

Alleviating Iranian EFL Students' Speaking Anxiety: Mobile-assisted instruction vs. traditional instruction

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Abstract

Language classrooms are occasionally anxiety-breeding situations. Foreign language classroom anxiety which negatively affects foreign language learning is typically associated with productive activities mainly speaking skill. To cope with the issue and overcome language learning difficulties, the present study was conducted to explore the impact of mobile-assisted language learning on enhancing EFL students' oral proficiency and relieving their speaking anxiety. 60 sophomore female students whose ages ranged from 18 to 24 were selected from Zand University in Shiraz, Iran and randomly divided into two groups. Traditional instruction was adopted to teach both groups for two hours in a week for four months. Out of class, however, they did various speaking activities. The participants in the control group followed their course book speaking activities. But, the experimental group experienced mobile-assisted language learning to do their out-of-class speaking activities via a mobile application (Voice Thread). The Preliminary English Test and the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale questionnaire were used to collect the required data. Paired samples *t*-test results indicated that Voice Thread experience significantly enhanced the participants' oral proficiency and lowered their foreign language speaking anxiety. These findings provide experimental evidence that Voice Thread can be used as an educational tool to help EFL students to improve their oral proficiency and create their own individual less-threatening language learning environment.

Keywords: EFL speaking anxiety, ICT, learners' autonomy, MALL, VT

Introduction

Language anxiety originates from students' competitive natures because they mostly consider themselves less fluent while they are comparing themselves with their peers in the classroom. According to Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis, if this emotional filter is high, EFL students can't figure out the input, as it will not enter the area of their brain which deals with language learning. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) came to this conclusion and defined anxiety as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (p. 128). Abu-Rabia (2004) concurred with Horwitz et al. (1986) and stated that an EFL learner

experiencing foreign language anxiety is “a student who appeared worried, physically insecure, and unable to engage in situational learning” (p. 712). Safari Moghaddam and Ghafournia (2019) also distinguished anxiety as the most important factor which negatively affects foreign language learning. They detected a negative correlation between students’ performances in EFL classrooms and their levels of anxiety and concluded that language classrooms are occasionally very anxiety-breeding situations, particularly when students are required to speak in front of their teachers and classmates. Other researchers also verified that foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) is one of the most important barriers learners have to prevail in language classes (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Fariadian, Azizifar, & Gowhary, 2014).

Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) argued that FLCA is typically associated with productive activities mainly speaking skill while EFL learners feel fear of being evaluated negatively by their teachers and classmates. They added receptive skills (reading and listening) provide learners with the opportunity to ponder and correct themselves, while speaking skill requires high level of attentiveness in a time frame, which can’t be controlled by learners.

In the same vein, Fariadian, Azizifar, and Gowhary (2014) conducted a case study on Iranian students and concluded that the participants’ pronunciation errors and consequently their levels of anxiety were increased when they were asked to speak spontaneously in front of their teacher and classmates. They argued that the main reason for students’ anxiety in the classroom was their apprehension of making pronunciation mistakes and being laughed at by their peers. The participants reported they felt too anxious and nervous to cooperate with their classmates and teachers, and they were not able to focus on speaking activities attentively. To prevail their speaking anxiety, they tried to remember their speech by rehearsing it, which brought about more pressure and anxiety.

To cope with the issues and overcome language learning difficulties, Kompan, Edirisingha, Canaletta, Alsina, and Monguet (2019) asserted that EFL instructors and students explore new methods to integrate technological tools, into language teaching/learning. Therefore, they will be able to improve instructors' teaching quality and learners interaction in the classroom. As concluded by Kolomietts and Guryeyeva (2018), how to utilize technology in EFL learning classes is still unanswered question. With regard to wide-ranging ICTs which can be utilized in EFL teaching/learning challenges. Likewise, Ravenscroft, Warburton, Hatzipangos, and Canole (2012) recommended that the new utilization of these tools require further investigation since if they are not inspected closely and thoroughly, EFL instructors might wrongly suggest solutions which do not correspond to students' learning issues.

