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Benefits and barriers of online speaking practice: A case study in the United Arab Emirates

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Abstract

This exploratory case study reports on the design and implementation of online speaking practice in the context of IELTS preparation courses in a private, non-profit national university in the UAE. Providing speaking practice can be challenging in classes with high student numbers and limited class time. Therefore, online speaking assignments were designed to fulfil students' need for more speaking practice. Students were required to prepare, then record their responses to IELTS type questions and share them with classmates. Two device agnostic voice recording apps were used: VoiceThread and SoundCloud. The study examines students' perceptions on the assignments through a mixed-method approach to identify benefits and barriers of such assignments. Findings show an improvement in how students perceive their speaking skills, fluency, self-confidence, collaboration, peer learning, and autonomy through error detection and self-correction. The barriers, however, can be categorised within three main areas: technical, motivational, and cultural values. Although the findings are relevant to this particular context, the study contributes to the research on the use of asynchronous voice recording web tools in the Middle East, particularly with reference to cultural values as a barrier. It also provides a practical example of the use of such tools.

1. Introduction

When teaching foreign or second language speaking skills, particularly to students with low-level proficiency, the instructor's role becomes quite complex due to the complexity of the act of speaking as a socio-linguistic process (Dakowska, 2005). On one hand, instructors try to adopt a communicative language teaching approach to enrich classroom interaction (Aleksandrak, 2011) and make their classes more student centred. On the other hand, students' low-level language proficiency requires increased language input and instructor interference and guidance. Language input is sometimes increased to overcome the shortcomings of the communicative approach which focuses on communication more than on the socio-linguistic aspects of speaking (Aleksandrak, 2011). Typically, speaking skills lesson plans are divided into three phases: target language input, structured output, and finally communicative output which should indicate an increased degree of communicative competence. These phases align with the three stages of developing speaking skills: awareness, appropriation and autonomy (Thornbury, 2007). Here, in particular, lies the challenge in the context of this study, where the number of students is usually high and lesson time is limited. Students do not get enough practice inside the classroom. However, this challenge is not particular to the context of this study, Aleksandrak (2011) duly points to "the inadequate frequency of speaking opportunities in the classroom" (p. 38). Technological affordances can lend a helping hand in that regard, more so due to the general trend of students being motivated (Dreimane, 2019; Yang and Chen, 2007) and engaged (Dunn and Kennedy, 2019) by technology integration in their lessons.

To fulfil students' need for more speaking practice, three online speaking assignments (OSAs) were designed as an integral part of the IELTS Listening and Speaking (L&S) course. These assignments involved using two asynchronous, voice recording and sharing Web tools, namely, VoiceThread and SoundCloud. Students were required to respond orally to IELTS related prompts, record their response, and share it online with classmates. Later, students' perceptions of these assignments were investigated.

The significance of this study is that it contributes to the body of research on effective use of asynchronous voice recording web tools in the Middle East, particularly with reference to cultural values as a barrier. It also provides a practical example of the use of such tools and examines students' perceptions of OSAs. A mixed method approach was used to explore possible benefits and challenges.

Students were invited to answer a questionnaire, followed by semi-structured interviews. Data from both sources were analysed and the results indicated positive findings, possible challenges and some areas that need further research.

1.1 Context of the study

The context of this study is a semi-private university in the United Arab Emirates. The Intensive English Program (IEP), offered by the University's English Language Centre, provides four levels of language proficiency programs for first year students who need to achieve a score of band 5 in the IELTS (or TOEFL 500) as a prerequisite to entering certain colleges where the medium of instruction is English.

The university has two campuses, men's and women's. This study was conducted in the women's campus in two sections of level 3, IELTS L&S course where the author was the instructor of the course. Each section was allocated five hours a week with a range of 20 to 30 students per class. The population of students was mainly Emirati with a blend of other Arab students, aged 18 to 26. Students' progress was continuously assessed by their course work, assignments, and exams. The grades they get, however, are not part of their university GPA. Therefore, grades are not considered a motivator for students.

As noted by AlOkaily (2015, 2019), students are usually under pressure to get the required IELTS score. Feelings of impatience and frustration are quite common among students taking IEP courses. Therefore, instructors need to keep students engaged and motivated to combat this frustration. Devising creative assignments, especially involving technology, can help in that regard and is encouraged by University policy.

