

Effect of Using Internet Tools on Enhancing EFL Students' Speaking Skill

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Abstract

This quasi-experimental study aimed to examine the effect of using shared online oral diaries on the EFL Saudi First year university students' speaking proficiency. It used one male and one female EFL Saudi First year university students classroom sections to represent the experimental group and one male and one female classroom sections to represent the control group. An equivalent speaking proficiency test, developed by the researcher, was applied on the control and the experimental groups before the study started to ensure their equivalence; and was also used as a post-test. The results of the post-test revealed significant differences between the mean scores of the experimental group and the mean scores of the control group in favor of the experimental group.

Keywords: online oral diaries, Speaking skills, Motivation, Sociocultural theory, Technology in education

Introduction & Background of the study

The last decade of the twenty century and the first decade of the twenty-first century have witnessed rapid explosions of information which lead to a necessity need to cope with the ongoing scientific acceleration in all fields of cultural, scientific, and economic life. Information revolution, an evident in the invention of the internet, is the most important technological accomplishment to date. Internet enables people to cancel distances, shorten time, and make the world more like a small electronic screen(Al Musa, 2002). Education is required to meet the needs of this growing scientific acceleration.

This means that education aims and objectives in the Third World countries should be changed to meet the era's variables, aiming not only to help students in the cognitive domain, but also focus on their needs to attain the skills, capacities, and self -reliance to interact with the era's variables and build a new life based on sovereignty, not dependency on others (Al Musa & Al Mubarak, 2005). Education needs to equip students with the needed tools and skills that make them capable of dealing with these new requirements effectively. Thus, involving technology as a goal in itself in the educational paradigm is no longer a privilege; on the contrary, it is an urgent need.

With the increasing reliance on technology and the need for digital proficiency, it is expected that the use of online technology to work with second language acquisition is a natural by- product of the changing face of the educational world. Evidences have shown that students who conduct their learning online are better than students who work in traditional settings for the learning of a second language, in terms of their levels of anxiety and their need for gap awareness in their language skills (Pichette, 2009). Studies have also shown that the use of technologies in teaching languages have an increased advantages on the development of grammar, vocabulary, reading, writing, pronunciation, listening, and speaking skills (Levy, 2009).

Speaking which is "the use of oral language to interact directly and immediately with others" (Butler, Eignor, Jones, McNama & ,Suomi, 2000, p. 2) could be the most important language skill in communication. In second language learning, some researchers claim that speaking is the heart of second language learning, and they argue that it is the most important skill for business and government personnel working in the field (Egan (1999). Speaking is essential because it is mostly needed to communicate within the international market. Students who usually speak English well have better chances in their lives in terms of the kind of job they might be offered, gaining promotions, or even continuing their studies (Baker and Westrup, 2003).

Students may struggle to develop strong EFL English speaking skills due to the complexity of the language (Nunan, *Second Language Teaching & Learning*, 1999). The differences between English and the native tongue discomfort with speaking the new language in front of other people (Ellis, 2008), and most importantly lacking the chance to practice the language frequently and in different contexts. (Shumin, 2002). Although learning EFL in general and speaking skills in specific is quite demanding, the reality of Saudi students proves that, “despite good overall planning, purposive curriculum, integrated textbooks, qualified teachers, achievement is below the expectations” (Khan, 2011: 1).

Altwaijri (1982) also found that “Saudi students spend at least ten years learning English, ... but their English proficiency is generally unsatisfactory when compared to the amount of time spent in learning it” (as cited in Al-Twairish, 2009: 21). Based on the previous scholarly evidence that English level in general and speaking skills in specific are beyond the needed level, studies are needed to examine different methods of teaching that might help elevate students’ levels of achievement in EFL learning. Speaking English is quite challenging for EFL Saudi learners. Among the most important reasons for weak speaking skills among Saudi students is the lack of usage of these skills outside the classroom.

Online oral diaries are a key component of learning a second language, as they allow for a more personal and nuanced use of the language in a safe environment (Thomas, 2009). Doing the videos online—particularly through the medium of cell phone videos—offers students the opportunity to be practicing their language skills anywhere and with little prior preparation, which keeps them involved in the process. The process of creating online oral diaries is very much supported by Vygotsky’s theories, which state that learners are engaged when they are asked to participate and collaborate through the mediation of different tools, which goes to stimulate a zone in which learners can work in different ways to solve problems and create new options for learning .

