

USING VOICE THREAD TO ENHANCE SPEAKING ACCURACY: A CASE STUDY OF IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

The present study investigated the possible contribution of Voice Thread (VT) website to the Iranian EFL learners' speaking accuracy in terms of using correct form of hypothetical conditional sentences. Moreover, the language learners' perception of the website was also explored. To this end, 18 English literature freshmen from a state university in Iran were recruited for the study. The participants were randomly assigned to control ($n=9$) and experimental groups ($n=9$). The control group performed merely face-to-face tasks while the experimental group conducted face-to-face and asynchronous online speaking tasks using VT website. The results of the mixed methods study revealed that both groups enhanced their speaking accuracy and the experimental group failed to outperform the control group. Furthermore, the findings of a semi-structured interview, which were corroborated by those of diary writing, indicated that even though the experimental group appreciated the significance of the website, they assumed that it could not cater to their needs. The findings of the study encourage teachers and researchers alike to pay due attention to learners' perception of their learning experience in general and their experience with Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) in particular.

Keywords: Speaking Skills, Voice Thread, Asynchronous, Speaking Accuracy, CALL.

INTRODUCTION

In EFL contexts, speaking is a demanding skill (Lazarton, 2001) and it is one of the primary elements of communication that requires special attention and instruction. Yu et al. (2015) believe factors such as an efficient language context, appropriate instruction and support can have significant effects on language learners' speaking skills. Their study on Asian EFL learners' speaking skills revealed that Asian EFL learners encounter many challenges in the way of their speaking skills such as anxiety and lack of sufficient interaction in the Asian contexts. In Afshar and Asakereh's (2016) study, Iranian EFL students and their EFL instructors also believed that insufficient opportunity to speak English in the Iranian context was among one of the problematic factors in the way of Iranian EFL learners' progress in speaking skills.

With the emergence of technology, EFL learners have potentially had more opportunity to practice their English out of class. Computer-Assisted Language Learning

(CALL) is widely employed in education to help learners work autonomously with respect to their own time and purposes (Collentine, 2011). Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) is an appropriate context for social interactions, which can provide students with authentic materials, feedback, and efficient instruction (Alshahrani, 2016). Blake (2016), and Yen, Hou, and Chang (2015) also maintain that CMC tools provide EFL students with authentic speaking materials and feedback opportunities. Blake further adds that language learners find producing their video and audio clips enjoyable. This can suggest that language instructors should not assume that only face-to-face speaking can lead to facilitative effects on EFL learners' speaking skills (Payne & Whitney, 2002).

With the importance of CMC in mind, this study was aimed at investigating the impact of a neglected online context (i.e. Voice Thread (VT)) on EFL learners' speaking accuracy. In addition, their attitudes toward the online context were investigated, as language learners' satisfaction with a

learning context can be a determining factor in their learning process (Asakereh & Dehghannezhad, 2015).

Studies on the Impact of CALL on EFL Learners' Speaking Skills

Regarding the significance of CALL, a vast array of studies has been conducted to investigate its impact on EFL language learners' speaking skills. For instance, Bueno-Alastuey (2011) carried out an experimental study on 48 students, participating in an ESP course in public university of Navana in Spain, to investigate the impact of synchronous voiced-based CMC on language learners' speaking skills. To this end, the experimental group performed their oral tasks online via Skype or text chatting while the control group carried out only face-to-face tasks. The results of the study showed that the experimental group outperformed the control group. However, although the author mentioned that the participants' fluency, intelligibility, and accuracy (grammar and vocabulary) were considered as a benchmark for measuring their speaking skills, she did not clearly mention which aspects of grammar were considered for evaluation. To examine the impact of podcasting on the Iranian EFL learners' speaking skills, Farangi, Nejadghanbar, Askary, and Ghorbani (2015) also recruited 60 Iranian EFL upper-intermediate students. The findings of their study showed that podcasting had a significant impact on language learners' speaking skills. Moreover, the findings indicated that combining podcasting with face-to-face speaking classes can be more fruitful than using podcasting as the only teaching tool. This can suggest that language learners found real life learning an indispensable part of their learning, which cannot be replaced by virtual learning. As this study was merely quantitative, the participants' attitudes toward the online context were not taken into account. Alshahrani (2016) also examined the impact of videoconferencing on Saudi EFL students' speaking skills. The findings of the study showed that a slight improvement in the language learners' speaking skills occurred; however, EFL students were satisfied with the videoconferencing as an effective tool for improving speaking skills. In the same vein, Hsu (2016) also investigated the impact of voice blogging on

language learners' speaking fluency, complexity, and accuracy. A total of 30 Thai EFL learners participated in the study. To supplement their speaking classes with ample opportunities for speaking outside the classroom, each individual was supposed to speak on a topic and audio record his/her voice and then post it on the blog. The results of the study revealed that language learners made significant progress in their speaking complexity while no such progress was observed in their accuracy and fluency. As the studies by Alshahrani (2016) and Hsu (2016) were one-group pretest-post design, one cannot make justified claims that merely the treatment contributed to the findings of the study (Hatch & Farhady, 1982).

