

Research Article

ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ONLINE CHAT-BASED STRATEGY ON IRANIAN INTERMEDIATE EFL LEARNER'S SPEAKING ABILITY

***Zahra Masoumi, Morteza Khodabandehlou, Shahrokh Jahandar and Marjan Najafi**

Department of English Language, Faculty of Foreign Languages, Rodaki institute of higher education, Tonekabon, Iran

**Author for Correspondence*

ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to investigate the effectiveness of online chat-based strategy on Iranian Intermediate EFL Learner's speaking ability. For these purpose 100 learners of English at Shokouh language institute participated in this study. Having being homogenized by an OPT test, 40 learners were selected and they were randomly assigned into two groups, control and experimental. Then both groups sat for a pre-test, which was a speaking test. The purpose of this test was to measure the learner's initial subject knowledge of speaking ability. Then one group received treatment based on online chat-based strategy. However, the other group received no treatment. The treatment procedure took 10 sessions. Finally at the end of the course both groups sat for the post test of speaking ability. Then the statistical analysis was run through ANCOVA. It was explored from the study that learner's speaking ability improves more when they are provided with online chat-based strategy. However, this study provides a significant contribution in curriculum innovation and policy with respect to the learner's speaking ability development.

Key Words: *Online Chatting, Speaking Skills*

INTRODUCTION

When the Internet was not even born to the lay world and computer technology was only in its infancy, the acclaimed linguist, Halliday (1989) predicted it all too well when he said that the distinction between speech and writing was becoming blurred as a consequence of modern technology. The development of new technologies, widespread use of the global information network, and the growing number of its users has greatly promoted the teaching methods based on the Internet (Sopromadze, 2008). True it is that technology cannot replace traditional teaching approaches but today's educational system cannot grow and will not succeed without access to computers and the Internet (Kuo, 2008).

Ally (2008) defines online learning as the use of the Internet to access learning materials, to interact with the content, instructor, and other learners, to obtain support during the learning process in order to acquire knowledge, to construct personal meaning, and to grow from the learning experience. One potentially useful Internet activity for language students is chatting, that is, communicating in real time by typing or voicing a message into a computer so that it can immediately be read on other computer screens or heard by users, even in another part of the world. Some sites on the Internet are specifically intended for nonnative English speakers and provide opportunities for them to communicate in English (Kitao and Kitao, 2000; Basabe *et al.*, 2004).

Through chatting, learners of a language can communicate inexpensively and quickly with other learners or speakers of the target language all over the world. This communication can be either synchronous with all users logged on or chatting at the same time or asynchronous with a delayed message system such as electronic mail (Warschauer and Healey, 1998).

Hudson and Bruckman (2002) discovered some advantages of chatting in their study. They mentioned that during the regular semester, classroom interaction was largely teacher-oriented, despite the best effort of the teachers involved. Even though teachers initiated online conversations in the same way, the resulting interaction was student-driven and significantly more interactive than the classroom interaction.

Research Article

A number of computer mediated communication studies have uncovered similarities between text-based interactions via computer and face-to-face interactions (Pellettieri, 2000, Tudini, 2003; Smith, 2003). Also, Tudini (2003) found that learner's chat discourse displays features that according to selected indicators of spoken discourse bring it closer to the oral than written medium. These indicators include repairs and incorporation of target forms, variety of speech acts, discourse markers, and feedback tokens. Online chat rooms can be incorporated into the course syllabi of foreign language courses as a regular homework assignment to encourage students to use the target language actively and frequently. By scheduling regular visits to a foreign language specific chat room, the foreign language instructor can greatly increase the amount of time students spend communicating in the target language (Rankin, 1997). Active participants in English learning chat rooms can increase their vocabulary and syntactic knowledge as well as their self-efficacy before using writing and speaking skills in other higher-risk situations such as testing or conversation (Martin, 2008).

Alongside the merits of chat rooms described so far, a multitude of other studies demonstrate their various advantages in EL T. Some such examples are reported below:

- Offering the learner the chance to produce language which is somewhere between everyday spoken English and the language in its written form (Simpson, 2008).
- Allowing learners to interact in an authentic context with native speakers (Skinner and Austin, 1999) without being restricted by location (Wilson and Whitelock, 1998).
- Enabling communication to take place in real time (Mynard, 2002).
- Promoting active involvement and being enticed into conversing with others yet being able to withdraw when learners feel like it (Sullivan and Pratt, 1996).
- Encouraging collaborative learning and teamwork among language learners and helping them to develop their group skills (Su, 2007).
- Providing opportunities for negotiation of meaning, thus promoting language acquisition (Hegelheimer and Chapelle, 2000).

