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Research Article

Supplementary Online Study Platform for an Oral Communication Skills Course: Implementation, Evaluation and Suggestions

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to explore how first-year candidate teachers of English make use of an online support to their EFL oral communication courses. The online support consists of asynchronous speaking and listening activities designed to be completed outside the classroom as a supplementary material. The findings of the study suggest that online support has potentials as a supplementary independent study tool to support oral communication courses. The participants preferred speaking activities to listening activities. Participants could do most Speak Only activities, namely individual discussion, prompted speech and situational talk without any preparation, except for vocabulary related activities and integrated speaking activities, which required preparation. Integrated speaking-listening activities demanded prior mental or physical preparation. The frequency and extent of preparation varied across participants, yet the participants employed a variety of preparation strategies, including brainstorming, verbatim script writing, contextualization, and keywords as prompts. Listen and respond could easily be completed by noting new words and listening to the recording a couple of times, whereas integrated listening-speaking activities required intensive listening and note taking. The participants used the activities in the online support mainly to expand the learning that takes place in the classroom and to revise the relevant content. Previewing was another reason to use the activities; however, it was not as common as the other two purposes.

Anahtar Sözcükler:
Asenkron Bilgisayar Ortamlı İletişim, Ders Dışı Çalışma Ortamları, Sözlü İletişim Becerileri, Öğretmen Adayları

Türkçe Başlık: Sözlü İletişim Becerileri Dersi için Çevrimiçi Destek Uygulaması

Özet: Bu çalışmanın amacı birinci sınıf İngilizce Öğretmenliği öğrencilerinin Sözlü İletişim Becerileri II dersinde kullanılmak üzere hazırlanan asenkron konuşma ve dinleme etkinliklerinden oluşan bir çevrimiçi destek uygulamasını nasıl kullandıklarını araştırmaktır. Çevrimiçi destek uygulaması için hazırlanan etkinlikleri katılımcıların ders dışında destek materyal olarak kullanmaları hedeflenmiştir. Bu amaç doğrultusunda, araştırma modeli olarak durum çalışması benimsenmiştir. Araştırma bulguları, çevrimiçi destek uygulamasının Sözel İletişim Becerileri dersini desteklemek için tamamlayıcı bağımsız çalışma aracı olabileceğini göstermiştir. Katılımcılar konuşma etkinliklerini dinleme anlama etkinliklerine tercih etmiştir. Çoğu *bireysel tartışma, hazırlıklı konuşma* ve *duruma dayalı konuşma* tarzı hazırlanan konuşma etkinlikler herhangi bir ön hazırlık yapılmadan tamamlanmıştır. Bütünleşik konuşma etkinlikleri ve kelime etkinlikleri tamamlamak için katılımcılar ön hazırlık yapmıştır. Ön hazırlığın yapılma sıklığı ve yoğunluğu katılımcıdan katılımcıya fark göstermekle birlikte, katılımcılar beyin fırtınası, kelime kelimesine hazır metin hazırlama, bağlam içinde sunma ve hatırlatıcı anahtar sözcük üzerinden anlatım gibi farklı hazırlık stratejileri kullanmışlardır. Dinle ve cevap türü dinleme anlama etkinlikleri birkaç dinleme sonrasında sadece anahtar sözcükler not edilerek tamamlanabilirken, bütünleşik dinleme-anlama etkinlikleri için detaylı dinleme ve not alma gerekmektedir. Katılımcıların çevrimiçi destek uygulamasındaki etkinlikleri yapma amaçları ise derste öğrendiklerini genişletmek ve ders dışında da konuları tekrar edebilmek olarak özetlenebilir. Derse hazırlanma diğer bir kullanma biçimi olmakla beraber, tekrar kadar yaygın değildir.

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1. Introduction

Encouraging learners to interact in the target language out of the classroom is now regarded essential in foreign language development, especially in contexts where the target language is a foreign language (Ahmadian, 2012; Benson, 2011; Benson & Chik, 2010; Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003; Nation, 1990; Nation, 2003; Van Lier, 1996; Warschauer, 1997). In today's world of information and technology, the teachers can extend learning beyond the walls of the classroom easily. Learning takes place everywhere and at any time, so restricting learning to the classroom and expecting learning to take place only there is now obsolete. Nowadays, it is a widely accepted fact that learners also need to take responsibility for their learning and engage in activities both in-class and out-of-class (Benson, 2008). In search for new learning environments, technological improvements and advancements can open up new worlds for teachers and learners (Salaberry, 2001). As also emphasized by Osguthorpe and Graham (2003), "the availability of computer technologies, such as the Internet, has greatly expanded the educational options available to learners and instructors alike" (p. 277).

With the emergence of Web 2.0 tools, blending face-to-face experiences with online activities for outside the class learning is also becoming important (Graham, 2006; Liang & Bonk, 2009; Whitelock & Jelf, 2003). Especially, blending face-to-face instruction with computer-facilitated environments allows teachers to expand the boundaries of the class. It also provides students with more effective and interactive learning experiences, where there is a great deal of flexibility and freedom of access to the learning resources anywhere and anytime (Anderson, 2003; Curtis & Lawson, 2001; Lynch, 2002; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Stracke, 2007; Swan & Shea, 2005; Woods & Ebersole, 2003; Woods & Baker, 2004).

The use of computer-mediated communication tools can provide authentic contextualized language input beyond the confines of the classroom (Luke, 2006) and help to increase student-to-student, student-with-task, and student-to-instructor interaction outside of traditional class time (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000). Research on computer-mediated communication has expanded over the two decades. The advantages of synchronous oral communication in oral communication skills are well known, yet the need to be present in real-time to be able to attend synchronous oral communication is cited as one of the drawbacks. Recently, there have been more research studies that examine the use of asynchronous oral communication tools in oral communication courses (e.g., McIntosh, Braul & Chao, 2003; Sun, 2009; Wang, 2006; Yao, 2007). These studies examine how newly emerging asynchronous communication tools are integrated into language classrooms focusing on different aspects of oral communication; however, in all these studies, the integration of the activities designed using these tools is a compulsory part of the course. Hence, even though the participants were expected to complete these activities in their own time outside the classroom, participants' completion of these studies has been a required part of the course they were taking. Nonetheless, in out-of-class practice of language skills, students should be in charge of their learning. In this study, therefore, the general purpose is to examine how first-year candidate teachers of English use an online support medium designed to endorse their oral communication skills course through voluntary practice outside the class hours. The online support in this study is designed as a supplemental model for the existing course and participants' use of the online support is on a voluntary basis. Michigan State University (MSU) Centre for Language Education and Research (CLEAR) Rich Internet Applications (RIA) tools are used in the design of the

activities and materials, and asynchronous mode of interaction where learners make online recordings and send them to the researcher for evaluation is adopted.

1.1. Background to the Study

English Language Teaching departments in Turkey are responsible for training future teachers of English. One of the primary goals of these programs is to train future teachers who are proficient users of the language. Therefore, the first year of the program is devoted primarily to language skills development. In that first year, the candidate teachers have courses designed to develop the four language skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing, as well as expanding on their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. Candidate teachers have introductory and advanced courses related to each skill, and at the end of that year, students are expected to gain the skills that they will need in their professional life.

Oral communication courses are the ones that candidate teachers have the most difficulty because these skills are generally neglected in their prior language learning experience. When they come to university, most are reluctant and shy to speak in language classes. Besides, from their prior learning experience, they are accustomed to teacher-led instruction, so they are neither familiar nor comfortable with peer interaction. Because the classroom is the only environment where candidate teachers practice oral communication skills, and they have little chance of using the target language outside the class, their oral communication skills develop slowly. Second language acquisition theories (e.g., DeKeyser's Skills Acquisition theory; Long's Interaction Hypothesis; Swain's Output hypothesis) claim that speaking develops through practice; therefore, students need to produce the language for skills acquisition (Mitchel & Miles, 2004). DeKeyser's Skills Acquisition theory (DeKeyser, 2007) emphasizes the need to focus on skills development and asserts that along with declarative knowledge (knowledge about the language), learners need procedural knowledge (knowledge of the language) and the best way to transform declarative knowledge into procedural knowledge is through extensive practice. Practice leads to automatization, which is one of the most crucial factors developing one's fluency in a foreign language (Schmidt, 1992). Therefore, repetition as a means of consolidation and building procedural knowledge should be emphasized in oral communication skills courses (DeKeyser, 2007).

