University Students' Perceptions of Using a Communication Platform for English Speaking Courses

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Abstract
Attributable to the fast pace of globalization, demand for effective English speaking skills has been growing rapidly. It is clear that a greater enhancement of the communication skills of university students is a critical mission of English educators. At the current time, an array of communication platforms is being used across different education levels. The purpose of the study was to explore university students' perceptions of the pros and cons of using a chat-based communication platform for English speaking courses. The target population for this study was students at a selected university in northern Taiwan. This study employed a qualitative approach. Specifically, interviews were conducted to gather qualitative data to gain insight into the perceptions of the participating students. Results of the study revealed that students are generally satisfied with the technology for educational purposes due to its accessibility and practicality. However, students pointed out several limitations that prevented the software from being an ideal substitute for actual classroom meetings, especially for speaking courses. It is concluded that despite the usefulness of chat-based communication platforms for online classes, students in speaking courses have a noticeable preference for direct interactions with their classmates and instructor in person. Recommendations are made for instructors of speaking courses to conduct an optimal online learning environment that best resembles the characteristics of actual face-to-face interactions.

Keywords: English Speaking, EFL (English as a Foreign Language) Teaching, Online Teaching, Communication Platform, Course Design

Introduction

Attributable to the fast pace of globalization, demand for effective English speaking skills has been growing rapidly. It is clear that a greater enhancement of the communication skills of university students is a critical mission of English educators. Likewise, a greater understanding of the practical needs of students in the modern era is a vital task for English teachers (Philominraj, Bertilla, Ramírez-Muñoz, & Fuentealba, 2018). Simply achieving adequate scores on English proficiency exams is no longer sufficient for students in the 21st century. There is an important shift from general English to practical English. Of the four facets of English skills, namely reading, listening, writing, and speaking, instructions in speaking have not been sufficiently provided to Taiwanese university students. It could even be said that speaking is easily one of the most lacking aspects of Taiwanese university students' English competency. In reality, however, it is essential for students to continuously acquire and improve English speaking skills to carry out successful international communication (Nickerson, Gerritsen, & Meurs, 2005).

The Ministry of Education in Taiwan has been actively promoting the use of digital technology on university campuses. Its most recently released objectives clearly stated the importance of providing advanced digital learning environments and further implementing digital learning (Ministry of Education, 2022). In the same press release, it was stated that the expansion of English language proficiency testing would be implemented. In spite of this, simply obtaining adequate scores on English proficiency tests is no longer sufficient for students in the 21st century. An important shift from general English to practical English is taking place. Of the four facets of English skills, namely listening, reading, writing, and speaking, instructions in speaking have not been sufficiently provided to Taiwanese university students. In short, speaking skills is easily one of the most lacking aspects of Taiwanese university students' English competency. This presents a unique challenge to English educators in Taiwan to teach speaking courses online.

The digital era paved the way for students to instantly access any information. Students' learning preferences have changed with the digital revolution (Noskova, Pavlova, & Yakovleva, 2021). The online environment is an enormously vast learning platform where information is readily available virtually anywhere on the Internet. As such, knowledge and skills taught at the university level must be able to reflect real-world applications to accommodate students' practical learning needs. Foreign language teaching in higher education must include interpersonal problem-solving abilities real-world communication skills that can be applied to the global workforce.

A study that examined connectivist theory in English language learning showed that being involved in dialogue and collaborative learning increases connectivist knowledge, negotiation, and reflection (Sozudogru, Altinay, Dagli, Altinay, & Altinay, 2019). It was also stated that online communication tools can be used as an effective supplementary material for learning. That study concluded that a new way of language learning becomes essential for learning with online social networking tools in higher education.

In a recent study, Ilin (2022) stated that educational technology, now a staple of contemporary classrooms, offers many benefits, including access to knowledge, mobility, multiple means of engagement, accessibility, distance learning, and the ability to connect in unprecedented ways. However, it was pointed out that few studies explore the preferences of

the learners. It was further stated that without assessment of the user preference, the benefits of learning through technology are often lessened.

In an English as foreign language (EFL) context, Washburn (2021) measured learner course satisfaction with digital composing modes and examined online factors of digital multimodal composing preference in an online EFL communication course. Quantitative results indicated Korean students expressed aversion to video recordings and video responses as well as moderate concern for video conferencing. It was further stated that text-based digital discussions can present meaningful challenges to learners to apply new language skills all without the affective challenges of face-to-face classes or synchronous video conferencing.