It is relevant here to describe the cultural background of this context as it is relevant to some findings of the study. The university states on its official website that its core values are deeply rooted in Arab and Islamic culture. Language, religion and tradition have been identified as forming cultural norms and lecturers have described the context as conservative (AlOkaily, 2016). Consequently, students' attitudes, as well as lecturers lesson planning are affected by considerations of the prevailing cultural norms of the university.

1.2 Problem statement

Speaking skills in IELTS preparation classes in this context are allocated around 2.5 hours a week. The high number of students in class (38 students) is challenging

when designing speaking exercises in the classroom because some students tend to dominate interaction while others opt to stay quiet. Similar problems were documented in the literature as students often feel not proficient enough in speaking due to the lack of occasions to speak (Boonkit, 2010) or the inefficiency of speaking activities in English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) courses (Aleksandrak, 2011).

One solution is for instructors to create more speaking opportunities on an online forum with audio recording capabilities so that each student gets a chance to practice. Some students in this study have occasionally expressed appreciation of how OSAs have helped them improve their speaking skills. Yet, some other students have reacted negatively to that sort of assignments and missed their submission deadlines. This prompted the investigation of students' perceptions of OSAs in an attempt to explore the benefits and the challenges they faced while doing them.

1.3 Research questions

This study investigates students' perceptions of the OSA by asking the following questions.

- How do students perceive online speaking opportunities offered as part of the IELTS preparation course?
- How do they perceive the effects of the designed OSAs on the development of their speaking skills?
- What are the challenges that students faced while doing their assignments?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Teaching approaches for IELTS speaking skills

There are a number of approaches to prepare students for the IELTS speaking component. IELTS preparation textbooks typically follow an approach of identifying recurrent topics and designing lesson plans around them, e.g. (Kovacs, 2011; Jackeman & McDowell, 2011; O'Connell, 2010). Alternatively, other textbooks identify question types and strategies and design lesson plans around them e.g. (Matthews & Salisbury, 2007; O'Sullivan & Thurlow, 2011; Jakeman and McDowell, 2010). Other approaches involve strategies that are custom tailored to fit particular students. Issitt (2007), for example, targeted three important areas, namely: self-confidence, critical thinking, and IELTS marking criteria to help improve IELTS band scores. Another example is a study by Stones (2013) where he describes how recording students' speaking practice, then asking them

to transcribe it can help students identify some of their own mistakes and enables the instructor to provide written feedback on the same transcript.

The approach proposed in this report is a combination of the above-mentioned approaches and will be discussed later in the procedure section.

2.2 Voice recording web tools for learning and teaching

A number of online tools that can enhance second or foreign language learning have been used and tested in a variety of teaching situations. Studies report positive results on the use of Web 2.0 tools and Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) especially ones involving voice recording. Sun (2009) cites a number of such studies that show increased motivation, engagement, achievement, learner autonomy, cooperative and collaborative learning, among other results.

Other studies have been more specific in reporting findings on the use of particular tools. The first tool is VoiceThread which is a cloud based application for sharing any type of media and allows participants to comment on that media by adding comments in a number of ways: audio (by microphone), video (by webcam), text, or media files. VoiceThread, has been quite popular with educators. Brunvand & Byrd (2011) emphasised its user-friendly interface. Delmas (2017) and Ching & Hsu (2013) used VoiceThread in graduate, online programs and both studies report increased collaborative learning and a sense of belonging to a learning community. It has also been used by undergraduate students to practice their English language speaking skills and learn presentation skills (AIOkaily, 2013, 2015), by pre-service teachers as a forum for reflection (McCormack, 2010), by business students for presentation delivery (Chan & Pallapu, 2012), by undergraduate students to facilitate collaboration on their projects (Augustsson, 2010), and as content delivery tool (Kidd, 2013). Fox (2017) reports on the use of VoiceThread to increase collaborative learning in an online educational programme for clinical nurse leaders who preferred the asynchronous voice communication over the text-based forum discussions. This is a sample of some of the research available on the use of VoiceThread in educational settings and it all points to the potential this tool has in fostering higher levels of collaboration and learner engagement. Smith & Dobson (2011) commented on its characteristic ease of use, and how it combines all aspects of language literacy, "into one seamless presentation tool" (p. 325).

Language learning is an area where voice recording has often been used to improve communicative competence.