Recently, the issue of FLCA has been investigated by many scholars(Delmas, 2017; Dugarsyrenova & Sardegna, 2017; Ebadi & Asakereh, 2018). Similar to the above studies, the current research is another attempt to investigate the actual source of FLCA and then to alleviate it by the integration of technology. This research intended to be more comprehensive in nature, as it tries to detect the most producing FLCA situations; concentrating on the real source of FLCA, which could affect the improvement of foreign language learning.

The results of this research could be significantly interesting to EFL teachers/learners, since FLCA can negatively affect EFL learning, learners performances, and consequently their achievement . moreover, this research is significant with respect to its implication for EFL education. The investigation of the integration of technology to alleviate FLCA originating from communicating in the foreign language will make EFL educators more insightful to the issue of FLCA and will assist them to create less-threatening educational environments for their students.

Research Question

Q1. Is there a significant difference between the oral proficiency of Iranian demale EFL students who use Voice Thread and the oral proficiency of those who use traditional face-to-face instruction?

Q2. Are the anxiety levels of Iranian female EFL students using Voice Thread statistically different from the anxiety levels of those studying English in a traditional environment?

Review of literature

Innovative technology-assisted environments are changing the ways both EFL instructors and learners choose in learning procedure(Apson, Sisan & Tungkunan,2019). Technology enhanced educational settings have the potential to create the less producing FLCA environment in which EFL learning will be enjoyable for both instructors and learners (Pufahl & Rhodes,2011).Considering the devastating impacts of anxiety on EFL learning, many researchers tried to find efficient solutions to help learners to overcome their ELCA. Pufahl and Rhodes (2011) proposed that information and communication technology (ICT) could help teachers to provide much less-threatening EFL environments by lowering students anxiety. However, they argued that more research is required to find out how to apply synchronous and asynchronous technologies in educational environments, as “ there is a lack of empirical findings that demonstrate precisely how technology can enhance foreign language learning’(p.275).

The findings obtained from the studies in which the researchers employed ICTs (McIntosh, Braul, & Choe, 2003; Poza,2005) revealed that learners felt more confident while they were speaking in technology-assisted environments. Along the same vein, Richards (2014) figured out that the integration of mobile applications helps students to come up with new ideas to solve their language learning problems such as anxiety and stress. Due to its specific features, among all competing mobile applications, Richards (2014) introduced Voice Thread (VT) as a helpful educational tool which enables students to practice what they have acquired in the classroom. VT is a free-to-use Web 2.0 technology which allows language students to communicate with their teachers and peers by recording their voices and posting the recordings to them. VT allows language learners to post English comments around images, video clips, sound clips, and questions posted by language teachers.

Dugartsyrenova and Sardegna (2017) corroborated Richards (2014) and reported that VT provided language students with additional time and materials to scheme their learning processes autonomously . participants detected that distinctive characteristics of VT which gave them the opportunity to record their voice messages and play them back helped them to enhance their oral proficiency, improve reflection procedure, develop self-evaluation, increase creativity, and experience less foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA). But, they did not appreciate VT as a good substitute for face-to-face interaction.

Delmas (2017) discovered FLCA was impeding 39 U.S. adult learners' language learning. Although existing research demonstrated the positive effects of VT, Ebadi and Asakereh (2018) argued that the application was not helpful. They conducted a study on Iranian EFL students and distinguished that although the participants who practiced speaking activities on VT appreciated the experience, they could not master the students who practiced the same activities in a traditional context. They reasoned that since the majority of Iranian EFL students use mobile applications for non-educational purpose, using mobile phones in language classes distracts their attention, detains communication, and consequently obstructs language learning.

In spite of these criticisms, in an EFL context such as Iran, students have to cope with many challenges while they are acquiring English skills, particularly speaking skill, because

authentic materials and native speakers of English are hardly accessible. On the other hand, EFL teachers who intend to provide effective classroom lessons encounter many barriers such as students' apprehension and anxiety. As a result, both EFL instructors and learners are dissatisfied with the clear gap existing between language learners' present speaking abilities and the desired ones.