Practicing speaking in the classroom can be challenging for both students and the classroom teacher. The most effective use of class time in foreign language classrooms is when students speak in pairs or groups, but then it is difficult for the teacher to monitor all students and give feedback to them on their language use individually (Harmer, 2007a). Besides, some students may find talking with their peers a waste of time, because they do not believe in the benefits of collaborative learning or learning from peers (Scrivener, 1994) or think that peer discussion is not as beneficial as talking with the teacher (Harmer, 2007b), so generally they are not willing to communicate in the classroom. Another problem that is more prevalent in monolingual classes with reference to practicing speaking skills is that the students may communicate in their mother tongue when they work in pairs or groups, which makes pair and group work less effective as a teaching practice (Jenkins, 2000). Another constraint is individual differences. Some students are less confident to speak in the foreign language, so they prefer to be silent. Others dominate the class for different reasons, leaving scarce time for others to express their ideas. In a study conducted by Başöz and Erten (2019), the factors influencing EFL Learners' in-class willingness to

communicate in English were explored and it was found that among many other factors, classmates, materials, topic interest and familiarity, as well as self-perceived communication competence affected students' willigness to communicate.

Another problem is the time. The time allocated for speaking practice in the class is limited. Long and Porter (1985), based on a quick calculation of the time individual students have in a class of 30, estimated that in a 50-minute lesson with 30 students, if the students talked only to the teacher, they would get 30 seconds of talking time per lesson and this would build up to "just one hour per student per year (p. 208)" if the students are in an intensive language program. In a class where there is only three hours of face-to-face conduct per week, some students may even complete the course without engaging in any spoken interaction in the classroom. Since many students have little or no chance of speaking English outside the classroom, speaking practice is restricted to the classroom only. Even though the students have an opportunity to work on and practice other language skills outside the classroom through homework, in terms of practicing speaking skills, classroom is the only venue, and students cannot easily put into practice what they learn in the class outside the class, namely in the real world. Hence, they do not benefit fully from the classroom environment. Nonetheless, students need a lot of practice to develop oral communication skills. All of these factors highlight the need to create outside the class environments for students to practice English. With regards to this, the out-of-class study has started to find support in learning and now more and more researchers and educators emphasize the importance of out-of-class study (Benson, 2001, 2006, 2008; Field, 2007; Gan, Humphreys, & Hamp-Lyons, 2004; Inozu, Sahinkarakas, & Yumru, 2010, Lai &Gu, 2011; Pickard, 1996).

With the emerging technologies to support out-of-class learning, more research reveals positive outcomes of technology-enhanced out-of-class study (Beltran, Das, & Fairlie, 2006; Lam, 2000; 2004). Blending face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated environments allows teachers to expand the boundaries of the class and provides students with more effective and interactive learning experiences, where there is a great deal of flexibility and freedom of access to the learning resources anywhere and anytime. The availability of new technologies and widespread use of the Internet lead teachers to use the available resources for out-of-class study. According to Sagara and Zapata (2008), asynchronous oral CMC tools, just like the one designed for the study, have the potential to enhance learners to take control over their learning, because they choose the sequence of what they learn and decide on when to learn, too. Another advantage of asynchronous oral CMC tools is that they allow L2 learners to express their thoughts at their own pace. Learners have a chance to plan what they want to say prior to making their voice recording, which leads to a feeling of confidence that the learners may not always experience in face-to-face situations (Sun, 2009; Zhao, 2010). Similarly, because the asynchronous oral CMC tools allow students to pause, play, listen to, record, and re-record their speech, they also help shift learning from teacher-centered to student-centered (Fotos & Browne, 2004). Since the pressure of real-time interaction that occurs in face-to-face classrooms is annihilated, asynchronous CMC environments may also help students to develop effective communication strategies to improve speaking skills (Xie & Sharma, 2004). The use of asynchronous oral CMC tools outside the classroom also increases the quality and quantity of oral production (Rosen, 2009). Since many traditional classrooms provide students limited feedback opportunities, asynchronous oral tasks can allow for additional instructor and peer review (Meskill & Anthony, 2005).

Furthermore, the presence of rich multi-media, hypermedia and other interactive tools addresses different learning styles and encourages self-regulated learning. Besides, web-enhanced mediums, when designed to take into account learner's needs and interests, may increase learner motivation and engage learners in highly interactive language experience (Chun & Plass, 2000; Gruber-Miller & Benton, 2001; Kung & Chuo, 2002; Mosquera, 2001; Osuna & Meskill, 1998; Rico & Vinagre, 2000). Murray (2000), looking from an angle of tasks and materials available in these mediums, states that as learners try to carry out the multitude of activities, they also become more proficient in using the target language. Provided that there is variety in the choice of activities and that learners are exposed to the targeted forms through different activities, learners have better chances to progress at their own pace and track their gains in terms of language use. Supported by teacher feedback and peer support, they improve day by day and their reliance on the teacher or their peers lessens each day as they progress in the course. Given that the learners are provided with the kind of scaffolding and support described above, they can become more proficient in learning.

With increased planning of oral production, access to both peer and instructor feedback, and additional opportunities for self-reflection, asynchronous CMC technologies have been found to enable L2 learners to express their thoughts at their own pace and feel more relaxed and confident than in more threatening face-to-face situations (Sun, 2009). Therefore, a well-balanced face-to-face instruction supported by asynchronous CMC environments can provide benefits to the learning environment, including the development of independent learners, a source of instant feedback, and motivation for learners (Sharma & Barrett, 2007). One of the problems frequently cited in educational contexts is that in the traditional modes of education, the connection between classroom procedures and out-of-class activities is neither well established nor contextualized (Kukulska-Hulme, 2009). What learners can do outside the classroom is restricted to homework, assignments, or projects. Learning that occurs out of the class is not directly related to the learning that happens in the language classrooms, and without teacher support, students are on their own when they engage in out-of-class activities. Therefore, when designing out-of-class study activities, there should be parallelism with what happens in the classroom and the learners should be familiar with the tasks and know what is expected from them. That is why special attention was paid to activity design in this study. The activities designed in the study closely resembled the ones done in the classroom to establish the connection between what happens in the classroom and what students will do outside the classroom. Thanks to the parallelism with the classroom procedures and activities, candidate teachers could use the online support to preview, revise and extend the learning that takes place in the classroom.

Recently, there have been research studies that explored the use of asynchronous oral communication tools to develop oral communication skills (Afrilyasanti & Basthomi, 2011; Charle Poza, 2005; Dunn, 2012; Gleason & Suvorov, 2011; Hamzaoğlu & Koçoğlu, 2016; Hsu, Wang, & Comac, 2008; Kirkgöz, 2011; Korucu-Kis & Sanal, 2020; McIntosh, Braul, & Chao, 2003; Pereira, Sanz-Santamaria, Montero, & Gutierrez, 2012; Rosen, 2009; Sun, 2009; Yao, 2007). Taking a closer look at these studies, it is possible to feature two lines of research, considering the methodological considerations and purposes of the studies. One line of research studies tries to explain how learners use and perceive asynchronous communication tools in oral communication classes. These studies tend to be case studies with fewer participants and the aim is to explain in detail how the learners perceive the learning experience. These studies yield initial findings and pave the way to experimental or mixed method studies that seek causal relationships. Case studies tend to focus more on

participants' perceptions and personal accounts of their learning experience. The other line of research studies, on the other hand, focuses on the role these tools have on different aspects of oral proficiency, such as increased oral proficiency levels; fluency, accuracy, vocabulary or language development; lowered anxiety, or better articulation of ideas. Some studies focused on oral proficiency, whereas others focused on psychological variables, such as anxiety and motivation. These studies tend to adopt an experimental research design, or a mixed research approach, mainly because the aim of these studies is to examine the effect of extra practice opportunities on different aspects of oral communication skills. These studies show the impact of asynchronous communication tools in developing oral communication skills. Some advantages of using asynchronous computer-mediated communication tools on oral communication skills are:

