

Innovative uses for Google Docs in a university language program

Mark Firth

Keisen University
mark@keisen.ac.jp

Germain Mesureur

Keisen University
germain@keisen.ac.jp

This paper demonstrates a number of practical applications in which the Google Docs suite is currently being used within a university ESL program in Tokyo. Specifically, it gives examples of the scope and limitations of the free online software on four levels: (1) the program level – management of teaching assignments and reporting of grades; (2) special program management – online book reports for extensive reading; (3) course management – homework production and submission, and self and peer assessment; and (4) project work – collaborative writing and student-generated questionnaires.

Overview of Google Docs

“Google Docs” is a suite of free browser-based productivity software offered by Google. These web applications are a good example of the current trend that can be observed in many aspects of computing where documents, and the software used to create them, are both hosted online (i.e. in the cloud). Google Docs applications include a word processor, a spreadsheet, a presentation package and a form designer. In addition to the applications themselves, Google Docs offers a space on the server for storing documents created in Docs, which is currently limited to 1GB of free storage space, upgradable for a fee. Google has also recently made it possible for users to upload files of any type to the storage area, effectively allowing the user to backup files online. The shift from PC/LAN to cloud computing provides the user with the ability to access their documents and usual ap-

plications from any computer connected to the Internet. This provides a high degree of flexibility for content creation and sharing.

The range of features and customization offered by each of the applications in the suite does not rival those available in full-fledged packages such as Microsoft Office or Oracle's OpenOffice. Nevertheless, most of the basic features of each application type are present, usually in a form that makes them user-friendly for those already familiar with other packages.

As we will discuss here, the ability to easily create forms that can be used to collect data via a simple web page is of particular relevance to the language classroom. The full list of specific features available on Google Docs that are utilized for our programs at Keisen University are:

- ✧ Documents (ie Word Processor)
- ✧ Spreadsheets
- ✧ Forms
- ✧ Sites

Once created, either by the teaching staff, or directly by the students, all Docs can be shared either between selected users or with the general public, published and co-edited, or simply displayed on basic websites using Google Sites. In addition, Docs can be downloaded in a variety of formats compatible with most common packages, or converted to **PDF**.

Known issues

The package is not without shortcomings. It should be noted that while it is possible to grant read-only access to everyone, users wishing to author and/or edit Google Docs need to create an account with Google. This does, however, allow the user to have universal access to additional free tools, such as Gmail, Blogger, YouTube, Picasa photo hosting, etc. The large number of free tools accessible within a single account, and the possibility of their integration with one another, makes Google Docs a very powerful toolkit for the language classroom.

There is an issue with the conversion into Google Docs of files created in Microsoft Office. Documents containing heavily formatted elements are usually stripped of a large amount of formatting to match the reduced feature-set available in Google Docs. Examples of this include limited font set, non-conversion of complex charts and tables, and the lack of slide transitions and animations in presentations. For the most part, the conversion in the opposite direction (i.e. from Google Docs to Office) was found to be trouble-free.

In addition, it is important to remember that both the Google Docs package and the documents created/stored with it are online and, as such, are subject to the potential speed and accessibility issues linked to this type of technology. This problem can be partially avoided by using the offline access feature of the Docs, which however does prevent simultaneous editing/syncing of shared documents.

With all of this in mind, we believe these shortcomings are greatly outweighed by the practicality and flexibility offered by Google Docs.

1. Google Docs at the program level

Keisen University's core English program for first and second year students utilizes a content-based approach with class themes chosen by the instructors. With approximately 45 core classes running each semester, some 19 of the 23 instructors are contracted part-time teachers. This necessitates much communication by e-mail from the English Center to instructors on a week-to-week basis. There are days when in fact there are no full time faculty members available to assist with part-time staff requirements. The use of Google Docs as a centralized database of administrative information is becoming increasingly important for the program's management. Some of the ways Google Docs are being utilized are listed below.

Management of teaching assignments

The English Center posts the document of Teaching Assignments online for all teachers to access, from anywhere at anytime. This is particularly useful for teachers who will invariably be off campus, and often overseas, during vacation times. Because teachers know the department to which their students belong and the levels that they will be teaching, they are better able to prepare their materials wherever they may be located. While it is possible to achieve similar results using a combination of conventional software, no other non-specialist package allows a spreadsheet to be edited and its output automatically published and updated as easily as can be done here.