Methodology

Design

This quantitative study was designed as an experimental one in order to collect numerical data to answer the previously mentioned research questions. This experimental research used objective measurements to study the effect of applying mobile-assisted instruction on enhancing participants' oral proficiency and alleviating their speaking anxiety. Experimental studies give researchers the opportunity to have a high level of control over the study variables. They also bring about specific conclusions and duplicable results (Dornyei, 2007).

Participants

Since the participants were supposed to be at the same level of proficiency, the teacher employed random sampling to select 60 sophomore female students who were majoring in English teaching and translation at Zand University in Shiraz, Iran. They were between the ages of 19 and 25 and their native language was Persian. Before starting the treatment, the speaking paper of the Preliminary English Test (PET) which was prepared by Cambridge English Language Assessment was given to all the participants.

The PET includes three parts: Introduction, photo description, and topic discussion. For the test, in the classroom, the teacher examined participants one by one for about 12-15 minutes and recorded their audio responses.

The results of the PET ensured the teacher that they were at the same level of oral proficiency ($0.36 > 0.05$). Then, the teacher randomly divided them into two experimental and control groups. There were 30 students in each group. The teacher was an English instructor at the university, she taught the students in both experimental and control groups, and she distributed the FLCAS questionnaire to the experimental group.

Training Program

In the first two weeks of the 2018-2019 fall academic year, the teacher conducted a training program to train the participants in the experimental group. First, she introduced them to VT and the way they could use it. During four sessions, students watched some introductory videos- <http://voicethread.com/share/409> and <https://youtu.be/2jVW-aAyGPE>- to learn how to download VT, create their own accounts, record their voice messages, and finally share their recordings.

Instruments

To collect the required data in order to answer the research questions, two instruments were used. Two parallel forms of speaking papers of the PET which were prepared by Cambridge English Language Assessment. These tests assessed the students' oral proficiency before and after the treatment. The PET was selected because of three advantages: first, two parallel versions were readily available.

Second, the PET assessment scale was well-defined and accessible, which made the examiner less biased and more objective. Third, Cambridge assessments are all provided based

on reliability, validity, practicality. For this research, the PET was piloted on a similar group of sophomore female students ($n=20$) other than those participating in the study. The PET was given to them twice over a period of two weeks. A test-retest reliability of 0.84 ($p < .05$) indicated good reliability. The PET also content validated by a panel of three EFL experts.

To compare the FLCA of the participants in the experimental group before and after the treatment, the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) questionnaire consisting of 33 questions was distributed. Initially, Horwitz et al. (1986) used the questionnaire to investigate 108 university students' anxiety levels and the researchers reported a test-retest reliability of 0.83 ($p < .01$) over a period of eight weeks. For this study, the FLCAS questionnaire was piloted on a similar group of sophomore female students ($n= 18$) other than those who participated in the study. The Cronbach's alpha was 0.76, which indicated highly acceptable reliability.

To find out the validity of the FLCAS questionnaire, the researcher asked three experts to read the questions, determine if the items were relevant to the research questions, and write their comments on the items. Their comments assisted her to remove, reword, and reconstruct some of the questions.

Data collection procedures

First, the teacher randomly sampled 60 participants from sophomore female students who were studying English teaching and translation at Zand University of Shiraz, Iran. The pre-test (i.e., the speaking paper of the PET) was given to the participants to figure out whether they were at the same level of oral proficiency before conducting the treatment. In the classroom, the teacher examined all 60 participants one for about 12-15 minutes and recorded their audio responses. First, she asked them to introduce themselves and speak about their family and general interest. Then, she gave them two photos of Toronto and Paris and asked them to describe the photos. As the last part of the test, she asked them to choose the city which they like to visit.

After, she randomly divided the participants into two experimental and control groups. Traditional instruction was adopted to teach both groups in the classroom for two hours per week in four months. Out of class, the participants in the control group followed their course book (*ACT Series*) speaking activities presented for each topic. The same topic from *ACT Series* book was selected for the experimental group.

According to the selected topic, she posted some images, sound clips, and video clips to the participants accounts on VT. On VT, the students downloaded her posted messages, and recorded their English comments on them. Later, they posted their voice recordings to their teacher. Figure 1 illustrates the screen shot of a sample of experimental group interaction on VT.