McIntosh, Braul & Chao (2003) used it through an asynchronous voice conferencing tool, Wimba Voice Board, as part of an EAP language course. They reported that other than facilitating collaboration among learners, it indicated a deeper thought process and helped achieve communicative competence. Sun (2009) related similar findings after using Voice Blogging with language learners and Hew & Cheung (2012) also cited literature on how voice recording provides good practice to students learning a second language in “speaking, listening, and do self-diagnosis of pronunciation errors.” (p. 362)

2.3 Barriers to the use of web tools

A number of barriers that hinder the use of Web tools have been widely identified as well. In a study conducted in Oman, Al-Senaidi, Lin & Poirot (2009) classify barriers to ICT integration in teaching into two types:

external or first-order barriers, which relate to the limited resources, lack of time, lack of technical support, and technical problem, and the internal or second-order barriers, which relate to the teachers’ attitudes to ICT such as lack of confidence, resistance to change and negative attitudes, and no perception of benefits (Ertmer, 1999; Snoeyink and Ertmer, 2001).

Students were reported to have felt shy, intimidated, or embarrassed by the notion of recording and sharing their voice (Ching & Hsu, 2013; Hew & Cheung, 2012; Yaneske and Oates 2010; McIntosh, Braul & Chao, 2003; McIntosh et al 2003; Marriott & Hiscock 2002). Other studies in the UAE noted that students were more engaged but would not do any additional work, participation or contribution beyond the requirement (AlOkaily, 2016, 2013; Santos, 2013). However, AlOkaily (2016) reports that some lecturers refrain from designing assignments or activities that require students to make audio/video presentations based on the perception that it would be culturally inappropriate.

On the technical side, Smith & Dobson (2011) identified that the publishing options offered by VoiceThread do not lend itself to quick easy publishing of students’ work and that a process needs to be followed to ensure collaborative work gets shared properly. Sound quality related issues and computer lag or freeze were also listed among the annoyances that went along the process (McIntosh et al. 2003). The same studies also reported that it can be time consuming due to technical problems or to the need to repeat recordings more than once before students were satisfied with the final product. Many of these findings have also emerged from the data collected for this study. Further explanation

emerges from the analysis of the student interviews.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a pragmatic ontological position to knowledge claims in the form of paradigmatic pluralism (Onwuegbuzi & Leech, 2005). Therefore, both explanatory and exploratory case study design was followed to investigate students’ perceptions on the use of voice recording through asynchronous Web tools. The case study draws on both quantitative and qualitative data as an approach to acquire more in-depth, holistic description (Cohen, Manion, Morrison, 2011) to complement and validate findings through explanatory sequential design (Creswell, 2009; Onwuegbuzi, 2004). This approach was adopted in an attempt to minimise researcher/instructor bias through anticipating possible influences on the students. Hence, quantitative data was collected and analysed. The analysis showed some findings and some gaps; therefore, qualitative data was collected to validate the findings and close the gaps of the quantitative data. Both methods had the same weight and are collated in the discussion section of this paper. The data gathering tools used in the study were questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. Figure 1 (Adapted from Ivankova & Stick, 2007) shows a visual model for mixed-methods sequential explanatory design procedures followed in this study.

3.1 Participants

The participants of the study were 38 female students in level 3 IELTS preparation, L&S class. All participants were from an Arab, Muslim cultural background. More than half were local Emiratis (20 students), some Saudi (10), Syrian (5), and Jordanian (3) aged 18 and 20 with two students aged 24 and 26. The number of students diminished along the course because students were allowed to exit the course at any point upon achieving an IELTS score of band 5. By the time the questionnaire was administered, the number of students had fallen to 30, of which 27 answered the questionnaire.

3.2 Design of the OSAs and teaching approach

Once again, it should be mentioned here that the author was the instructor of this course. A systematic approach was followed when teaching the speaking component of the IELTS exam (Figure 2).

First, recurrent topics were introduced by eliciting students’ prior knowledge on these topics to activate schema (Carrell, 1984). Then, students were put into groups and

Figure 1. Mixed-methods sequential explanatory design procedures (adapted from Ivankova & Stick, 2007)

each group was provided with a different set of IELTS questions. Students brainstormed for ideas and took notes. Upon completing the preparation of answers, I asked individual students to respond to the questions orally. Class time does not permit that each student gets a chance to practice the

part they prepared; therefore, students were required to go to a VoiceThread presentation that was previously created for them with the set of questions that were provided to the whole class. Students were asked to find the slide that had their set of questions and respond to it orally by recording

Figure 2. Online speaking assignment design

their voice. Students reported that they needed to record their responses many times before they were satisfied with the recording and shared it on the VoiceThread for all classmates. Knowing that there will be audience (their classmates) made them more self-conscious and eager to perfect their response. In the process, they identified their mistakes in pronunciation and grammar and attempted to correct them by re-recording. Later, the same VoiceThread was made available for class students by adjusting the settings to allow students to see each other's responses on each set of questions. Therefore, that particular VoiceThread became a platform for students' different responses. In other words, it became a bank of possible responses to different exam questions and each of them got the chance to respond to questions individually.