This document of Teaching Assignments also assists teachers with sharing class information at the end of the spring semester when the teacher for each class is changed for the fall semester. Teachers exchange information on aspects such as topics covered, strategies that worked well and individual student needs. During the semester, the same resource also helps teachers find another class with whom to do shared-activities with.

Rosters

Once the Administration Office has released class rosters in Excel format, these can be imported into Google Docs for teachers to make their own copies and keep in their own folders. The benefits of teachers having their own electronic copies of the rosters are self-explanatory but it is particularly beneficial within our program as individual teachers have their own grading breakdowns and criteria that they must fill in themselves. In addition, because Keisen runs classes on a twice-weekly basis some of these classes have two instructors, who may not be on campus simultaneously. They can, however, maintain their shared roster as a Google spreadsheet. This allows them to quickly identify students who may have attendance problems on only one of the two days, and to also share grades or schedule non-conflicting assessment dates. Furthermore, the student ID numbers correspond to their e-mail addresses so that should a teacher need to contact a student by mail, he/she can do so without having to contact advisers or the Administration Office.

Teacher contact details

An online version of the teachers' contact details is maintained in Google Docs for teachers to edit and update themselves. This helps the English Center to maintain up-to-date mailing lists and assists individual teachers who want to get in contact with colleagues.

Reporting of grades for program-wide analysis

Because, as is the case in many Japanese universities, we rely heavily on part-time instructors within a framework of teacher developed courses, we find it useful to hold an End of Semester meeting for all teachers in the program. At the meeting, for each class they teach, teachers report the total number of students receiving each letter grade. This data is used as a basis for an open-floor discussion about the performance of students in each class within each department. The issues that are usually raised include reasons for failures, the number of students receiving an AA grade, feedback we are receiving from students within each department, and grading policies in general.

About one week before the end of semester, teachers are sent an e-mail with a link to a Google Doc spreadsheet (Figure 1a) showing all of the classes listed. Teachers simply need to fill it in. Teachers are still asked to submit the official grade sheets to the Administration Office. Although the Google sheet is not password-protected, privacy is not an issue because the data is simply a tally of the number of students for each grade. In the rare case that a person not connected to the University, or student, did stumble across the link on the web no sensitive data would be compromised.

Department A						
	DA-1	DA-2	DA-3	DA-4	Total	%
AA	0	1	2	0	3	4.3
A	3	3	2	5	13	18.6
B	7	6	8	5	26	37.1
C	7	5	3	4	19	27.1
F	1	3	3	2	9	12.9
Total	18	18	18	16	70	100
Department B						
	DB-1	DB-2	DB-3	DB-4	Total	%
AA	1	3	0	0	4	5.9
A	3	2	3	3	11	16.2
B	3	5	4	2	14	20.6
C	5	4	9	6	24	35.3
F	5	4	3	3	15	22.1
Total	17	18	19	14	68	100
Grey cells are to be filled by individual teachers						

By the time of the end of semester meeting, which is usually held a few days after the last class, all of the teachers will have filled in the chart. The spreadsheet can then be simply projected on to a large screen for everyone to see and comment upon. The data can also be used to generate easy-to-interpret charts, which provide useful feedback such as grade distribution (Figure 1b) and pass rate by department (Figure 1c).