Figure 1. The screen shot of a Sample of Experimental group interaction on VT

Next, the teacher listened to their voice recordings and sent her own comments about them on VT. After listening to the teacher's comments, the students recorded new versions of their voice recordings. Next session, in class, the teacher asked all the students in both groups to make a short presentation of their out-of-class speaking activities. Using strategies such as giving an example and rephrasing, she provided effective feedback to all students in both experimental and control groups. Figure 2 illustrates the cycle of their language learning.

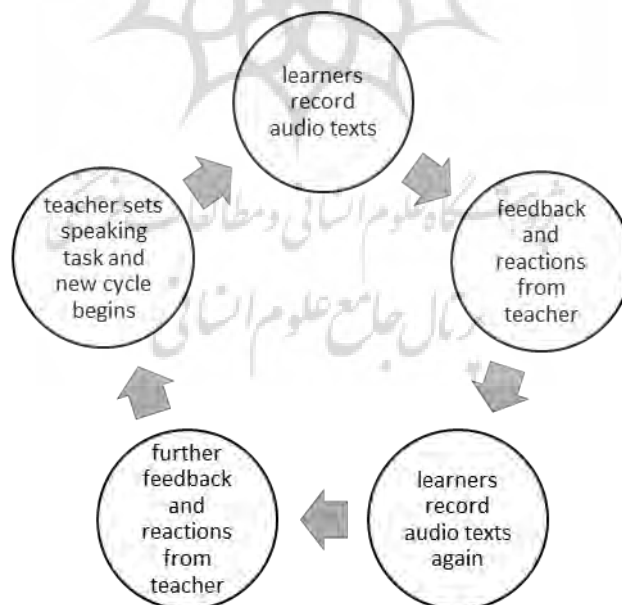


Figure 2. Participants' Language Learning Cycle

To explore the effect of the treatment which took four months, the parallel form of the speaking test of the PET (post-test) was given to the participant of both groups. The post-test was

conducted exactly the same as the pre-test. The topic for discussion, however, was summer vacation. Similarly, the teacher recorded all the participants' responses.

Applying oral performance descriptors from the PET scale which was prepared by Cambridge English Language Assessment, the teacher herself scored the students' responses. The scale included four criteria: pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and discourse management. According to the criteria, the grading rubrics evaluated students from one (novice mastery) to five (advanced mastery). If, for example, a student was evaluated one on the discourse management descriptor, the score indicated that she made responses including frequent hesitation and short phrases. Offering a conversation chart, the PET scale helped the teacher to change the students' responses to the numerical scores revealing if they could succeed in achieving oral proficiency standards. The students' scores ranged from 4 to 20.

Finally, to compare the experimental group participants' FLCA before and after the experience, the teacher asked them to fill out the FLCAS questionnaire consisting of 33 questions in the classroom. Necessary explanations and instructions were provided to avoid any ambiguity. The teacher asked the students to answer the questionnaire as honestly and as completely as possible. Then, the 5-Likert Scale was used to give the following numerical values to the items of the questionnaire: Strongly agree= 5, agree= 4, undecided= 3, disagree=2, and strongly disagree=1.

Data Analysis Procedures

To find inter-rater reliability of the pre-test, the researcher asked an experienced and trained assessor to listen to the students' recorded responses and scored them as she did. Then, the Pearson correlation was calculated. Next, a *t*-test was run in order to figure out whether the students in both groups were at the same oral proficiency level before conducting the treatment. The researcher used a paired samples *t*-test to find out whether there was any significant difference in the participants' speaking scores in the pre- and post-tests.

The FLCAS questionnaire was given to the participants of the experimental group as pre- and post-course scales. According to their answers, the seven most producing FLCA situations were detected and the number of strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, and strongly disagree responses to these seven items was counted and presented in the form of percentages. To perform the statistical analysis, the researcher used the SPSS software version 24. Finally, all the research data were tabulated to simplify their implementation.