Some students had technical difficulties accessing VoiceThread due to the type of digital device used or due to slow Internet connection. In response, students were given the option to use SoundCloud, a platform for creating and sharing audio files. SoundCloud was chosen because of its simplicity and ease of use. Students needed an introductory session on how to use SoundCloud and how to make the recordings private, i.e. not shared publicly with the world. Then, students shared their recordings with classmates by posting the links to a shared Google drive spreadsheet.

3.3 Procedure: A two-phase study

The data collection was done in two phases: quantitative and qualitative.

3.3.1 Phase 1: Quantitative method: Questionnaire design and data collection

Students were asked to respond to an online questionnaire to assess their perspectives on their experience with voice recording. They were informed about the nature and purpose of this study and signed an informed consent stating that their participation in the questionnaire was totally optional and completely anonymous, and that their voice recordings will not be used as part of this study.

The questionnaire was cross-sectional as the data was collected at one point in time (Creswell, 2003). The design process of the questionnaire followed three stages (Table 1): identifying the general purpose, identifying the subsidiary topics, and formulating specific information requirements (Cohen et al. 2011), all of which were driven from the initial research questions.

The questionnaire contained a number of statements that reflect both general and subsidiary topics based on findings from the literature review. There was a four-scale response option for each statement starting with 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'disagree', and 'strongly disagree'. The 'neither agree nor disagree' option was purposefully removed because

students did three OSA assignments; hence, they should have an informed opinion about it. Cohen et al. (2011) explain this possibility as follows:

Choices may be ‘forced’ by omitting certain categories (e.g. ‘no opinion’, ‘undecided’, ‘don’t know’, ‘neither agree nor disagree’). If the researcher genuinely believes that respondents do, or should, have an opinion then such omissions may be justified. (p. 389)

An open-ended question was added to give students the chance to add anything that the questionnaire did not tackle. Although open ended questions are normally associated with qualitative data, this question was considered as part of the quantitative data (Singer & Couper, 2011). Oppenheim (1992) draws attention that ‘statistical tabulation’ of open-ended questions might reduce the richness of results. In this case, such loss was compensated in the qualitative phase. The questionnaire was hosted on qualtrics.com and piloted with a random sample of five students to “ensure that the categories are comprehensive, exhaustive and representative” (Cohen et al. 2011 p 384). There were no significant problems except a refinement of some sentence structures to simplify the questions. It is worth mentioning here that questions were simplified to suit students’ English language level. The link to the questionnaire, along with a cover letter to explain purpose, was emailed to the remaining 30 students of both sections. 27 of them responded. 19 of the 27 answered the open-ended question.

Table 1. Questionnaire design

Design Stage	Questionnaire Topic
General purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> to obtain a detailed understanding of students’ perceptions of the OSAs
Subsidiary topics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the benefits of OSAs in improving students’ speaking skills, and the challenges students faced while doing their assignments
Information requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Benefits: improved speaking through practice? collaboration? repetition? sharing? Challenges: are they technical? motivational (i.e. willingness to work outside of the classroom)? cultural?

3.3.2 Phase 2: Qualitative method: Interview design and data collection

This phase was designed to validate questionnaire findings and acquire more specific information regarding the challenges that faced students (Creswell et al, 2003). Six semi-structured interviews were conducted to probe areas that were not reflected explicitly in the questionnaire.

