# Pedagogical values of mobile-assisted task-based activities to enhance speaking skill

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**Abstract**. The purpose of the present study was to examine the impact of online mobile-assisted task-based activities on improving Iranian intermediate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' speaking skills. To achieve the purpose of the study, 90 intermediate language learners were selected ranging between 13 to 16 years old and divided into three interactive, non-interactive, and conventional groups. The interactive and non-interactive groups conducted online task-based speaking activities via WeChat mobile application. In the interactive group, the students were encouraged to interact among themselves on the topics from their course book. The non-interactive group experienced the same condition except that they were only supposed to have learner-teacher interactions with no interaction among peers. The conventional group followed the same task-based speaking activities within the class period but with the absence of technology. Data were collected administering the speaking section of Cambridge Preliminary English Test as pre- and post-tests. The results revealed that learners in the interactive group outperformed those in the face-to-face group regarding their speaking skills.

**Keywords**: online task-based activities, speaking, m-learning, mobile-assisted language learning, MALL.

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## 1. Introduction

As global cell phone users are spreading like wildfire, the mobile is becoming the integral part of anyone's life. Beyond its purpose as a means of communication, the mobile phone can serve educational purposes, such as developing language learning. Speaking skills, as one of the complex language learning components, can benefit from the pedagogical values of mobile phones. It becomes more vital when we know that "a large percentage of the world's language learners study English in order to develop proficiency in speaking" (Richards & Renandya, 2002, p. 201).

As mentioned by Soureshjani (2013),

> "in this age of communication, [speaking] seems to be playing a major role, and the purpose of teaching the language has shifted from the mastery of structure to the ability to use the language for communicative purposes" (p. 167).

As soon as mobile phones became a crucial part of our lives, more teachers felt the need to use them in language learning tasks. By the advancement of technologies, mobile-assisted language learning caused a new revolution in language teaching and learning.

> "The use of mobile technology is a new gate-way to create more interactive environment in the classroom in an interesting and innovative way by making teaching more and more effective" (Yedla, 2013, p. 92).

Language learning is merely one of the areas that can benefit from the advantages of mobile learning (m-learning). Mobile phones might be used as a medium in different fields of language teaching, i.e. listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Therefore, on the pillars of the technological supply of mobile phones and the educational demand of improving speaking skills, we have laid the foundations of this article. In the current study, the researcher tried to investigate the way of effective learning through mobile technologies, a shift from teacher-led learning to a student-led one, via m-learning.

The present study aims at answering the following questions:

- Do online task-based speaking activities have any impact on the Iranian EFL learners' speaking ability?

- Are there any statistically significant differences among online task-based speaking and conventional groups regarding Iranian EFL learners' speaking ability?

- Is there any significant difference between male and female students regarding the impact of online task-based speaking activities on Iranian EFL learners' speaking ability?

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

In order to accomplish the present study, out of 132 intermediate Persian language learners from English classes in one of the institutes in Tehran, named Simin, 90 were participants of this study. The participants were selected adopting simple random sampling. To ensure that the participants were at the same level of proficiency, a Preliminary English Test was administered. 44 male learners and 46 female learners were selected. Their age ranged from 13 to 16. The 90 students were equally assigned to three classes: interactive, non-interactive, and conventional (face-to-face) groups.

### 2.2. Instrument and procedure

The instrument that was used in the study is the speaking section of the Cambridge Preliminary English Test 4 (2003) as pre- and post-tests. In order to conduct the present study, the following steps were taken: PET was administered to participants to discover the homogeneity of participants regarding their general proficiency. Therefore, two classes were selected as experimental groups, while one class was the control group. One session was devoted to both experimental groups, in which the teacher taught them how to work with one of the mobile applications (WeChat) prior to the treatment. The participants in the experimental group A received 20-30 minutes treatment for all 20 sessions, including three sessions in a week studying Cambridge English for Students. In every session of experimental group A, the participants connected on WeChat for 20-30 minutes after the class when they were at home. For the online task-based speaking activity, students were expected to follow three stages: pre-task activities, task cycle, and post-task activities.

In the first stage, photos played an important role. Students had to answer a few questions about the photos posted by the teacher. The most important thing in this phase was to focus on the preparation of the main task.

During the task phase, the researcher performed opinion exchange tasks asking students an opinion-based question on the lesson's topic. The students were expected to talk about their ideas and experiences. In addition, the participants were required to ask each other questions and to comment on others orally. During the task phase, the researcher tried to listen to what the participants were saying and also helped them to interact with each other.

In the post-task activities, participants were expected to present what they discovered during the task. It primarily focused on summarizing the outcome of the task.

On the other hand, in experimental group B during the task phase, the students were expected to talk about their ideas and experiences, but they were not required to ask questions and comment on others orally. During the task phase, the researcher only tried to listen to what the participants were telling each other.

During the task phase in the control group, the teacher asked tasks (opinion exchange tasks) and the students were expected to listen and talk about their ideas and experiences within the classroom, but they were not required to ask questions and comment on others orally. The only difference was the absence of technology.

## 3. Discussion

In order to investigate the effect of mobile-assisted task-based activities on the speaking skills of Iranian students and thus answer the research questions, a post-test was administered to all groups and a quantitative method was applied to compare the results with the ones from the pre-test. The results showed interactive students' speaking ability was significantly improved compared to that among the non interactive students. This finding is consistent with the results of some previous studies which support the significant impact of task-based speaking activities on speaking skill (Levy & Kennedy, 2005; Lu, 2008; Zhang, Song, & Burston, 2011).

Unfortunately, most studies so far involved mobile phones usage in learning vocabularies rather than using mobile phones to interact with a wider Internet audience, although most studies had positive impacts on learning English. According to the results that Levy and Kennedy (2005), Lu (2008), Zhang et al. (2011) found, the researchers tried to develop task-based speaking skills through m-learning.

## 4. Conclusions

The overall findings of this study suggest the importance of online task-based speaking activities in the instruction of speaking skill to lead students to greater learning opportunities and to make speaking in the second language an autonomous process. In the present study, the results indicated that groups with online task-based speaking activities developed higher speaking ability in English.

All in all, it can be concluded that learners in the interactive group outperformed those in the face-to-face group regarding their speaking skill. Furthermore, the learners' speaking skill showed a greater improvement in the interactive group than that among the other two. Also, there is not any significant difference between male and female students regarding the impact of m-learning on learners' speaking ability.

The findings can be pedagogically advantageous for language teachers, teacher educators, and material developers. However, these conclusions are limited by such factors as the participants' level and the length of the study.

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