The Effect of Online Learning in Developing English Speaking Skills

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Abstract: The COVID 19 pandemic has affected all aspects of the life, including the education system. Online learning appears to be efficient in several subjects, including English as a Second Language (ESL). The purpose of this study is to prove through a review of previous research that distance learning helps ESL learners in Saudi Arabia to practice English and develop their speaking skills more efficiently than being in an offline classroom setting. This study reviews up-to-date studies related to the importance of online lessons in developing speaking skills for ESL learners. The study illustrates the difficulties students face in offline classes that prevent them from participating in English discussions; discusses the importance of online learning in developing English speaking skills; and 3) provides suggestions that will help ESL learners to speak English fluently.

Keywords: Distance learning, online classroom, offline classroom, English as a second language (ESL) learner, COVID-19

أثر التعلم عن بعد في تطوير مهارة التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية

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المستخلص: أثرت جائحة COVID 19 على جميع جوانب الحياة، بما في ذلك نظام التعليم. حيث أثبت التعلم عن بعد فعاليته في عدد من الموضوعات، بما في ذلك تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية (ESL). ففي هذه الدراسة هدف الباحث من خلال مراجعة الأبحاث السابقة إلى إثبات أن التعلم عن بعد يساعد متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية (ESL) في المملكة العربية السعودية على ممارسة اللغة الإنجليزية وتطوير مهارات التحدث لديهم بشكل أكثر كفاءة من التواجد في الفصول الدراسية المعتادة. تستعرض هذه الدراسة الدراسات الحديثة المتعلقة بأهمية التعليم عن بعد في تطوير مهارات التحدث لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية. حيث ستتناول الدراسة 1) الصعوبات التي تواجه الطلاب في الفصول الدراسية المعتادة والتي تمنعهم من المشاركة في تحدث اللغة الإنجليزية. 2) مناقشة أهمية التعلم عبر الإنترنت في تطوير مهارات التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية؛ و3) تقديم اقتراحات من شأنها أن تساعد متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية على التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية بطلاقة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التعلم عن بعد، الفصول الدراسية عبر الإنترنت، الفصول الدراسية داخل المدارس، متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية (ESL)، فايروس كورونا.

Introduction

English has become the world's primary language (Fidyati et al., 2021). It is the economic and scientific language worldwide; therefore, schools and universities in Saudi Arabia tend to teach (ESL) over other languages to help students to communicate effectively with the world around them. Students in Saudi Arabia learn English at schools starting at the elementary level and it is the only foreign language

schools teach from elementary school until the first year of colleges in some programs, which means students are exposed to English language for about six years (AlFallaj, 2013). Despite this, the focus of these programs in schools and universities is mainly on grammar and vocabulary. So, students will be able to read and pass English exams with high marks, leading to a lack of communication skills and fluency (AlFallaj, 2013; Kumar, 2021). This is problematic, given that speaking English is an important skill not only for social interaction and networking, but also broadens employment opportunities (Fatimah, 2020 Fidyati et al., 2021).

The measure of acquiring a language is speaking (Brown, 2014; Naser and Hamzah, 2018). It is clear that people need to communicate with others to develop their skills and learn more about other cultures. However, this communication cannot occur effectively without perfect pronunciation in most cases (Tsojon and Aji, 2014). In this regard, educators and teachers do their best to deliver the language effectively. However, some strategies that teachers use to help learners acquire the four essential English language skills — reading, writing, listening, and speaking — are ineffective (Alfallaj, 2013; Kashmiri, 2021). Therefore, the education system should deeply consider developing new ways to improve students' speaking skills, such as online learning.

Although distance teaching has been popular over the past several decades, its application has drastically increased as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Fatima, 2020). Distance learning goes back to 1990-2000 in Saudi Arabia's education system due to the development of the internet and digital technology (Hassounah et al., 2020). More recently, the Ministry of Education (MOE) established the National Center for e-Learning in 2017 as part of the Saudi Vision 2030 initiative to provide services and support for distance learning in the Saudi education system (Hassounah et al., 2020, p. 4). After Saudi Arabia declared the COVID-19 pandemic an international health emergency on January 30, 2020, the education system in Saudi Arabia was suddenly forced to shift to e-learning to protect its citizens (Alqurshi, 2020; Tanveer et al., 2020). Fortunately, many universities in Saudi Arabia were already utilizing e-learning systems such as Blackboard and McGraw-Hill within their programs, including King Saud University, Taibah University, King Khalid University, Qassim University, Islamic University of Madinah, Al-Baha University, and King Abdul-Aziz University (Hassounah et al., 2020). Although the infrastructure provided by the Saudi Vision 2030 initiative facilitated the shift to e-learning, universities, students, academics, and administrators faced challenges during the transition due to the COVID-19 lockdown (Tanveer et al., 2020). Fortunately, this was short lived, since Saudi universities have reported that by the end of 2020, "102 million users were conducting 107,000 hours of web-based learning in more than 7600 virtual classes" (Hassounah et al., 2020, p. 5).