This study relied on Vygotskyan’s Sociocultural theory of learning which believes that social interaction plays a fundamental and core role in the acquisition of knowledge and in learning (Wertsch & Sohmer, 1995). Vygotskyan’s Sociocultural theory also believes that by communicating with a more knowledgeable people, the individuals are able to build upon their knowledge and therefore “leapfrog” developmentally in greater steps than would be possible without such communication with more knowledgeable people. Those people could be their parents, teachers, or peers and is certainly relevant in the acquisition of a second language, as the exposure to native speakers will hasten the acquisition of further language learning. A non- native speaker learns more about the natural flow and rhythm of a second language by interacting with others who have more knowledge than him or her in the secondlanguage .

Volle (2005) investigated the acquisition of oral skills in an online course for Spanish learners. The project involved creating audio e-mails in which students read aloud chosen passages and performed grammar drill activities. They also were asked to use audio e-mails to record two speaking activities – one before the start of the course and the other at the end. These then were compared to get a better picture of the enhancement in students’ oral performance. The findings revealed that students’ oral proficiency had significantly improved .Barr, Leaky, and Ranchoux (2005) carried out a project to provide first-year undergraduate French students with collaborative and individual learning through a digital medium alongside their face-to-face conversation classes. Unexpectedly, the findings revealed that by the end of the project, the control group showed greater progress in oral proficiency than the experimental group.

The researchers argued that the unexpected results could be due to the short time of application of the project, and thus recommended repeating the project with extended time, paying attention to the types of technology used and their relevancy to the learning experiences .Maggie & Deniz (2011) examined the effect of podcasts on the Spanish speaking skills of high school students. After six months ,the study revealed that the frequency and variety of carefully designed weekly podcasting assignments over time helped notably to improve students’ speaking skills.

The concept of oral diaries

An oral diary is quite a new concept. It is a tool by which students record their daily lives and events using recording devices. The purpose is for the student to speak their information, rather than to write it out (Nunan, 1995). Up to the researcher’s best knowledge there are no studies that examine the uses of such tool in English language teaching and learning at the university level in Saudi Arabia in specific and the Arab world in general.

Advantages of Using Diaries in Education

Diaries have the advantage of allowing students to engage in more natural speech and give them the benefit of engaging them on a personal level, which helps to increase their overall motivation with the subject matter. Digital diaries, in comparison with paper-based diaries, are also used more frequently than paper-based diaries, helping students to engage more frequently (Gleaves, Walker, & Grey, 2007). The teacher's role in oral diaries is to encourage the students to continue to engage in the program, to give advice and counsel when things are not working as expected, and to listen to the diaries where appropriate to give feedback as to the language acquisition of the student (Zwart, Wubbels, Bergen, & Bolhuis, 2009).

Disadvantages of using Diaries in Education

The frequency of the use of diaries may differ from student to student, which makes it more difficult to use as an overall assessment tool. When using oral diaries, there are often problems with technical difficulties which make it problematic for some students. A primary obstacle is the access to appropriate equipment in the educational setting. Where schools are unable to provide the necessary equipment, it places an unfair inequality on the students who may or may not already have the necessary equipment (Harley, Henke, Lawrence, Miller, Perciali, & Nasatir, 2006). Another obstacle is having less or no experience in using the needed tools and software, the thing that might compromise the process of using these diaries as an aiding educational tool and leads to failure and demotivation rather than success (Barr, Leakey & ,Ranchoux, 2005).

Objectives, Questions and the Need for the Study

This study aimed to examine the effect of using internet tools- Daily diaries- on EFL First Year students' speaking proficiency in comparison with the traditional methods of teaching speaking. The study addressed the following question:

Are their significant differences in the EFL students' mean scores of the English language speaking proficiency post- test due to the method of teaching (Shared Online Oral Diaries and traditional method of teaching) and gender?

Gender is included as one of the variables because the Saudi female students do not have the same opportunity to be in contact with foreigners and native speakers before they join the university as male students do because the Saudi society is a very conservative one. This study expected to share some new techniques in teaching speaking with the English language teachers. It also aimed at training the teachers who were involved in the study on using the Shared Online Oral Diaries in their classes to enhance the situation of teaching speaking.

Definition of Terms

- English language Proficiency: It refers in this study to the Saudi First year EFL students' abilities in the English language speaking skill which was assessed by an English speaking test (the post-test).
- Online oral diaries: An oral diary is a tool by which students record their daily lives and events using recording devices. The purpose is for the student to speak their information, rather than to write it out (Nunan, 1995). In this study an oral diary refers to the First Year Saudi university students daily events they recorded in and outside the classroom and e-mailed them to their English language teachers.