Dunn's (2012) study was among one of the few studies conducted on the effects of using VT on EFL learners' speaking ability. In her study, she investigated the impact of VT interaction on high school students' anxiety and speaking ability in the foreign language classrooms. The results of the study revealed that the website had no significant effects on students' anxiety level while it enhanced their oral proficiency to some extent. This study was also quantitative in nature; therefore, the participants' attitudes toward the website remained uncharted. A recent study by Dugartsyrenova and Sardegna (2017) also explored the impact of VT on 8 undergraduate Russian as foreign language learners' speaking skills. The participants took part in 8 tutoring sessions during which they were engaged in both VT and face-to-face activities. In the VT activities, the participants were exposed to visual, aural, and textual input and they generated and posted their voices and videos on the website and received individual feedback from their teacher. Furthermore, they commented on their peers' output. The participants believed that the platform is ideal for enhancing language skills including their speaking skills, as the platform provided them with independent planning for learning. However, they noted that it was not an appropriate platform for peer-to-peer interaction and cannot replace real-life communication.

EFL Learners' Perception of CALL

In order to ensure the effectiveness of CALL, EFL learners'

perception of a given computer-assisted context should be examined. Woodrow (1991) believes awareness of language learners' perception of CALL plays a principal role in designing a computer-assisted curriculum and evaluating computer-assisted courses. In order to encourage language learners to employ computer in their learning, language instructors need to examine language learners' attitudes toward computer use in learning. Accordingly, a large number of studies examined EFL language learners' perception of using computer for enhancing their language skills in general and their speaking skills in particular. For instance, Ebadi and Goodarzi (2017) conducted a mixed methods study to explore Iranian under/postgraduates' attitudes toward CALL, the results of which showed that the participants generally considered CALL conducive to their learning. However, as the study did not focus on any specific platforms, caution should be exercised in generalizing their perceptions to all virtual platforms. In the same vein, Sydorenko, Hsieh, Ahn, and Arnold (2017) also investigated how learners' beliefs about CALL are shaped. The study indicated that a set of factors, such as satisfaction with technology, efficacy of technology, benefits of technology, and skills in using computer can have an impact on learners' beliefs about CALL.

A number of studies, however, explored participants' attitudes toward a particular platform. For example, as a part of their study, Hung and Huang (2015) investigated 51 EFL learners' attitudes toward a speaking blog on which the learners posted their voices. The results of the study revealed that the majority of the participants reported positive experience with the voice blogging. In the same vein, Huang (2015) examined the effect of voice blogging on EFL learners' attitudes toward voice blogging. The findings showed the participants had complacent attitudes toward creating voice blogging as they believed it can enhance their speaking skills.

Chen (2011) employed Microsoft Speech Application Software Development Kit (SASDK) to improve college students' oral skills. The students believed that the website can potentially improve their speaking. They further added that the website provided free-anxiety context;

however, they reported that the principal drawbacks of the website were lack of sufficient feedback and daunting standard to meet in order to achieve a passing mark. On the other hand, Trinder's (2016) study on 175 students enrolled in advanced classes of Business English Curriculum revealed that the majority of the students preferred face-to-face communication to CMC. They believed that technical problems, lack of authenticity of the situation, and inappropriateness of the context for presenting their emotions and feelings were among some of the negative factors contributing to the ineffectiveness of CMC.

The above-mentioned literature indicates that CMC can more or less improve language learners' speaking skills and EFL learners find CMC facilitative to a great extent. Although a bulk of studies has investigated the impact of different computer-based tools on speaking skills, VT website seems to be neglected. This could be due to the premise that VT does not provide full access for free to its users; therefore, it is not widely used by researchers in the field. It should, however, be noted that the limited access to the website can meet language learners' needs to a significant extent. Moreover, it seems the studies (e.g. Dunn, 2012; Farangi et al., 2015) neglected to discuss how students' perception of CALL can have possible positive or negative effects on their speaking skills. Accordingly, in the present study, quantitative data analyses have been consolidated by systematically integrating qualitative data (students' perception) with the quantitative ones (task performance scores) (Riazi & Candlin, 2014). In addition, while employing correct English tenses in speaking is one of the problematic aspects of speaking (Davidse & Vandelanotte, 2011), this area appears to be neglected in the literature. Accordingly, to fill the gaps noted in the literature, the following research questions were formulated:

- Are there any significant differences between the control group, performing only classroom tasks, and the experimental group, conducting both classroom and online tasks using VT, in terms of their speaking accuracy?