The effectiveness of an online course definitely requires from a teacher more than only technical knowledge, but a reflective and innovative attitude that prioritizes the learning process focused on the student (Queiroz and Mustaro, 2003). Accordingly, in network-based language learning, teacher training at universities is essential so that those learning environments can actually be integrated in the classroom and used by as many EFL teachers as possible (Heidelberg, 2007).

Purpose of the Study

As it is said earlier, the present study is an attempt to ameliorate the pedagogical and practical implication and application of the effectiveness of online chat-based strategy on Iranian Intermediate EFL Learner's speaking ability. However the study tries to answer the following question that might yield message to curriculum innovation and policy.

Does online chat-based strategy have effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learner's speaking ability?

The present research can be useful for material designer and material selection and preparation, which might be a paradigm shift in curriculum innovation.

Research Question

In order to tackle the problem of the research in a much consolidated way, a research question has been formulated as follows:

- Does online chat-based strategy have effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learner's speaking ability?

Research Hypothesis

In order to answer the research question, the following null hypothesis has been formulated:

H₀: Online chat-based strategy does not have any effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learner's speaking ability.

Research Article

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Introduction

This part introduces the method of the study. More specifically it details the design of the study, the subjects who participated in the experiment, the instrumentation, procedures and statistical analysis.

Design of the Study

The design of the study was quasi-experimental design which is a pre-post test design.

Participants

The participants of the study were 100 intermediate students both male and female. After administration of OPT test, 40 intermediate students whose scores were between 32 and 79 were selected. They were divided into two groups, control and experimental. Both groups sat for the pre-test of speaking ability to take their initial knowledge of speaking ability. Then one group received treatment based on online chat-based strategy. However, the other group received no treatment and finally both groups sat for the post-test, which was the same speaking test.

Materials

The following materials were employed throughout the course of this study. An OPT test was used for the purpose of homogenizing the proficiency of the learners. Another type of the test, which was used for the purpose of the study, was speaking test. This type of test was used as a pre-test to measure the learner's initial subject knowledge in two groups. And finally the same speaking test was used as a post-test based on which the efficacy of online chat-based strategy was determined.

Procedure

The procedure through which this study is conducted includes different stages of application which embraces the selection of the subjects, instruments and materials. Basically three types of test were used in this study, an OPT test which was used to make the subjects homogeneous. Having being homogenized, they were randomly assigned into two groups, control and experimental. Both groups sat for a pre-test of speaking in order to take their initial subject knowledge of speaking ability. The test consisted of 7 minutes of discussion or face-to-face interaction. They randomly chose a topic for the speaking test from their textbook such as all about you, my favorite people and celebrities, routines, and my free time and hobbies. The speaking test scores were based on the language points followed in the course outline of English 1.

The control group received no treatment and approached the traditional way of teaching speaking. However the experimental group received treatment based on online chat-based strategy. Online chatting was a tool to allow the participants to type the messages in a chat box. The conversations from the chat box were saved automatically as chat scripts. Then, they were separated into two parts: one part was the number of sentences and the second part was the number of correct sentences that followed the language points of English in the textbook.

The chatting topics were from the textbook as well as the pre- and post speaking tests. They were assigned to chat for two and three times (50 minutes per time) for each topic in ten weeks without any absence. Finally both groups sat for the post-test of speaking test to assess the effectiveness on the specific treatment program.

Statistical Analysis

The data was analyzed through SPSS an ANCOVA will be powerful enough to handle the significant of the study if there is any.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

As it is noted, the present research aimed at ameliorating the status of the effectiveness of online chat-based strategy on Iranian Intermediate EFL Learner's speaking ability. So this section enjoys two types of statistics: descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics are sets of brief descriptive coefficients that summarize a given data set, which can either be a representation of the entire population

Research Article

or a sample; besides the mean and standard deviation (SD).

