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Mobile Technologies in Blended Learning Environments for Better Speaking Classes via Voki

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Abstract

With their growing popularity, mobile technologies can be seen as having the capacity to enhance language learning by offering learners a flexible and dynamic learning environment that is not limited by time or location. The main objective of this study is to explore the potential benefits and implications of incorporating mobile technologies as an integral part of blended learning in language classes. In this context, this study investigates the use of a well-known Web 2.0 tool, namely Voki, to explore its impacts on high school students' English speaking skill and their perceptions in blended learning environments. The findings indicate that Voki provides a fun and motivating platform for students to practice their speaking and can significantly increase their speaking skill. In addition, students who participated in English classes incorporating Voki found it beneficial, leading to positive outcomes in terms of their speaking performance. By purposefully integrating mobile technologies into language learning, educators can harness their full potential and enhance the learning experience for students. On the whole, integrating a Web 2.0 tool like Voki with its multimedia features can be a valuable educational resource to improve English speaking skills in blended language classes.

Keywords: Mobile Technologies, Blended Learning, Web 2.0, Voki, English, Speaking

Introduction

It is true that today mobile technologies are everywhere attracting the interest of people from different backgrounds and age groups. With their unique features such as providing access to any kind of information quickly and ease of use, people can quickly obtain information by using a smart device. This growing popularity has attracted the interest of researchers to facilitate their distinguished features for the purpose of learning objectives. Also, mobile technologies are claimed to have the potential to enhance language learning by providing learners with a flexible and dynamic learning environment that is not constrained by time or location (Pengnate, 2018). This has led to the increased use and investigation of mobile technologies, giving rise to the term Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL). MALL is a form of language learning that facilitates using personalized mobile devices, allowing learners to engage in language learning with no time and place boarders (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008). The definition of MALL emphasizes the facilitation of mobile phones or similar wireless-connected devices for teaching and learning objectives. Hence, it can be said that the internet and advancements in technology acted as a significant contributor in language instruction, leading to the popularization of the term MALL.

Mobile technologies have had a significant impact on language learning across various settings (Kukulska-Hulme, 2009). While they offer numerous benefits, such as enhancing language learning outcomes, there is also research highlighting potential drawbacks. Some applications and tools may be distractive, affecting students' attention, and students may not always hold a

favorable opinion of technology use (Cakir & Solak, 2014). However, technology integration in foreign language education has generally shown success (Golonka et al., 2014). In this context, there has been a growing acceptance of technology as a pedagogical tool and a valuable resource for learning due to ongoing and rapid technological advancements in language education (Khezrlou, 2019). To fully leverage the opportunities for language learning, research should focus on understanding the affordances of technology (Plonsky & Zeigler, 2016). Therefore, the utilization of mobile technologies and their potential value in language education remain significant areas for further investigation. Exploring the potential of mobile technologies as an integral part of blended learning in language classes is one of the objectives of this study, aiming to shed light on their potential benefits and implications.

Blended Learning

Within the scope of this study, blended learning is a concept that has been defined in various ways, incorporating different perspectives and assumptions (Stein & Graham, 2014). In one fundamental definition blended learning is described as the combination of face-to-face instruction with online methods, providing advantages for both teachers and students (Osguthorpe & Graham, 2003). Several studies have reported advantages of blended language learning (Banados, 2006; Al Zumor et al., 2013; Dangwal, 2017). Blended learning is commonly employed in educational environments to find a solution to the needs of today's learners, potentially enhancing student encouragement and commitment by benefiting from mobile technologies (Harun & Hussin, 2018; Ginaya et al., 2018). Its application in English language classes is found in various contexts, as exemplified by a study conducted by Yang and Kuo (2021). According to the mentioned study by Yang and Kuo (2021), the integration of blended learning in EFL classes can be beneficial for language learning as students tend to be more engaged in online interactions. Additionally, another study carried out by Ramalingam et al. (2022) supports the idea that technology-based instruction is a widely used and popular strategy within blended learning approaches for English language education settings.