3.3.2.1 Sample selection

The type of sample was, according to Cohen et al. (2011), a dimensional sample (p. 158) or a purposive nonrandom sample (Mackey & Gass, 2005; p. 123)

Figure 3. Interview Sample Selection

Since one of the main purposes of the interview was to identify the type of challenges (being technical, motivational and/or cultural), students in both classes were categorised according to these categories. The categorization was based on knowledge of students’ capabilities and tendencies. This knowledge was built gradually through daily contact with them as their instructor. Some students were categorized as more tech-savvy because they were ready to help when any technical problem occurs. Some were self-driven and highly motivated. They were categorised as such because they were the ones who did the work in class and were constantly asking for more practice and did their assignments on time. Others were more observant of Arabic, Islamic culture and traditions. This was displayed through their conduct and code of dress. Of course, there were students who were in two or all three categories. The Venn diagram (Figure 3)

shows the interviewees distribution within these three categories. As mentioned earlier, pseudonyms are used. A fourth category was where students came from. I tried to have a representative from each country. Reference to students' countries will not be made to further protect their identity

3.3.2.2 Interview design and protocol

The interview was designed as a set of questions with some freedom for both interviewer (author/instructor of the course) and the students to allow for exploration of students' perceptions from a number of angles. The content was driven from the initial research questions, literature review, and the quantitative results from phase 1. The first main purpose of the interview was to explore and elaborate on the challenges students faced. In other words, why some of them delayed or resisted doing these assignments. The second main purpose was to validate the statistical evidence from phase 1 of the study regarding how the OSAs helped improve students general speaking skills and better prepared them for the speaking component of the IELTS exam. The main questions revolved around areas to be explored according to Table 2. Some sub-questions were added when students did not give enough information.

The questions were asked in both English and Arabic to ensure that meaning was not lost and the interviewees were given the option to answer in either language. Two of them answered in English and four answered in Arabic. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. To validate the interviews, interviewees were then invited to read the transcription and sign that it is a true account of the interview. All students' names were removed and pseudonyms were used instead to protect their identity.

4. Results

4.1 Quantitative data analysis.

The results of the questionnaire gave some insights regarding the use of OSAs (Table 3). For purposes of analysis, 'strongly agree' and 'agree' were grouped together to indicate a general agreement, and the same was done with responses indicating general disagreement.

Statement 1 assessed students' overall perception of the assignments and showed unanimous agreement that the OSAs were effective in improving their speaking skills. Statements 2 to 6 were intended to explore phases of the assignment, i.e. IELTS topic preparation, recording

answers, listening to own recording, re-recording, sharing and listening to other students' responses (in that order). Again, responses showed an almost unanimous agreement that students went through the intended assignment phases. Only one student indicated that she shared her recording without listening to it. The second phase of data collection was planned to validate them in case they were the result of any possible influence that the knowledge of the research project had on students.

Statements 7 through 10 aimed at identifying which tool (VoiceThread or SoundCloud) was more difficult to use and whether the difficulty came from using the website or the mobile app. Although the statements might seem double-barrelled, asking about both delays and errors in each of the statements, the purpose behind this was to generally identify where it was easier to do the assignment through mobile apps or the website. Hence, the type of technical difficulty, being errors or delays, is really not the focus of the question here. Asking students these questions can help understand the nature of the technical difficulty they faced because knowing it would help in future planning of similar assignments. Students reported facing more difficulties with VoiceThread, 60% with the website and 48% with the mobile app. SoundCloud numbers regarding technical difficulties, however, were significantly lower with 15% for the website and 38% for the mobile app. We can conclude here that students found SoundCloud.com to be an easier alternative as an asynchronous, voice recording Web tool.

Statements 11 and 12 explored students' motivation or willingness to do more OSAs. 4 students (15%) preferred to practice in class only, and 2 students (7%) indicated that they were not willing to do more assignments. These results did not seem consistent with the reluctance and the delays that occurred in assignment submissions. Therefore, more detailed interviews were required to validate these results.

Statements 13 to 14 probed how students felt about posting their voice recordings and about other people listening to them. 16 students did not mind recording and posting while 11 did mind. The same numbers were reflected in the next statement in that 16 students did not like being listened to while 11 disagreed to that. Most students seemed to be not comfortable about posting their recordings publicly. This can be viewed in light of the earlier mentioned study (AlOkaily, 2016) where lecturers felt that it might be culturally inappropriate to ask female students to record audio/video of themselves speaking and post it on an online platform.