- What are the EFL learners' attitudes toward face to face and online-based speaking tasks posted on VT?

1. Conceptual Framework

Comprehensive output hypothesis (Swain, 1985) serves as the framework of the study. Swain (1995) believes language production can lead to fluency and accuracy as output produced by learners can enjoy three functions, namely consciousness raising, hypothesis testing, and metalinguistic functions. Moreover, output helps language learners to pay close attention to not only how to communicate a message, but also how to say it (VanPatten & Benati, 2010). As language learners in EFL context have scarce opportunity to produce oral language out of class, creating about of class context for learners to perform oral tasks, and generate language can potentially be effective (e.g. Farangi et al., 2015; Sun & Yang, 2013; Yen et al., 2015). Therefore, it seems VT website as an asynchronous context can provide an appropriate context for EFL language learners to generate sufficient output so that this can lead to consciousness raising, hypothesis testing, and metalinguistic awareness. As Pecot-Hebert (2012, p. 130) puts it, "asynchronous technology affords the class many benefits. First, it allows students a chance to carefully craft, alter, and practice their responses, as opposed to face-to-face conversations where this is not an option".

2. Methodology

2.1 Context and Participants

A total of 18 English Literature freshmen from two classes in a state university in the west of Iran were recruited based on a convenience and purposive sampling. Prior to the study, a questionnaire examining their demographic background, such as age, gender, years of studying English, and their level of familiarity with computer was administered to the participants. The results of the questionnaire showed that the majority of the participants took part in English classes at language institutes for two years on average before matriculating at university, while a few did only self-study. All the participants were, therefore, familiar with the English language prior to start studying English academically. To preserve the

participants' personal information, pseudonyms were used throughout the study. Additionally, informed consent was obtained from all the participants before the study commenced.

Based on what they reported in the questionnaire, their level of familiarity with computer ranged from average to high. As the experimental group was supposed to work with computer to upload their voices, their computer literacy level was evaluated. To do so, the experimental group completed an online computer literacy questionnaire, which can be found at http://www.halfbakedsoftware.com/quandary/version_2/examples/computacy.htm.

The results revealed that they were advanced computer users. Furthermore, the participants in each class, whose age ranged from 18 to 22, were assigned to experimental and control groups, 9 in each class, based on a purposive random sampling. They were taking a four-credit grammar course 1, held twice a week, at the time of the study as part of the requirements for the BA program. Understanding and using English grammar by Azar (1999) was offered for this course. In Iran, EFL BA students are required to take English grammar 1 and 2, eight credits in total, in the first and second semesters, respectively. The course, emphasized the integrated and communicative nature of grammar learning, aimed at helping the students understand, and use English grammar through communicative and interactive language-learning activities. In this course the focus was chiefly on English tenses (i.e. past, present, and future). However, other aspects of English grammar were addressed as well. Each class lasted for one and a half hours. In addition, each student was supposed to be well-prepared every session as there might be some unexpected questions or quizzes. After the professor, one of the researchers, had taught each part of the textbook, the students were asked to do the related exercises in the textbook and share the answers with their classmates. Furthermore, the last 20 minutes of each class time was allocated to oral task performance in which the professor provided them with related speaking tasks to encourage them to use the structures they had previously learnt.

2.2 Online / Classroom Speaking Tasks and VT Website

The authors have employed speaking tasks adopted from sample TOEFL tests in order to examine the participants' speaking accuracy. As Spratt, Pulverness, and Williams (2005, p. 34) put it "accuracy in speaking is the use of correct forms of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation". Therefore, speaking accuracy cannot be boiled down to only the use of correct forms of grammar; however, in this study, they narrowed down the focus of the study to only one aspect of accuracy, namely English tenses. Ellis (2009) also believes that "focused [corrective feedback] CF is potentially more effective than unfocused CF, so teachers should identify specific linguistic targets for correction in different lessons" (p. 14).

Prior to the main study, first, four speaking tasks tapping into the use of past, present, future, and conditional sentences type 2 were administered to the participants to identify the most difficult task in which they make the most frequent mistakes. An overview of the tasks is demonstrated in Table 1.