- increasing the quality and quantity of oral production in the foreign language (Charle Poza, 2005; Hamzaoğlu & Koçoğlu, 2016; Kirkgöz, 2011; Rosen, 2009)
- excellent resource for outside class practice of oral communication skills, especially in contexts where the target language is a foreign language (Yao, 2007)
- helping students (and instructors) to keep track of their progress in oral proficiency in time (Hsu, Wang, & Comac, 2008);
- encouraging formative assessment through the recordings (Hsu, Wang, & Comac, 2008)
- increasing motivation and self-confidence to speak in the foreign language (Korucu-Kis & Sanal, 2020; Wang, 2006; Yao, 2007) and decreasing foreign language speaking anxiety (Charle Poza, 2005; Dunn, 2012; Hamzaoğlu & Koçoğlu, 2016; Korucu-Kis & Sanal, 2020; McIntosh, Braul, & Chao, 2003; Wang, 2006)
- encouraging learners to take risks and produce more spoken language (Afrilyasanti & Basthomi, 2011; Charle Poza, 2005; Pereira, et al., 2012)
- creating individualized study opportunities for shy and reserved student who do not want their peers to hear them speak the foreign language in the classroom (Yao, 2007)
- encouraging students to employ different strategies when preparing for the tasks and promoting self-evaluation and correction of oral production (Gleason & Suvorov, 2011; Sun, 2009),
- positive evaluation from learners and instructors with reference to potentials for learning (Afrilyasanti and Basthomi, 2011; Hsu, Wang, and Comac, 2008; McIntosh, Braul, & Chao, 2003; Pereira, et al., 2012; Sun, 2009; Yao, 2007),
- creating a learner-friendly learning environment by: (1) allowing more time for preparation and brainstorming and elevating the pressure of time in responding (Sun, 2009), (2) allowing reflection on oral production prior and after submission (McIntosh, Braul, & Chao, 2003).

2. Method

This research follows the case study methodology. The role and use of technology in language learning (Van Lier 2005) is an area which is currently in great need of case study research. Especially, there is a need for studies that explore specific features of available technology that have potentials of making a difference in the learning process and reflecting good practice (Chapelle, 2003; Felix, 2005; Beatty, 2010). Besides, as Duff (2008) also emphasized, when the topic of research is relatively new and is not previously explored in detail, case study methodology is the best research option.

Since the aim of the study is to examine how participants used the online support, it was considered essential to seek for similarities and differences in how participants used the online support and whether these could be explained, relying on cause-effect relationships, focusing on different degrees of participation and the reasons behind such behaviors, as well as how different participants made use of different aspects of the online support. It is marked as an explanatory case study (Yin, 2009), because it attempts to present the data contemplating on cause-effect relationships. The study addresses the broad research question of how the participants of the study made use of the online support platform. In this study, to answer the research question, convergent parallel design as one of the traditional models of a concurrent triangulation design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017, p. 69) is used to collect and analyze data, because both qualitative and quantitative data have equal priority in the study, and they are collected simultaneously. The convergence of qualitative and quantitative data will help to "clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation" (Stake, 2003, p. 148).

2.1. Participants

In the study, convenience sampling was used to determine the participants. There were nine sections of oral communication course and the online support platform was introduced to two of these sections randomly. The candidate teachers who have indicated a lack of stable internet connection or a personal computer were eliminated from the study on the onset. The study initially started with 21 participants; however, 13 participants did not make any use of the online support and were removed from the study, so a total of eight volunteered first year candidate teachers of English participated the study. All the participants had similar language learning experiences before coming to university. Most participants studied in either teacher training high schools or in high schools with intensive English classes. All participants of the study were CEFR B2 level and can be considered strong upper-intermediate students. Therefore, the participants can be considered a homogenous group, yet their prior learning experience may differ. In the presentation and discussion of the findings, pseudo names were used to identify the participants and present the data.

2.2. Online Support Platform

The online support consisted of supplementary materials prepared specifically for the platform that were parallel to the course content and allowed asynchronous communication between the researcher and the participants. There were activities adopted from the textbook and activities parallel to the course content prepared by the researcher. In every activity, there was an embedded *audio dropbox* (web page integrated voice recording device) for participants to record their responses. Participants' recordings fell into researcher's *dropbox* from which he could listen to the recordings and make comments. Below in figure 1 are some sample activities prepared for the platform. As can be seen from these samples, the activities were designed as stand-alone web pages and accompanied with visual and written prompts to guide the participants. Along with these prompts, the researcher also prepared a *guidebook* for the participants in which each activity; expectations from the participants; and required task specifications were explained in detailed.

The content validity of materials was assured by consulting ten language instructors, who had necessary experience about the course and the course content. There were three basic

types of activities, namely *Speaking Only*, *Listen & Record* and *Listening-Speaking Integrated*. *Speak Only* activities were independent speaking activities in which students need to record their responses on questions or prompts designed to focus on fluency. *Listen & record* were listening activities with comprehension questions that students record the answers for designed primarily for accuracy and *Listening-Speaking Integrated* activities were speaking tasks where students listen to audio, audio-visual materials and make a guided or free speech about it, designed to foster overall oral communicative ability.

When designing the online support medium, the researcher considered different learners and their needs. Freedom and flexibility were in the heart of the design. All the activities designed for the online medium were available to the learners from the onset. So, the learners could practice course content before class or go back and revise the content that was already covered in the class. The learners could also possibly do one activity more than one time and compare their performances. Hence, how learners used the program and how much of the program content they would use was entirely up to them. A well-balanced blend of activities derived from the textbook and those prepared by the researcher also gave participants flexibility and freedom to use different activities for different purposes.

The medium of presentation: The activities designed for the online support were stand-alone webpages that anyone could access with the link for the website. However, giving learners a list of webpages was not user-friendly, so all the designed activities were put on a Silverlight Application designed by the researcher for ease of use. The online support application had two interfaces, one for the students and one for the researcher. The researcher could access both interfaces; however, the students could only see the student page. The administration page allowed the researcher to:

- add or delete participants; and access their log in information,
- track the time the students spent on individual activities,
- add a start and due date for an activity,
- make changes to the online support, like adding / deleting content, and
- access activity evaluation forms.

Student Page: The layout of the student's page was also simple and easy to use. The topics and activities related to the course content were placed on the left column and when students clicked on an activity, the RIA activity would appear on the right column. The students just needed to click on the activity that they wanted to do. Below is the screen shot for the layout.

On the bottom left corner of the activity, there was a start-stop button. The students were asked to click on that before starting the activity. The start-stop button was a time-tracker, used by the researcher to collect data about how students use the online support. Once an activity was completed, the participants were instructed to click on "Stop" button, which would automatically lead them to the "Learning Log".

2.2.1. Data Collection Tools and Procedures

Data for the study was collected during the implementation and after the implementation. Data about the process came from two important sources of documentation, namely Student Learning Logs collected right after students' completion of online support activities and Researcher's Log of Participant Engagement. These two documents tracked

participants' use of online support. They also collected data about "how a participant used the program" and supported the evidence from other sources. Data collected after the implementation came from Student's Final Evaluation Survey and Semi-structured interviews.

Researcher's Log of Participant Engagement: Students were expected to work on different activities. Hence, it is anticipated that there would be differences among the students in terms of activities completed and time spent on the activities. To track how different students made use of the program; the researcher kept track of the process. The process was tracked with a timer to measure how long each activity took to complete.