Table 2. Interview questions and rationale

Main Question	Rationale
What challenges did you face when doing your online speaking assignments?	To encourage students to elaborate on the challenges they faced.
Why, do you think, students did not respond quickly to the assignment? I needed to remind them several times to do it.	By referring to other students, I intended to make the interviewee less embarrassed because the question implies that it was about other students and not about her so that she would not feel defensive about why she delayed her submission (if she had been among those who delayed it).
Any suggestions for the future? How can we better use online speaking assignments with future classes?	This is another way interviewees can think of barriers or challenges. To explore which aspect they would have changed in the assignment to render it more doable.
What number of assignments, do you think, would be reasonable for a whole course?	To assess if they would be willing to do more or if they thought that three assignments were too many.
Did you feel these assignments improved your speaking skills?	To validate reported benefits from phase 1

Statement 15 asked students to choose which sharing mode would be more acceptable for them: publicly, with teacher only, or with teacher and classmates only. Although 22 students (81%) chose to share with teacher and classmates, the one student who chose ‘with teacher only’ was allowed the option of not sharing.

Statement 16 was added for the purpose of identifying which digital device students were using in an attempt to associate type of device with degree of difficulty. This proved to be difficult to find out due to the fact that half the students indicated using more than one device.

The open ended question, ‘In general, how do you feel about online speaking assignments?’, was answered by 19 students. After doing a content analysis by looking at the themes mentioned in the responses, I found that the responses can be broken down to 49 comments with identifiable patterns (Table 4).

For example, 14 indicated that the assignments were useful by using the term ‘useful, good way, benefit, and good idea). 5 indicated that it gave them better IELTS practice, another 5 mentioned collaboration, and 3 described the repetition process in recording as very helpful. 2 students mentioned benefitting from more practice outside of the classroom. The most significant finding was that 19 comments indicated improvement in speaking skills, fluency,

vocabulary, and confidence. These results will be validated in the qualitative phase later.

4.2 Qualitative data analysis

Open coded analysis (Flick, 2009) was used, and the main themes found answered the research questions in that students identified barriers to be technical, motivational and cultural, with an added personal barrier in terms of shyness or lack of confidence. Moreover, the benefits were identified as: improving speaking skills, better IELTS preparation, becoming more confident, learning through collaboration, usefulness of listening to one’s own recording and identifying mistakes. The following sections provide detailed analysis of these findings.

4.2.1 Benefits

All six interviewees reported benefiting from the assignments as a whole. Four of them mentioned recording, identifying errors, and rerecording in particular. Interestingly, this point was mentioned as both a challenge and a benefit.

“It took time to record because the first time I recorded, I had a lot of grammar mistakes and pronunciation mistakes. But when I repeated the recording, I fixed all these problems. It is very good when you listen to your own speaking.” (Muna)

Table 3. Questionnaire statements and results

	Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	The Online speaking assignments were efficient in improving my overall speaking skills.	17	10	0	0
2	The Online speaking assignments helped me prepare for the IELTS exam.	20	7	0	0
3	I listened to my recording before submitting it.	18	9	0	0
4	I sometimes needed to repeat my recording at least once.	11	15	1	0
5	I got more ideas to speak about from listening to my classmates' assignments.	17	10	0	0
6	Sharing the Online speaking assignments helps students learn from each other.	20	7	0	0
7	I faced errors and delays while trying to use the VoiceThread website.	4	12	9	2
8	I faced errors and delays while trying to use the VoiceThread app on my mobile phone.	7	6	10	4
9	I faced errors and delays while trying to use the SoundCloud website.	1	3	14	9
10	I faced errors and delays while trying to use the SoundCloud app on my mobile phone.	3	7	8	9
11	I would rather practice speaking in class only.	2	2	17	6
12	I am willing to do more online speaking assignments.	12	13	0	2
13	I don't mind recording my voice and posting it somewhere on the Internet.	8	8	8	3
14	I don't like anyone to hear my voice.	3	8	13	3

Table 4. Open-ended question analysis

Total number of responses	19	
number of comments after breakdown	49	100%
improved speaking skills, fluency, vocabulary, and confidence	19	33.8%
useful, good way, benefit, and good idea	14	28.6%
Better IELTS preparation	5	10.2%
learning through collaboration	5	10.2%
useful repetition in recording process	3	6.1%
more practice outside of classroom	2	40.1%
new idea (innovative assignment)	1	2%

In another example, Salma mentioned increased confidence and fluency: “It really helped me improve my speaking and be more confident. It’s the repetition that helped. Having to repeat the recording several times made me more fluent.” She also talked about how being conscious that other students will listen to her response motivated her to perfect her recording: “I had to redo the recordings several times until I felt everything was correct so that anyone who listens would benefit from it and not hear mistakes.” This shows that students realized the benefit of having to record, assess, repeat recording several times and how it provided good practice.