After their speaking task performances had been audio recorded for an in-depth evaluation, the results of frequency analyses revealed that the most frequently occurring mistakes were observed in the hypothetical conditional task. To ensure the interrater reliability of the data, one of the researchers went through the analyses for the second time after two days interval. The intrarrater reliability was found to be acceptable, ($r = .95$). Therefore, the researchers considered hypothetical conditional task as the focus of the study. As already stated, the experimental and control groups were provided with

Tense	Task
Past	Talk about an event in your life that made you very happy. Explain what happened and why you felt so happy. Include details and examples in your explanation.
Present	Describe an object that is very special in your life. Explain why this object is important to you. Include details and examples in your explanation.
Future	What are your predictions for our planet in the 20 years to come? Include details and examples in your explanation?
Conditional Sentence Type 2	What would you do if you were told you had only one month to live?

Table 1. Overview of the Pretest Speaking Tasks

classroom tasks (see Table 2). The students in both groups were asked to carry out similar speaking tasks in the classroom for four sessions. However, in addition to the face to face tasks which included doing related textbook exercises and performing hypothetical conditional tasks, the experimental group was also asked to perform four online speaking tasks, demonstrated in Table 2.

In the online speaking tasks, they posted their voice entries on the VT which is considered as an appropriate context for uploading their voice entries and giving comments and feedback on them. According to the VT website (<http://Voicethread.com>), VT is a cloud application, which requires only an up-to-date version of Adobe Flash and works in any modern web browser. It is used to upload images, audio files, and videos on which one can give comments using one of the five commenting options, namely microphone, webcam, text, phone, and audio-file. Given the privacy of the accounts in this website, outsiders cannot have access to the posts as each account has a specific user name and password created by its users. In addition, it provides an asynchronous context in which learners have more time for planning and can contribute to their speaking accuracy and complexity and reduces frustration level (Blake, 2016).

As none of the participants was familiar with VT website, first the website and its affordances were introduced to them orally. Although it looks user-friendly, language learners need to be trained to use it and practice using it (Haverkate-Ens, 2014). Therefore, to ensure that all the

Context	Hypothetical Conditional Tasks
Classroom	If you were an English teacher, what would you do to improve your students' English?
	If you could choose to live anywhere in the world where would you prefer to live? Why?
	If you could be invisible, what would you do?
Online	If you were the president of Iran for one month, what would you do?
	If you could have dinner with anyone (dead or alive), who would you choose, and why?
	If you could wish only for one thing, what would you wish for? Why?
	If you could change one thing in the world, what would it be?
	What would do if you were a millionaire?

Table 2. Classroom and Online Tasks

participants can work with the website, Camtasia software version 8 was used to screencast how to operate VT. The participants were informed about how to upload their voice entries and give comments on their classmates' voice entries. To sign up, the professor had created the usernames and passwords for the participants, and they were assured that nobody could have access to their accounts except for themselves. It should be noted that full access to the website was not available for free. Due to the limited access, one could not upload more than five voice entries. To upload more voice entries, the previous ones must be deleted. Therefore, two accounts were created for the nine experimental participants. A screenshot of the website is presented in Figure 1.

For four sessions, the experimental group uploaded their one-minute voice entries on the website where other members could listen to the audio files and give comments on them. The professor also provided them with direct corrective feedback. In order to ensure that they would listen to their classmates' voice entries, each individual was required to listen to at least one voice entry uploaded by his/her classmate and then give comments, such as excellent, good, and weak on it. The professor also presented his explicit corrective feedback on each online speaking task and asked the students to reflect on the feedback. In order to reduce the directness of the feedback and encourage them to participate in the task performance, he started the feedback with positive reinforcement, such as good, thank you, very good, etc. Moreover, to ensure students reflect on the feedback and errors, next session they were asked to present oral reports on their errors and the feedback they received on their voice entries.

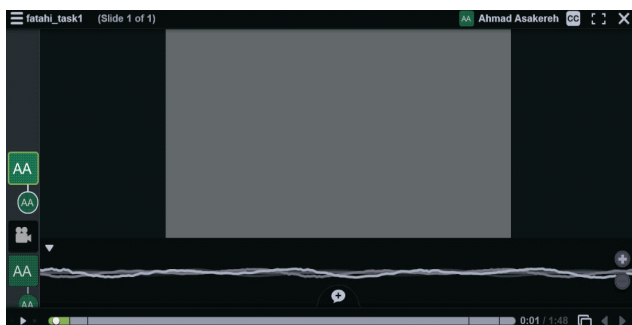


Figure 1. A Sample of VT Screenshot

2.3 Semi-structured Interviews

A semi-structure interview, adapted from Freiermuth and Jarrell (2006), was conducted to have an in-depth and "emic" (Croker, 2009, p. 8) understanding of students' experience in online and face to face tasks. Four participants, two males and two females, from the experimental group were selected based on stratified random sampling. They carried out the interview in the students' native language, Persian, so that they could provide us with a more comprehensive picture of their experience. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, translated into English, coded and the recurring themes were identified.