It has, however, been argued that distance learning is not effective, and students do not benefit or achieve teaching goals in online learning environments. While many studies have illustrated the challenges associated with online learning, they often do not provide solutions that deal with such

difficulties beyond those related to curriculum, textbooks, or teachers' strategies within face-to-face classrooms. This article therefore reviews the current literature related to the importance of online lessons in developing speaking skills for ESL learners. The study attempts to 1) illustrate the difficulties students face in offline classes that prevent them from participating in speaking English; 2) discuss the importance of online learning in developing English speaking skills; and 3) provide suggestions that will help ESL learners to speak English fluently. This is particularly relevant, given the COVID-19 pandemic has forced the transition to distance learning and thus provides the opportunity to evaluate its effectiveness for ESL learners.

Difficulties ESL Students Face in Offline Classrooms

To establish the effectiveness of online learning for ESL students, it is first necessary to examine the difficulties these students face in offline classrooms. The studies reviewed below demonstrate how offline classrooms can negatively impact the ability of students to learn English as a second language because students prefer to communicate with native English speakers, teachers stick to the curriculum and do not offer innovative learning opportunities, and the students' personalities themselves can impede their learning in such contexts.

First, Alfallaj (2013) collected data from three different institutes in Buraydah, Saudi Arabia to explore ESL students' pronunciation in offline classroom settings. He found that students faced difficulties in learning linguistics and pronunciation within their traditional classroom. In fact, he found 77.7% of student would like to have native English teachers and 91% would prefer to communicate with native speakers. Students also identified that the hours for teaching speaking and listening should be increased and that educators should focus on pronunciation. Alfallaj (2013) concluded that teachers should encourage their students "to communicate with native speakers as much as possible" (p. 142). Kashmiri (2021) also argues that students need to communicate directly with native speakers to practice English in a natural context. English online speaking classes would be the best way to help ESL learners connect and communicate with native English speakers to develop their English-speaking skills.

Another study of Preparatory Year Program (PYP) students in three institutes in Saudi Arabia conducted by Naser and Hamzah (2018) found that teachers stick to the curriculum and exams, which prevents them from developing strategies that might help them improve their students' pronunciation. Therefore, students were worried about the exam and teachers were forced to follow the pacing schedule (Naser and Hamzah, 2018), which in turn lead to a loss in the joy of learning how to speak English in an offline context. Furthermore, some teachers are not well prepared to teach English speaking effectively. According to Kashmiri (2021), most depend on Grammar Translate Methods (GTM), which is unsuitable for achieving language proficiency. Finally, the use of outdated materials, including technology and curricula, are also obstacles that prevent learners from enjoying learning the language (Kashmiri, 2021).

However, online learning will provide learners with an interactive live environment to practise and learn English effectively.

A final obstacle to learning English in offline classrooms is the personality of the students themselves. Kashmiri (2021) identified several important obstacles second language learners are exposed to within offline classrooms. For example, anxiety and a lack of confidence makes many students uncomfortable when they learn English in front of their classmates, which negatively affects their learning (Kashmiri, 2021). This can be compounded by the large class sizes typical of offline ESL classrooms that can make students feel intimidated (Kashmiri, 2021). Indeed, when students cannot find suitable ways to develop their speaking skills, they tend to use "autonomous learning" (Fidyati et al. 2021). It is therefore important for teachers to develop engaging and effective strategies for students to develop their speaking skills, which may be facilitated through online classrooms.

Related to this is the motivation of students to learn (Kashmiri, 2021; Kumar, 2021; Zakarneh, 2018). Kumar (2021) specifically designed a study to discover the effect of motivation on developing speaking skills among English as a second language learners. He found that students who are motivated learn better than other learners. Also, he found that some students are self-motivated and more willing to get knowledge. However, according to him "a great teacher can also make learning enjoyable and motivated for students to achieve their full attention and potential" (Kumar, 2021, p. 419). In spite of the limitation of the research "specific space, numbers and setting" (Kumar, 2021, p. 419), we can have a clear view that learning English as a second language needs motivation and that cannot occur without teacher's guidance. As he mentioned, students "would be more motivated to learn if the classroom is a congenial place where students feel recognized and appreciated" (Kumar, 2021, p. 420). He concluded by suggesting motivational strategies and mention "activities-based teaching, games and discussions, debates and visual aids such as colorful charts, diagrams and videos" (Kumar, 2021, p. 420) could be effective to motivate students. All what he has suggested can be used online by providing excellent second language teachers to motivate learners and put less stress on offline classroom teachers.

