

The Effect of "GO ENGLISH.ME" A Virtual Learning Website on Lower Intermediate Iranian EFL Learners Speaking Ability

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Abstract

GoEnglish.Me can provide EFL learners with authentic materials in a variety of topics. In addition to authentic materials, the site can offer an opportunity of learning real Spoken English by American Native Speakers. To achieve the purpose of this study, you can probe the effect of GoEnglish.Me on lower-intermediate EFL learners' speaking ability. 44 female subjects from a language institute in Mashhad were selected and randomly assigned to control (N=22) and experimental (N=22) groups. Participants in experimental group received the internet and were allowed to employ the materials of GoEnglish.Me in order to practice speaking. Participants in control group practiced speaking traditionally, that is, they did not have any access to computer and internet, and the practice was done through face-to-face conversations, teacher-student interaction and etc. Finally, it was found that experimental group outperformed the control group in posttest ($p < .05$). Also, the finding provides pedagogical implication for employing GoEnglish.Me as an effective virtual environment in order to help EFL students improve their English language skills.

Keywords: GoEnglish.Me, Speaking Ability, Iranian EFL learners

1. Introduction

Regardless of the importance in the area of speaking skills, this ability particularly in a foreign language is complicated; similarly supported by Scott and Ytreberg (1990) considering speaking as the most demanding skill for both teachers and learners. Internet has shown to positively affect the process of learning English as a foreign language (EFL). The access to definitions and usages of English words along with their native and correct pronunciation in various contexts on the internet (Dictionary.com; Merriam-Webster Online) has paved the way for EFL learners to improve their language knowledge. In addition to these sites there are some other sites which can provide the EFL learners with different audio-visual materials being important in enhancing their oral skills. The role of oral skills in EFL contexts is vital and mastery of speaking and listening can help you avoid any misunderstanding that may occur during the conversations. "Go English. Me" is the focus of this study and its effects on improvement of EFL learners' oral skills are explored. The educational ways provided by the site are based on such activities as going to college, finding a friend, marriage and other social activities. The conversations are performed by American Native Speakers.

Using of the internet has been already explored by some EFL researchers. For example, Mitra, Tooley, Inamdar and Dixon (2003) investigated the effects of English-language learning software, some English films, and a speech-to-text software engine on students' pronunciation improvement. The experiment was designed to investigate two hypotheses. The results of their study experiment were positive and could provide pedagogical implications for employing Computer technology in EFL pronunciation classes. Hismanoglu and Hismanoglu (2011) stress on the exposure to the internet and employing the internet-based pronunciation lessons can help Turkish EFL learners solve their articulation problems. Baniabdelrahman (2013) found the internet effective in enhancing EFL Students' Speaking Skill.

1.1 Statement of the problem

Most of the EFL learners tend to speak English, but to achieve this goal, they need to be provided with motivating sources which is helpful in this regard. Internet, recently has vied with the traditional ways in learning and teaching, as a tool which can bridge the gap of interpersonal communications among the people of the world. This study tries to investigate the effects of an internet site "GoEnglish.Me" on improving speaking ability. Through this site EFL learners can easily have access to authentic materials offered by Native American speakers.

1.2 Significance of the study

Investigation of the effects of a computerized programme in EFL settings, e.g. GoEnglish.Me, can be significant due to its novelty. Introducing such sources as this site can be also significant since EFL students can practice speaking through the exposure to native speakers. Also, EFL teachers can take benefit from these sites to increase their knowledge and improve their speaking, as well. Future studies can benefit from the findings as documents.

1.3 Research Questions

The main research question posed by the researcher was:

Q: Does the use of "go English .me" have any significant effect on Iranian lower-intermediate EFL learners' speaking ability?

1.4 Research Null-hypothesis

The Following research null-hypothesis was proposed:

H0: Use of "go English .me" does not have any significant effect on Iranian lower-intermediate EFL learners' speaking ability.

2. Review of Literature

Review of previous literature in the area of EFL indicates a serious gap in the area of developmental interventional research on the impact of CALL and virtual contexts on EFL learners' speaking ability. This section presents a review of theoretical studies which have been previously conducted on this issue. The emergence of computer as a learning tool in the field of EFL has evoked language practitioners and theoreticians to probe theoretical and practical aspects of this young phenomenon. Nelson, Ward, and Kaplow (1976) pinpoint that:

“The unique property of the computer as a medium for education is its ability to interact with the student. Books and tape recordings can tell a student what the rules are and what the right solutions are, but they cannot analyze the specific mistake the student has made and react in a manner which leads him not only to correct his mistake, but also to understand the principles behind the correct solution”. (32).

Employing computer-assisted-language-learning in developing speaking skills dates back to the last decade. Inoue (1999) believes that in the second/foreign language classrooms, CALL creates situations where learners' interests are stimulated, dialogue and communication are allowed, reactivity is enhanced, a sense of personal worth is fostered, collaboration among students working together is facilitated, rich learning experiences for all students are permitted and communication skills are improved.

