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**IMPROVE YOUR ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN
ENGLISH BY USING INFORMAL SYNCHRONOUS CHAT**

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Abstract

This study was conducted to find out how effective implementing a Skype Informal Synchronous Chat (ISC) outside the classroom component into the learning process of an English as a foreign language (EFL) oral communication skills (OCS) course at Near East University (NEU) was to improve the oral skills, natural fluency and confidence of participants. A quasi-experimental study was carried out. The participants were 24 students from NEU taking the OCS course, divided into an experimental and a control group. Data was collected from a pre- and post-speaking test and from semi-structured interviews, analysed, and the findings discussed. The results of the study show that after the intervention, the experimental group improved their speaking skills more than the control group. According to the research participants the practice of ISC was very effective, useful, and enjoyable and reduced their speaking anxiety. It is therefore recommended that the ISC be integrated into the English oral communication syllabi.

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Keywords: Oral Communication; Speaking Anxiety; Synchronous Chat; Skype.

1. Introduction

There is no doubt that interaction in educational environments is one of the sine qua non elements to bring success in teaching and learning. Computer-mediated communication environments, such as Voice over Internet Protocol via Skype, are widely used nowadays in learning a foreign language.

2. Problem Statement

Perhaps out of the four language skills that language students need to master in EFL or ESL educational contexts is speaking (Aljumah, 2011). This means being "able to pronounce phonemes correctly, use appropriate stress and intonation patterns and speak in connected speech" (Harmer, 2011, p. 343). Harmer also mentions that speakers of English have to be able to speak in different genres and situations and use a range of conversational and conversational repair strategies. One of the main problems that EFL teachers are confronted with is not being able to increase the chances of students to use the foreign language within the classroom. According to Yang & Chang (2008), Taiwanese students do not develop their English speaking skills because of "limited class time and unequal access to interaction in a traditional classroom setting". Another problem is improving students' speaking skills through communicative activities in classes with a common native language (L1) which invites them to use it instead of the second language (L2). As Huerta-Macias & Kephart (2009) noticed in their study on L1 use in adult EFL classrooms, students tend to switch to L1 because of the emphasis on content in some classes. The participants of this study are confronted with the same problem. They are Turkish or Turkish Cypriots and do not feel confident enough and usually rely on their L1 to express their thoughts during classroom activities.

3. Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

- a. Has the implementation of Skype ISC after class improved participants' oral communication skills?
- b. According to the participants' views how did using Skype ISC after class affect their speaking skills?
- c. What are participants' views regarding the use of Skype ISC after class?

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of the study was to find out how effective implementing a Skype ISC outside the classroom component into the learning process of an English as a foreign language OCS course at NEU was to improve the oral skills, natural fluency and confidence of participants.

5. Research Methods

The study used a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest design. Ary et al. (2010) state that an experimental research is the "study of the effects of the systematic manipulation of one variable on another variable." In this study the independent variable was the exposure of the students in the experimental group to an informal context of EFL use via Skype while the dependent variable was their performance on a specific speaking test.

This research is quasi-experimental since the selection of the control and experimental groups did not follow a random procedure. The participants in the study were students in two different classes, taking the same OCS course. All the participants in the study were exposed to a pre- and post-test to find out their level of speaking English and to investigate the possible impact of the intervention. The test used

was the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). The intervention was applied to the English language teaching (ELT) students in the experimental group by involving them in everyday five minute conversations with a partner by using Skype to improve their oral communication abilities. The control group, which consisted of students in the TRN (translation and interpretation) and ELL (English language and literature) programs, was not asked to use this. Seven randomly selected students of the experimental group were interviewed at the end of the experiment to find out about their experience of using Skype ISC to improve their oral communication skills.

5.1. Context

Students studying in the English Department follow a program that aims at both improving their language use abilities and training them to become competent English language teachers, translators or literature BA graduates. All the courses taught in the department are in English. The possibility of students being exposed to English outside the classroom cannot be neglected. The first year students need to improve their OCS as their level of English differs for different reasons.

5.2. Participants

The participants of this study were 24 first year students who took the OCS course during the spring semester of the 2015-2016 academic year. They study in ELT, ELL, and TRN programs. The majority were from Turkey and North Cyprus. As the course was separately taught to two groups of students, the ELT group, which consisted of 12 students, was randomly chosen as an experimental group and the ELL and TRN group, which consisted of 12 students, as a control group.