The challenges that ESL students face in offline classrooms reviewed above demonstrate how Saudi students can benefit from online classrooms. To fully develop their English language skills, ESL students need to communicate directly and individually with native speakers or professional instructors under the school's supervision. Online classrooms not only provide students the opportunity to practice with native English speakers in an efficient and effective way, but also offer innovative and flexible ways to teach English that can accommodate students' personalities and learning styles in a way unobtainable in offline classrooms.

Importance of Online Learning for Developing English Speaking Skills

As with any technology, online learning poses both challenges and benefits for its users. Some teachers faced difficulties when helping learners' transition to online classrooms during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, although a country like Saudi Arabia was prepared for the transition, teachers faced many barriers to effectively helping students in online classrooms (Tanveer et al., 2020, p. 11). Furthermore, "[i]t has been established that most of the students of present age are techno savvy, yet for some students, use of computer to attend a virtual class or learning a new concept can be a real nightmare" (Fatimah, 2021, p. 4).

Despite these challenges, Weiss (2000) argues that online classrooms are effective, and students can learn even though they are not face-to-face with their teachers. This is supported by research by Jabeen and Thomas (2015), who found 77.7 % of 53 language student participants who attended online classes for the first time in different institutes in the United Arab Emirates found such classes were sufficient and effective. However, it was argued that speaking was the lowest skill to benefit from online learning due to a lack of interaction between students and their teachers, as students prefer to interact with their instructors more than with their peers (Jabeen & Thomas, 2015). This is plausible since this study was conducted when e-learning was first launched in the United Arab Emirates.

Distance learning has, however, significantly progressed since that date and there is a high potentiation that ESL learners can benefit from online classroom through developing their speaking skills. Online learning is innovative, and learners benefit from using technology to stimulate learning, improve their experience, and engage and communicate globally (Zakarneh, 2018). In addition, Khan (2011, as cited in Zakarneh, 2018), found that online resources "attract the attention of learners, including passive learners" (p. 174). Zakarneh (2018) further illustrates that e-learning is an effective mode as a platform to teach English through a survey of Arab students who attended English courses at different universities. He found that student performance improved and learning the English language was facilitated through the online courses. The majority of students also improved all four of their English skills through e-learning along with the acquisition of vocabulary and grammar. Thus, online classrooms offer the ideal setting in which ESL students can improve their English language skills because they provide and innovative and stimulating environment that facilitates learning all four aspects of ESL.

Suggestions to Improve English Fluency among ESL Learners

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has forced schools to transition to online classrooms, which show great potential for improving the language skills of ESL students in particular, there are a number of areas that require improvement. These include making online learning innovative and engaging, including the use of conferencing platforms that will allow students to not only interact with their instructors in real

time, but also offers students the opportunity to communicate with native and professional English speakers to further develop their English-speaking skills.

First, online learning should strive to teach ESL in using innovative and engaging techniques. Weiss states that to do so, teachers should teach subjects "in a way that cultivates relationships" (2000, p. 51). Although Weiss (2000) was not referring to teaching ESL specifically, her argument that subjects are being taught online and effectively applies to this review. Therefore, instructors should not simply use e-learning systems to allocate assignments, but they should also interact effectively with their students through the virtual world. Lee and Pyo (2003) argue "web-based instruction (WBI) programs improve oral proficiency and communicative skills by exposing learners to realistic language learning environment and make the learning of language lively and more interactive" (cited in Zakarneh, 2018, p. 172). However, this only refers to an online platform that provides interactive digital materials for learning English.

Fatima (2020) studied EFL learners at Muscat College, Oman, to discover the changes to teaching ESL and the impact on students that occurred due to the COVID-19 pandemic. She found that the majority of the participants prefer to learn using online applications and concluded that e-learning during the lockdown in Muscat College has shown success.

Further, according to her findings, students were more likely to learn independently. She concluded that

"Even though e-learning has become a part and parcel of 21st century with its plethora of benefits to both the teacher and the student, yet the language faculties everywhere need to have solutions to overcome the challenges posed by it. A change in attitude and technological literacy should be encouraged among the students in order for e-learning to work effectively" (Fatima, 2020, p. 5).

