

What If There Is Nobody Around to Speak English? Then Keep Your Voice Diary

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Abstract

This study aims to explore English Language Teaching (ELT) prep-class students' perceptions of keeping personal voice diaries via a voice recorder as a way to extend speaking practice beyond the classroom walls. Following a ten-week treatment under which 12 voluntary students attending ELT prep-class at Ondokuz Mayıs University kept voice diaries in English outside the school on a regular daily basis, data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The qualitative analyses of the students' answers indicate that an overwhelming majority of them regard speaking as a challenging skill due to factors like lack of fluency and excessive anxiety. As for the accessible chances to practice oral English, most of the participants report that there is an apparent inadequacy of opportunities beyond school. When asked about the contribution of individual voice diaries to the alleviation of the lack-of-practice-opportunities problem, almost all of the participants except one evaluate keeping voice diaries as an effective means of speaking improvement. It is praised mostly for its boosting effect on self-expression skills, fluency, and pronunciation; and for its lowering effect on anxiety and stress. In line with the findings of this study, it can be concluded that there is no equivalent substitute for the improvement of oral skills through dialogue and interaction between human beings in flesh and blood; however, keeping voice diaries on an individual basis can somehow help EFL learners overcome the limited conditions they face during their struggle to practice and improve oral English.

Keywords: English as a foreign language (EFL), non-native speaker, speaking, voice diary

1. Introduction

English today holds a worldwide *lingua franca* status as a result of the USA's apparent dominance in economic, technological, and political domains all around the world. Therefore, it is somehow spoken in almost every country across the globe. While it is the native language in some countries like England and America, it is spoken as a second language (ESL) in countries like India and South Africa and as a foreign language (EFL) in countries like Turkey and China. This distinction is well summarized in Kachru's (1985) categorization as *the Inner Circle*, *the Outer Circle*, and *the Expanding Circle*. As a country that hosts the speakers of English as a foreign language, Turkey is a part of the Expanding Circle. This EFL-ESL distinction may not seem to mean much at first sight as both contexts are generally united in a single term, *L2*; however, Krashen's (1982) acquisition/learning hypothesis clarifies the distinction to a satisfying extent. Krashen's (1982) elaboration on language acquisition is as follows:

The result of language acquisition ... is subconscious. We are generally not consciously aware of the rules of the languages we have acquired. Instead, we have a 'feel' for the correctness. Grammatical sentences 'sound' right, or 'feel' right, and errors feel wrong, even if we do not consciously know what rule was violated (p. 10).

Putting emphasis on the fact that acquisition occurs as a part of a natural process, Krashen (1982) explains the conditions in which language learning occurs as follows:

We will use the term 'learning' henceforth to refer to conscious knowledge of a second language, knowing the rules, being aware of them, and being able to talk about them. In nontechnical terms, learning is 'knowing about' a language, known to most people as 'grammar' or 'rules'. Some synonyms include formal knowledge of a language or explicit meaning (p. 10).

To support Krashen's (1982) this comprehensive elaboration that appears somewhat technical, it is better to have

a look at the practical reflections of this dichotomy. The ‘acquisition-learning’ matching here refers to ‘ESL-EFL’ matching in the context of developing English language skills. While ESL learners (they do not necessarily acquire English after a certain age) are vastly exposed to English in daily life and feel the necessity to use it in order to survive, EFL learners mostly cannot find adequate opportunities to use English in authentic contexts and their English language experience is considerably limited to artificial settings. The conclusion here is that although languages are best learnt orally as part of a natural course, it is not always possible for EFL learners to lay the infrastructure through oral practice. In Turkey as an EFL country, for instance, English language learners face a longstanding problem with the development of oral skills. This, in turn, poses a demanding handicap restricting their language skills mostly to reading and writing. This EFL issue in Turkey is interpreted by Dogancay-Aktuna (1998) as follows:

In Turkey English carries the instrumental function of being the most studied foreign language and the most popular medium of education after Turkish. On an interpersonal level, it is used as a link language for international business and for tourism while also providing a code that symbolizes modernization and elitism to the educated middle classes and those in the upper strata of the socioeconomic ladder (p. 37).