Sung and Yeh (2012) conducted an interview study that investigated Taiwanese university students' perception of incorporating language learning technology into English learning. The study found that students showed positive attitudes toward technology integration in foreign language learning due to its convenience and practicality. However, students pointed out an obvious need to improve the technology's functionality to develop speaking skills. Another qualitative study that used semi-structured interviews, also found that learners of English for Specific Purposes showed held positive opinions on the incorporation of CALL (Olejarczuk, 2018).

Considering the inevitable trend of globalized education, effective English speaking skills are becoming increasingly more crucial for Taiwanese university students. Ensuring the effectiveness of English instructions provided to students to promote adequate English speaking is not just beneficial in terms of academics, but also raises students' competitiveness in the global job market. This is especially important during a difficult time when classes can shift from face-to-face to online and back again. The purpose of the study was to explore university students' perceptions of the pros and cons of using a chat-based communication platform for English speaking courses.

Methods

This section presents the methodology utilized in the study. The selection of the target population and participants are described in the following paragraphs. Data collection and data analysis procedures are also described in this section.

The target population of this study was the students at a selected university in the northern part of Taiwan. Three English speaking classes with a total of 62 students took part in this study during the Spring semester of 2022. The 62 students were from 19 different academic programs. Fourteen groups of three to five students were interviewed to collect data from the students.

A qualitative approach was employed to conduct the study. In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the instrument for data collection (Creswell, 1994). The instruments used included interview questions about students' perceptions on online learning and the online platform's effectiveness in English speaking skill development. Specifically, the interviews aimed to acquire valuable information about students' perceptions of using a communication platform for English speaking courses during the two months that their English speaking classes had to be carried out online.

A total of six interview questions were designed by the researcher. The questions concerned the students' perspective of online classes, problems encountered using the online communication platform, and the perceived effectiveness of the online communication platform in speaking classes. As to assure the quality of the interview questions, two EFL researchers with experience in conducting qualitative studies were asked to assess the validity and reliability of the contents. Minor changes in the wording were made based on the feedback by the researchers. The interviews made use of the six prearranged questions.

For perspective, the coronavirus pandemic worsened at an incredible rate in Taiwan during the second quarter of 2022. Consequently, the great majority of classes in high education shifted to emergency remote learning as of April 2022. The interviews were conducted at the end of May 2022, which allowed the students to have half of their class meetings in the classroom and the other half online during the semester. Each group interview, completed entirely in English, lasted about 25 to 30 minutes. In the case that the participating students' responses were not clear enough, additional questions were asked to elicit further information.

Results

Group interviews were conducted to collect data from the participants. The following section presents the summaries of the interview responses.

Question 1: What is your perspective on the online communication platform used during the second half of the semester? Please describe your experiences during the eight weeks of online classes using the platform.

In general, students considered the online communication platform to be convenient, user-friendly, and versatile. Students indicated that in a time when PowerPoint lectures are common, their learning habits during online lessons have remained largely unchanged. As long as they paid continuous attention to the teacher's instructions, their learning outcome would not differ greatly.

Depending on different instructors' familiarity with the online communication platform, some instructors would change their teaching methods when classes were conducted online. The unwanted changes resulted in fewer interactions with the instructors for certain classes.

Students pointed out that the record function allowed them to review the lessons. This is not possible when classes are conducted inside the classroom. Other students also made use of screenshots when needed.

Several students indicated that the convenience of attending these online lectures virtually anywhere was favorable. However, many students revealed that maintaining a high level of focus during online classes was not an easy task. There were simply too many distractions around them.

Question 2: What problems or difficulties did you encounter using the online communication platform during online classes? Please describe the problems you faced and what bothered you most.

Various technical errors associated with online learning occurred that ended up hindering students' learning process. There were many instances when the instructors were unable to commence a meeting due to connection problems. Likewise, students encountered problems signing into the platform or joining the class meetings due to similar reasons. One particular student never successfully joined the class meeting by clicking on the join button provided by the instructor. A separate link always had to be sent to that particular student for her to join.

There were times when the Internet connection speed came to a halt for several students. Malfunctioning microphones and webcams also caused many delays during class time. Students' microphone volume and quality vary greatly, which affected the communication process. Lag due to slow network speed also noticeably decreased the quality of communication. Students had to resort to typing their responses on the message board when such technical problems occurred. This was deemed very unproductive, especially for a speaking class.

A small number of students pointed out that older computers were not able to perform adequately for online classes. As such, students had to make use of their smartphones instead. However, the much smaller screen on a smartphone made it rather difficult to see the lecture notes. During presentation sessions toward the end of the semester, a small number of students reported that they were not able to share their screens. This further complicated the issue as students were not able to show the visual aid they prepared for the presentation. Similarly, the researcher also encountered this problem and was forced to switch to the use of another tablet to continue the lecture.