2.4 Diary Writing

The participants in the experimental group were asked to write about their experiences with online and face to face tasks. On day one, they taught them how to write a diary. They wrote their diaries in their mother tongue, Persian. They asked them to include every single point that they find in the way of their online and face to face task performances so that the data of their diaries, which were supposed to be submitted at the end of the study, would be triangulated with the data adopted from the interviews. Their diaries were translated into English, coded, and the recurring themes were identified as well.

2.5. Design of the Study

An explanatory mixed-method design was employed in this study. To address the first research question, the experimental and control groups' speaking tasks were analyzed in the quantitative section of the study, the results of which were consolidated through semi-structured interviews and dairies as the sources of qualitative data to address the second research question. The visual design of the study, adapted from Ivankova and Creswell (2009) is presented in Figure 2.

2.6 Data Analysis

To answer the first research question, frequency analysis was run to ascertain which group made the most frequent mistakes in their speaking with respect to hypothetical conditional sentences. Moreover, Fisher exact test was run in MATLAB software version 7 to examine whether there

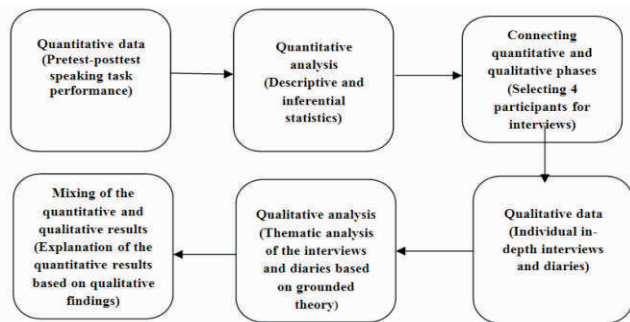


Figure 2. Visual Diagram of the Design of the Study

were any statistically significant differences between the pretest and posttest of experimental and control group. To conduct the test, the median of each group was specified, as unlike mean, median is a non-parametric test and is more compatible with the non-parametric Fisher exact test. The number of participants who was above and below the median was thus counted and compared. Furthermore, McNemar's test was used manually to examine whether there were any significant differences between the pretest and posttest of each group. For this test, the error frequencies above and below the median were calculated and compared. To answer the second research question, the semi-structured interviews and diaries were transcribed verbatim, coded, and the general themes were identified.

3. Results

3.1 Task Performance Results

The frequency of the participants' errors in speaking accuracy in terms of using hypothetical conditional sentences is summarized in Tables 3 and 4.

Although the results of the pretest and posttest demonstrated reduction in the frequency of errors in both groups, the experimental group did not outperform the control group in the posttest regarding the frequency of errors in their speaking tasks. As already mentioned, errors which are only related to hypothetical conditional rules were taken into account. For instance, the sentence (If I had one month to live, I WILL* spend WHOLE THE* time with my family) contains two errors; however, only the first error was considered as it is directly related to the rules of hypothetical conditional sentences.

The results of Fisher exact test indicated that the returned

Number	Pseudonyms/ Experimental Group	Pretest/Mistakes Frequency	Posttest/Mistakes Frequency
1	Maryam	1	0
2	Zahra	1	0
3	Hassan	2	0
4	Fatima	9	3
5	Zohre	2	0
6	Soha	8	5
7	Mahsa	10	2
8	Iman	1	0
9	Sadat	1	0
	Total	35	10

Table 3. Frequency of Errors of Experimental Group in Pretest and Posttest

Number	Pseudonyms/ Control Group	Pretest/Mistakes Frequency	Posttest/Mistakes Frequency
1	Sara	1	0
2	Fatemeh	2	1
3	Mahya	2	1
4	Samaneh	1	0
5	Shabnam	9	3
6	Zahra	1	2
7	Mohammad	7	1
8	Nazanin	10	2
9	Khadijeh	3	1
	Total	36	11

Table 4. Frequency of Errors of Control Group in Pretest and Posttest

test decision is $h = 0$, which showed no significant difference between the frequency of errors in the pretest of experimental and control group. Therefore, both groups were homogenous.

The returned test decision $h = 0$ indicates that Fisher exact test did not show any statistically significant difference between the posttest of experimental and control groups.