Web 2.0

As part of mobile technologies, the term Web 2.0 refers to a category of tools that are utilized in conjunction with mobile technologies. Essentially, Web 2.0 platforms are online platforms that enable users to create, share, and modify information easily through the internet (Chugh & Ruhi, 2018). These tools foster collaboration, user-generated content, and interactive experiences, contributing to the dynamic nature of online interactions. There are various studies which have explored the facilitation of various Web 2.0 tools which investigate their effectiveness and potential benefits in educational contexts (Alsmari, 2019; Rosell-Aguilar, 2018). By the same token, what this study utilizes is VOKI which is an educational Web 2.0 tool that enables educators and students to create personalized talking characters, with which users have the flexibility to customize the character's appearance, ranging from historical figures to animals or even their own likeness.

Speaking Skill

In language learning, the fundamental skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing are essential for comprehensive language comprehension and effective communication. Speaking skills play a crucial role in using language in real-contexts and communication. Within the scope of learning a foreign language there are various efficient methods, one of which is to engage in real-life situations where the language is used, particularly for practicing speaking skills. By actively participating in communication and interacting with others, learners can enhance their speaking abilities. It is unfortunate that some students may neglect or struggle with developing their speaking skills because they are afraid of making mistakes or being criticized (Ev & Sarıçoban, 2023). Speaking skill is considered as the most essential skill in language learning because it involves actively communicating with other users of the target language, allowing learners to effectively express themselves and engage in meaningful interactions (Ur, 2012). Since learners may not have as many opportunities to be exposed to English out of school settings, it is pivotal to present them the opportunities to engage with the language in real-life

contexts beyond the learning environment. Making use of Web 2.0 tools can act as a supplementary tool to overcome the challenges associated with speaking in the foreign language

Voki

VOKI offers various recording options, including using a microphone or uploading an audio file. Teachers can utilize these features to present their materials or introduce topics, while students can use VOKI to practice skills that may be challenging to express in a traditional classroom setting. Furthermore, VOKI primarily focuses on using voices as the main tool, requiring users to record their voices or write sentences using phonetic transcription for the avatar to speak properly. Therefore, VOKI is particularly suitable for practicing speaking skills. It provides students with the convenience of practicing and improving their speaking ability anytime and anywhere, extending beyond the confines of the classroom. VOKI speaking avatars are considered to be supporting tools for the classroom with allowing various presentations and helping learners to improve their speaking online (İstifanoğlu, 2020).

However, there is research highlighting the negative impacts of Voki as well. Among the drawbacks Voki's causing distraction can be cited as creating and customizing the avatar can take too much time and students can lose track of the work (Schrock, 2012). In addition students can be challenged by continuing their work later because of possible technical issues that might occur (Esteban, 2013).

Significance of the Study and Research Questions

In many EFL contexts, speaking skills have been traditionally given less attention compared to other language skills which including reading and writing. The focus has often been on learning grammatical structures and vocabulary, neglecting the development of oral communication skills. As a result, learners may have limited opportunities to practice speaking outside the classroom, hindering their ability to become fluent and confident speakers. However, recognizing the importance of speaking skills, there is a growing emphasis on incorporating speaking activities and promoting communicative competence in language classrooms. In this sense, technology can play a crucial role in providing additional opportunities for speaking practice and creating a more interactive and communicative learning environment. By integrating technology into language learning, students can engage in speaking activities beyond the confines of the classroom and at their own convenience. Hence, this study aims to investigate high school students' views regarding the Web 2.0 tool Voki and how it impacts their speaking skills in blended learning settings. Thus, the research questions are formed as given below:

1. What are the effects of Voki-based activities on the speaking performance of students in English classes?
2. What are the opinions of students regarding Voki-based activities in English classes?

Participants

Purposive sampling method was used to select the participants who were 9th grade school students at a private school in Istanbul. 44 students in total participated in the study, with two classes each with 22 students. Both groups were in different campuses of the school. They were assumed to be equal as the school followed the same curriculum in all campuses and assigned students to their classes as mixed ability groups based on their exam results, they sat at the beginning of the term.