Student Learning Log*:* Student learning logs focused on the actual experiences of the participants, trying to understand how they used the online support. Every participant was asked to complete a learning log consisting of Yes-No questions, Likert-type statements, and open-ended questions upon their completion of an activity. There were ten questions dealing with different aspects of the activities. The first question asked the participants to state why they had chosen to work on that particular task. The options were for revision, for preview or as supplementary practice. Questions 2-5 were about the recordings used in listening only and integrated listening speaking activities. Question 6 directly addressed the participants' success in getting all the answers right at their first listening in listening tasks. Questions 7-9 addressed how participants completed the speaking activities. The open-ended question as the tenth questions inquired a brief description of participant's learning experience

Student's Final Evaluation Survey: The survey was designed as an overall evaluation of the program. There were twenty 5-point Likert-type statements. When preparing the survey, expert opinion was gathered from three experts in the area of curriculum design and program evaluation and two experienced Oral Communication Skills course instructors. The feedback and recommendations from the expert group were evaluated and necessary adaptations were made before finalizing the survey. The survey was finally piloted with a group of candidate English teachers for language ambiguity and based on their feedback, some of the statements were rephrased for reader friendliness and language ambiguity.

Semi-structured interviews: For a deeper exploration into participant's opinions regarding: the online support, the relative benefits of the program, and different components of the program; interviews were conducted. The interview with the participants was in a standardized open-ended interview format with questions parallel to the statements on the Students' Post-Evaluation Study Survey. There were 4 main questions with sub-questions in the interview protocol. The topics are:

1. students' views of the program in general, its applicability to speaking-listening courses (interview question 1),
2. how students used the program (interview question 2),
3. students' views of the activities and design of activities (interview question 3), and
4. other comments about the online support platform or suggestions for future implementation (interview question 4)

Although there are different interview formats to be employed, standardized interview format (Patton, 2002) is considered the most convenient and the most reliable way of collecting the desired data for the study, because the aim of the study is to reveal the perceptions as sincerely and detailed as possible with little or no guidance and directing,

standardized open-ended interview was used. The researcher did not interfere with the participant's responses in any way during the interview and asked only the questions pre-prepared. This way the researcher collected comparable data and during the interviews, researcher bias expired or kept under control. The interviews with the participants were carried out in the final week of the spring term in a friendly atmosphere. The interviews were conducted on one-to-one basis and in participants' native language. Each participant was interviewed in a private room, and they were all offered coffee and cookies. The rationale behind creating a friendly atmosphere was to gather the sincerest responses from the participants and make them feel ease about the interviewing process.

Since data triangulation is in the heart of case studies for validity and reliability issues, it is important to describe how the iteration of data was arranged in the study. Data about the process, namely learner's log and researcher's logs, about activity completion were also addressed in the Student Final Evaluation Form and Open-ended Interview(s). There were items in the Student Final Evaluation Form and Open-ended Interview specifically written to support the data from learning logs and researcher's logs about activity completion. All data from the participants were recorded under their name, including the data from post-study data collection tools, so it was possible to support or to refute data about individual participant(s) from different sources.

2.3. Data Analysis

For the quantitative type of data, mainly descriptive statistics were used. Descriptive statistics of the quantitative data revealed the overall picture, which was supported and detailed with qualitative data. Descriptive statistics about these helped the researcher to quantify some of the findings and provide a framework for qualitative data as a means of triangulation. When analyzing the data from the survey, the researcher scaled down the 5-point Likert Scale to agree or disagree. The participants who either agreed or strongly agreed with the statements were gathered under Agree and those who chose Indecisive, Disagree or Strongly Disagree were classified as Disagree. So, the survey results were tabulated and presented in a dichotomy of Agree or Disagree.

As for the qualitative data, the researcher ran a content analysis to identify themes by looking at reoccurring ideas. The method used was the Constant Comparative Method (Merriam, 1988) where the researcher constantly compared data to identify reoccurring ideas and then tried to classify these into categories. The content analysis was carried out by the researcher and one of his colleagues who has experience with qualitative data procedures independently. After the analysis, the themes identified were compared and inter-rater reliability was assessed using Cohen's kappa. Cohen's kappa coefficient (κ) was found to be 0.71, which was considered as substantial concordant. The categories on which the two raters could not reach an agreement on were taken out from the analysis.

Table 1.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

	Data Collection Tool	Type of Data	Analysis
Data collected during the implementation	Learning Log	Qualitative & Quantitative	Descriptive statistics, Direct Quotation
	Researcher's log	Quantitative	Time in minutes, and frequencies

Data collected after the implementation	Final Evaluation Survey	Quantitative	Descriptive statistics
	Open-Ended Interviews	Qualitative	Content Analysis

3. Findings

To answer the question of "how" the participants made use of the online support platform, the researcher relied on learning logs, researcher's logs, as well as survey findings and interview findings. The learning logs and researcher's logs provide an in-depth understanding of how different participants used the online support, focusing on reasons to complete the activities, the time spent on the activity, the preparation done to complete the activity, length of recording, the number of questions answered, and improvement in speech quality over time.

3.1. The overall picture of how the participants used the online support platform

The online support platform was designed to support the learning that took place in the classroom and extend it to boundaries outside the class. The platform consisted of a total of 31 activities, some of which were adopted from the course book and some which were designed parallel to the course material by the researcher. Since the aim of the study is to explore how the participants made use of the online support platform, first an overview is presented before going in depth into details about how the participants used the online platform. The table below provides an overview of how different participants used the online support.

Table 2.

Participants' use of the online support medium

	N of *Speak Only* activities (out of 22)	N of *Listen & Report* activities (out of 19)	Time spent on the program	Average time spent on activities	Average Length of Recording	Shortest Recording	Lengthiest Recording
Barbara	8	6	2'18"	10"37""	02:57	00:39	05:52
Betty	12	9	3'56"	11"15""	01:31	00:50	03:23
Carol	3		1'15"	15"	03:47	01:09	06:28
Christine	10	7	5'34"	19"41""	01:09	00:29	01:54
Elizabeth	9		2'38"	17"33""	01:40	00:39	03:49
Emily	6	4	2'04"	12"24""	01:15	00:15	02:21
Hailey	5		1'02"	10"33""	00:54	00:13	01:33
Monica	4		45"	9'	00:44	00:26	01:12
	59	26	2'23"	13"25""	01:44	----------	----------

There were 22 *Speak Only* and 19 *Listen & Report* type of activities for participants to choose from. Looking at the table above, the participants preferred *Speak Only* to *Listen & Report* type of activities. Half of the participants only completed speaking activities; whereas others generally preferred a blend of speaking only and listen and report activities. The activities took on average 13 minutes to complete, which means that one whole lesson can be completed in about one and a half hours.

The recordings the participants sent for evaluation varied in length. The average length of recordings was 01:44. The shortest recording was 13 seconds and the lengthiest was almost six and a half minutes. Looking at total time spent on the program and average time spent on activities, it is fair to say that *listen and report* type of activities took longer time to complete. Therefore, those who have completed only the speaking activities spent less time on activities than those who have completed both listening and speaking activities. As for how individual participants made use of the online support medium, Betty, with 12 *Speak Only* and 9 *Listen & Report* activities, completed the greatest number of activities. Carol, with only three *Speak Only* activities, and Monica, with only four *Speak Only*, made the least use of the online support. Since *Speak Only* were designed to foster fluency and the *Listen & Report* activities aimed at accuracy, Betty and Christine, with the highest completion rate, probably have benefited from the online support most, followed by Barbara and Emily.

The time a participant spent on activities on average also reflects individual differences. Hailey and Monica spent the least time on the program and their recordings were the shortest in length with below a minute on average. Carol, on the other hand, who has completed only 3 of the speaking activities, spent more time on the activities, because her recordings were much lengthier than the ones sent by Hailey and Monica. To sum up, there were variations with regards to how much and how well the participants made use of the online support. As activity types, the *Speak Only* tasks were the most popular activity type and took the least time to complete, whereas *integrated listening-speaking* activities were the least popular and took the longest to complete.

3.1.1. The reasons behind participants' task completion

Having portrayed the broad picture about participants' usage of the online support, the next step is looking into details. The activities were designed parallel to the course content so that the participants could revise, expand or preview the content. The table below shows the reasons why the participants did the activities.