Inferential statistics are used to make generalizations from a sample to a population prone approach. Inferential statistics have two prone approaches. First sampling must be conducted to be representative of the underlying population. Second the procedures must be capable of drawing correct conclusions about the population.

Descriptive Statistics

Before starting the treatment, an OPT Test was employed to establish the homogeneity of the subjects in terms of language proficiency. It consisted of three parts: structure, vocabulary and comprehension. Initially, 100 male and female students participated in the study.

After administration of OPT tests 40 intermediate students whose scores were between 32 and 79 were selected. Then they were randomly classified into two groups, one of them was considered as the control group and the other one as experimental group.

A descriptive statistical analysis was run on the collected data of OPT test. The results are shown in the Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for the proficiency test

N	Mean	SD
100	42	1

Table 2 shows the number of students participated in pretest and posttest. It should be noted that no one excluded.

Table 2: Number of students participated in pre-test and post-test Cases

	Case				Total	
	Included		Excluded		N	Percent
	N	Percent	N	Percent		
Pretest*group	40	100%	0	0%	40	100%
Pretest*group	40	100%	0	0%	40	100%

The descriptive statistical analysis done on the collected data of pre-test and post- test is shown in table 3.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics for the pre-test and post-test

Group		pre-test	post-test
Experimental	Mean	53.15	71.6
	N	20	20
	SD	9.83	9.78
Control	Mean	56.95	55.85
	N	20	20
	SD	9.7	9.63
Total	Mean	55.05	63.72
	N	40	40
	SD	11.52	12.46

Research Article

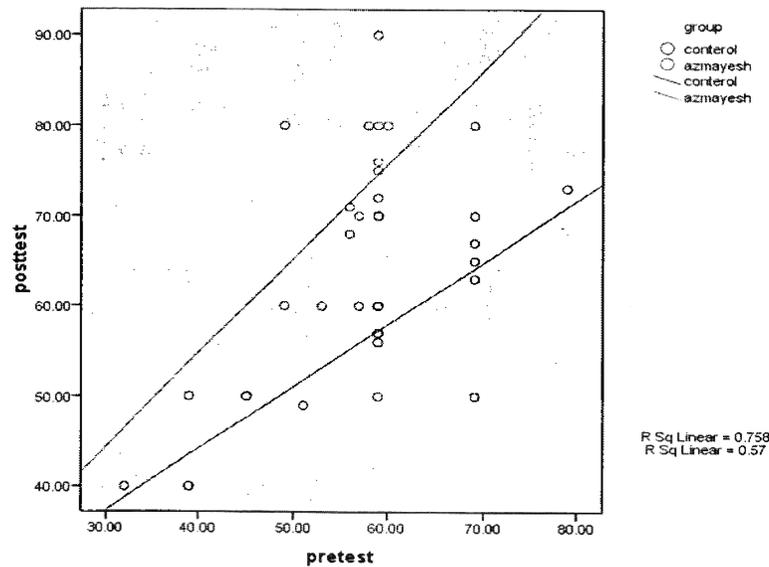
Inferential Statistics

Analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) is particularly appropriate when subjects in two or more groups are found to differ on a pretest or other initial variable. In this case the effects of the pretest and/or other relevant variables are partialled out, and the resulting adjusted means of the posttest scores are compared. Through ANCOVA differences in the initial status of the groups can be removed statistically so that they can be compared as though their initial status had been equated.

In this study, in order to investigate the research hypothesis “Online chat-based strategy has no effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learner’s speaking ability “, the differences between mean scores of pretest and posttest of control and experimental group were calculated through ANCOVA. Before running ANCOVA, the following hypothesis was examined:

1. Linear relationship between variables (pre-test and post-test)
2. Equality of variances
3. Homogeneity of regression

1 .The linear relationship between pre-test and post-test was examined through spread plot, graph 1



Graph 1: Speaking ability in control and experimental group from pre-test to post-test

As graph 1 shows because the regression lines are parallel, so there is a linear relationship between the two variables pretest and post-test. It means that the relationship between the two variables in both groups is the same.

2. In order to examine the quality of variances, Levin’s Test of Equality of Error Variances was run. It tests the null hypothesis that the error variance of the dependent variable is equal across groups.