The results of McNemar's test revealed that there was a statistically significant difference between the pretest and posttest of experimental group. Critical value of χ^2 with degree of freedom 1 at the 95% significant level is .0039.

$$\chi_o^2 = \frac{(|6-3|-1)^2}{9} = 0.4444$$

The results of McNemar's test also demonstrated that there was a statistically significant difference between the pretest

and post test of control group. Critical value of χ^2 with degree of freedom 1 at the 95% significant level is .0039.

$$\chi_o^2 = \frac{(|4-2|-1)^2}{6} = 0.6667$$

3.2 Interview Results

To answer the second research question, the authors have interviewed 4 participants (2 males and 2 females) who were selected based on stratified random sampling from among the experimental group. Having conducted the interviews in Persian, they transcribed, translated and then coded them and identified the recurring themes. To check the accuracy of the translation, the transcripts were back-translated by one of the researchers.

Grounded theory method (Strauss & Corbin, 1994) was employed to come up with the recurring themes, after coding the interviews, the themes emerged from the data. That is an inductive approach taken for identifying recurring themes (Richards, 2003). Moreover, in order to ensure the recurring themes emerged from the interview match what the participants intended to communicate, the participants were asked to check them for precision. Each interview took around 20 minutes (80 minutes in total). The interviews were conducted immediately after the study so that the participants could remember every single detail.

All the participants believed that the face-to-face tasks in the classroom were favorable, fruitful, and challenging. They believed that face-to-face tasks provided them with the opportunity to participate in discussion and they assumed that giving comments on each other views was very interesting. Excerpts 1, 2, 3 present students views on the face to face tasks.

Excerpt 1 Ali: I found face-to-face tasks very useful as we were provided with a topic for discussion and I was presenting our ideas and others gave comments on my ideas.

Excerpt 2 Zahra: I never had discussion in the classroom so this gave me the opportunity to present my ideas and it was useful that there was someone there to draw my mistakes to my attention.

Excerpt 3 Hossein: Face to face tasks were very useful, as first we were taught the structure and then we used them in our speaking. This helped me to learn them better. I found the challenging part of the discussion very interesting especially when we were giving comments on each other ideas.

Although they all considered the face-to-face tasks to be helpful, the participants mentioned a few demerits of the face-to-face tasks. However, Nahid believed that she could not find any negative points in face-to-face tasks. Excerpts 1 and 2 are presented as samples of their views in this regard.

Excerpt 1 Zahra: Some students did not speak because they were shy to take part in face-to-face tasks and I think the time of speaking part was not sufficient.

Excerpt 2 Hossein: I believe that speaking part of our class should be held in a separate session because we were focusing on grammar and it was difficult for me to shift to speaking.

Nahid and Hossein found online tasks satisfactory while Zahra and Ali found them average. The following excerpts 1, 2, 3 present their views on online tasks.

Excerpt 1 Nahid: The corrective feedback I received from the professor was very helpful and I enjoyed listening to the other students' voice entries to see what others think.

Excerpt 2 Hossein: I liked the online tasks because I did not have any stress in online task performance but in face-to-face tasks it was not so.

Excerpt 3 Zahra: The website was new to me. It made me more conscious of my speaking accuracy and grammar. They, however, found some problems with online tasks and they all unanimously believed that face-to-face tasks were more or less useful than online tasks. Zahra, for instance, said that "online tasks were not natural and did not show my real speaking ability because in the class I had the opportunity to speak on the spot and discuss the topics with my classmates". Ali also said that "if there had been an online context where we had received synchronous feedback it would have been more effective".

Hossein stated that "One thing I did not like about the online tasks was that there was no interaction and discussion in online tasks, something that we did in the face-to-face tasks". He also claimed that "if there had been synchronous tasks, it would have been more fruitful". He added synchronous task performance is more natural and challenging.

Nahid was not completely satisfied with asynchronous tasks either as she thought synchronous contexts can engage her more in speaking and make her more active.

With respect to corrective feedback, they thought the online corrective feedback they received from their instructor was helpful. However, they mentioned that their classmates rarely gave feedback on their voice entries. Nahid said that "when you receive online feedback, you find out that at least someone has listened to your voice entries and if any mistakes are detected in your speaking, they will draw them to your attention".

Zahra also said that "I found your feedback very useful and one thing I really liked about your feedback was that you first gave compliment on my voice entries and then you provided the corrective feedback. This really encouraged me to listen again to my voice entries and check my mistakes one by one". She believed that if her classmates had been more serious and presented their comments on her voice entries, it would have been more helpful.