Table 3.

Learning Logs about the Listen and Report Type of Activities

Lesson	No of Submissions	Revision	Previewing	Expansion
7	17	6	2	9
8	26	16	2	8
9	17	7	8	2
10	12	1	2	9
12	13	1	2	6
TOTAL	85	31	16	38

Looking at the reasons why participants did the activities, expansion appeared to be the top reason, with 44,7% of the activities being done to extend the learning that took place in the class. Revising course content is the second reason with 36,5%. Previewing, with 18,8%, was the third reason why participants did the activities. Looking closely at how the activities distributed with reference to those adopted from the book and those prepared by the researcher, participants generally used the activities prepared by the researcher for expansion purposes, with the exception of some done for either revision or previewing purposes. These activities were very closely tied to the content of the textbook, so the participants probably assumed that completing these activities would help them speak better in the classes or prepare them for the speaking exam. As for the activities from the

book, most speaking activities were done for revision purposes, expect for some challenging topics that were completed before the class. Listening activities from the textbook were generally done before the class, probably to get a gist of it before going to class. The participants generally complained about not understanding the recordings when they listened in the class, so some of the participants might have listened to the recordings before the class, so that they would not experience difficulties when listening to the recordings in the class.

3.1.2. Findings from learning logs about the Listen and Report type of activities

Having portrayed the broad picture about participants' usage of the online support, the next step is looking into details. The activities were designed parallel to the course content so that the participants could revise, expand or preview the content. The table below shows the reasons why the participants did the activities.

Table 4.

Learning Logs about the Listen and Report Type of Activities

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Barbara	6		1'27"	14"33"'	01:55	00:50	03:13	More than once	pausing, rewinding and forwarding to catch points, key words
Betty	6	3	1'37"	10"47"'	01:10	00:39	02:14	More than once	jot down key words, pausing when taking notes
Christine	4	3	2'00"	17"27"'	01:40	00:29	02:21	More than once	Detailed word for words notes, pausing sometimes required
Emily	4		36"	09"13"'	00:55	00:21	01:09	More than once	Detailed word for words notes
	20	6	1'25"	13"00"'	01:25	------	------		

NOTE: 1. Verbal Response to Aural Input (12 in total), 2. Integrated Listening and Speaking Tasks (7 in total), 3. Time spent on the program, 4. Average time spent on activities, 5. Average Length of Recording, 6. Shortest Recording, 7. Lengthiest Recording, 8. Required times of listening to the text, 9. Type of preparation done

Activities that required participants to listen to a recording and answer comprehension question verbally were more popular than integrated listening-speaking activities. The participants spent the longest time completing integrated listening-speaking activities. These activities required participants to view a video or listen to a recording and take notes about the content. They, then, expected to use their notes with their own ideas to complete the task. Because of the requirements of these tasks, they took longer time to complete. Task difficulty and the time the participants had to devote to complete the task could be

the reason why some participants were opted to avoid integrated listening-speaking tasks. Betty and Christine did not only spend the most time on *listen & report* activities, but also completed more activities. They both did a well-blend of *verbal response to aural input* and *integrated listening-speaking* activities. Christine spent the longest time on the program and sent the lengthiest recordings. Emily with only 4 recordings to *verbal response to aural input* spent the least amount of time on the program and also sent the shortest recordings.

The time spent on the activities showed that different activities required different times of preparation and there were individual differences in the times and preparation required to complete the tasks. The longest time spent on an activity was 35 minutes, and the shortest time 5 minutes. There was a total of 26 recordings sent for feedback. The average length of recordings was approximately one and a half minute. The longest recording was 3:13 and the shortest was 0:21. 13 of the recordings were below a minute and 13 were more than a minute.

All participants listened to the recording more than one time and took notes about the recordings that sought specific answers from them. The notes were in various forms, ranging in specificity. Betty and Barbara preferred key words as notes, whereas Emily and Christine preferred detailed word for word note taking. All four noted the necessary information to answer the questions, rather than writing out everything verbatim. Betty needed to pause the recordings time to time or rewind / forward to catch the important points. Barbara could catch the important point in the run of the listening; however, needed to pause the recording when taking notes. Emily and Christine also mentioned the need to pause the recording from time to time to take notes. The notes helped the participants to answer the listening comprehension questions.

When preparing their verbal responses, participants had to engage in selective and intensive listening. Listening comprehension tasks that demanded selective listening could easily be done by noting down necessary information; however, for those activities that demanded intensive listening, detailed notes were necessary. Since note-taking is now regarded as an important academic skill, those who had no prior training or experience with note-taking thought note-taking was challenging and required them to either listen to the text more than one time or pause the recording from time to time to take notes.

3.1.3. Findings from learning logs about Speak Only activities

There were 22 *Speak Only* activities, prepared parallel to the course content. The participants sent voice recording on 14 of these activities. The number of submissions for each activity varied. Table 5 below displays the description of the activity, the participant, the length of submission, and the type of prior preparation done.

Table 5.

Learning Logs about Speak Only Activities

Description	Participant	Length	Type of Preparation done
There are eight questions, related to money, making a budget, living on a budget, living in a new city as a student, and ways to make money. The students can answer all the questions or just one depending on their needs.	Hailey	00:49	*No prior preparation needed*
	Barbara	04:38	*No prior preparation needed*
	Emily	02:32	*Brainstorm key words*
	Elizabeth	03:17	*No prior preparation needed*
	Carol	03:44	*Notes on each question to feel secure*
There are nine challenging situations for students in which students need to make ethical judgments and justify the reasons for their actions.	Barbara	05:42	*No prior preparation needed*
	Emily	02:21	*No prior preparation needed*
	Elizabeth	01:14	*No prior preparation needed*

	Carol	06:28	*No prior preparation needed*
There are situations for which students need to ask for information. The students tell what they would say in that situation.	Hailey	00:13	*No prior preparation needed*
	Barbara	01:07	*No prior preparation needed*
	Emily	00:15	*No prior preparation needed*
There are options to choose from. For each pair of choices, students decide on where they would prefer to go, and then state your reasons.	Christine	01:54	*No prior preparation needed*
	Emily	00:29	*No prior preparation needed*
	Betty	02:06	*Brainstorm key words*
	Barbara	04:45	*Brainstorm key words*
	Monica	01:12	*No prior preparation needed*
	Hailey	01:33	*No prior preparation needed*
Students will talk about a place they would love to visit one day, stating their reasons and what they would do there.	Christine	01:01	*No prior preparation needed*
	Carol	00:28	*No prior preparation needed*
	Betty	01:39	*No prior preparation needed*
	Barbara	02:42	*No prior preparation needed*
	Monica	00:51	*No prior preparation needed*
	Elizabeth	01:05	*No prior preparation needed*
	Hailey	00:56	*No prior preparation needed*
	Emily	00:16	*No prior preparation needed*
There are 12 adjectives and 12 nouns. Students need to match them and describe places using these adjective-noun combinations.	Christine	01:47	*Brainstorm some ideas.*
	Betty	03:23	*Written out whole script*
	Barbara	02:20	*Written out a story with all the words*
	Monica	00:26	*Brainstorm some ideas*
The task asks students to choose a hotel that best meets their expectations and needs. There is a video for each hotel and a written description. The video presents the overview of the hotel, whereas the description focuses on facilities, qualifications, guest comments, and other relevant details that would make a hotel preferable.	Emily	00:35	*Detailed reading and note-taking*
	Christine	01:36	*Detailed reading and note-taking*
	Cynthia	01:09	*Detailed reading and note-taking*
	Betty	01:08	*Detailed reading and note-taking*
	Barbara	00:39	*Detailed reading and note-taking*
	Monica	00:29	*Detailed reading and note-taking*
	Elizabeth	01:28	*Scanned and caught the main features*
	Hailey	01:00	*Scanned and caught the main features*
There are three headlines which need a story to become a news story. Prepare a short news story about each headline and record it.	Betty	01:31	*No prior preparation needed*
	Christine	01:11	*Written out the news and read it aloud.*
	Barbara	01:50	*No prior preparation needed*
There are different behavior patterns which can have different meanings in different cultures and they are expected to talk about the norms in Turkey.	Christine	01:16	*Brainstormed ideas, then start the task*
	Betty	01:14	*Written out the whole script*
	Elizabeth	01:28	*Written out a story with all the words*
Students will act as if they volunteered for a documentary exploring how people from different cultures react to different actions.	Christine	00:40	*Brainstormed some ideas*
	Betty	01:32	*No prior preparation needed*
	Elizabeth	03:49	*No prior preparation needed*
There are three videos about Hofstede's theory of cultures. Students watch the videos and explain Turkish culture.	Christine	00:52	*Note-taking, viewed the videos two times*
	Betty	01:22	*Note-taking, viewed the videos two times*
	Elizabeth	01:12	*Note-taking, paused the video at times*
Students need to express what they will do in different situations.	Betty	00:50	*No prior preparation needed*
	Christine	00:45	*No prior preparation needed*
	Elizabeth	00:39	*No prior preparation needed*
There are vocabulary items from the book about love affairs and students need to make sentences.	Betty	01:12	*Brainstormed ideas, then start the task*
	Christine	00:29	*Written out the whole script*
	Elizabeth	00:56	*Written out a story with all the words*
The students will make the Turkish version of a popular sitcom.	Betty	00:52	*Brainstorm ideas to complete the task*