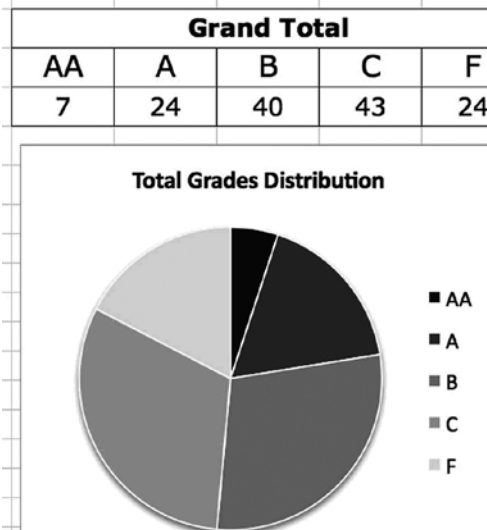


Figure 1b. Distribution of grades

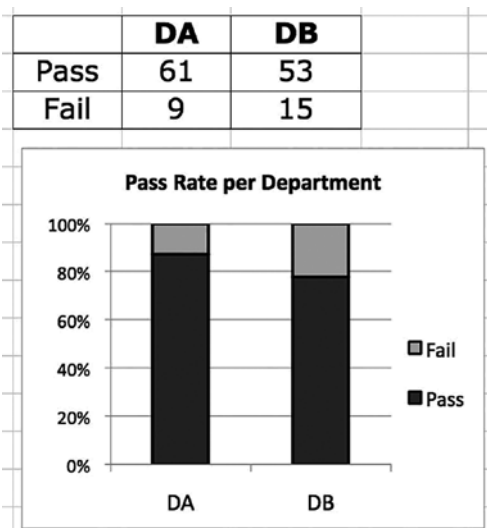


Figure 1c. Pass rate according to department

Another benefit of having these grades recorded on a Google doc is that the English Center can quickly learn the approximate number of students who will need to enroll in repeater's classes the following semester. This in turn assists with scheduling teachers and the number of classes to run. In the past, we have had to wait to get the data back from Administration Office before we could do this. Further, we have had instances of opening too many classes resulting in too few students in some repeater's classes, whilst at other times, the number enrolled in repeater's classes has exceeded an ideal number. Projecting the number of repeaters who may enroll in the following semester has become more accurate by knowing early the number of F grades given.

The use of Google Docs for program management has a lot of potential, however, it must also be noted that there are some limitations to using Google Docs at the program level. If a document contains private data, then obviously access to the document should be password protected; however, only those who have Gmail addresses can view such shared documents. One solution to this could be for administrators to open multiple accounts in Gmail according to the content in the documents: grades, calendar, class registers and so on. The password could then be shared with instructors.

2. Google docs for special program management

At any given time, teachers and administrators will have various extra-curricular projects running. Over the past few years at Keisen we have been gradually developing our extensive reading (ER) program, and stocking more graded readers in the library. An effective way to manage the ER program for participating classes was to run the program online.

Online book reports for extensive reading

Many teachers at Keisen carry out ER in their classes. In the Fall Semester of 2009 we had 16 classes participate in an On-line Book Report Program. We received a total of 588 book reports from students. The benefits to students in participating in extensive reading are becoming more widely known and accepted in the field of language acquisition, some of which include: reading fluency, expanded vocabulary, improved writing skills, spelling accuracy, motivation levels, and even oral proficiency (see Cho & Krashen, 1994; Lai, 1993; Mason & Krashen, 1997; Robb & Susser, 1989); however, three main difficulties for teachers remain with running an ER program:

1. Monitoring the progress of students over the whole semester.
2. Maintaining students' motivation for reading (both, intrinsically and extrinsically).
3. Knowing whether the students are in fact actually reading the books or not.

At Keisen we are well on the way to overcoming the first two challenges with the powerful use of forms in Google Docs. All students in the 1st year program are sent an e-mail from the ER mail account with a link to a form (survey) to fill in for each reader that they complete. After the form is submitted by the students, the data is automatically stored in an online spreadsheet. Teachers who wish to have their students participate in the program help them to set targets for the number of books they should read. It is encouraging that we sometimes even receive book reports from students who were not required to participate by their class teachers. At the end of each semester prizes are awarded to students who

have read the most books and individual teachers also provide feedback on the students' progress in their own classes.

The third difficulty in running an **ER** program: being able to ascertain whether the students are actually reading the books or not, is more of an ideological issue for teachers, who will need to make their own decisions. If we are truly striving to have students become autonomous learners and if we do value reading as being its own reward, then this is an excellent opportunity for teachers to hand over some of the responsibility to the students. Google Docs cannot assess whether or not the students have actually read the books or not. It should be remembered, however, that the form can require the students to write their impressions of each book and teachers can quickly browse over the responses to see the length and quality of their students' comments (see Appendix A for an example extensive reading form). The steps required for creating a form (survey) that you can send to your students are as follows:

1. Go to "Google Documents".
2. Click on "Create New" and select "Form".
3. Type in the questions that will generate the data you require. It is important not to write too many open-response questions to reduce the amount of data processing required. Also, whenever possible, "Choose From a List" works better than "Multiple Choice" since it uses up less space on the form.
4. Click on "See Responses" and choose "Spreadsheet" to see the spreadsheet that will be produced.
5. Send the form to students by clicking on "Form", "Send Form" (use Bcc). If you don't have the students' e-mail addresses, you can copy the link on the form and paste it into a word document and give it to them through a shared drive for students in a computer-equipped classroom.