Results

Findings of the study before and after the treatment are presented and tabulated as follows:

Before the Treatment

The following table (Table 1) shows the data analysis of inter-rater correlation between the two examiners' scores prior to the treatment.

Table 1. *Pearson Correlation Between the Researcher and the Second Assessor's Scores*

		The Researcher	Second
Assessor			
	Pearson Correlation	1	0.976**
Second Assessor	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
	N	60	60

The Researcher	Pearson Correlation	0.976**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	
	N	60

As shown in Table 1, the correlation between the two raters' scores is high ($r= 0.97^{**}$) indicating that the two assessors estimated the students' scores consistently. This result proves that there is a considerably high index of reliability. Then, the averages of the raters' scores were taken as the raw scores for future computations.

Table 2 illustrates the *t*-test results for the participants' homogeneity in both groups prior to the treatment.

Table 2. *t*-test for the participants' homogeneity in speaking before the treatment

Confidence difference	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Differences	Error Differences	95% Std. of the	
							Lower	
Equal variances Assumed	0.364	0.549	-0.921	58	0.361	-0.200	0.217	-0.634
Equal variances not assumed	0.364	0.549	-0.921	57.994	0.361	-0.200	0.217	-0.634

As Table 2 indicates, there was no significant difference between two groups' speaking scores ($0.36 > 0.05$). This result ensured that they were at the same oral proficiency level before the treatment, thus indicating the groups' homogeneity.

After the Treatment

The results of the investigation in relation to the two research questions stated above are delineated and discussed below one by one.

This research question is asking whether the oral proficiency of the participants who used V T is statistically different from the oral proficiency of those who used traditional face-to-face instruction. A paired samples *t*-test was calculated to compare the students' scores in the pre- and post-tests and to inspect the impact of the experience on their oral proficiency. The results were illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3. Paired Samples *t*-test to compare participants' performances in pre- and post-tests

	Std.	95% Confidence Interval	Sig.
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	Mean	Std. Deviation	Error Mean	of the difference		<i>t</i>	(2- <i>df</i>)
				Lower	Upper		
Control Group	-0.666 0.000	1.295	0.236	-1.150	-0.182	-2.819	29
Voice thread Group	-3.566 0.000	1.304	0.238	-4.053	-3.079	-14.973	29

As Table 3 displays, the participants' speaking performances in the control group ($M = -0.66$, $SD = 1.29$) was statistically different from the participants' speaking performances in the experimental group ($M = -3.56$, $SD = 0.23$). These statistics also show that both groups performed better in the post-test.

This question asks if the anxiety levels of Iranian female EFL students using VT are statistically different from the anxiety levels of those studying English in a traditional environment. The FLCAS questionnaire was given to the participants of the experimental group as a pre-course scale and they were asked to choose if they disagreed or strongly disagreed (or agreed and strongly agreed) with 33 items in the questionnaire. According to the participants' answers, the seven most producing FLCA situations and the percentages of the students who had chosen them were illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4. *The seven most producing FLCA situations*

%	Situations
83	I tremble when I know that I am going to be called on in my English class.
81	I keep thinking that the other students are better at English than I am.
79	I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak English.
73	I always feel that the other students speak English better than I do.
66	English class moves so quickly that I worry about getting left behind.
58	I can feel my heart pounding when I am going to be called on in my English class.
51	I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my English class.

The percentages displayed in Table 4 indicate that the participants in the experimental group showed high levels of FLCA. Further to this, these statistics proved that the most producing FLCA situation (83%) was when the students were asked to speak in English class. About half of the participants (51%) reported that they got too nervous and confused to speak in English class.

Then, the participants' five response categories, i.e., strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, and strongly disagree, were put on an agreement-disagreement continuum. The 5-Likert Scale was used to give numerical values to their responses, the values were summed up, and the mean score was calculated ($M= 2.92$; $SD= 0.60$). The mean of the anxiety of the group using VT which was 2.92 indicated that they were feeling anxiety in their classroom before the treatment. The next step was to compare the participants' FLCA before and after using VT, which was done through a paired sample *t*-test (Table 5).