Table 4: Levine’s Test of Equality of Error Variances

F	Df1	Df2	Sig
2,38	1	38	0.13

According to table 4, the calculated F is not meaningful. So there is equality of variances and ANCOVA can be run.

3. The data in table 5 are related to test of homogeneity of regression .Before running covariance, between subject’s effects of pre-test-group should be investigated.

Research Article

Table 5: Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Source	Type III sum of squares	df	Mean squares	F	Sig
Corrected Model	4853.610 ^a	3	1617.87	48.2	.00
Group (a)	2.94	1	2.94	.09	.77
Pretest (b)	2134.25	1	2134.25	63.58	.00
Group* Pretest(a*b)	90.75	1	90.75	2.7	.11
Error	1208.36	36	33.56		
Total	168497	40			

As table 5, shows between —subjects effect (a’b) is not significance (F= .09, sig=.76). It shows that the data supports homogeneity of regression .Therefore, covariance should be run just for between-subjects effect of post-test and group to show whether mean scores of two groups are the same or not. The results of this analysis are demonstrated in table 4.

Table 6: Mean and corrected Mean of speaking ability

Source	Post-test		Corrected Mean	
	M	SD	M	SE
Experimental	85.55	9.63	55.520a	1.32
Control	71.6	9.78	71.930a	1.32

Table 6 shows the corrected means of dependent variable speaking ability performance. The data demonstrate that the means of experimental group are upper than control group.

Sum of analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) of speaking ability performance in experimental and control group after eliminating between-subjects effect is demonstrated in table 7.

Table 7: Sum of Analysis of covariance

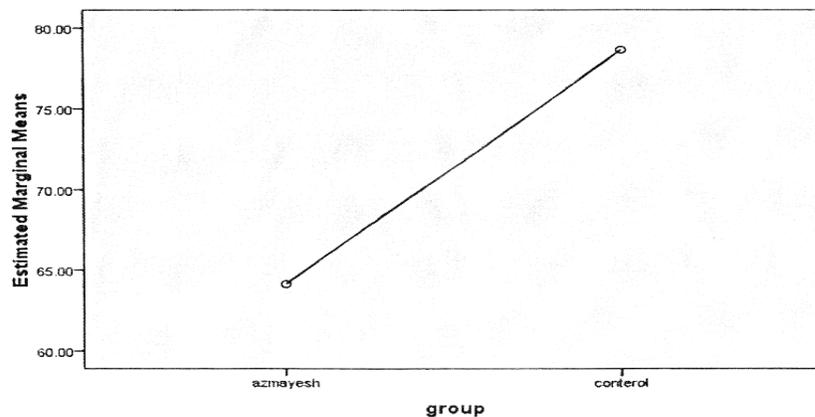
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	4762.860a	2	2381.43	67.82	.00	.78
Pre-test	2282.23	1	2282.23	65	.00	.63
Group	2687.44	1	2687.44	76.54	.00	.67
Error	1299.11	37	35.11			
Total	168497	40				

As it can be seen, the corrected model (f .00, F—67.82) is statistically significant.

The results (F76.54, f.000, Eta=.67) show that there is a difference between two groups .It means that there is a significant difference between experimental and control group. As a result, the null hypothesis “Online chat-based strategy has no effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learner’s speaking” was rejected, so it can be concluded that online chat-based strategy has an effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learner’s speaking ability.

Research Article

To clarify the result, the data will be demonstrated in graph 2. The vertical axis represents the post-test and the horizontal axis represents experimental and control group.



Graph 2: Means of post-test of experimental and control group

The graph shows that there is a significant difference between speaking ability performance of experimental and control group. It clearly shows that the experimental group who received treatment on the basis of online chat-based strategy had better scores on post-test.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine whether using online chat had any significant impact on the oral fluency of Iranian EFL learners. Since at the outset of the study the participants were homogenized with respect to both general proficiency and oral fluency, the significant difference observed between the two groups in terms of their oral fluency at the end of the treatment period could be logically attributed to the impact of online chatting. Therefore, the results of this study indicated that online chatting, including both voice and text chatting, had a significant impact on the oral fluency of the sample of the Iranian EFL learners who participated in this study.

The researchers clearly observed that the learners in the experimental group were actively involved in expressing themselves freely in the chat rooms without the very common anxiety and fear of making mistakes; this sense of security also motivated them to accomplish more as they went along during the course.