On the other hand, there exist some softwares which can be used to develop speaking skills. Kataoka (2001) states that those who use computers in order to develop speaking skills are more self-confident compared to the other learners. Also Pennington (1996) argued that pronunciation is better trained through computer systems because learners' consciousness of their own spoken language errors does not create problems in their learning.

Access to internet is another advantage of CALL where the learner can make a 'conversation-like written discourse' (Pennington 1996: 155) called chat. Such conditions, which may be more comfortable than class environment, the users can negotiate on different issues. thus, learning process may be facilitated.

Alsied and Pathan (2013) investigated the advantages of employing computer technology in EFL classrooms and its implications in foreign language settings. Several advantages were shown that indicate the facilitating and positive effects of CALL programs in EFL settings. For example, a CALL program can create a learner-centered classroom in which s/he is provided with several of opportunities to work both on their own, and as part of a group to find their own learning needs and to use the English language in an authentic situation.

Barani (2011) investigated the relationship between Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and listening skill of Iranian EFL learners. His findings showed that there was a significant difference between CALL users and nonusers in favor of the experimental group (those who took benefits from CALL).

Nachoua (2012) demonstrated that the employment of CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning) is an effective method to enhance students' motivation hence their performance in listening. Nachoua's findings (2012) considered CALL as a motivating method and computers as worthwhile tools to be employed in second/foreign language contexts to enhance students' listening skill.

Watkins and Wilkins (2011) explored the effect of using YouTube in the EFL classroom. They found that YouTube can be an advantageous instrument through which multiple foreign language skills can be instructed. Employing YouTube both inside and outside the classroom can improve conversation, listening, and pronunciation skills. YouTube videos can also be used as realia to stimulate cultural lessons, improve exposure to World English, and promote authentic vocabulary development. Even reading and writing activities can be structured around YouTube videos (Watkins & Wilkins, 2011).

Baniabdelrahman (2013) explored the effect of using shared online oral diaries on the EFL Saudi First year university students' speaking proficiency. It was found that the employment of oral diaries with the first year university students was significantly helpful in increasing their participation and their motivation in English classes. Students' participation in the classroom is a reflection of their strong motivation toward learning.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The participants of this study were 44 Iranian lower intermediate students who learn English in a Language Institute, in Mashhad, Iran. The participants' age ranged from 19 to 23 years. Based on gender segregation in Mashhad language institutes, only females took part in this study. These participants were randomly assigned to control and experimental groups.

3.2 Instrumentations

In order to ensure that the participants of this study were homogenous, Quick Placement Test, developed by Oxford University Press and Cambridge ESOL and was administered. The test includes 60 multiple-choice items including vocabulary, reading comprehension, and grammar. The reliability and validity of this test has been already confirmed.

In addition to QPT, some oral questions were provided for the participants of both groups as the pretest and the posttest. These questions were related to the topics they practiced during the speaking course lasting for 15 sessions.

3.3 Materials

During the course, the participants in both control and experimental classes practiced speaking about "going to college", "finding a friend", "marriage" and etc. the materials in experimental class were provided by the net "Go English. Me" which allows EFL students to learn American English on line, to practice and improve their speaking skills to become more familiar with American culture, and interact with others who share these goals anytime and anywhere. Participants in the control group have no access to the internet and they should practice speaking through traditional ways.

3.4 Procedure

Based on a placement test (Quick Placement Test), a sample including 44 female lower-intermediate EFL students was selected and randomly assigned to experimental (N=22) and control (N=22) groups. Participants in experimental group became familiar with "Go English. Me" site which provided them with a variety of audio-visual materials. The site allows its users to record the audio-visual materials in order to compare their pronunciation with an original form and self-correct their errors. The site provides its users with about 80 daily conversations and short video-clips. There is a variety of issues including hospital, apartment, college etc. This site has designed a social network through which the users can interact and communicate. Flash player 10, Java and explorer 8 must be installed to use the applications of the site. The user also needs to have microphone. A high speed internet is also necessary. The experimental class was equipped with computer and a high-speed internet. Participants in this class were allowed to connect to the internet and benefit from the site. The experimental class was learner-centered and the teacher is responsible for solving the problems students encounter. Students themselves tried to enhance their speaking ability through online interactions with their peers.

On the other hand, participants in control group did not receive any computer-based materials throughout the course and they were not allowed to take benefit from *Go English. Me*.

Such topics as those instructed in experimental class were brought into the control one. Traditional techniques including repetition, student-teacher and student-student interaction in real contexts are employed. Finally an interview-based speaking posttest was administered to compare the scores obtained by experimental and control groups. Using SPSS the significance of the difference between means was tested.