Table 5. Paired Sample *t*-test results for the comparison between students' FLCA levels before and after VT experience

N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig.
Pre-course Scale	30	91.051	18.387		
					2.342
					29
					0.025
Post-course Scale	30	86.743	17.827		

The results revealed that the participants' FLCA levels were significantly different before and after the treatment, and there was a reduction in the mean score after using VT ($91.05 > 86.74$).

Discussion

The available affordances in the classroom are very limited in EFL contexts such as Iran. Since there are not language laboratories in most language institutes in Iran and authentic materials and native speakers of English are hardly accessible, EFL students have to deal with many issues in acquiring speaking skill.

Among these issues, FLCA seems the most serious one in Iranian EFL learning processes, especially when learners are asked to speak in front of their teachers and classmates (Fariadian et al., 2014). Their apprehension of making pronunciation mistakes and being laughed at can create FLCA.

As Safari Moghaddam and Ghafournia (2019) stated, there is a negative correlation between students' performances in EFL classrooms and their levels of anxiety. In fact, anxiety is the most important factor which negatively affects foreign language learning (Safari Moghaddam & Ghafournia 2019). To verify Safari Moghaddam and Ghafournia's (2019) contention, the present survey aimed to investigate the effect of using VT on alleviating EFL learners' speaking anxiety to check if it is effective in comparison to the use of the traditional way of teaching and practicing the participating students' oral skill.

Results of this study supported the view that technology-based assisting tools such as VT in our case can be a solution to FLCA problem and they can help EFL teachers to provide much less-threatening environments by lowering the students' anxiety (Pufahl & Rhodes, 2011). In another word, the integration of VT into learning processes assisted the Iranian participants to improve their oral proficiency and to alleviate their anxiety levels. More discussion and elaboration of the two research questions are explained in more details.

With regard to the first research question, concerning the significant difference between the oral proficiency of the students who used VT and the oral proficiency of those who used traditional face-to-face instruction, the results showed that VT significantly improved students' oral proficiency because it engaged them in a number of interesting and interactive speaking activities. More indicatively, the differences between the control and experimental groups may be related to several reasons: First, using mobile phones in EFL learning was a novelty which may have persuaded the participants to use these devices more enthusiastically, the students, therefore, could have gained better achievements. Second, MALL program is based on individualization and learner autonomy which can improve language learning since students feel they are able to control all language learning processes by themselves (Alzubi, Singh, & Hazaea, 2019). Third, VT assisted the teacher to give immediate feedback to each individual student. Finally, since VT provided EFL learners with the opportunity to playback and modify their voice recordings before sharing them with their peers and teacher, it could positively affect their oral proficiency. In other words, in the VT environment, the students had access to the lessons which were available in both speech and text and they could refer to online learning materials and resources whenever they required them.

The obtained results corroborated Dugartsyrenova and Sardegna (2017) who found out that VT created a multisensory environment in which EFL learners could practice speaking activities such as watching video clips, listening to audio clips, and sharing voice recordings. They argued that EFL learning is more enduring in these contexts. Interestingly, findings of this study, regarding the positive effect of the VT tool on lowering learners' anxiety, were in line with the results of Delmas' (2017) study in which he explored how this application assisted learners to feel less shy of making mistakes, more motivated to learn, and consequently more successful in language learning. Besides, VT assisted them to improve their oral proficiency and feel a sense of community in the VT environment.

But, the findings are not in agreement with the research carried out by Ebadi and Asakereh (2018) on Iranian EFL students. They argued although the experimental group enjoyed the VT experience, they reported the application was not useful enough to satisfy their needs. The researchers concluded the VT environment by itself may not bring about effective language learning unless students' attitudes towards their learning experience are rigorously investigated.

Concerning the second research question, i.e., the impact of using VT on relieving learners' anxiety, the results indicated that integrating VT as an educational aid reduced the participants' FLCA which mostly originated from productive skills, particularly speaking skill (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014).