5.3. Procedures

Before starting the research study, permission was obtained from the head of the English department. Next, the researchers informed the students in the experimental group about the study. They were provided a list of topics to talk about for 5 minutes every day and then they were free to discuss about other topics as well. This group was asked to use Skype for two months, April and May 2016, to speak with a partner. The researchers did not interfere to pair the students allowing the participants to feel more comfortable to speak with classmates of their own choice. They decided upon the time of the activity. In order to use only English, they were asked to record their conversations.

Both groups took a pre-test to find out their levels in speaking English. The test used was IELTS, which is suitable for levels ranging from B1 to C2 in relation to the CEFR. The next step of the experiment was to have all participants in the study take a post-test after the intervention to see the impact on the experimental group. For the next step, seven students in the experimental group were interviewed to find out about their experience of using Skype. All the data were analysed and discussed according to the research aims.

5.4. Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection tools used for this study were the IELTS speaking test and semi-structured interviews. The IELTS was used for the pre- and post tests. The IELTS speaking test is 11 to 14 minutes long with three parts: in part one students answer questions about themselves, in part two they speak about a topic and in part three they have a longer discussion on a topic. Examiners award a band score for each of the four criterion areas: Fluency and Coherence, Lexical Resource, Grammatical Range and Accuracy and Pronunciation. The four criteria are equally weighted. The topics used for the pre-test were different from the ones used for the post test and were all selected from topics used by IELTS.

The other material used to provide data was a semi-structured interview. After the post-test seven randomly selected experimental group students were asked, using a semi-structured interview, about their experience of using Skype. "Semi-structured interviewing follows the open-ended approach that is characteristic of ethnographic and qualitative research." (Whitehead, 2005, p.17).

The questions asked were:

1. How was your experience about using Skype to develop your oral communication?
2. What did you learn from this experience?
3. What else would you do to improve (your experience of using Skype to develop) your oral communication?
4. How was your collaboration with your partner?

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The responses given by the participants were coded, interpreted and analysed. The IELTS speaking test results of both examiners were compared using IBM SPSS 20 software.

5.5. Validity and Reliability

For validity, standardized IELTS speaking pre and post tests were administered. To avoid bias, as one of the researchers was teaching both the control and the experimental group, the grading of students' oral test was done by two outside examiners. The examiners were instructors teaching in the English department. In order to ensure inter-rater reliability, the grades of both examiners were compared to find out whether they correlated. As seen in Table 1, experimental group's pre-test and post-test results of the speaking test by both examiners correlated above 0.8.

Table 1. Paired Samples Correlations and T-test results of the Experimental and the Control Group

Experimental Group								
	N	Correlation	Sig.	t	s	Sig.	ST Error M	MD
Pre R1-Post R1	12	.930	.000	-7.916	.71111	.000	.20528	1.625 (%29.54)
Pre R2-Post R2	12	.809	.001	-5.631	.71774	.000	.20719	1.16667 (%18.42)
Control Group								
Pre R1-Post R1	12	.791	.002	-2.385	.90767	.036	.26202	.625 (%10.34)
Pre R2-Post R2	12	.597	.040	-2.602	.88763	.025	.25624	.66667 (%11.11)

Similarly, as shown in Table 2, the correlations of control group’s pre-test and post-test results of the test were statistically significant. There was also a strong correlation (see Table 2) between the pretests and posttests of both examiners. The statistically strong correlations shown in Table 1 and 2 between the pretests and posttests of both groups and examiners show that the results of the IELTS speaking test used for evaluation were highly reliable.

Table 2. Speaking Test Correlations

Test	R	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pre R1-Pre R2	.707**	.000
Post R1- Post R2	.754**	.000
Pre R1-Post R1	.774**	.000
Pre R2-Post R2	.712**	.000

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

5.6. Ethical Issues

All participants were briefed about the intervention, the voluntary participation and their freedom to withdraw from the study at any stage and any reason without any consequences. To preserve anonymity and confidentiality pseudonyms were used when reporting the results of the study.