Question 3: After eight weeks of using the online communication platform, do you consider it an ideal tool for an English speaking class? Why or why not?

Despite the established usefulness of the communication platform for online class meetings as a whole, especially during the pandemic, most students actually do not consider it an ideal tool for an English speaking class.

Several students felt that the online environment removed several important characteristics of interpersonal communication as well as public speaking. They preferred their training, in terms of public speaking, to be more realistic and rigorous. In addition, they also expected their training to help them overcome the fear of speaking in front of a crowd. In contrast, a small number of students revealed that the lack of face-of-face interaction reduced their feeling of nervousness and anxiety level. This unexpected benefit provided them with more courage to speak up. The perceptually more relaxing environment prompted them to speak up more. Some even went as far as describing telecommuting and speaking in an online environment are the ways of the future. They believed that increasingly more human communication will be carried out online in the digital age.

The message board allowed certain students to type their responses instead of providing verbal responses. Unimportant messages and even emoticons would pop up at unnecessary times, resulting in a less formal learning atmosphere. Problems associated with the message board would not be present during class meetings in a physical classroom.

Several students pointed out that non-verbal communication is a significant part of human interactions. However, this critical aspect is sometimes missing in online classes. Some students even described this as counterintuitive for a speaking course.

Students also indicated that any potential problem associated with Internet connection speed or equipment malfunction would be magnified for a speaking class. The decreased communication quality due to technical issues would eventually affect the learning quality of speaking classes online. This makes the online communication platform much less favorable for a speaking class.

Question 4: Do you think using the online communication platform can effectively enhance your English-speaking skills? Why or why not?

Several students cautiously indicated that the online communication platform can enhance students' English conversation skills. However, it does not provide the same realistic environment for students to enhance their public speaking skills.

Many students believe that speaking into a microphone is not the same as speaking to another individual face-to-face. They indicated that body language and emotional expressions cannot be accurately conveyed. Furthermore, the important use of appropriate eye contact cannot be practiced in an online environment.

Some students believe that in an online environment, students with higher levels of motivation will continue to engage themselves in in-class activities. On the other hand, less motivated students will disengage themselves even more from the activities. More dominant students, often found in speaking classes, could speak in a monologue while other students further shun away from speaking. A student even described this undesirable situation as a vicious cycle.

A group discussion sometimes requires a leader to take the initiative to begin the activity. Students revealed that silence among a group is usually apparent and somewhat uncomfortable inside a classroom. However, students were able to tolerate long periods of silence when activities were conducted online, especially without the use of webcams. This—compounded with the lack of an active leader—created a counterproductive situation for a speaking class.

Another negative side effect identified by the students was the possibility of "cheating" during online classes. Pages of notes and other resources could be available to students when they had to carry out presentations online. Students could read from a script, which would not normally be allowed when presenting in front of an audience in the classroom.

Question 5: In what ways could the online communication platform be utilized as an effective platform for an English-speaking class?

In line with the aforementioned notion that certain students were less motivated to actively participate in group activities, many students felt that different discussion groups should be formed on a regular basis similar to physical class meetings. However, they understood the extra time that instructors had to spend to reassign different groups using the online communication platform.

Students pointed out the importance of making the use of webcams a class requirement. Some felt this would allow online communication to better match in-person experiences. Moreover, this would allow the instructor to better monitor students' learning online.

On the technical side, students suggested that all teachers and students be better trained and better equipped to become fully competent in the use of the online communication platform, particularly during a time that classes would be expected to stay online extensively. This would ensure instructional quality and learning efficiency during class meetings when the online communication platform is used. Some students believe that if all technical errors could be prevented, their learning in a virtual environment would just be as effective.

Overall, students believe that the online communication platform readily consisted of essential functions and features for successful online learning. However, a virtual environment could not promote effective in-person interactions for a speaking class. In short, improvements should be made in terms of technology proficiency and student participation.

Question 6: Any additional comments you would like to share regarding your experience with the online communication platform this semester?

At the selected university, attendance was taken through a QR code. It was revealed students could possibly scan the QR code and not really attend class meetings online. It was further revealed that the QR code could be sent to students that were not even present on the online communication platform. Accordingly, the webcam requirement was once again brought up by the students.

All in all, students pointed out that in a turbulent time, both teachers and students should be ready to carry out class meetings physically in the classroom or online. It is the responsibility of both parties to become proficient in the use of the online communication platform. Teachers and students alike should embrace the technology with a positive mindset to maximize their teaching and learning. These two aspects are especially critical for a speaking class to be conducted effectively.