Dogancay-Aktuna (1998) makes it clear that the primary reason behind learning and using English in Turkey on an interpersonal level is either carrying out international business transactions or gaining an upper status in the social hierarchy. There is no mention of daily activities like going to the bazaar and buying vegetables or asking someone an unknown address. These are all crystal-clear indications of the enormous differences between ESL and EFL settings.

1.1 Speaking Skill

Following Direct Method and Audiolingual Method, the advent of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as of 1980s brought great popularity for speaking skill. As a productive skill, speaking possesses some distinguishing features. Brown (2001: 270) lists these as follows:

- Clustering: fluent speech is phrasal, not word by word
- Redundancy: a broad variety of language forms, alternatives, etc.
- Reduced Forms: contractions, elisions, reduced vowels, etc.
- Performance variables: hesitations, pauses, backtracking and corrections
- Colloquial Language: idioms, etc.
- Rate of Delivery: speed
- Stress, rhythm, intonation
- Interaction

The above items are mentioned by Brown (2001) as the aspects rendering speaking skill more difficult than other language skills. Speaking, by its very nature, involves different dimensions. Lackman (2010) gives the sub-skills of speaking as “fluency, accuracy with words and pronunciation, using functions, appropriacy, turn-taking skills, relevant length, responding and initiating, repair and repetition, range of words and grammar, and discourse markers” (p. 3). An oral text is produced while speaking in a quite different form compared to writing which involves producing a written text. In most cases, everything develops spontaneously and achieving this flow is rather challenging for many learners especially in EFL settings considering the disadvantages involved. Ur (1995) lists the frequently-encountered problems about speaking activities as (1) inhibition –fear of making mistakes, shyness; (2) nothing to say –coming up with ideas to say; (3) low or uneven participation –unequal talk times among group members; and (4) mother-tongue use –the easy way (p. 121). These items actually reflect the situation in most of the EFL speaking classes.

As Rivers (1981) points out, “we learn to speak by speaking” (p.188). Reading, writing, listening, and also other micro-skills like grammar and vocabulary are far easier to practice individually. Nevertheless, speaking stands alone with its unique features. Therefore, every real opportunity to practice oral English outside the classroom should be caught by EFL learners. These include one-to-one occasions (best case), virtual interactions, and even monologues. Authentic one-to-one speaking in English is not something broadly accessible in Turkey due to the EFL disadvantage. Also, virtual chances like Skype still need a long way to reach all learners. Accordingly, learners should be oriented to new alternatives likely to bring benefits to their speaking improvement in out-of-class environments.

1.2 Keeping Voice Diary in English

Keeping written diaries is practiced by some people as a part of their habits. But it is mostly written in the native language. If EFL learners in Turkey, for instance, try to write their diaries in English on a regular basis, it will most probably contribute much to their writing skill including sub-skills like vocabulary and grammar (Tuan, 2010). Therefore, turning this idea into a voice diary seems likely to bring certain benefits to the development of speaking skill. Voice diary here refers to the audio file produced orally by language learners through a voice recorder.

Even though voice recording is not something new, the decline of language laboratories somehow had debilitating effect on its popularity. However, with the rise of ‘voice 2.0’ tools like *Audacity*, *Jing*, *Screencast-o-matic*, *Voxpop*, *Voki*, *Voicethread*, *Vocaroo/Mailvu*, *Audiopal*, *Chirbit*, and *Cinch Recording*, voice recording has become much easier and more communicative. Thanks to such new tools, language learners can now record their voices and, if they wish, share the recordings with their friends or teachers via video blogs (vlog) or podcasting sites. Ideally, the use of such innovative tools sounds really promising; however, is it that easy to integrate voice recording into language learning process on the part of learners? As is the case with any technique, voice recording has some strong and weak sides that should be taken into account by both learners to use it and teachers to guide learners.