Ali found the feedback on his voice entries he received from the instructor very informative. He, however, said that "I did not receive enough feedback from my classmates". He added that there should have been more members so that he would have received further comments on his voice entries.

3.3 Diary Writing Results

Although all the participants in the experimental group (N=9) were asked to write their diaries in Persian, only five of them submitted their diaries at the end of the study. After collecting the dairies, it was translated into English. Subsequently, they coded them and extracted the general themes. The themes extracted from the diaries corroborated what the participants reported in the interview to a great extent.

In their diaries, they all unanimously referred to the facilitative effects of online feedback they received from their instructor. Sara, for instance, mentioned that "the comments I received from the instructor helped me to correct my grammar". Reza, however, mentioned in his diary that it would be more helpful if they were more members to listen to our voice entries and present their comments.

According to the diaries, it seemed that the members first had some problems with uploading their audio files because either they did not have access to computers or did not know how to do so. However, they revealed that once the Android version of the website was available to them, the problem was removed. As nowadays smart mobile phones are ubiquitous and easy to carry, making use of a mobilephone version of a web-based application can be more efficient. In her diary, Fatemeh, for example, mentioned "first uploading my voice was difficult but once I installed the application on my cellphone, it got much easier". As Stockwell (2012, p. 203) notes, "the device (mobile phone) is something that we can take out and use at any time or place".

It seems they were also very interested in the topics posed in the class. They mentioned that they were challenging and interesting. Zahra, for example, wrote that "the topics were interesting and new to me and this made me more creative".

Their diaries further demonstrated that they found face-to-face tasks more facilitative. Zahra mentioned in her dairy that "face-to-face tasks led to friendly atmosphere in the classroom and also I did not have to wait for the comments on my speaking. I was receiving the comments while I was speaking and this was very good".

4. Discussion

In the present study, attempts were made to investigate whether using VT could enhance speaking accuracy in terms of using correct form of hypothetical conditional sentences. Furthermore, the experimental group's perception of online and face-to-face tasks was explored.

The findings of the first part of the study revealed that

although the experimental group's errors were reduced in the posttest to a great extent, the experimental group did not outperform the control one. That is, there was no statistically significant difference between the experimental and control groups in terms of their error frequency in the posttests. The findings of this part are in line with those of Hsu's (2016), in which the participants were engaged in voice blogging over a semester leading to a significant improvement in their speaking complexity; however, no such improvement was observed in their speaking accuracy and fluency. Basically, the results of the present study can be attributed to a couple of factors including lack of high enthusiasm among the participants to use the website, and lack of knowledge about the effectiveness, and efficiency of CMC on the part of the language learners.

Apparently, the participants were not very enthusiastic about using the website. Although they believed that the website possessed some merits, they noted in the interview that it did not make them engage in active interaction. They asserted that asynchronous contexts cannot be as effective as synchronous contexts, which can engage them in real-life communication. The findings of this part are in line with those of Dugartsyrenova and Sardegna's (2017) in which the participants also did not find VTa satisfactory platform for engaging oral communication (Yang, 2011). Furthermore, in a study by Hrastinski (2006), EFL students using a synchronous context were more willing to communicate in comparison to their counterparts using an asynchronous context. Duncan, Kenworthy, and McNamara (2012) also exert emphasis on this feature of synchronous contexts. They believe that "synchronous forums allow for a much higher level of interactivity than time-delayed or asynchronous forums" (p. 434).

The participants also believed that the asynchronous online tasks could not help them build friendly relationship. The findings of this part are in harmony with Trinder's (2016) in which the majority of the students preferred face-to-face communication to CMC. Lee (2016) states that language learners may lose their motivation in CMC as there is no real-life face-to-face communication in CMC. In addition, Tsiplakides and