Research Design

This study can be classified as a mixed-method research approach. According to Creswell (2017), mixed-method research includes gathering both quantitative and qualitative data to comprehensively address research problems. By integrating and analyzing these data types, researchers can draw meaningful conclusions. The study employs post-test experimental design with a control group. Additionally, a semi-structured interview was conducted to gather the perspectives of the experimental group students regarding the Voki intervention.

Data Collection

Data for this study came from an adapted version of Cambridge KET speaking exam given to both

groups after the intervention. In addition, semi-structured interviews were carried out with five volunteering students. The questions were referred to another expert in the field to ensure reliability. The reliability score was found to be 90.2 for both experts. To ensure sufficient study time and increase the reliability of the results, the Voki intervention was administered during an eight-week period to the experimental group. The control group, however, received the conventional method recommended in the relevant training program, following the same process. By implementing the interventions in both groups, the study aimed to compare the effects of Voki (experimental group) with the conventional method (control group) in a balanced and equivalent manner. Two scorers evaluated the speaking exam and interrater reliability for both raters were found to be .081 at the significance level of .001.

Intervention

The intervention of Voki in students' English language classes aimed to offer them additional opportunities for speaking practice both inside and outside the school environment. The activities designed and presented through Voki were aligned with the curriculum and intended to support the improvement of students' speaking skills. The goal was to create a dynamic and interactive learning experience that actively engaged students with the language and topics taught in class. The intervention continued for eight weeks, during which students were encouraged to utilize the assigned Voki activities twice a week for two hours at school, based on their teacher's guidance and recommendations. The students were also encouraged to prepare their tasks after school as assignments. The teacher maintained a checklist to keep track of the students' performance and ensured that they actively participated in discussions and completed the assigned tasks related to the topics. The teachers provided positive feedback aiming to motivate and encourage further engagement from the students. A sample English lesson conducted via Voki is as follows:

As part of warm up activities, the teacher referred the students to the topic in Voki and uploaded her own voice before referring them to the discussion topic in Voki page. After dividing the students as pairs or groups of 3 or 4, students are asked to choose and decide on what aspect of the topic to discuss. The pairs or groups search and find the related materials according to the topic and prepare a list of the main points. Pairs or groups start presenting their chosen material and issue it on their own site. The rest of the pairs or groups share their ideas according to the presentations. After class, students are asked to record their voices and make a summary of their material and gives feedback.

An example of Voki avatars students used can be seen in Figure 1 below.

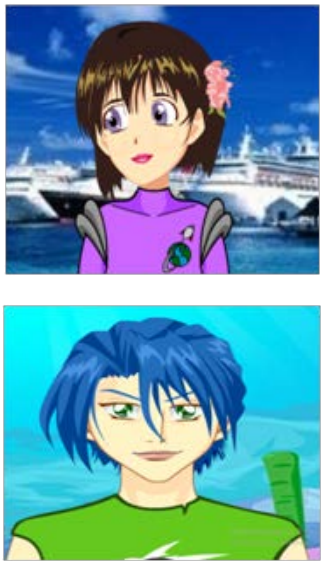

Figure 1 Some of the Avatars Students used

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using descriptive analysis techniques. The exam results of the participating students were evaluated and presented in tables. The students' responses were explored through interviews, and direct quotations from the interviews were included in the findings. To ensure confidentiality, the students' real names were replaced with codes such as S1 and S2 when reporting their remarks in the interviews.

Results

As mentioned before, both groups were considered to be homogenic because they were

assigned to their classes as mixed groups according to their exam results the school required them to take. The KET speaking results the students took after the intervention is provided below in Table 1.