The Pros:

- Students can use these tools to develop their skills outside the classroom
- Students tend to take more care over what they say when they're going to be recorded
- Students have rehearsal time
- Students can self-assess their own speaking skills, encouraging more awareness and independence
- Students can work on differentiated tasks
- Students can work at their own pace
- Students can hear their progress over time = motivation

The Challenges:

- Students find listening to their voices embarrassing. (After the first time, they're usually fine with it.)
- It can be demotivating when students realise their weaknesses. (But perhaps this is a necessary part of learning?)
- Why record when people can speak face to face? (Face to face communication is the goal but voice recording can play its part)
- Some students are unable/unwilling to self-assess. (They need to be guided.)

(taken from <http://englishvoices.weebly.com>)

While the advantages above attract attention to enabling learners to develop language skills on an autonomous basis, the disadvantages generally focus on possible student demotivation during the process. The potentially involved negative sides can be dismissed to some extent when the learners realize the tangible contributions of regular voice recording over weeks.

As for the scarce studies that hold a touch on voice recording, the findings of Çakır's (2015) study investigating the opinions and attitudes of prospective English language teachers for the use of mobile phones in foreign language learning indicate that 44.6% of the participants never use the voice recording feature of their mobile phones for learning purposes, while 45.6% sometimes use and 9.8% often use this feature. The rate of the never-users is rather striking. The results of Begum's (2011) research on EFL learners in Bangladesh support the findings reported by Çakır (2015) in that the least used function of mobile phones among the participants is recording. Likewise, the study by Yaman, Şenel & Yeşilel (2015) on the smartphone use of EFL learners at tertiary level in Turkey suggests that voice-recording function is not mentioned among the most important uses of smartphones. However, the findings of a case study conducted by Gromik (2011) with the participation of 9 Japanese undergraduate EFL students suggest that video recording on a weekly basis has significantly positive effects on the students' speaking skill and attitudes towards speaking skill. Although Gromik's research asked the participants to produce video recordings, it was intended for speaking development, and therefore it suggests some positive implications for the use of voice diaries by EFL learners.

Keeping voice diaries on a daily basis aims to help EFL learners overcome the limitations imposed by living in

an EFL country and extend speaking practice outside the classroom. Indeed, speaking consists of two main dimensions: oral production and spoken interaction. Reciprocal interaction is an indispensable part of authentic speaking. However, in cases where this mutual communication is not applicable, learners can be encouraged to focus on oral production. Voice diary is one alternative that can be employed to this end.

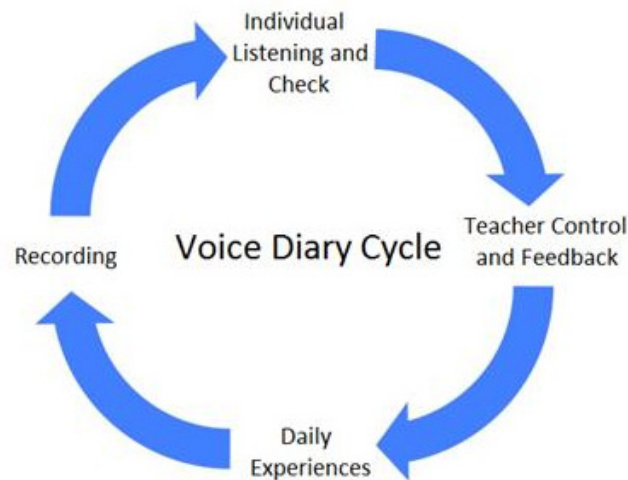


Figure 1. Voice diary cycle

As it is obvious from Figure 1, voice diary cycle starts with the daily experiences of the students like things about the school, an interesting piece of news, an unexpected event, etc. Their experiences both inside and outside school constitute the basic information source for the voice diaries just like written ones. As the voice diaries are planned to be checked by the teacher (for feedback), the students should be reminded that their diaries should not cover private issues. In the second step they record an approximately 5-minute voice diary (the length may be extended over time) by improvising through a recording tool like mobile or smartphones, or specific online/offline software on computer. Following the recording phase the students listen to and check the voice diary (maybe then re-record). In the last stage students submit their diaries to the English language teacher via e-mail or in a flash disc on a weekly basis. The teacher, in turn, listens to the diaries and provides oral feedback to each of the students.

