students to become smarter than a smartphone, we need to think harder about the pedagogies we are using to teach them. Technology can amplify great teaching but great technology cannot replace poor teaching. (p. 4)

Most of the views discussed above say that Google may be much-knowing and quite useful but it may also bring some disadvantages to the learning process. Bringing the issue back to the context of writing skill, we should question the degree to which Google should be allowed to provide content about the assigned topics. If a writing topic is entirely googleable, it poses a serious risk for students in that they may want to accelerate the process and copy-paste or partly copy-paste. This is not something we want in terms of both ethics and the development of writing skills. It is not ethical because it is apparent plagiarism. If something like this is allowed at early stages in writing, it may turn into a bad habit for learners over time. It is not supportive for writing skill because the students do not produce themselves; instead they use something others produced. Writing is a productive skill and the production process should be shaped through the minds-on and hands-on efforts of the learners. Google will surely be used in the preparation process, but to a justifiable extent.

So how can we render writing topics non-googleable? General topics are not good for writing. Specific, to-the-point, individualized topics are better in that they aim to enhance analysis, synthesis, critical thinking, and production skills of learners. Therefore, while assigning already available writing topics, some modifications can be made on them to break their googleableness.

Methodology

In order to render the googleable-nongoogleable issue more tangible, the writing topics covered in an advanced writing coursebook are investigated by the researcher in terms of their googleable or non-googleable characteristics. The selected writing book is "Creating Meaning" (Blass et. al., 2008) that is covered under the course of 'Advanced Reading and Writing' in the ELT Programme at OndokuzMayıs University. The book is an advanced reading and writing resource and its units start with passages that aim to foster reading skills and then go on with information and activities/tasks that aim to enhance writing skills of the learners.



The book consists of eight chapters and each chapter focuses on a different type of writing. While the first chapter asks students to write a summary of a text, sixth chapter concentrates on argumentative essay. In this study, we do not prioritize types of writings; instead, we try to focus on writing topics and evaluate them in view of their googleable or non-googleable characteristics. To this end, 1st, 7th, and 8th chapters that cover summary writing, critique writing, and thesis statement writing respectively have been omitted. The rest of the chapters include 15 writing topics to be assigned to learners.

Findings and Discussion

Fifteen writing topics covered in ‘Creating Meaning’ are listed chapter by chapter below and following each chapter’s topic list brief discussion as to their googleableness or non-googleableness is presented.

Chapter 2 (p. 50)

- (1) An innovative person who helped change someone’s life
- (2) An innovation that changed the world
- (3) An innovation you would work on if money were no object
- (4) A topic of your choice related to innovation

The 1st and 2nd topics above are too broad and seem to be easily googleable. The 4th one enables the learners to select a specific dimension themselves and is therefore a bit risky. However, the 3rd topic covers the innovation issue within a specific scope and individualizes it (...you would work on if money...), thus making it partly googleable.

Chapter 3 (p. 73)

- (1) Choose a natural disaster. In your essay, describe the steps in the process that led to this natural disaster.
- (2) Describe a natural disaster that affected you, someone you know, or the citizens of any country. Describe your reactions to the disaster or those of others.

The 1st topic above is too broad and appears to be googleable. On the other hand, the 2nd topic places the issue on a specific basis (...that affected you, someone you know...) and thus turns out to be partly googleable.

Chapter 4 (p. 95)

- (1) In an essay, compare one of the approaches to justice described in this chapter with another approach to justice that you are familiar with.

- (2) In an essay, compare the two approaches to justice that you have read about in this chapter.

The two writing topics above ask students to first focus on and analyse the reading passage covered in the chapter and then produce a comparison essay. Both of the topics handle the issue of justice on a specific basis and orient students to conduct synthesis and critical thinking before producing a written text. Briefly, both of the topics appear to be partly googleable.