Subjects of the Study

This study is a quasi experimental one with two independent variables (The method of teaching and gender) and one dependent variable (students' scores in the speaking post-test). The participants of the study consisted of two male and two female first year university students' classroom sections (20 students in each) in Riyadh city in Saudi Arabia. The clustral random sampling method was used because it was impossible to redistribute students into new classroom sections. All of the participants were of level two in the English language proficiency placement test which the English Language Skills Department in the Preparatory Year Deanship usually runs at the beginning of each academic year.

After being admitted by the university, students had to join the Preparatory Year Deanship for one academic year and had to study English four hours a day, five times a week for one complete academic year. All their teachers were native speakers of English. Immediately after joining the Preparatory Year Deanship and in their first week in the university, they sit for a placement test to be distributed after that over six levels of English language proficiency. One male and one female classroom sections were randomly assigned to be the experimental group and the other two sections were assigned to be the control group.

Despite the fact that all the participants were of level two based on the placement test, they also sat for a pre-test of speaking to ensure the equivalence of the two groups because the placement test, which the Preparatory Year Deanship usually runs at the beginning of each academic year, does not usually cover the speaking skill.

The Pre and Post-tests

The researcher developed a speaking test which was used twice: one before the study started and one at the end of the study. The purpose of the pre-test was to ensure the equivalence of the experimental and control groups before the study started while the purpose of the post-test was to assess the students' abilities in speaking toward the end of the study and to compare the results of the experimental group with the results of the control group. The test consisted of description of charts, figures, pictures and demonstration or role cards.

The Exam is a Proficiency Test. It is worth 30 points. It lasts between 10 to 12 minutes. It is composed of two parts. Each one of the two candidates paired up for the exam is awarded one global mark. There are no half marks. Candidates are scored on a global scale, from 1 to 3. Then the total score is converted to be out of 30. Interaction is not a feature of the rubric. Comparison is not made between candidates to decide on their mark; instead, Candidates are scored against the criteria set out in the rubric. A candidate of lower ability may still score a full mark, like a higher ability candidate. The exam is conducted by an Assessor and an Interlocutor. The interlocutor guides the student through the tasks.

The interlocutor follows the script as in the interlocutor guide. The interlocutor does not verbally interfere with the student's answers in any way. He/She only gestures or nods his/her encouragement in order to keep the candidate going if stuck. At the beginning of Part 1, the Interlocutor greets the candidates and seats them. Once the candidates are seated, the Interlocutor introduces himself/herself and the Assessor.

Interlocutor: Good morning/afternoon. My name is _____ and this is _____. He/she will just listen to us.

Interlocutor: [Candidate A] What is your name? And how do you spell that?

Interlocutor: [Candidate B] What is your name? And how do you spell that?

Then The Interlocutor introduces the activity as follows:

Interlocutor: [Candidate B] I'm going to ask you some questions. [Candidate A] you just listen but do not answer. I will ask you your questions later."

The Interlocutor asks questions from one topic group for Candidate B to answer. When the Interlocutor has finished asking the questions, he/she follows the same procedure for Candidate A, as above, but with a different topic group. The number of questions that the Interlocutor asks depends on the length or brevity of the candidates' answers; short answers generate more questions, a candidate who answers at greater length is asked fewer questions. The Interlocutor ensures that each candidate has an equal amount of time to speak. In Part 2, candidates are asked to speak together for three to four minutes. The Interlocutor introduces the activity as follows:

Interlocutor: In the next part, you are going to talk to each other. Now use the Candidate A and Candidate B question and answer cards. Use one of the odd-numbered sets for Candidate A and one of the even-numbered sets for Candidate B.

Interlocutor: (Candidate A) Here is some information about (for example set 1 "Happy Bun" Sandwich Snack Shop).

Interlocutor gives Candidate A the Set 1 Answer Card.

Interlocutor: [Candidate B] You know nothing about "Happy Bun" Sandwich Snack Shop. so ask [Candidate A] some questions about it.

Interlocutor gives Candidate B the Set 1 Question Card. Interlocutor indicates prompt words.

Interlocutor: [Candidate B] Use these words to help you. Do you understand? Thank you.

The Interlocutor continues the same with all the examinees but using different sets of questions. The Assessor is the one who awards the candidate a mark. He/She consults with the Interlocutor. The Assessor is in charge of dealing with the e-podium, changing slides as needed.