Under the information and theoretical background provided above, this study seeks to find answers to the following research questions:

- 1) Do the EFL learners regard speaking as a challenging skill?
- 2) What are the most difficult aspects for EFL learners while speaking in English?
- 3) Can EFL learners in Turkey find enough opportunities to practice oral English?
- 4) Do EFL learners think keeping voice diaries is useful in terms of speaking improvement?
- 5) In what ways do they find it useful or not?

2. Method

This is a case study under which 12 (3 males and 9 females) voluntary students attending ELT prep-class at Ondokuz Mayıs University kept voice diaries in English outside the school on a regular daily basis for ten weeks. The participants were all attending prep-class for the first time. According to Dörnyei (2007), "... a well-designed qualitative study usually requires a relatively small number of respondents to yield the saturated and rich data that is needed to understand even subtle meanings in the phenomenon under focus" (p. 127).

While keeping voice diaries, the four phases illustrated in Figure 1 were followed. Following this process qualitative data were collected through one-to-one semi-structured interviews with the participants in order to investigate the participants' views on the efficacy of keeping voice diaries in English. The qualitative analyses of the participants' answers gathered during the interviews were conducted through coding, categorization, and interpretation with the contribution of three experts teaching in the ELT field. The answers for the 1st, 3rd, and 4th

research questions were coded as either '+' or '-'. Then, '+' answers were categorized as positive and '-' answers as negative. The yielded categories for these answers were quantized to pave the way for a better interpretation. On the other hand, the answers for the 2nd and 5th research questions were coded with some keywords like 'fluency', 'fear', 'pronunciation', 'anxiety', etc. and categorized accordingly.

3. Findings and Discussion

In order to find an answer to the 1st research question, we asked the participants whether they consider speaking as a challenging skill or not. 75% (9 out of 12) of them stated that speaking is a challenging skill while the remaining 25% (3 out of 12) did not regard it as challenging. This finding was quite expected in that there are a number of factors that distinguish speaking from other language skills (Brown, 2001). Especially in EFL settings, English language learners feel the challenges of developing oral skills far more than those in ESL settings. Under this framework, the diagnosis of 'a challenging skill' by the participants is quite important for them to find ways to cope with these difficulties.

The 2nd research question of the study aims to find out the most difficult aspects of speaking English from the perspective of the participants. The qualitative analysis of the answers gathered through the interviews reveals that almost all of the participants regard 'fluency' as the most demanding aspect. They also mentioned aspects like 'stress', 'anxiety', 'fear of making mistakes', 'pronunciation', and 'understanding the interlocutor correctly'. These answers apparently show that most of the participants feel 'anxiety' concerning speaking in English, which is not surprising in Turkish EFL context (Tüm & Kunt, 2013). Therefore, more effort should be exerted to overcome such inhibitions. The voice diary alternative may constitute a partial, if not absolute, support within this framework.

The 3rd research question aims to answer whether the participants find enough opportunities to practice oral English. The quantization of the answers gathered about this dimension points out that 42% (5 out of 12) of them were not able to find adequate opportunities to speak English, 25% (3 out of 12) could practice speaking English only at school in a limited way, 8% (1 out of 12) found enough opportunities but did not avail themselves of these chances, and 25% (3 out of 12) thought that they had access to enough opportunities in terms of practicing English orally. These figures clearly display that the overwhelming majority of the participants (67%) regard finding enough opportunities to practice oral English as a problem within Turkey's EFL context. Combined with the answers obtained for the 1st and 2nd research questions, the findings as to the 3rd research question strongly consolidate the conclusion that the effective development of speaking skill is really difficult in EFL settings.