Depending on the task types, participants employed different preparation strategies. One general strategy for vocabulary activities was to write out a script that included all of the targeted vocabulary items. The participants, then, read these aloud. The main purpose of preparing a script for the vocabulary activities was to create the context and fit all the words into that particular context. Hence, preparation for the task was contributed positively to task achievement.

There was only one activity in which participants had to gather data from reading texts to answer the given question. The participants employed two distinct strategies when

addressing the task. Two of them scanned through both texts and noted some key features that stood out. The remaining six read the two texts carefully and took notes on the parts that were relevant to the given task. Although all participants could easily relate the information given in the reading texts and develop coherent arguments to address the question, those who read the texts in detailed referred to more details when explaining their reasons. Compared to scanning, detailed reading appeared to be a better strategy when the task requires the synthesis of information from different sources.

Five of the participants completed the speaking activities with prompts, questions or situations without any prior preparation; however, three of the participants preferred to do some kind of preparation. One of them started out with writing out whole script and reading it aloud. Then, she started using brainstorming as a strategy and towards the end, she used mental rehearsal with key words to remind her. It is possible that at the beginning, she felt insecure about her speaking skills and relied on ready-made script to help her ease the recording process. The other stated she always did a mental rehearsal of what she would say before starting the recording. The third took notes on all questions before answering them. Her recordings were the lengthiest and the most detailed. She developed a coherent argument when addressing the questions and both her major points and minor points were relevant to the given task. The impact of prior preparation in the speech of these participants was apparent. These three participants made the least errors with reference to language use and vocabulary. The content of their speech stood out and it was very easy to follow the line of argument. Furthermore, responses of those who had done some prior preparations were more detailed and addressed the task more effectively than those who had not had any preparation prior to making their recordings.

Stating personal preferences, such as a place to visit or making justifications for their line of thought could be addressed without any prior preparation. The participants were familiar with the content from their courses, so they could address the questions without any prior preparation. Since the activities in the online support platform derived from course content, topic familiarity appeared as a factor influencing learners' choice to do or not to do any preparation.

There were also individual differences with reference to the need to do or not to do any prior preparations. Monica and Hailey did not engage in any preparation as a general strategy and their recordings were also the shortest. Betty preferred a mental rehearsal or brainstorming before starting the task. Her recordings were the lengthiest and included the most details. Barbara, on the other hand, started the task without any prior preparations, but still addressed the task effectively, providing sufficient details, justifications or examples. Christine preferred doing detailed preparations. She preferred key words, ideas or sentences on paper, because these made her feel secure. For some activities, key words or ideas as prompts were adequate to complete the activity, yet when she was preparing the news report, she wrote the whole story and read it aloud.

The learning logs showed that the participants could complete the independent speaking activities without any preparation. Vocabulary-based speaking activities and integrate speaking tasks required prior preparation. Whether there was any need for prior preparation or not was also addressed in the survey and the interviews. Five out of eight thought that the speaking activities could be completed without any preparation. The interview findings are also confirmatory to these findings. Christine said that "*the speaking exercises did not require any preparation. They could be completed without any prior preparation";*

however, she has also reported that she did some prior preparation to feel more secure when doing the recording. Betty referred to brainstorming as a strategy that she relied on and said, *"what I did was to read the instructions and started to think about what I would say. Then, I started recording my response"*. When asked to comment on how she prepared to the speaking activities, Carol said that, *"I took notes on a piece of paper before starting the recordings. The notes were my mind map and helped me to keep on track"*. Elizabeth referred to topic familiarity and importance of personalization as a factor affecting one's preference to do preparations. She said, "*speaking tasks were about me and my life and also we had some ideas about the topic from the class and had already talked about them, so I did them without any preparation."* Barbara said that the need to engage in prior preparations depended on the activity type and said that she could do most of the speaking activities without any preparation. She said she did not prepare for the activities with prompts or discussion questions or situations. However, she said "*for some activities, I did prepare some notes, because they required me to use specific vocabulary when completing the activities*."

To sum up, speaking activities, except for those which focus on vocabulary development or a specific genre, did not require any preparation. However, engaging in prior preparation helps for a better content and language use. Brainstorming and mental rehearsal are the two main strategies the participants relied on when preparing for the independent speaking activities. For the activities with an emphasis on vocabulary development, most participants had to write out a script before completing the task. Those who had not done any prior preparation could not successfully fulfill the requirements of the task. For integrated speaking tasks, participants needed to engage in intensive listening and rigorous note taking, which they thought demanding. That is probably one of the reasons why these activities were not preferred by some participants and took the longest time to complete.

3.2. Results from the Post-Study Evaluation Survey and the Interviews

In order to support the findings from the researcher's field notes and participant's learning logs, participants were also asked to comment about their learning experience in the Post-Study Evaluation survey and in the semi-structured interviews. The statements in the survey were 5-point Likert-scale (1-Strongly disagree and 5. Strongly agree); however, for ease of presentation, participants' responses were classified under Disagree or Agree. Those who indicated positive opinion (a 4 or 5 on the Likert scale) were classified under Agree, whereas those who rated a negative or neutral opinion (a 1, 2 or 3 on the Likert scale) were classified under Disagree. Below table presents data about participants' opinions of the online support platform.

Table 6.

Opinions about the online support platform

DA=Disagree; A=Agree		**DA**	**A**
1)	I think the activities in the online support helped me to understand the content of oral communication course better.	1	7
2)	The online support changed my opinions about asynchronous computer mediated communication positively.	1	7
3)	One of the strengths of the online support was anywhere and anytime access.	1	7
4)	If the online support had been carried out as a supplemental model to the course in a computer lab, it would have been more beneficial for me.	5	3
5)	The online support helped me use my time more effectively.	8	0
6)	Online support can be a new way of developing one's oral communication	1	7

	skills.		
7)	The listening comprehension and speaking activities that were adopted from the course book were worthwhile in terms of revising the content of the course.	2	6
8)	Thanks to the online support, I was more prepared for the course.	3	5
9)	I think the online support on its own is enough to develop my speaking and listening comprehension skills.	8	0
10)	It was worthwhile to have many activities about the topics.	2	6
11)	Variety in speaking activity types helped me develop my weaker areas.	1	7
12)	If there were fewer activities, the online support would be more favorable.	5	3
13)	I think there was no need to include activities from the course book.	4	4
14)	I made more use activities prepared by the researcher.	4	4
15)	Giving the students choice and flexibility in the activities was worthwhile.	3	5
16)	For most speaking activities, I needed to make a preparation prior to completing the task.	5	3
17)	For most listening comprehension activities, listening to the recording for only one time suffice to complete the activity.	4	0
18)	I had difficulty understanding the recordings and other audio-visuals chosen in activities that were not from the course book.	2	2
19)	The activities in the online support were prepared taking into account the language skills of the students.	1	7
20)	Personalization of all the speaking tasks was boring.	6	2

The Post-Study Student Evaluation Survey consisted of statements which investigated participant's opinions regarding the impact (if any) of online support as a study tool, the design of the online support, the medium of delivery, the activities and how the participants addressed these activities. The first statement, which asked participants whether the activities in the online support helped them to understand the content or not, investigated the overall impact of online support as a supplementary model to the face-to-face course and was evaluated positively by the participants. Statement 6 (opinions about the online support as a new mean of developing oral communication skills) also supports the finding related to the overall impact of the online support as a study tool. Participants' responses to statements related to the design of the online support (statements 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15) also confirm this.