6. Findings

6.1. The Effect of After Class Skype Informal Synchronous Chat on Students’ Speaking Skills

A quasi-experimental pretest-posttest design was used in order to find out whether the Skype ISC intervention improved participants’ speaking skills. Compared to the control group, the experimental group did better on the speaking test (see Table 3).

Table 3. Mean Differences of Experimental and Control Group Pre-test and Post-test results

GROUP	M (Pre-test R1)	S	M (Post-test R1)	S	MD	M (Pre-test R2)	S	M (Post-test R2)	s	MD
Experimental	5.500	1.50756	7.1250	.95644	1.6250 %29.54	6.3333	1.15470	7.5000	1.16775	1.1667 %18.42
Control	6.0417	1.48413	6.6667	1.15470	.62500 %10.34	5.9583	1.09665	6.6250	.77239	.66667 %11.11
Total	5.7708	1.48894	6.8958	1.06301	-	6.1458	1.11783	7.0625	1.06641	-

According to the speaking test results graded by the first examiner, the experimental group improved their grades by 29.54 %, while the control group improved their speaking grades by 10.34 % only. Similarly, experimental group improved their grades more by 18.42% compared to the control group which managed to improve their grades by 11.11% according the second examiner’s assessment.

6.2. Participants' Views Regarding the Effects of Skype Informal Chat After Class on their Speaking Skills

In order to disclose participants' viewpoints regarding their experience with Skype informal chat after class, semi-structured interviews with randomly selected seven participants were conducted. All participants in the experimental group mentioned that being involved in the project and talking for at least five minutes every day with their speaking partner enhanced their oral communication skills.

Several participants stated that their speaking skills were improved and they became better in oral communication: "I can see that my English has improved. Our first conversation with my partner was not very good but I noticed that the last one was much better" (Maria, personal communication, May 29, 2016). Karen similarly stated that she has learned a lot and improved her speaking skills without trying very hard. "I learned a lot from speaking with my partner. I feel that I am much better in communicating my ideas to people and I did this with a little extra effort after class" (Karen, personal communication, May 29, 2016). John stated that he was really surprised that he has improved a lot in a very short time. "When the project has started I didn't believe it was going to be very effective. I was really shocked to see the change and how I've improved in a very short time" (John, personal communication, May 29, 2016).

Most of the participants in the experimental group stated that they benefited a lot by collaborating with their speaking partners. Some even mentioned that their partners especially the native speakers were like teachers guiding and helping them with language issues as well. "Maria was a good partner. For things that I did not know how to say she would help me like a teacher. I think I helped her too, but most of the time she helped me. When I did not know how to say something in English I tried to explain what I wanted to say. For example, 'a thing that you put water inside' and she named the word" (John, personal communication, May 29, 2016).

Karen mentioned that she had the informal second speaking partner and expressed her collaboration with them as: "I spoke with both Mary and Linda on Skype. I learned a lot from speaking with Mary. With Linda first we brainstormed the topics we were going to discuss about and then we talked and recorded our conversation. My partner liked this, as he cannot speak English very well, he felt more confident in speaking. I think he has improved a lot" (Karen, personal communication, May 29, 2016). Similarly, Linda stated that he learned many things from her partner and teach him at the same time: "My partner helped me to improve my English, and I think I also helped him to improve a lot; we supported each other in carrying out the tasks properly (Linda, personal communication, May 29, 2016). Robert explained her collaboration as "Whenever we had words that we had to use and we did not know them in English we tried to explain them in English and after the conversation we checked with a dictionary and tried to use those words later" (Robert, personal communication, May 29, 2016).

Lisa believed that she had improved her oral skills "I think using Skype is very good because my speaking skill is not good and speaking with my partner my speaking has improved a lot (Lisa, personal communication, May 29, 2016). Mary on the other hand stated that she taught many things to her speaking partner: "My partner improved her English a lot. I understood what she was saying. I think my partner improved her pronunciation by speaking with me" (Mary, personal communication, May 29, 2016). During the interviews, the participants stated that after taking part in the project, they started to use

more English with their speaking partners and friends outside class as well: “Now we speak English more often, during the breaks, in the cafeteria and etc. When you use the language a lot it is easier to improve and remember new words” (John, personal communication, May 29, 2016). “We decided to use English every day, not only on Skype, even in school now we speak English between us during the breaks as well” (Lisa, personal communication, May 29, 2016).

