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In this column, we discuss the latest developments in ed-tech, as well as tried and tested apps and platforms, and the integration between teaching and technology. We invite readers to submit articles on their areas of interest. Please contact the editor before submitting.

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Paul Raine has been a Japan-based teacher and coder since 2006. He has developed the web-based language teaching and learning platform *TeacherTools.Digital*, and many other web-based tools.

ZenGengo: A Teacher Review

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The use of online tools and materials for teaching and learning languages was already increasing before the spread of COVID-19, but the pandemic further accelerated the adoption of such tools. As we move back to face-to-face lessons, many teachers are choosing to keep using the digital tools they adopted during the pandemic. Amongst a multitude of online resources available to language educators, ZenGengo offers a particularly useful set of features and benefits, which makes it a valuable platform in times of online and offline teaching.

What is ZenGengo?

ZenGengo (zengengo.com) is an online assignment creation platform that doubles as a learning management system (LMS). A key aim of the ZenGengo platform is to efficiently offer teachers quick content creation and automated grading. The platform is also easily accessible by students. ZenGengo allows educators to create various digital activities which can be accessed across devices since activities are accessible through URLs, embedding, and QR codes.

The platform structures itself around folders and assignments. A folder represents a class. Within these classes, there are ten assignment types (Figure 1) with which students can engage. Each folder shows the number of assignments in blue and the number of new submissions in red (Figure 2). Students access assignments via a URL or QR code, or assignments may be embedded in other platforms. In a "lesson," there may be multiple assignments grouped together, allowing students to access these with a single link rather than numerous separate

links for each individual assignment. Each folder also contains an exportable gradebook with scores for completed student assignments. In addition, teachers can collect student details upon starting an assignment, upload a list of student names so that students can register by selecting their name, or have students log in via a Google or Microsoft account.

Figure 1
Assignment Types

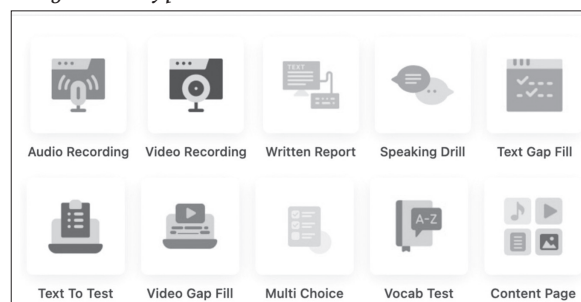
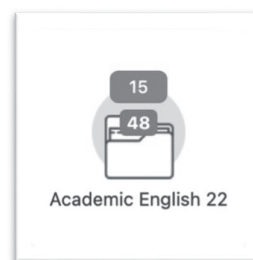


Figure 2
A Class Folder



Why ZenGengo?

This platform has some clear benefits to educators and students. Firstly, students can easily access learning content in multiple ways (via URLs and QR codes across multiple devices). ZenGengo is adaptable to different teaching styles and contexts via the distribution of URLs, embedding it into other LMSs

or via QR codes on paper worksheets. In addition, students can select their names from a dropdown menu when starting an assignment, eliminating any need for students to remember login details. Secondly, the aesthetics of the assignments are clean and intuitive for both educators and students, which can reduce onboarding (i.e., initial learner training) when using the platform (Figure 3). The layout and process for creating assignments is straightforward (Figure 4). Assignments can also include multiple instances of media prompts, such as video, audio, PDFs, and images. Thirdly, “lessons” allow teachers to group similar and related assignments together, which can allow teachers to structure and scaffold the order of assignments in individualized and coherent ways. Finally, and most importantly, creating tasks using the assignments is efficient. Many assignments, such as *text-to-test*, *gap fill*, and *speaking drill*, can be created by simply copying and pasting text into the assignments. The assignments process the text and automatically generate tasks for that assignment based on the text the teacher has provided, which the teacher can then edit. This simplicity can also help teachers save time in the creation of online tasks. This time-saving aspect is also supported by the lesson wizard feature, which can automatically generate up to four different assignment types from one text source. Creating other assignments is similarly efficient due to the simple but intuitive layout in a step-by-step flow to create tasks.

Figure 3

Student View of a Speaking Drill Assignment

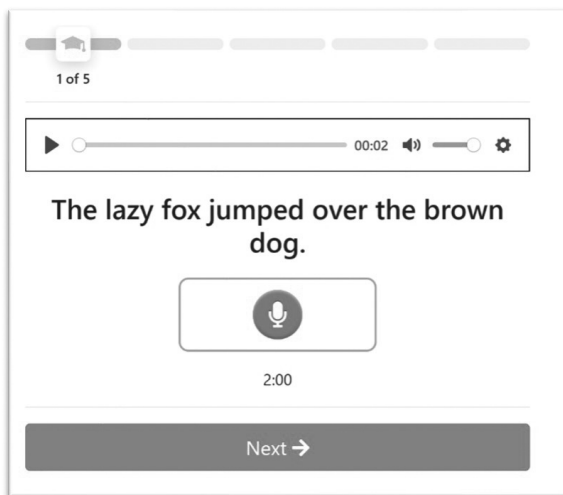
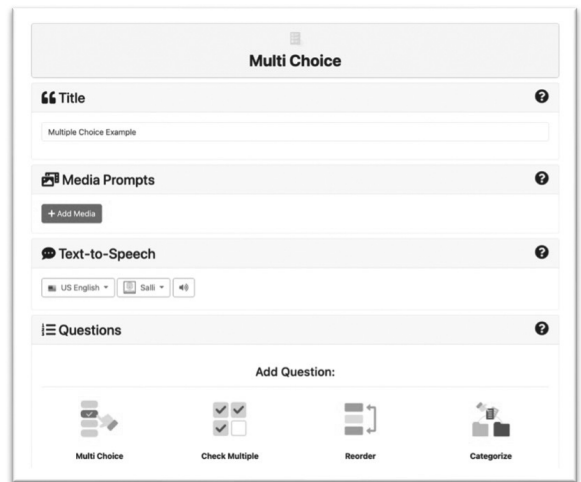