In the interviews, when talking about the strengths of the online support, the participants made reference to different uses of the online support platform. Elizabeth said that,

> "*the online program can be used as a study tool to both revise and preview class content. The students can study that day's topic when they get home, because they have just covered the content in class and talked about it; it would take less time to complete the activities*".

Similarly, Hailey used a personal anecdote when explaining how the online support fosters revision and said

> "*one day I was sick and I could not attend the class. I asked my friends what they did, and they told me about the lesson. When I checked the content on the online support, the same content was there. I could make up for that class from the online support."*

As for whether online support prepared them for the class, in the interviews, Emily said

> *"if you do all the activities of the lesson before coming to class, you have an idea about that lesson's content and don't need to worry about what to say again in the class".*

the variety in speaking activities and stated the variety helped them develop their weaker areas (statement 11). Barbara emphasized the importance of variety in developing their weaker areas and said that: *"there were six activities per lesson and each activity focused on a different aspect of the lesson. Some were related to vocabulary, others were about fluency. Doing all the activities helped me a lot."* Barbara emphasized the anytime and anywhere access when talking about the benefits of the program for her. She said

> "*the students can read books, but they cannot practice speaking outside class. Thanks to this online support, students have a chance to practice oral skills from the comfort of their homes"*.

The interview findings are further supported by participants' responses to the survey. Six out of eight thought the activities adopted from the course book were worthwhile in terms of revising the content of the course (statement 7). Five participants thought that the online support helped them to be more prepared to the course (statement 8). The variety in *Speak Only* activities helped participants to work on areas that needed improvement (statement 11) and both the activities adopted from the book and those prepared by the research was useful for revision, expansion and previewing (statements 13 & 14). The participants also agreed with the fact that the activities were at an appropriate level and giving them flexibility and freedom was favorable (statements 15 & 19).

Half the participants were content with activities adopted from the textbook, whereas the other half thought they were redundant. The interviews provide further support and elaborate on the findings from the survey. In the interviews, some of the participants mentioned the monotony and redundancy as their reason why they thought activities adopted from the book were not necessary, whereas other said these activities helped them to revise or preview the course content. In the interviews, Carol said

> "*the activities from the book allowed vocabulary recycle. The words we covered in class were also in the activities we did on the online support, so it helped long-term retention of this words*".

Monica said, "*sometimes you don't get a chance or don't want to speak in the class, you can always go and do the activities online*." Similarly, Emily, emphasizing the multi-media richness of the activities in the online support, said

> *"my peers who haven't looked at the online support properly say the activities are the same as the one in the book, but they are not. There are videos, pictures, and other recordings. You've really put a lot of effort into this. In the class, we speak about the topics in the book, but on the online support, we watch videos, listen to recordings."*

Hailey reflects the opinions of those who find the activities from the book redundant in the following excerpt.

> "*we cover the topics in the class, then we go to the online support for practice, but there we see the same activities that we had already covered in the class. I think the activities from the book were redundant and demotivating."*

This is further supported by Barbara who said "*the activities from the book were really boring. They were useful and necessary, I agree, because it is an online support; but the book is dull, when we see it again online, it becomes monotonous*".

As for participants' responses to statement 14, similar concerns differentiated the responses. Half of the participants who considered activities from the book monotonous

thought they had more use of the activities prepared by the researcher, because these helped them to extend the learning that takes place in the classroom, others thought the activities from the book and the ones prepared by the researcher were equally useful. Participants' responses to statement 12, which asked students whether fewer activities would make the online support more favorable, also showed that the participants who found the activities from the book redundant and monotonous thought fewer activities would make the online support more favorable, whereas those who thought the activities from the books helped them to revise the content, disagreed and thought number of activities was appropriate. More than half of the participants considered giving them choice and flexibility in the activities worthwhile, whereas three disagreed (statement 15). As for whether it was worthwhile to have several activities on different topics, almost all, except for two, thought the number of activities were reasonable (statement 10).

To sum up, the responses show that the participants evaluated the online support positively, and believed it was useful with reference to preparing them for the course, reviewing and revising the content and realizing their weaknesses. Thus, the participants' overall learning experience with the online support can be regarded positive.

4. Discussion

This study explored how candidate English teacher made use of an online support platform for developing oral communication skills. Online support consisted of *Speak Only* and *Listen and Report* type activities. For each lesson, there were six activities parallel to the course content and the candidate teachers were expected to send the researcher an audio-recording as their response to the given task. Some activities were adopted from the course book, whereas some were prepared originally by the researcher to expand on the course content. The participants worked on their own pace and time to complete the activities. The detailed analysis of how the participants made use of the program showed that there are individual differences with reference to commitment, time spend on the program and completion of tasks available on the platform. These eight participants showed enthusiasm and strong devotion to fulfill the requirements of the online platform. Completion of activities was entirely on voluntary basis and the eight participants clearly made use of the platform for their own sake and personal growth. The devotion and enthusiasm can be explained by self-determination theory. The participants displayed a good example of the importance of motivation, especially intrinsic motivation in learning. The findings of the study showed that the participants generally preferred Speak Only activities to Listen & Report activities.

Listen & Report activities were more demanding and time consuming. Students needed to work on audial, audio-visual or visual material to complete the task. Compared to Speak Only activities, these activities fostered accuracy and heavily depended on one's listening skills and strategies. These tasks required note-taking, synthesizing and analyzing, which are high cognitive skills that need training. The participants expressed their stagger when doing these activities. Listening to a recording and answering comprehension questions were generally considered easier that integrated speaking-listening activities and task achievement in these activities were slightly better compared to integrated tasks.

Speak only activities were designed to foster candidate teacher's fluency in the foreign language, so their preference also highlights their interest to develop their fluency in the target language. Candidate teachers have scarce practice opportunities outside the class, so

the online support platform created an outside class environment for them to practice their speaking skills. Since the content was familiar to them from the course, the Speak Only activities were means for further practice, which could gradually lead to automatization. As also emphasized by DeKeyser (2007), extensive practice in target language fosters automatization and learners have the chance to transform declarative knowledge to procedural knowledge. Hence, the Speak Only activities promoted automatization and fluency as expected. Another interesting finding of the study was the need for preparation before completing tasks.

Research on speaking has proved the importance of preparation time on task achievement (e.g., Foster and Shekan, 1996; Koga, 2010; Liu, 2006; Mak, 2011; Subasi, 2010; Subekti, 2018). Even though the participants generally preferred to speak impromptu without any preparations, the study also showed that prior mental preparation had an impact on the overall success in task achievement, especially with reference to content, organization and language use. The ones who had some preparations before speaking could also produce longer stretches of talk with few language mistakes. In other words, prior mental or written preparations before speaking leads to a rise in quality and quantity in language production. Earlier studies on asynchronous computer-mediated oral communication also showed that asynchronous mode of interaction, in which the pressure of real time conceptualization, formulation and articulation is annihilated, leads to a growth in the quality and quantity of oral production in the foreign language (Charle Poza, 2005; Hamzaoğlu & Koçoğlu, 2016; Kirkgöz, 2011; Rosen, 2009). Therefore, it is fair to conclude that engaging students in some sort of mental preparation before the task is also necessary in online support platforms. This mental preparation could be in the form of brainstorming before doing the actual task or giving prompts to the students to help them generate ideas. Looking from a broad angle of how people speak, helping learners with conceptualization and formulation may lead to better performance. Since the participants of this study fed from face-to-face lessons in terms of content and ideas, the priority was given to extent learning outside the class without providing further language input or assistance. However, the importance of preparation in task achievement also showed that every activity on its own requires assistance to the students, especially in conceptualization and formulation stages of speech production. Therefore, in further implementations of the platform, language assistance could also be included in activity design.