Known issues with forms

One limitation of forms is that to manually populate the fields in a drop down list is very time consuming. It can be done by copying and pasting titles from a book list, but each title must be done individually. Teachers might prefer to have students type the titles into a blank field. Alternatively, readers might like to save a copy of the form we have developed at (<http://sites.google.com/site/docsforesl/>). The forms we created are available as templates, along with many more user-submitted forms, presentations and documents.

When creating a form, it is also important to realize that if you want to change the order of questions on your form, the subsequently collected data will correspond to the new form and the previous data will remain as it was. It may take several attempts of sending the form to colleagues to ensure that you are receiving the desired data.

One further caveat is that, unlike full-fledged course management systems, Google Docs forms do not allow the saving and retrieving of answers, meaning that the user must complete the form and submit it in one single session, without navigating away from, or closing the form page. This was found to be a problem on a couple of instances where longer than usual book-reports were being written by students, who then lost part of their work when they inadvertently opened a different website in the form window.

However, it is important to emphasize that, for teachers, the use of forms greatly lightens the administrative load that is generally associated with running an extensive reading

program. All teachers have access to the spreadsheet and can sort the data according to their own classes and monitor the number of books their students have read.

The raw data can be summarized in charts, which can also be embedded into a Google site (or any other web site) for students to see how their class and department are fairing. Examples of the charts we generated and published on a Google site are illustrated in Appendix B.

The tutorial of how to manipulate the data to make these charts can be seen at <http://sites.google.com/site/docsfores/>.

3. Google Docs for course management

It should be noted that Google Docs does not claim to necessarily be any specific kind of Web-based learning environment such as a **CMS** (Course Management System), or an **LMS** (Learning Management System). Here, we simply describe how various Docs are being used to facilitate the management of the teaching and learning at Keisen.

Coursework

All Google Docs and related tools mentioned in this paper are available in a multilingual interface. This is particularly useful for lower-level learners whose access to the software's full potential is thus not hampered by their limited knowledge of the technical English used in menus and options. Conversely, higher-level students can be challenged to use the full suite in English only. This knowledge is transferable since the vast majority of commands used in Google Docs is similar or identical to those used in the Office suite.

One of the added benefits of Google Docs is that because it is free and browser-based, it enables users to create very decent-looking documents anywhere. This allows students who might only own the less-expensive netbooks to create all of their documents online without being compelled to buy Microsoft Office. Students can then easily convert their documents to Microsoft formats on campus for homework submission as required.

Homework production and submission

In classes that focus on writing skills, the ability to read and comment on students' drafts is essential. Students feel reassured when they know they are on the right track with their writing. When a student shares a document with a teacher, the teacher is able to detect mistakes and to correct them at an early stage, therefore saving time and effort for both parties. In addition, research has shown that students pay more attention to comments from teachers on their work when this feedback is received on draft papers than when the corrections are returned with the graded assessment (Chandler, 2003). Again, the revision history feature is quite handy as it allows the teacher to check back on various draft stages of the homework production (see Figure 2).

The embedded support for GMail makes submitting coursework produced in Google docs very easy. Having an electronic version of the assessment can also help teachers search for plagiarized content copied from the Internet.

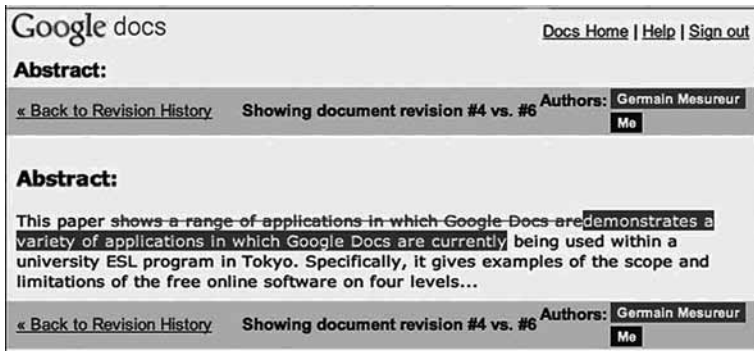


Figure 2. Revision history in a text document

Self assessment

Another very useful way to integrate forms into the classroom is to have each student fill in a self-assessment form after a unit of work. For example, in one class, Keisen students were asked to complete a short questionnaire after each presentation they gave in the class. Most of the questions could be answered by rating themselves from 1–10 or selecting from items in a drop-down menu. Figure 3 shows some of the types of questions asked.