Theoretically speaking, the findings of this study showed alignment with the affective filter hypothesis (Krashen, 1982). The privacy of learners' accounts made them feel less FLCA endorsing Krashen's (1982) view about the competitive natures of the learners' private environments. Abu-Rabia (2004) came to this conclusion and stated that EFL learners who experience FLCA feel too worried and insecure to engage in EFL learning processes.

Some of the students participating in this survey figured out that VT helped them to feel less anxious because they felt they were not being watched or assessed while they were recording their voice messages on this application. The results were supported by Krashen (1982) who stated that the learners who are assigned to speak in front of their teachers and classmates become very anxious because they compare themselves with their classmates and they think they are less proficient.

In contrast, they might seek out more intake when they feel comfortable and secure. For example, some of the participants of this research found out that practicing speaking on VT made them forget about their insecurities and inhibitions and speak freely.

In some cases, due to many grammatical mistakes, the participants' voice messages were not intelligible. However, there was some evidence of self-correction in their following messages, indicating that utilizing VT helped the instructor to create a corroborative learning environment in which the learners carried out the activities stimulating autonomous language learning.

The research findings were also consistent with the results of Poza's (2005) study showing that mobile technology assisted the students to reduce their anxiety levels towards speaking skill and feel more confident.

Conclusion

As a learning context influences how well EFL students pursue their education, its structuring is very important for both instructors and learners. A highly effective learning environment creates a positive educational atmosphere in which students are intellectually and emotionally active and they will appreciate the process of language learning.

Since authentic materials and native speakers of English are hardly accessible in EFL contexts such as Iran, language learners encounter many challenges while acquiring speaking. As Bahrani (2011) stated, the primary objective of EFL teaching is to provide students with the space and time they require to practice speaking English comfortably. Thus, this study was designed to investigate the impact of using VT on improving Iranian learners' oral proficiency and lowering their anxiety levels. Accordingly, results indicated that VT provided the learners with a more relaxed atmosphere and gave them the necessary space and time to practice speaking effectively, which lowered their apprehension and enhanced their confidence. The participants also reported that they felt more validated while they were practicing speaking on VT. More specifically, it assisted students to improve their oral proficiency and alleviate their foreign language speaking anxiety in the Iranian context.

The study findings gave experimental evidence and useful information on the significance of incorporating mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) in EFL teaching/learning, which seems essential, particularly in the contexts where language class size perpetually increases (Pufahl & Rhodes, 2011). The results also contributed to the best utilization of ICTs to enhance students' learning quality. Thus, both English institute authorities and their teachers are strongly recommended to be acquainted with new advances in technology.

As Dashtestani (2016) reported, Iranian EFL instructors and language institutes keep students from using mobile phones in educational contexts. The findings of the current study provide EFL teachers and institutes with more information about integrating tech tools, on general, and mobile applications, in particular, to develop students' learning quality. Taking into consideration the findings of our experimental research, we suggest that teachers encourage students to utilize these tools to enhance their oral proficiency by telling them how today's tech tools can be used effectively and how the technology helps them to share knowledge with people around the world.

In consideration of the results, we recommend materials developers to integrate educational mobile applications in the courses of English speaking and introduce effective applications at the end of each unit. Likewise, we suggest that course designers plan for incorporating ICTs including mobile applications in speaking courses and add online follow-up activities to learners' textbooks in order to give them enough time to carry out the activities promoting their speaking skills. Besides, results assist syllabus designers to entail viable

recommendations for reaching students' autonomy by accomplishing tasks which are designed to provide greater choices for students about their learning.

Nonetheless, these implications and findings should be generalized and interpreted more cautiously because of many research limitations. First, in this study, there is no information about students' cognitive style. As reported by Shamsavar and Tan (2011), EFL students' satisfaction with their cognitive style is significant in their language learning. Therefore, it is recommended that more studies be conducted in this field. Second, as Djwandono (2019) concluded, slow internet download speed significantly affected the participants' motivation for practicing speaking in the VT environment. Finally, Razak, Yassin, and Maasum (2017) figured out that female learners feel more foreign language anxiety than male ones, therefore, it would be more intriguing to conduct the same study and explore the impact of gender differences on EFL students' anxiety levels and their achievements.

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