Looking at the reasons why the participants used the online support, it is fair to conclude that the online support program was used as a study tool either to review or expand the learning in the classroom. Although previewing content prior to the lesson was also one of the goals of the online support platform to prepare the learners to the content, previewing was not favored as much as review or expansion by the participants. The participants were formally assessed on the content to fulfil the requirements of the course, so working on the activities in the online platform may have also prepared them for the speaking tests that they took. The impact of online support program on individual test performance was not a matter of interest; however, the participants mentioned in the interviews that practicing speaking outside the classroom also prepared for the test. Therefore, the online support platform seems to best function as a study tool for learners. Because they received feedback on their performance, they could also see their weaknesses and worked on those areas for improvement.

The findings of the study are confirmatory with earlier research on asynchronous computer-mediated tools on oral communication tools. Similar to the findings of Charle

Poza (2005) and Hamzaoğlu and Koçoğlu, (2016), the quality and the quantity of oral production in the foreign language increased. As was also emphasized by Yao (2007), in contexts where the target language is a foreign language, the online support platform was an excellent resource for outside class practice of oral communication skills. Especially the findings from interviews and the survey showed that completing activities on the online support fostered participants' self-confidence and increased their motivation to speak in the foreign language. The online support with its different study modes also created individualized learning opportunities for students. Since the students could complete as many activities as they want, they have also reported lower speaking anxiety. Similar results were fielded in studies of Hamzaoğlu and Koçoğlu (2016), Korucu-Kis and Sanal, (2020), Wang (2006) and Yao (2007) who have also found that working on asynchronous computer-mediated communication activities leads to increased motivation and self-confidence and lower anxiety levels. The perceived usefulness and benefits of asynchronous computer mediated communication on students' oral communication skills were also highlighted in the studies of Charle Poza (2005), Hamzaoğlu and Koçoğlu (2016), Korucu-Kis and Sanal (2020), McIntosh, Braul, and Chao (2003), and Wang (2006). As also discussed in Başöz and Erten (2019), lack of motivation and low self-confidence may lead to unwillingness to communicate; so, the online support may contribute positively to face-to-face lessons, especially for those who are less willing to communication. Furthermore, the online support platform was evaluated as a learner-friendly learning environment by the participants, mainly because the activities encouraged students to employ different strategies when preparing for the tasks. The activities have also promoted self-awareness, self-evaluation and correction of oral production as participants were allowed to take as much time as they wish for brainstorming and preparation. This, in turn, as also found in the study of Sun (2009), took away the pressure of time in responding and led to higher levels of self-confidence. To sum up, the findings of this study are not only confirmatory and parallel with earlier studies, but also add new insights into the role of asynchronous computer-mediated communication tools in developing oral communication skill.

As for the implications derived from the study, it is fair to say that the asynchronous computer-mediated speaking and listening activities can foster language learners' oral communication skills if the activities are designed taking into account the needs of the students. Variety and freedom of choice are two key aspects of successfully working online support platforms. Variety is important to address different learners and apply differentiated learning at a basic level. Since students have various activities to choose from, they can make more or less use of the program to overcome their weaknesses or sophisticate their strengths. Freedom is equally vital for successful implementation of the online support platform, because by completing the activities on the online platform, students take responsibility of their learning. This, in turn, triggers their autonomous learning skills. One of the predominant and comprehensive theories of motivation supports the importance of self-directed or self-regulated learning. Giving students' freedom is a way to promote self-directed learning. Therefore, the online support platform with its need-driven, learner-centered design can benefit other students who are willing to enhance their communication skills.

Although at the time of the study, the online support platform was designed as a means of providing extra learning opportunities for language learners, the pandemic conditions, and the restrictions it has brought out have changed our understanding of and implementation of mainstream education. Blended learning environments or supplementing mainstream education with computer-mediated learning communities were generally regarded

unnecessary and unpopular; however, the pandemic has once again proven that face-to-face conduct is not sufficient on its own to maximize learning. To make effective use of classroom time, out-of-class study should be encouraged and fostered in mainstream education. Contemporary models of blended or hybrid learning environments encourage flipped classroom procedures for maximizing the learning that takes place face-to-face. The online support platform can also be regarded as a potential novelty to support and develop student's oral communication skills, which is now regarded as the most neglected and least developed, yet the most needed language skill.

5. Conclusion

The online support platform, which was under a close investigation in this study, can be considered as a useful study tool for candidate teachers to practice oral communication skills outside the classroom. The online support platform could work as a stand-alone platform for learners to practice, as well as running parallel with face-to-face education. As a stand-alone platform, online support allows flexibility and freedom of access, where boundaries of the classroom disappear. Students have a chance to access the platform at anytime from anywhere and work on the activities on their own pace. As a stand-alone platform, the online support has the advantage of providing limitless preparation time for students, which might be encouraging for students who feel shy or anxious to speak in class. Another potential benefit of online support as a stand-alone platform is that teachers can also assess how much the students progressed from the beginning to the end by looking and analyzing learning logs. The learning logs provide invaluable information for the course instructor to fully evaluate the students' speaking skill development and progress. As a stand-alone platform, the online support can also be used for assessment purposed. Students' engagement with the activities allows both formative and summative assessment. Individual performance of a student on a particular activity can be graded for summative purposes. Likewise, the progress and development made from the beginning to the end can be used for formative assessment. To sum up, the online support platform has the potential to be both a teaching and assessment tool, especially in courses that are fully online.

The online support platform is also applicable for hybrid or blended learning environments. Adapting a flipped learning approach, the teacher could assign most of prior preparation to outside class and save time for other activities for the class conduct hours. As a hybrid model, the online support platform can extend the learning taking place in the classroom and offer more practice opportunities for the learning. Considering the flexible design of the online platform, not only can students regulate their own learning, but also their teachers could guide individual students to bring into open the best potential of them. The online support platform in hybrid teaching methods also has the potential to promote self-regulated learning and to foster autonomy. For a more controlled and regulated learning, the activities on the online platform can be assigned to students with strict due dates. Using the online platform as homework could also be considered for blending face-to-face instruction with online components.

To conclude, the online support platform has great potentials to assist learning. From the perspective of the students, the online platform requires self-regulation and devotion. No matter how it is implemented, it is important to guide the students in the process and explain the importance and potential benefits of the online support for their personal development. Running the online support without any regulations or on entirely voluntary

basis may not always yield the best results, so when deciding on the role of the online support in learning, it is important to evaluate its potentials and decide on the best model, taking into account the learners, their preferences and prior learning experiences, resources and time available for teaching and learning, as well as the preferences and perceptions of the instructor.

As for any research, the current study should also be evaluated with its limitations and he findings and the implications of this study should be considered within the specific context the research was conducted. The number of participants in this study was scarce and with a different group of learners, it is possible to arrive at different results. The researcher was not the course teacher, so it was not possible to lead students to the online support. Guidance is important, especially in initial stages of the implementation, when students discover the potentials of the platform and realize its usefulness or redundancy. Another limitation of the study is that the study was conducted with advanced level students of English. These students may be less reluctant to make use of supplementary activities because they are confident about their language abilities. Maybe the study could yield different results with less proficient learners. Finally, due to the nature of most qualitative studies and especially case studies focusing on lived experiences of participants, generalizations and assertions may be misleading; therefore, the findings of the study should be evaluated and analyzed within the specific context it was implemented.

Ethical Issues

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest in the publication of this paper.

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