PRACTISING ONLINE APPROACH VIA SKYPE ACTIVITIES TO DEVELOP SPEAKING SKILLS AMONG MALAYSIAN UNDERGRADUATES

Sarala Thulasi Palpanadan*

Center for Language Studies
Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia
Malaysia
sarala@uthm.edu.my

Iqbal Ahmad

Education Faculty
University of Malakand
Pakistan
dr.iqbal.shah@uom.edu.pk

*Corresponding Author email: sarala@uthm.edu.my

Submission: 03 April 2021

Revised: 22 May 2021

Accepted: 03 June 2021

*Peer-review under responsibility of 5th ASIA International Multidisciplinary Conference 2021 (Online)
Scientific Committee*

<http://connectingasia.org/scientific-committee/>

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Office # 6, First Floor, A & K Plaza, Near D Watson, F-10 Markaz, Islamabad, Pakistan,

editor@readersinsight.net

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ABSTRACT

Speaking skill pedagogy has always remained as a huge enigma for English as a Second Language (ESL) educators. Despite the challenge, the need to master the skills prevail in academia. The undergraduates especially those from the technical division seem to grapple with the ability to perform well in their studies and market products upon employment due to the inability to communicate well in English. Nowadays, there are numerous platforms available for ESL learners to improve their speaking proficiency. Thus, this paper intended to study the effectiveness of using Skype activities via online approach to help students enhance their confidence in speaking in English. Reflective journals were collected from 100 undergraduates who enrolled in an English course in a public university. Besides, 10 undergraduates were randomly selected to participate in a semi-structured interview. Thematic analysis was conducted using Transana software where four main themes emerged: account possession; familiarity; challenges; and features. It was found that many participants were aware of Skype but did not have the account prior to the study. Majority of the participants admitted that Skype activities helped them to converse better which enhanced their motivation to speak in English more confidently and fluently.

Keywords: *Skype, Speaking Skills, Online Approach, Platform, Malaysian Undergraduates*

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

1. University students faced various challenges in acquiring sufficient competency in English language particularly in speaking skills. Furthermore, the current scenario of having to rely on online platforms to learn speaking skills has caused the lecturers and undergraduates to undergo new experiences in teaching and learning speaking skills.
2. Using Skype as one of the platforms had provided a new experience for many university students to enhance their speaking skills via online platforms. The participants of this study had highlighted the experience of using Skype activities in four aspects including account possession, familiarity, challenges, and features.
3. This study found that university students were getting more familiarized with online platforms such as Skype and started to utilize them more meaningfully. The participants confirmed that the use of Skype activities had increased the confidence levels and thus, helped to improve their speaking skills in English.

Research Objectives

The purpose of this study was to introduce a suitable online platform that will be suitable for university students to improve their speaking skills in English. The research objectives of the study were: 1) To assess the influence of Skype method among the university students' speaking skills abilities and 2) To investigate the university students' perceptions of practising Skype method in speaking activities in English. The outcome of the study would be useful to highlight important aspects to consider in conducting speaking activities for university students using online platforms to harness the best outcome of an online speaking lesson.

Methodology

This qualitative research involved 100 selected students from a technical university in Malaysia. The participants consisted of students who were in their degree programs and enrolled in English courses at the university. The participants were introduced to various types of online platforms during the lessons and asked to prepare a reflective journal to state their perceptions of using Skype activities as an online platform to conduct presentations and practice speaking skills. They were told to write reflections based on their individual experiences without the influence of any other parties. Their reflections were collected immediately after the completion of the online speaking class as to ensure participants could remember the details of the sessions clearly. Thematic analysis was conducted to determine the students' perceptions of the effectiveness of using Skype platform during the speaking lessons in English. The emerged themes were validated by three experts from the same field (teaching and learning). Based on the themes identified, further actions can be taken to further enhance the speaking skills of the university students using the related online platforms.

Results

Thematic analysis was conducted on 100 reflective journals (from 100 participants) where 4 themes emerged: account possession; familiarity; features; and challenges.

Account Possession

Based on the findings, only about 38 participants possessed the Skype account earlier. Many participants only created the account as they were told to do so by the lecturer for the course requirement.

Familiarity

62 participants had heard about Skype but had not used it before. 10 participants were using it actively. 25 participants had the account but only used it a few years ago to communicate with overseas friends/relations.

Features

The participants who liked this platform highlighted reasons including the setting of the platform of giving the feeling of being in class and having creative, livelier and interesting background.

Challenges

Some participants complained that they were not able to get connection easily compared to other platforms, the sound system was not appealing, they had to download the software prior to using the platform, it was not widely used in the classroom, they needed more time to learn the functions and the handphone battery drained faster.

Findings

Apparently, using Skype as the online platform to learn speaking skills was a new experience for many undergraduates. The benefits of using online platforms in education system has been emphasized in Malaysia even before the issue of Covid-19 (Rizal et al., 2019). Besides, research showed that using Skype as a learning tool had helped students to improve their speaking skills (Yen, Hou, & Chang, 2015). Thus, more learning sessions should be conducted using Skype as the learning platform so that students obtain opportunity to communicate more with their coursemates mainly to improve their speaking skills in English.

Acknowledgement

This research work was supported by UTHM TIER 1 Grant (H807).

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Dr. Sarala Thulasi Palpanadan is a senior lecturer at Center for Language Studies (CLS), Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM). She specialized in the areas of TESL, mixed method research, teacher education and second language acquisition. She has written books and published articles in reputable international indexed and refereed journals.

Dr. Iqbal Ahmad is attached to University of Malakand, Pakistan. Currently, he chairs the Department of Education at University of Malakand. He received his MS in education from Australian Catholic University and PhD in education from Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. Currently, He has published his research work in national and international journals and authored books.