Validity and Reliability of the Test

After building the test, it was given to three professors of curriculum and instruction of the English language, two professors of the English language and literature, and three male and three female English language teachers from the English Language Skills Department in the Preparatory Year Deanship for their comments and recommendations. All their comments of replacing the black and white pictures with colored ones and giving clearer instructions were taken into consideration. To establish the reliability of the test, it was applied on twenty students from outside the participants of the study and it was repeated two weeks later. Pearson correlation was calculated between the students' scores in the test in the two times. It was found to be 86.21%.

Equivalence of the Control and Experimental Groups

At the beginning of the study, the pretest was applied on all of the participants to ensure the equivalence of the experimental and the control groups. The results are presented in table 1 below.

Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations of the Students Scores in the Pre-test

variable	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Method Shared Diaries	40	15.80	3.33
Traditional Method	40	15.77	2.84
Gender Male	40	15.73	3.17
Female	40	15.85	3.83

Although the results show observed differences but still the students mean scores in the pre-test were closed. In order to check if the observed differences were significant, ANOVA test was run. The results are presented in table 2 below.

Table 2: Results of ANOVA Test of the Students Scores in the Pre-test

Source	DF	SS	MS	F-Value	Sig
Group	1	0.125	0.125	0.00	0.97
Gender	1	0.313	0.313	0.03	0.86
Error	77	743.06	9.65		
Total	79	743.39			

The results of ANOVA test show that there are no statistically significant differences regardless of the groups (experimental or control group) or gender which indicate that the two groups were equivalent before the study started.

Data Collection

The only difference between the method used in teaching the experimental group and the one used in teaching the control group was that the experimental group students were encouraged to use the shared online diaries whereas the students of the control group were not given this opportunity. Both of the two groups were taught the same English language textbook and the same other English language materials and teaching aids such as using smart boards, videos, data shows, and cassette recorders. The teachers of the two groups, the control and experimental, used to encourage the students to use the English language all the time in the English language classes. All the teachers were English language native speakers. The first step for using the shared diaries was building the blog. The researcher used a previously built website, adding a new blog page that is secured with a password.

Forty posts were added for 40 days in addition to one post named “teacher comments”. Then, the study was applied. The researcher met the male students face to face and the female students through the video circle conference, because it is forbidden for male teachers to meet female students face to face in Saudi Arabia, on the first day and explained to them in details the purpose of the study. He gave them the timeline and all the needed information including the blog password, which they would use as a platform to share their voice diaries. On the second day, the pre- test was applied by the researcher with the help of two assistant teachers. The pre-test was covered in three hours (ten to twelve minutes for every student).

Starting on the third day and for five days, the researcher joined the male students in their English classes and one experienced female trainer teacher joined the female sessions of the experimental group, one session per day that lasted for an hour. They (the researcher and the trainer teacher) were passive observers who only recorded students’ oral participation as it happened .After finishing the observation, the actual process started. The students were asked to record their diary daily using any digital recording they preferred. All of them chose to record it using their mobile phones, and then sent it to the researcher through e-mails.

The researcher converted the digitally recorded voice files (.arm) into blog-friendly files (.wmv). The researcher then uploaded all the files into a password-secured blog. The students were asked to log in to the blog and listen to five of their classmates’ diaries as well as comment on them on the blog. This process was repeated for six weeks. On the fifth day of each week, the researcher commented on students’ general performance for the week, trying to provide them with the needed encouragement and feedback. A post-observation was subsequently carried out in the same manner as the pre-observation and for five days in a row .The following day, the researcher applied the posttest on the students. Tables 3 and 4 below present the results.

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation of the Students Scores in the Post-test

variable	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Gender Male	40	18.88	3.55
Female	40	18.63	3.04
Method Traditional	40	17.48	3.15
Shared diaries	40	20.03	2.94

Scores are out of 30

As a result of the seen differences between the mean scores of the experimental and control groups as table 3 shows, ANOVA test was run. The results are presented in table 4 below.

Table 2: Results of ANOVA Test of the Students Scores in the Post-test

Source	DF	SS	MS	F-Value	Sig
Method	1	130.05	130.05	13.88	0004
Gender	1	1.25	1.25	0.13	0.716
Error	77	721.70	9.37		
Total	79	853.00			

The results show that there are statistically significant differences between the mean scores of the experimental group and the control group at $\alpha = 0.05$ ($F=13.88$, $P= 0.0004$) in favor of the experimental group which indicates that the shared diary method had positive and higher effect on the students speaking skill than what the traditional method had. The results do not reveal any significant differences between the mean scores of the male and the female students.