Students responded to the self-assessment activity very positively and they welcomed the opportunity to reflect on their own performances. Many students rated themselves poorly on preparation in their first presentations and as a result, in later performances, all students practiced more thoroughly bringing about better speeches. It should also be noted that self-assessment encourages autonomous learning.

Peer assessment

As part of good teaching practice, peer assessment is said to: promote a greater sense of involvement and responsibility; establish a very clear framework for students to understand the assessment criteria – which in turn promotes excellence; direct attention to skills and learning; and provide more feedback than may be otherwise possible (Weaver and Cotrell, 1986). Accordingly, in some classes at Keisen, students are required to not only review their own presentations on video, but also those of their classmates.

For a social issues class, the teacher video-records all poster presentations and uploads the speeches to the Google site designated for that class. In a follow-up lesson held in a computer lab, the students each complete an on-line form for every other student in the class. The instructor then sorts the student feedback into a chart (by presenter) and reports it back to the students along with teacher feedback. If desired, the names of those students writing the report can be kept anonymous. The advantages of assessing the presentations in this way are numerous. Students can more carefully focus on the content during the live presentations when the listening task involves note taking and writing questions for the speaker. During the second assessment done using the video, learners can focus on the target language and presentation skills. Apple and Kikuchi (2007) describe how they have

Presentation Self-Assessment

How happy are you with your presentation?

Very unhappy 1 2 3 4 5 Very happy

Compared to your first presentation, how did this second presentation go?

Better than I expected

As I expected

Not quite as well as I hoped

How many times did you practise your presentation?

None 0 1 2 3 4 5 time(s)

Did you ask someone to check your PowerPoint slides?

Yes

No

No, but I will next time!

Figure 3. Multiple question types are used in this self-assessment form

students evaluate their peers in a Microsoft Word generated document which provides a nice general set of questions for peers to rate each other by letter grade. By using forms and spreadsheets in Google Docs, feedback is automatically collated in a spreadsheet for speakers to quickly access.

Course feedback

Teachers can develop their own feedback questionnaires in addition to those administered by the university's regular questionnaire. Teachers do this to gain specific feedback on their syllabus and on the kinds of learning experiences their students are having. The detailed feedback that teachers can ascertain is arguably far more useful than a generic, obligatory, standardized university form. Inevitably, the desired result is to improve the teaching and learning an instructor can achieve in future courses. Feedback forms can be designed to be either anonymous, or to require the student names or ID fields. As was mentioned above, the initial creation of these forms can be quite tedious and time-consuming. This is however generally true of the development of most online teaching material. Inside a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), forms can be created and reused, but porting these from one VLE to another is not necessarily possible, and when it is, it is not usually done

so in a transparent format. Google forms can be replicated and customized quickly, with very little work being needed to create a fresh new look for a different class, department, or institution.

4. Google Docs for project work

The use of Google docs holds great potential for group or individual student projects. In addition to straightforward uses such as collaborative writing and peer-editing in text-based documents, the forms can also be used as a very powerful data collection tool.

Collaborative writing

Lundstrom and Baker (2009) have demonstrated that peer-reviewing offers benefits both for the reviewer and the reviewee and indeed, many Keisen students in our writing-oriented classes have repeatedly reported that collaborative writing was a fulfilling group project. Peer reviewing is traditionally paper-based or done by emailing around a computer file, where students add or edit content. More recently, the popularization of blogs and wikis has made this process more flexible, in that all students can edit the same document, more or less simultaneously. While both blogs and wikis have great advantages, namely, sequential posting and revision history, they both typically function on a model that is fully public. This has two main drawbacks. First, some of our students have reported feeling shy about having their work-in-progress posted on a public website. Second, when all groups are required to research the same topic it is important to prevent students from viewing and copying another team's work. Google Docs makes it very easy to produce co-edited documents that are only accessible to selected users, all under one interface, with full a revision history.