The 4th research question aimed to find out the efficacy of keeping voice diaries in terms of speaking improvement, and, to this end, the participants were asked whether they found it useful or not. The analysis of the answers indicates that approximately all of the participants (92%, 11 out of 12) found the process during which they kept voice diaries on an individual basis beneficial for them to improve speaking skill. With a complementary question the participants were asked about the pros and cons of keeping voice diaries as a means of developing oral English. The qualitative analysis of the answers provided for this question, which was addressed in the context of the 5th research question, points out that the participants who adopt a positive attitude towards keeping voice diaries mostly attract attention to the promotion of self-expression skills, fluency, pronunciation and reduction of stress and anxiety through this technique. On the other hand, the foremost shortcoming reported on keeping voice diaries is the lack of reciprocal interaction, which is the sine-qua-non of communication.

The answers of the participants about the 4th and 5th research questions clearly show that keeping voice diary is somehow a solution for the issues covered under the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd research questions. First, it helps EFL learners break limitations and cope with the challenging speaking skill. Second, it makes contributions to the learners' speaking skill in terms of sub-skills like fluency and pronunciation and affective factors like fear and anxiety. Lastly, by extending speaking practice outside school, it enables learners to create their own opportunity and fosters learner autonomy.

These findings add a complementary dimension to the existing body of research on voice recording in English language learning. The findings of the studies by Çakır (2015), Begum (2011), and Yaman, Şenel & Yeşilel (2015) indicate an underuse of voice recording for language learning purposes. However, the study of Gromik (2011) yields results to the favour of recording if applied on a regular basis. Likewise, the findings of the current study appear in favour of voice recording. That is, the learners are not generally aware of the potential benefits possessed by voice recording for practicing English; therefore, they should be informed about these potential uses in the light of the promising results obtained under this study.

4. Conclusion

In this study we tried to find out undergraduate Turkish EFL learners' comments and evaluations as to the use of voice diaries as a means to practice oral English considering the restrictions of EFL settings. The qualitative data obtained through semi-structured oral interviews indicate that keeping voice diaries is mostly regarded as a useful way to enhance speaking which is considered as a challenging skill by most of the participants. The results point out that it has several contributions to the development of different aspects of speaking like fluency and pronunciation as well as to the reduction of affective problems including anxiety and stress. On the other hand, its limitation about the lack of spoken interaction is reported as its foremost disadvantage.

Keeping voice diaries in monologue format cannot be considered as a cure-all solution for the problems encountered by Turkish EFL learners about oral skills. It is no doubt that the learners should be strongly encouraged and guided to practice oral English in authentic settings. To this end, they should be made aware of the opportunities brought by technology (Technology-enhanced Language Learning -TELL-, Computer-assisted Language Learning -CALL-, Mobile-assisted Language Learning -MALL-, etc.) and that every tiny chance to speak English is a real opportunity for them to develop further command over English. On the other hand, the existing limited opportunities to practice oral English in authentic settings can be compensated to some extent by keeping voice diaries regularly as an attempt to extend speaking practices outside the classroom walls. As the findings of this current study indicate, it holds a promising potential in terms of helping learners develop self-expression skills, fluency, pronunciation, and cope with stress and anxiety. This extra practice tool can, though limited, put a brick on the wall during EFL learners' quest for better English. In the light of these findings, it can be said that EFL learners should be oriented by their teachers to reap the benefits of keeping voice diaries for speaking improvement.

With a rather limited body of research, voice recording in language learning deserves a number of prospective studies. A more detailed experimental study with a pre- and post-test design may investigate the effects of voice diaries on the speaking proficiency of learners. Another prospective study may focus on sharing voice diaries with peers on a vlog. Thus, peer feedback and collaboration may be added as new dimensions.

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