4. Data Analysis And Result

Using SPSS the collected data were analyzed to check the null-hypothesis formulated for the present study. In order to ensure the normality of data, Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was employed for all data in both Quick-Placement Test and speaking test.

Table 1. Results of Kolmogorov-Smirnov test

		One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test		
		Pre-speak	Post-speak	qpt
N		44	44	44
Normal Parameters ^a	Mean	33.45	36.70	3.3477E1
	Std. Deviation	2.849	3.092	2.78274E0
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.154	.164	.180
	Positive	.154	.164	.180
	Negative	-.090	-.093	-.106
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z		1.024	1.087	1.191
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.246	.188	.117

a. Test distribution is Normal.

According to table 1, P-Value for all instruments, e.g. pretest, posttest and QPT is greater than .05. Therefore, the null hypothesis of Kolmogorov-Smirnov test being the normality of data is accepted, which indicates that all data are normal.

To check the performance of the participants in Quick Placement Test independent samples t-test was employed (Table 2).

Table 2. Results of independent samples t-test: QPT

Group	N	Mean	SD	DF	T-Value	P-Value
Control	22	33.31	2.76	42	.375	.709
Experimental	22	33.63	2.85			

AS Table 2 shows, there is no statistically significant difference ($df=42$; $t=.375$; $p=.709>.05$) between mean of control group ($M=33.31$; $SD=2.76$) and that of experimental one ($M=33.63$; $SD=2.85$). The statistics confirm that the language proficiency level of the participants is lower-intermediate (according to guidelines provided at the end of QPT; those EFL learners who score 30-39 out of 60 are considered to be lower-intermediate) as well as they are homogeneous.

Next, the participants' performance in pretest was checked through independent samples t-test (Table 3).

Table 3. Results of independent samples t-test: pre-test

Group	N	Mean	SD	DF	T-Value	P-Value
Control	22	33.55	2.77	42	.209	.835
Experimental	22	33.36	2.98			

As Table 3 shows, there is no statistically significant difference ($df=42$; $t=.209$; $p=.835>.05$) between mean of control group ($M=33.55$; $SD=2.77$) and that of experimental one ($M=33.36$; $SD=2.98$), which indicates the homogeneity of the participants in both groups at the start of the study.

Finally, the effect of treatment (GoEnglish.Me) on development of EFL learners' speaking ability was examined through comparing the means of experimental and control groups employing independent samples t-test. Data are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Results of independent samples t-test: post-test

Group	N	Mean	SD	DF	T-Value	P-Value
Control	22	35.59	2.53	42	2.535	.015
Experimental	22	37.82	3.24			

Based on data in Table 4, participants in experimental group ($M=37.82$; $SD=3.24$) performed significantly better results ($t=2.535$; $p=.015<.05$) than those in control group ($M=35.59$; $SD=2.53$). Accordingly, the significant effect of employing GoEnglish.Me as a virtual environment to enhance speaking ability among lower-intermediate EFL learners was approved. The finding was already supported by Baniabdelrahman (2013) who found internet as an effective educational tool in improving speaking ability. Similarly, Watkins and Wilkins (2011) indicated that internet sites like YouTube can be an advantageous teaching tool in EFL contexts.

5. Discussion and conclusion

GoEnglish.Me was introduced and its effect on speaking ability among lower- intermediate EFL learners was examined. Accordingly, to achieve the goal of this study a null-hypothesis was proposed and using SPSS it was checked. Results of independent samples t-test indicated the significant effect of GoEnglish.Me on EFL learners' speaking ability. This finding lends support to previous arguments regarding other applications of CALL in various fields EFL (Nachoua, 2012; Barani, 2011; & Baniabdelrahman, 2013).

Watkins and Wilkins (2011) similarly, found that video clips existing on the internet, e.g. YouTube videos, can also be employed as learning tools to stimulate cultural lessons, improve exposure to World Englishes, and promote authentic vocabulary development. Even reading and writing activities can be structured around YouTube videos (Watkins & Wilkins, 2011).

Further studies are needed to be done to examine the effect of different online sources on EFL pronunciation which is of great importance in speaking. It is hoped that the EFL students and teachers will take benefit from such sites as GoEnglish.Me which provide authentic materials. The present finding can offer pedagogical implications for employing GoEnglish.Me as an effective EFL learning environment in which EFL learners are provided with opportunities of real

and effective English learning. EFL teachers should receive necessary trainings about computer and internet and need to attain relevant information of different virtual environments to provide their students with the most effective and appropriate ones. EFL students can practice English on the internet which makes learning a dynamic and continuous process which never stops even when they rest. Therefore, due to new trends towards use of web-based contexts in teaching and learning English, conducting such studies can pave the way for further research; also, designing effective learning virtual contexts should be into curriculum designers' and material developers' consideration.

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