Table 1 KET Speaking Results

KET Speaking Results					
Experimental	**sd**	**Control**	**Effect size**	**sd**	**p**
9.4	2.4	7.6	0.82	2.4	0

As revealed in Table 1, students in the experimental group outperformed control group in speaking with statistically significant results. The answers given in the interviews also highlighted that students had a high opinion of the intervention which allowed to form two themes; fun and motivating. This can be seen in some of the quotations as follows:

- S2 "I love voice-recording in Voki because I can be whatever I want and say whatever I want"
- S3 "It is so enjoyable to watch my friends' videos or prepare posters. Later, we got together and had a laugh"
- S1 "I look forward to the lessons with Voki and doing things with my friends there. I was afraid to speak before Voki"

On the whole, students suggested that Voki contributed to their speaking process and encouraged them to participate more.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study can be interpreted as the incorporation of Voki in English classes had a positive impact on students' speaking performance. Students who used Voki as part of their language learning activities reported benefiting from the tool, indicating that it contributed to their speaking skills development. The use of Voki provided students with opportunities for fun and motivating speaking practice, leading to improved performance in expressing themselves orally. The lessons did not differ in the subject matter but in the method so the difference can be attributed to the effect of Voki use both in and out of classroom environment. These results align with previous research that emphasizes the potential benefits of integrating new technology in educational contexts. Eppard et al. (2019) highlight that despite the challenges of adopting new technology, it can offer advantages such as enhanced learning mastery, collaboration, and critical thinking when integrated effectively. As for Voki, a study conducted by Eggleton (2012) demonstrated that the use of Voki had a positive impact on students' motivation and enthusiasm in delivering speeches. Prior to using Voki, students exhibited a lack of motivation. However, when given the opportunity to create their speeches using this digital tool, their motivation and enthusiasm increased significantly. This suggests that the interactive and creative nature of Voki positively influences students' engagement and interest in oral presentations or speeches. The effectiveness of Voki in improving English speaking has also been supported by many other studies in the literature (Kieu, 2021; Kuswoyo et al., 2022; Zargaryan, 2012). These findings highlight the positive impact of Voki as a supportive tool to practice language learning specifically in speaking.

Moreover, in the context of mobile technologies, the findings of this study are also aligned with research indicating the contributions of mobile technologies in language education. This is consistent with the study conducted by Agca and Özdemir (2013), which revealed that learners perceived technology as a helpful tool for their learning. Similarly, another study suggested that the integration of technology in English classes leads to increased student participation (Balula et al., 2020). These consistent results highlight the positive effect of technology integration on language learning outcomes and learner engagement. Indeed, the effectiveness of mobile language learning has been supported by numerous researches in the field. Research by Xu and Peng (2017) and Thornton and Houser (2005) confirms the positive outcomes of facilitating mobile technologies for educational goals in various settings. The efficacy of mobile learning has been demonstrated in diverse areas, such as vocabulary teaching and pronunciation (Lu, 2008; Ducate & Lomicka, 2009). These studies can serve as a proof for the efficiency of mobile technologies in supporting language learning across different language skills and areas of instruction. This is also true for blended learning environments. According to Osguthorpe and Graham (2003), blended education offers several benefits, including increased access to information and being cost-effective. Based on these advantages, it can be concluded that facilitating a Web 2.0 tool has the potential to support English

language education. Integrating a Web 2.0 tool within a blended learning approach can enhance language learning experiences by providing opportunities for interactive and collaborative learning, as well as facilitating access to a great range of language materials. This is expressed by Felix (2003) who suggests that students learning another language feel blended learning environments more convenient and they also have a high opinion of blended learning highlighting that blended learning supports learning.

It should be remembered that this study is conducted on a small scale, and caution should be exercised in making broad generalizations or setting high expectations based solely on its findings. Although the study suggests that mobile devices can potentially improve academic performance in language education, it is necessary to further enhance the impact of mobile learning programs by investigating their use in longitudinal studies in as many different settings and age groups as possible.

Overall, Voki, being a web 2.0 tool, is an engaging educational resource that students can benefit from while practicing speaking. It adds fun to the learning process with its various aspects while serving as an enjoyable and fun platform to practice speaking skills for students and increases their motivation when integrated with a sound instructional design and allowed students to practice out-of-school context as well.

In conclusion, it is essential to remember that the effectiveness of these tools lies not in the tools themselves, but in how they are integrated into the language learning program. Thoughtful integration and alignment of technology with instructional goals and strategies are essential to maximizing the advantageous use of technology in language education. By leveraging technology, learners can engage in meaningful and engaging speaking activities, leading to improved fluency, pronunciation, and overall communication skills.

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