Also, one of her recommendations was in addition to the online apps and platforms that shown their effectiveness during the pandemic like "Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Classroom, Moodle, and so on, a new form of blended teaching-learning will evolve which will combine the features of online learning with face-to-face interaction" (Fatima, 2020, p. 5). Therefore, a blended teaching-learning approach that combines online modules with conferencing platforms will allow students and teachers to collaborate on the most effective means of learning and teaching ESL in online classrooms.

Educators and decision makers should provide help hands to facilitate difficulties for both teachers and learners. Naser and Hamzah (2018) argue that "[they] must create a good environment especially in English classes and there must be an activated EL [English language] clinic which can help students practice EL and it must be organized logically" (p. 96). They also argue that new teachers need to learn how to use specific strategies related to chosen skills in order to help students practice English in appositive environment. This study helps to raise the attention to the need of suitable environment and well-trained teachers to help learners develop their speaking skills. This can be found easily in a developed online speaking classroom.

Further, ESL learners need to communicate directly with professional native speakers to develop their speaking skills. In Alfallaj's study (2013) where he collected data from three different institutes in Buraydah, Saudi Arabia. He concluded that students prefer to communicate with native speakers under their teachers' supervisions to improve their fluency. Educators should therefore employ necessary methods to make it possible for learners to communicate with native speakers online in an organized schedule that are part of their curriculum. This may be easier to implement in an online environment because students will have the chance to communicate directly with native speakers. For example, online classrooms offer students direct contact with native speakers and professional English speakers that will help them speak English fluently in a short period of time. This will save both time and effort, as Brown (2016) has stated that money and time should be spent wisely in support of technology to support teachers and students.

The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically altered education, including how ESL is taught, worldwide. According to Dr. Hamad bin Mohammed Al Al-Sheikh, the Minister of Education in Saudi Arabia "[d]istance learning could eventually be a strategic choice for Saudi Arabia and not just an alternative following the coronavirus crisis period" (Naar, 2020). Therefore, efforts should be directed to assist learners effectively learn English online. Such efforts should concentrate on offering students innovative and engaging opportunities to develop their English-speaking skills in online settings.

Summary and Conclusions.

The transition to online learning forced by the COVID-19 pandemic has posed challenges to all aspect of life including education. As Dr. Hamad bin Mohammed Al Al-Sheikh, the Minister of Education in Saudi Arabia, stated "[e]lectronic learning after the coronavirus crisis will not be the same as it was before especially with the accelerated global trend towards e-learning and its technologies as a future option, and not just an alternative during exceptional circumstances" (Naar, 2020). Schools and universities have shifted to distance learning, and this has impacted ESL learners in Saudi Arabia who used to learn English in traditional classroom settings. Yet such offline classrooms do not effectively teach speaking skills to ESL learners. As demonstrated in the above discussion, students struggle to learn perfect English pronunciation from their non-native speaking teachers. Further, an emphasis on curriculum, schedules, and preparing for exams prevents both teachers and students from enjoying learning English in an effective way. Further, large class sizes prevent teachers from practicing English equally in their classroom and prevent students who lack confidence from participating. Overall, outdated methods for teaching English in face-to-face classrooms and lack of motivation prevent students from acquiring high level in speaking English in offline classrooms.

In contrast, the studies reviewed here show that students prefer online classrooms that provide direct interaction with native speakers to develop their speaking skills. However, most ESL programs focus

on all four English language skills within offline classrooms, while others emphasize the use speaking skills to interact with digital platform without real communications with native English-speaking professionals. Educators and decision makers should therefore carefully consider how to effectively assist ESL students. Distance learning is an ideal method to teach speaking to ESL learners since it provides professional native speakers who would collaborate to teach students under the schools' supervision. This article argues that interacting with professional English teachers online will enhance speaking skills and provide motivation for learners to use critical thinking and to communicate with people from different parts of the world. After the pandemic of COVID-19 all students will return to their seats, attend their physical classrooms, and sit face-to-face with their teachers. This should not prevent them from practicing English freely online with their teachers or other professional instructors from other universities under the supervision of their schools. Overall, online classrooms offer the opportunity for ESL students to practice English freely and improve speaking skills and should continue to be utilized in ESL programs following the transition back to offline classrooms. Since this study depends on reviewing several studies to prove the importance of online lessons in developing English speaking skills, more research is needed to measure this benefit in the real context.

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