Chapter 5 (p. 119)

- (1) “Culture regulates our lives at every turn. From the time we are born until we die there is, whether we are conscious of it or not, constant pressure upon us to follow certain types of behaviour that others have created for us.” Clyde Kluckhohn. Describe in what way culture affects your life. From your own culture, give examples of ways in which you are compelled to behave and what the effects are on you.
- (2) For most people, it is difficult to immigrate to another country. Write an essay describing the effects of immigrating to another country. Suggest what can be done to help immigrants adapt to their new home.
- (3) Look back at the readings on crossing cultures in this chapter. Choose the information that you think people should know before they immigrate to the country that you live in.

Each of the three writing topics above is quite specific and takes the issue of culture on an individualized basis. The 1st one asks students to analyse a quotation first and then write about the effects of culture on a personal basis. The 2nd one seems a bit broad at first sight; however, it asks students to present personal suggestions for immigrants’ adaptation process. The 3rd one requires students to read and analyse the reading passage covered in the chapter before writing an essay and thus directs them to produce a written text through their personal analysis. Briefly, all of the three topics here appear to be partly googleable.

Chapter 6 (p. 142)

- (1) Doctors have the right and the power to attach a do not resuscitate (DNR) order to a patient’s chart. They need not consult the family first if they do not think it is necessary-although often they do so.

Write an argumentative essay in which you present your opinion on what is the right thing to do and try to persuade the reader that you are correct.

- (2) Animal rights groups are opposed to using animals for scientific purposes in laboratories. Their opponents believe we need to use animals for testing so that human beings can benefit from the scientific breakthroughs.

Write an argumentative essay in which you present your view in a persuasive manner.



(3) When the Olympic Games were held in Seoul, South Korea, the Canadian runner Ben Johnson lost his gold medal because he tested positive for using drugs that were banned. Many Canadians were shocked and disappointed. They argued that athletes from other countries had also used drugs but had not been caught.

Write an essay in which you try to persuade the reader to accept your point of view regarding the punishment that should be imposed on athletes who are caught using banned drugs.

(4) Choose another ethical controversy and write an essay arguing for or against a specific position on the issue.

All of the above topics except for the 4th one draw a specific framework before asking students to write. However, they do not establish a link between the issue and personal experiences of the students. Therefore, there is a risk that students may write the arguments of others they have found on Google. By establishing a link between the topic and personal experiences of the students, these writing topics can be turned into a partly googleable form.

In brief, fifteen writing topics covered in the book “Creating Meaning” have been analysed in terms of googleableness and non-googleableness. While some of them appear to be completely googleable, others turn out to be partly googleable. By adding specific dimensions or establishing links to personal experiences of learners, we can render the googleable topics better and partly googleable so that they orient students to think critically, to conduct analyses and syntheses, and produce their own original written works.

Conclusion

Technology has undoubtedly become an indispensable component of human life and Google turns out to be one of the most commonly used technological fruits in daily life and educational realm. More specifically, Google appears to be a real assistant in terms of access to infinite information on anything while developing writing skills. It must be accepted that it surely contributes much to the improvement of writing skills. Before passing to the writing phase, learners are expected to possess a certain level of proficiency in reading skill and content knowledge about the topic to be covered. Google here provides them with a number of facilities. However, if the writing topic at hand is completely googleable and if there are already available essays about the topic on the Internet, the learner may be tempted to copy-paste. This is plagiarism and this does not promote critical thinking, on the contrary, it hinders. The googleableness of a topic does not necessarily mean that the learner will get involved in plagiarism. S/he may benefit from the information on the Internet responsibly and avoid plagiarism. Nevertheless, there is no need to leave an open door here; by assigning students really specific, analysis- and synthesis-based, and individualized writing topics, we can help them develop self-confidence, critical thinking, and better writing skills through active participation in original writing processes.

As for the book ‘Creating Meaning’ covered in this study, some of the writing topics can be regarded as completely googleable and some others are partly googleable. If an English language teacher wants to make use of this book, s/he can make some changes on the googleable topics and can render them partly googleable by adding some specific details or relating them with the personal lives of the learners.

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