6.3. Participants' Views Regarding the Use of Skype Informal Synchronous Chat

Almost all of the participants found using Skype a good experience. They mentioned that they enjoyed talking in English on Skype after class with their partners. More than half of the participants stated the experience was so enjoyable that they even forgot about the time when talking on Skype: “I enjoyed speaking with my best friend. It was a good speaking experience when we had time to do so. When we finished discussing the compulsory topics we also discussed about other topics and forgot about the time limit” (Robert, personal communication, May 29, 2016). “It always lasted longer than 5 minutes. We talked about a lot of things besides the compulsory ones” (John, personal communication, May 29, 2016). “We spoke more than 5 minutes every time, we forgot about time, and we became very good friends” (Lisa, personal communication, May 29, 2016).

Most of the participants said that the experience helped them overcome their psychological barriers they set up in speaking English. They avoided inhibiting themselves by actively participating in discussions and conversations in English. It helped to reduce their speaking anxiety. Linda expressed this during the interview as “When I speak I am shy but recently I improved my English and I speak with more confidence” (Linda, personal communication, May 29, 2016). Similarly Mary stated that she became more confident through talking on Skype “I am a shy person and when you don't see the person in front of you it's a bit easier to speak. I have problems even when speaking with my family – I was worried-, but I managed to talk comfortably. I felt confident” (Mary, personal communication, May 29, 2016). “Speaking with a class mate and not a teacher made me feel more comfortable” (Maria, personal communication, May 29, 2016). Robert generalised this and stated that the whole class overcame speaking anxiety and began to talk more. “We are all shy. We did not speak too much in class before. Now we feel better when we speak in class.” Participants also mentioned that they were able to talk and do other things at the time of their conversation, which saved their time and make the experience more natural. “It was a very natural experience. I had things to do in the house so I was speaking and doing things at the same time (Mary, personal communication, May 29, 2016). “It became something that we do every day, part of our daily routine” (Lisa, personal communication, May 29, 2016).

The participants also mentioned that they improved their social relations with their speaking partners. “We forgot about time, and we became very good friends” (Lisa, personal communication, May 29, 2016). “I discover that we have lots in common with my speaking partner, we have more to talk and more to share (John, personal communication, May 29, 2016)”. “Using Skype outside the classroom helped us a lot. Our relationship became closer, we are better friends now” (Robert, personal communication, May 29, 2016).

All participants stated that they enjoyed the whole project, found it very effective and they would be very happy if they were given the opportunity to use any synchronous platform to improve their

English speaking skills. The participants also mentioned that they would continue speaking with their partners and friends on Skype because they believed that they got used to talking in English on Skype. "I intend to continue using Skype to speak in English with my classmates all the time, I think it is going to be very difficult for me if I don't have Skype and talk" (Karen, personal communication, May 29, 2016).

7. Conclusions

Analysis of the findings disclosed that the ISC sessions have improved participants' oral communication skills. Through ISC, the participants felt more comfortable in communicating in English with their classmates as Kim, Rueckert, Kim, and Seo (2013) also noticed in their study. They managed to overcome their speaking anxiety and consider chatting with friends as part of their daily routines. It is apparent that all of the participants enjoyed chatting synchronously with their classmates by their mobiles, tablets or computers. They found the whole process a valuable experience that they believed should be used to develop oral communication skills. Through ISC the participants also broadened their social relations with their classmates, and become closer friends. At the same time, this helped them reduce or even eliminate the fear of making mistakes while talking, which is considered to be the main inhibition factor for language learners' speaking in the target language. Language learners become better in oral communication if they have less speaking anxiety. Informal synchronous chats as observed and disclosed in the findings of the present study, could be very effective to eliminate the speaking anxiety of language learners. It seems that EFL teachers need to create opportunities for their students to use technology for ISC in order to fight against speaking anxiety and develop their oral communication skills. They can include the practice of ISC in their course syllabi. Blending the ISC with actual speaking classes could be the panacea for language learners to tackle speaking anxiety and improve their oral communication skills in English.

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