Keramida (2010) hold that students' attitudes toward context of learning is a strong predictor of their success. This was also substantiated in a study by Asakereh and Dehghannezhad (2015) in which they showed that there was a positive relationship between EFL language learners' satisfaction with the context of learning and their speaking achievement. In a study by Alhamami (2017), it was also revealed that one of the three factors which could help teachers to predict whether students maintain their engagement in learning was students' attitudes toward learning environment. Given using technology in learning, Lai, Hu, and Lyu (2017) showed that students' learning experience was significantly affected by their perception of the usefulness of the technologies they adopted for learning. Consequently, the participants' negative attitudes toward the platform in the present study might have decreased the possible significant impact of the VT website on their speaking accuracy. Therefore, this can suggest that students' negative attitudes toward a context of teaching and learning, be it online or face-to-face, can affect their learning negatively. Language instructors urgently need to examine language learners' attitudes toward CALL. According to Woodrow (1991), awareness of language learners' attitudes toward CALL is of paramount importance for teachers as this awareness can provide teachers with further insights into students' learning experience. Additionally, this lack of appreciation can also be attributed to another possible issue. Basically, the classroom was not equipped with computers and CALL has played a peripheral role in the context under study. This might lead to the negligence in developing high appreciation of the positive effects of CALL on their speaking accuracy on the part of the students. This little attention to CALL in the educational context of the country may have its roots in the belief that CALL is culturally-loaded, which is in conflict with the current cultural context of education in Iran. In the Iranian education system, the traditional role of teachers as the providers of knowledge is still of utmost importance in the classroom and CALL can weaken their role in the classroom. Logistical and financial issues can also be

viewed as key factors preventing the implementation of CALL in the classroom.

All the aforementioned factors contributing to the modest impact of the website on the participants' speaking accuracy cannot be attributed to the inefficiency of the website itself. As it was discussed above, other factors can be involved, which require further investigation. On the other hand, in the interview, the participants referred to some positive points about the affordances of the website. They believed that shy students were not under pressure to use the website and post their voice entries; therefore, it seems the website was appropriate for those who were not willing to speak in the classroom due to shyness. This was also observed in a study by Laghi et al. (2012) in which shy students tended to adopt online context rather than face-to-face one to express their feelings. This indicates that shy students may find online context more amenable for interaction.

As the online feedback was presented in the written form, they believed this brought their mistakes to their attention more effectively. However, as already stated, it seems one of the chief problems with the website was its asynchronous feature which prevented the participants from having satisfactory interaction. Some participants referred to the fact that the asynchronous context cannot lead to close relationship among them. Apparently, as they were newcomers and were not sufficiently familiar with each other, they were willing to build a close relationship with each other. That is, they sought a learning context where they could develop congenial relationship, something which VT website was lacking. This can suggest that asynchronous contexts may not help language learners to build effective social and congenial relationship. Synchronous context, therefore, can be more effective in classes where students do not have close relationship with each other.

Moreover, it appears that face-to-face tasks were widely favorable as they considered them challenging, fruitful, and effective. In the interviews and diaries, they revealed that they savored discussing and giving direct comments on their peers' ideas.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be tempting to view CALL as a panacea for language learning. An online context can enjoy some merits; however, if language learners do not find it favorable, it may only have a marginal effect on students' learning. Sufficient awareness of this issue can encourage instructors to be more cognizant of the fact that online context by itself may not lead to effective learning unless learners' perceptions, as one of the main factors, are examined thoroughly. In educational contexts like Iran's education system, in which teacher-centered approach is rampant, students' attitudes, ideas, and voices are more likely to be neglected. Therefore, it seems one way to help students to have an active role in their learning is to help them make their voice heard in their learning process, which in turn can contribute to a more effective and efficient learning.

The findings of the study can have some implications for language instructors. EFL teachers need to investigate language learners' attitudes toward their learning as this can impinge upon the learning process, something which has also been substantiated by some recently-published experimental studies (e.g. Alhamami, 2017; Lai et al., 2017). Furthermore, the findings of the study suggest that EFL instructors need to consider the idea that online feedback can be a contributory factor in developing speaking accuracy as the participants presented a complacent attitude toward it, something which has also been manifested in a study by Bodnar, Cucchiarini, Penning de Vries, Strik, and van Hout (2017). In addition, it seems language teachers need to blend synchronous and face-to-face tasks (Patchan, Schunn, Sieg, & McLaughlin, 2015) rather than using merely asynchronous ones in speaking classes to develop friendly bond between learners. Future researchers across the world can conduct this study with many more participants in various contexts so that they can thoroughly illuminate the possible contribution of VT website to students' learning.

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Appendix

Interview Guide

1. Rate your experience in face-to-face tasks please.

- a) Very unfavorable
- b) Slightly unfavorable
- c) Average
- d) Slightly favorable
- e) Very favorable

2. What did you like about face-to-face tasks?

3. What did you dislike about face-to-face tasks?

4. What do you think of the face-to-face error correction feedback you received in the classroom?

5. Rate your experience in the online tasks?

- a) Very unfavorable
- b) Slightly unfavorable
- c) Average
- d) Slightly favorable
- e) Very favorable

6. What did you like about online tasks?

7. What did you dislike about online tasks?

8. Which type of tasks (online or face-to-face) do you prefer? Explain please?

9. What do you think of the online correction feedback you received through VoiceThread Website?

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