Figure 4

Teacher View of a Multiple-Choice Assignment



Use in Class

With the different assignment types and different modes of accessibility, ZenGengo can be implemented in various ways. The platform can be a suitable supplement for class-based work, both online, face-to-face, or in blended learning environments. A helpful feature is the QR code generator for each assignment; it can be effective to incorporate QR codes on paper-based worksheets (Figure 5). The smartphone-friendly layout of the assignments (Figure 6) supports blended learning in a simple but effective way, inside and outside the classroom. Students can listen to the audio while reading along with a printed transcript, submit audio recordings from a written prompt, complete comprehension questions for instant feedback, or engage with a treasure hunt activity. QR codes have also proven useful when accessibility to computers has not been practical in the classroom due to technical or Wi-Fi issues.

Figure 5

Using QR Codes to Supplement Paper-based Tasks

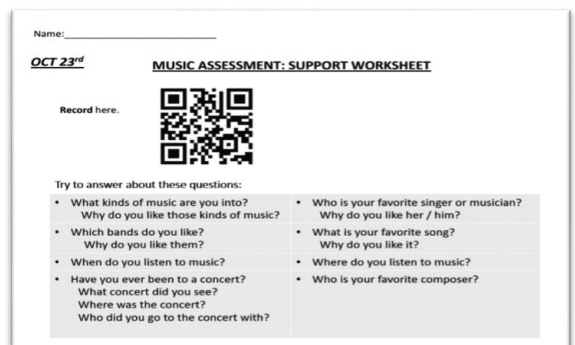
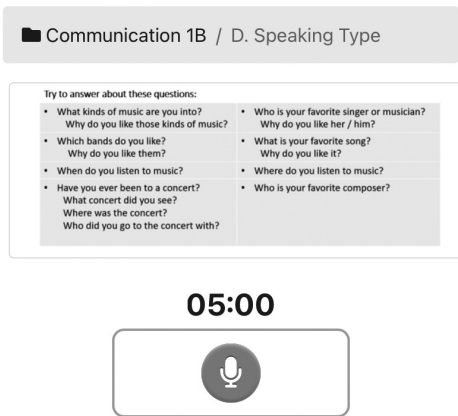


Figure 6*Smartphone View of an Assignment*

Using URLs and embedding activities onto other platforms may be used to complement or supplement other digital educational content, allowing educators to switch between platforms that are considered suitable for tasks that they want their students to complete. The *writing assignment*, for example, has a feature to disable copying and pasting for an online writing task to discourage the use of machine translation (e.g., DeepL, Google Translate). This feature can be used on other platforms that do not have a similar feature. Moreover, the *speaking drill* assignment (Figure 3) has multiple prompts for students to record their utterances, such as text-to-speech only, text, image, or audio, within the same task. This allows educators to create a variety of tasks focusing on the same skill.

The platform can also be a basic standalone LMS for educators who do not have access to other LMSs such as Moodle, Canvas, or Blackboard. ZenGengo can provide educators with a way to distribute digital assignments to students, keep track of their progress, and provide feedback on assignment types.

Drawbacks

There are, however, some drawbacks to ZenGengo, particularly in that it is a commercial product with different pricing tiers. These tiers affect how many class folders and how many assignments are available. Some educators who do not have access to funds via their educational institutions may find that the cost is not justifiable for their needs. In terms of settings, it is not possible for students to reattempt an assignment once they have submitted it unless they request that the teacher deletes

their submitted attempt. It would be helpful if students could attempt assignments multiple times. The platform also has limited features regarding customizability of assignments. While there are options within assignments to individualize content, they may seem quite restrictive for some educators. Furthermore, for those who are already using an LMS, it may feel that what they have at their disposal is sufficient for their needs.

Conclusion

ZenGengo is a helpful and easy-to-use tool to supplement online, face-to-face, and blended learning. The various methods of accessibility for students add to the platform's application in various contexts. The intuitiveness for students and simple task-creating process for teachers make ZenGengo a valuable tool. However, there are some limitations in customizability. It is hoped that the developers may address these limitations at some point in the near future, and thus make ZenGengo an even more useful platform.

Using TimelineJS in the English Language Classroom

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Timelines have come to take a central role in the history classroom. They are used 'to help students understand chronological order ... [and] visualize a sequence of events' (Downey & Long, 2015, p. 141). Additionally, they help students to grapple with information from multiple sources and to try to understand how different historical people and events are connected (Fillpot, 2009). Nevertheless, the use of timelines in education is not confined to the subject of history—they also find a place in digital humanities and English language courses, particularly Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) courses.

I have integrated timeline creation into university-level English-medium history courses and CLIL courses that I teach in Japan. Drawing on this experience, I will introduce readers to a platform called TimelineJS; explain how to use it; and reflect on its potential uses, benefits, and limitations in the English language classroom.