Discussion

Study results showed that certain students had less speaking anxiety when carrying out communication online using the communication platform. An experimental study conducted by Punar and Uzun (2019) also showed that the use of online communication platform had a positive effect on foreign language learners' English speaking anxiety because it decreased the learners' anxiety levels. It was suggested that online communication opportunities should be employed in educational settings since anxiety levels drop significantly when compared to face-to-face interactions in the classrooms. Therefore, this advantageous aspect should be carefully utilized, especially for students with a lower level of confidence levels. On a different note, it was stated that online speaking assessment will not bring serious concerns related to cheating as suggested by participating students in the present study. The notion is that the process will require the instructor as well as the students to speak to each other synchronously. This once more reinforces the importance of using webcams.

In the present study, students showed mixed feelings about the use of the online communication platform for educational purposes. They found the current technology and existing online communication platforms sufficient for classes to be carried out online without sacrificing too much instructional quality. They also found the online communication platform to be readily available for learning in a virtual environment. This is in line with the statement that social media tools have been playing a crucial role in the renovation of conventional teaching and learning practices around the world (Vivakaran & Neelamalar,

2018). It was further stated that though primarily developed for online social communication, these platforms were found to possess ideal features that can be used for teaching purposes to initiate active learning among students.

In spite of the abovementioned positive aspect, students of the present study generally expressed agreement that the negatives outweigh the positives when the technology is used for English speaking courses. They stressed the notion that English speaking classes should be conducted in a face-to-face learning environment whenever possible as to effectively enhance students' communicative and public speaking skills. This finding is different compared to a study that involved undergraduates studying English as a Foreign Language at a university in Japan, and Japanese as a Foreign Language undergraduates from a university in Australia (Sampson & Yoshida, 2021). The cross-national longitudinal study in which participating students engaged in text chats instead of voice chats, showed that mentions of positive amounted to more than double those of negative emotions. The positive result could be attributed to participating students did not actually have to speak during those sessions. Another possible explanation is that chat sessions involving international participants were more appealing as suggested by the students in the present study. It has been stated that with the construction of international online platforms, authentic intercultural communication conditions could be provided for university students to improve their English skills as well as intercultural communication competence (Liu & Wang, 2020).

As several students mentioned, non-verbal cues play an essential role in how people convey meaning and information to each other. Nonetheless, Ahmed (2018) argued that this fundamental aspect is frequently missing in online classes. This is particularly unconstructive for a speaking class. Sharma and Vyas (2022) suggested that certain training could be provided to teachers to perceive non-verbal cues in online classes. This could lead to an improved ability of the teachers to perceive students' non-verbal cues during online classes in a better manner. Subsequently, communication between the instructor and students could be enhanced even in a virtual learning environment. Another study also asserted that instructors can improve the effectiveness of online learning environments via non-verbal immediacy behaviors (Dixson, Greenwell, Rogers-Stacy, Weister, & Lauer, 2017).

A similar study was conducted to investigate Taiwanese university students' perceptions and feedback regarding an online English learning platform. Results of that study revealed that the platform, although specifically developed for interactive English learning, still lacked functionality for users to improve their speaking skills (Sung, 2019). The lack of sufficient features for interactive speaking practice was identified as a major weakness. The online communication platform used for this study was not specifically developed for educational purposes. However, the makeup of the platform allows continuous communication and speaking practice opportunities. Still, students did not find the virtual environment to be realistic or ideal for English speaking courses. Students carefully pointed out that the online communication platform itself is versatile for teaching and learning a foreign language. However, instructors' classroom management skills and students' classroom behaviors in a virtual setting greatly influence the platform's effectiveness for English speaking courses. Lastly, students' attitudes considerably influence their ability and willingness to listen and speak in an English speaking course online, which in turn affects their learning efficiency.

Conclusions

Results of the study revealed that students are generally satisfied with the technology for educational purposes due to its accessibility and practicality. The online communication platform is deemed effective for teacher-centered, lecture-based courses. However, students pointed out several limitations that prevented the software from being an ideal substitute for actual classroom meetings, especially for supposedly more student-centered English speaking courses. In an effort to improve the teaching quality of English speaking instruction and enhance the students' international communication competence, instructors today are recommended to fully grasp and utilize the various functions of the online communication platform.

It is concluded that despite the usefulness of chat-based communication platforms for online classes, students in speaking courses have a noticeable preference for direct interactions with their classmates and instructor in person. Instructors of English speaking courses need to adapt to the changing times with the aim of conducting an optimal online learning environment that best resembles the characteristics of actual face-to-face interactions. Subsequent studies should focus on exploring strategies for promoting English instructors' pedagogical and technological skills in teaching speaking classes both physically in a classroom and digitally through an online communication platform.

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