It should be noted that, as is the case with wikis, simultaneous editing of a Google document can sometimes confuse the server about what changes to save, and where. This issue may be addressed in the future by using Google Wave's live editing function, but this technology is still under development and has not been tested at the time of writing.

Student-generated questionnaires

Many of our task-based classes require students to develop questionnaires incorporating topics relating to the class theme. The ease with which forms can be created has been detailed above. Students can use forms to quickly design simple or advanced questionnaires and surveys. These can then be used to collect data to support their research and to give them real data with which to work.

Student-generated questionnaires are nothing new, but online forms can be filled in by respondents in their own time and at their own convenience. In addition, the data collected is available in spreadsheet format, can be analyzed in Google Docs or downloaded in Excel format. This process saves students the time previously spent on inputting paper-based data into the computer for analysis.

In this case, one could argue that the use of Google Docs could conceivably be so efficient that it might actually take away from the classroom learning experience. In this particular instance, verbal communication between the students is removed from the process of data collection. There is great value in the language practice that takes place in person-to-person interactions that live surveys and interviews generate. Nevertheless, we feel that the

amount of data that can be collected electronically using forms can, in some cases, balance the lack of communication that this method entails. Forms that are filled out online by many respondents are particularly advantageous in classes which place an emphasis on the final products, such as research papers or academic presentations.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined just a few examples of how Google Docs is currently being utilized in an **EFL** program in a university setting. It is hoped that we have demonstrated their application on the four levels of program management, course management, special programs and class project work. Due to the practical nature of the real examples we have provided, readers can learn more and copy and download templates at <http://sites.google.com/site/docsofores/>. By way of these examples, we hope that teachers and researchers alike might realize many more potential applications for Google Docs within their own teaching and learning environments. Finally, one area of application we hope to exploit in the future is the use of Google Docs as a tool for academic research.

References

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Appendix A

Screenshot of the form used for the Extended Reading Online Book Report Program

ER Online Book Report

Please fill out a Extended Reading Online Book Report after each book you read.

* Required

What is your name? *

What is your student number? *

What is your Department? *

What level is this book? *

Book Title *

* If not on the list, write the title here.
(Other)

How good was this book? *

Ranking

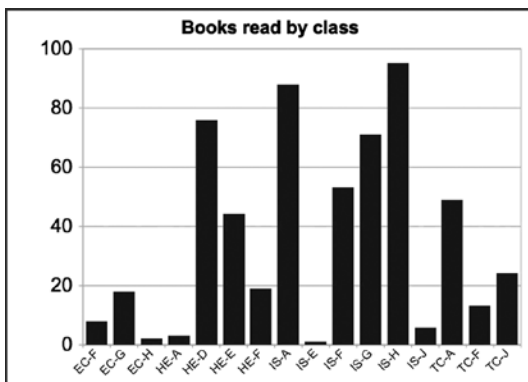
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Excellent
Not interesting	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

What was your impression of this book? *

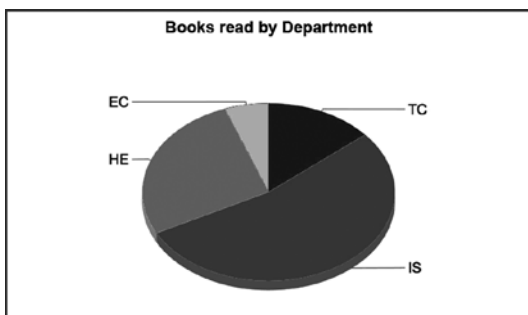
Please write 3-4 sentences on how you felt about the characters, an event, how the story relates to your life etc.

Appendix B

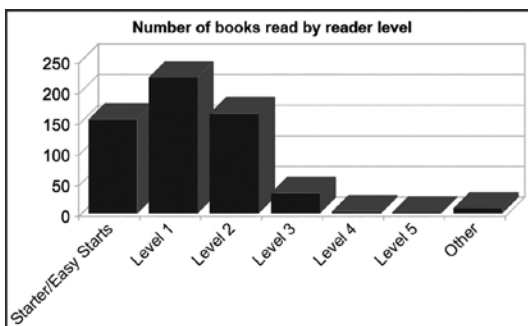
Examples of charts generated in Google Docs from data gathered using a form



Books read by class.



Books read by Department.



Number of books read by reader level.