Discussion

Although the primary language learning is done through the positive acquisition of knowledge through classroom exercises and workshops, the full grasp of weaknesses in the learner’s ability to speak and perform in a second language can only be progressed by having that student discover the areas where he or she is not yet proficient, so that the learner can then fill in those gaps.

Without this exposure to the gaps, he or she would be unable to acquire the next level of learning, as he or she would be unaware of the areas of learning that were still weak (Krashen, 2003). Internet based learning offers many advantages to the learner, including ease of accessibility, a range of activities and lessons that appeal to a wide range of learning types, and the ability to easily engage with multiple audiences (Lyman, 1999). The experimental students' improvement in their speaking skills as a result of their use of oral diaries could be due to three reasons:

Oral diaries gave the students the chance to participate socially with peers in the target language (Vygotsky, 1978); second, oral diaries provided them with the needed scaffolding either by peers or an expert (the researcher) (Donato, 1994); and third, elevating their motivation level, which leads eventually to the improvement of their general language knowledge (Lambert, 1972; Gardner and Lambert, 1972; Mansfield and Wonnitza, 2010). This supports that giving students the chance to practice the language more often helps break their hesitation, shyness, and anxiety, and thus affects their fluency level (Shumin, 2002).

Being the task interesting to them on a personal level, it may be possible to both decrease the anxieties that prevent some students from taking part in exercises which exposes the gaps in their knowledge and also to engage them on a level which is particularly relevant for their motivation and interest in the area of study. With more and more students showing an interest in working online, it may be that there are possible increases in motivation and interest which exist outside the simple parameters of engaging them in classroom exercises (Cole, 2009). Using online shared diaries offers the students the opportunity to use the language not only in the classroom, but also everywhere which may provide richness to the development of the language which might not be the case in the traditional way of teaching speaking in classroom alone.

Through their exposure to using an online diary to document their learning, the students are given a scaffolding environment whereby they can build upon the knowledge of others. This also provides them with an opportunity to engage in more naturalistic environments which exposes them to the gaps in their knowledge, potentially helping their language skills in that manner. Online oral diaries could be a helpful way for second language learning as they allow for a more personal, nuanced use of the language in a safe environment (Thomas, 2009). Through using the cell phone to record and send their daily diaries to the teacher, his device offered students the opportunity to practice their language skills anywhere without the need for prior preparation, which helped in decreasing the students' level of anxiety.

The results of this study confirm that the use of oral diaries with the first year university students helped significantly to increase their participation and their motivation in English classes. Participation of students in the classroom is a reflection of strong motivation toward learning. Schumin (2002) and Ellis (2008) support the notion that classroom interaction is the most reliable indicator of student motivation. The use of oral diaries gave students confidence in their abilities, by facilitating language practice on a daily basis without exception; this is difficult to achieve on a daily basis in the classroom. In addition, the use of oral diaries gave the students an opportunity to speak about their daily lives and to give their opinions using English.

The findings of this part of the experiment are consistent with several previous studies, which confirm that using technology leads, most of the time, to increase motivation in students and to greater classroom participation (Ilter, 2009; Wu, Yen and Marek, 2011). Based on the results of the study, it is recommended to carry out more investigation of the effect of the use of oral diaries on EFL students speaking skill. The English language teachers are also advised to vary their techniques in teaching speaking and include the oral diary as one of these techniques. Teachers can benefit from the case of having most of the secondary and university students cell phones in teaching and practicing using the speaking skill in and outside the classroom and follow up their daily oral diaries.

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IEP Speaking Exam: Global Descriptors

KSU IEP Grade	Descriptor
3	Relates basic information on, e.g. work/study, family, free time etc. Can communicate in a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar matters. Can make him/herself understood in very short utterances, even though pauses, false starts and reformulation are very evident. Can describe in simple terms family, living conditions, educational background and current studies. Uses some simple structures correctly, but may systematically make basic mistakes.
2	Makes simple statements on personal details and very familiar topics. Can make him/herself understood in a simple way, asking and answering questions about personal details, provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help. Can manage very short, isolated, mainly pre-packaged utterances. Much pausing to search for expressions to articulate less familiar words.
1	Only produces isolated words. Only produces isolated words or memorized utterances. Very long pauses.