Using Internet chat rooms for improving student's fluency is also of great importance due to the opportunity that a chat room naturally gives to its users by combining speaking and writing (more specifically typing) so that all of them can express themselves and type their ideas at the same time without any interference with and interruptions of others' speech. This is not possible in real classes since one cannot understand anything if all learners start talking and saying their ideas. A very prominent advantage of chat room worth mentioning is that whatever is typed there can be saved on disks and further be used by the students to improve their learning and by the teacher to evaluate students and their progress and design better activities and tasks for their improvement.

The bottom-line is that the establishment of the worldwide web in the last two decades marks a very important revolution in the history of human communication. In the third millennium, few people would contest that English is an essential world language today and that the Internet has become a part of modern life. The researchers hope that the results obtained from this study would serve beneficial for all those involved in language learning/teaching to help Iranian EFL learners improve a much-coveted goal, i.e. the fluency of their speaking.

Research Article

REFERENCES

- Almeida d'Eca T (2003)**. The use of chat in EFL/ESL. *TESL Journal* **7**(1). Retrieved from <http://www.malhatlantica.pt/teresadeca/papers/evora2002/chat-and-efl.htm>
- Bohlke O (2003)**. A comparison of student participation levels by group size and language stages during chat room and face-to-face discussions in German. *CALICO Journal* **21**(1) 67-87.
- Chen YH (2005)**. Computer mediated communication: The use of CMC to develop EFL learner's communicative competence. *Asian EFL Journal* **7**(1) 167-182.
- Compton L (2004)**. From chatting to oral fluency: Using chat to improve self-confidence and increase willingness to communicate. *Journal for Teachers of English* **4**(1) 547- 558.
- Kitade K (2000)**. L2 learner's discourse and SLA theories in CMC: Collaborative interaction in internet chat. *Journal of Computer Assisted Language Learning* **13**(2) 143-166.
- Lai C and Zhao Y (2006)**. Noticing and text-based chat. *Language Learning and Technology Journal* **10**(3) 102-120.
- Lee L (2002)**. Enhancing learner's communication skills through synchronous electronic interaction and task-based instruction. *Foreign Language Annals* **35**(1) 16-24.
- Park JY and Bonk JC (2007)**. Is online life a breeze? A case study for promoting synchronous learning in a blended graduate course. *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching* **3**(3) 307-323.
- Sangarun P (2003)**. The effects of source of pre-task planning on Thai EFL learner's oral performance. School of English, Suranaree University of Technology. SUT2-203-45- 12-40.
- Schultz RA (2003)**. The effectiveness of online synchronous discussion. *Informing Science* **6** 547-558.
- Seferoglu G (2007)**. The effects of synchronous computer mediated communication (SCMC) on English language learner's oral proficiency development. Paper presented at The 6th WSEAS International Conference on E-ACTIVITIES, Tenerife, Spain.
- Shekary M and Tahririan HM (2006)**. Negotiation of meaning noticing in text-based online chat. *The Modern language Journal* **90**(4) 557-573.
- Spencer HD and Hiltz SR (2002)**. A field study of use of synchronous chat in online courses. Proceedings of 36th, Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences. IEEE Computer Society 03 IEEE0-7695-1874-5, 1-10.
- Tudini V (2007)**. Negotiation and intercultural learning in Italian native speaker chat rooms. *The Modern Language Journal* **91**(4) 577 - 601.
- Usaha S (2000)**. *Effectiveness of Suranaree University's English placement test*. School of English, Unpublished SUT project, Suranaree University of Technology. SUT2- 203-40-20-21.
- Volle LM (2005)**. Analyzing oral skills in voice e-mail and online interviews. *Journal of Language Learning and Technology* **19**(3) 146-163.
- Wannarak A (2001)**. An investigation of communication strategies: A case study of EST students at Suranaree University of Technology, Unpublished SUT project, Suranaree University of Technology. SUT2-203-43-12-19.
- Xie T (2002)**. Using Internet relay chat in teaching Chinese. *CALICO Journal* **19**(3) 513- 524.
- Yuan Y (2003)**. The use of chat rooms in an ESL setting. *Journal of Computers and Composition* **20** 194-206. Retrieved from www.sciencedirect.com.