The fact that these assignments were a good opportunity to practice at home was noted by Mariam:

“This assignment is very useful. In the past, I tried to find anything online to help me with my speaking skills but couldn’t. These assignments gave me the chance to develop and improve and talk for a long time. We have one hour in the class but my teacher gave me the chance to practice at home too at any time and get a high score in the IELTS.” (Mariam)

Aalia, on the other hand, pointed out the peer learning aspect of the assignments: “They will benefit from hearing themselves speak and from hearing their classmates”. She mentioned collaboration several times, specifically to overcome technical issues: “Downloading the SoundCloud app took a long time because of the Internet. After that I didn’t know how to create an account. I asked my friend and I asked you and got the help I needed.” This point was reiterated by all interviewees which shows that there was cooperation among students to address technical issues and peer learning through listening to other students’ responses.

4.2.2 Challenges.

4.2.2.1 Technical challenges

Having technical difficulties was repeatedly mentioned in the interviews, although the web tools used are two of the most reported for their user-friendly interface and ease of use - as mentioned earlier in the literature review. This can only mean that students are not as tech-savvy as we might think they are. All six interviewees reported facing technical problems but they also reported how they helped each other to overcome them. They also reported that some devices were easier to use with certain web tools, for example, Muna preferred using her laptop because her Android mobile phone was more difficult to use. She also said: “Some

students don’t use technology a lot. This is a big problem.” clearly referring to the lack of digital skills. Salma also mentioned how she had to try several times with the help of the instructions sheet. She said: “I had to print the instructions of how to use SoundCloud. The one you sent us. I had to try several times before I could register with the website.”

The fact that they were instructed to make their recordings private on SoundCloud and share the link with others through Google drive, added to the difficulties they faced. Lamia mentioned this point quite clearly and mentioned also how she overcame it through collaboration. “I did face some trouble because I didn’t know where to send the link or how to share it and how to follow my classmates on SoundCloud. But we helped each other and solved these problems.” She also pointed out to the fact that VoiceThread was too slow to load that she did not want to continue with the assignment. This issue mainly occurs due to the different capabilities of students’ devices. Some have more powerful devices that enable fast processing of data and fast downloads, while others have less capable devices. This is a documented issue with BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) strategy for technology integration (AIOkaily, 2013, 2015)

4.2.2.2 Motivational challenges

In this particular teaching context, lack of motivation is more of an issue because all forms of assessments are not included in students’ GPA. Students do not feel an immediate need to do all that is required from them. Therefore, students pick and choose what suits them and mostly, what they pick is not really much. This point became clear when they were asked about why ‘other’ students delayed their work and needed reminding several times. The interviewees did not feel defensive and found it easier to discuss the reasons as the reference here was to ‘other’ students not themselves. Muna explained that “some students don’t like to work a lot for studying.” and Mariam reiterated that “it all depends on their mood. Some people are not disciplined. They don’t want to do any work.” Reham, too, pointed it out by saying “some others are just lazy. They think that they don’t have to do it.” Lamia and Aisha, on the other hand, were straight forward and talked about themselves:

“I didn’t feel it was important at first. I thought ‘let other students do it’. But when I started to do it, I was encouraged to do more.” (Lamia)

“It wasn’t difficult but maybe we got busy with other assignments. I find it difficult to do any assignments at home because of my children. I am only free after 10 pm but by that time I’d be too tired and sleepy.” (Aalia)

4.2.2.3 Cultural, technological incompatibilities

Cultural values, as explained earlier in the Context of the Study section, seem to influence students' behaviour in this part of the world. Signs of this can be observed in their conduct, preferences, dress code, among other signs (Diallo, 2014; Rapanta, 2014; Finlow, 2001). When probing this area in the interviews, some indirect signs surfaced through references to being 'afraid that someone would hear the recording' (Salma) or not wanting 'to post their recordings where someone might listen to them' (Muna).

One interviewee, Mariam, who was chosen for the purpose of being observant of culture, explained why it took her longer to do the assignments. She explained that there had been a discussion between herself and her parents regarding the issue of recording her voice and sharing it. She said:

"A major reason is our traditions and our parents. My parents did not allow me, at first, to record my voice and share it on the Internet, especially my father. He said it was not allowed in our religion. My mom did not object a lot and told me that I could do it if I was confident that my teacher will not share my recordings with people other than the classmates. I trust my teacher and that's why I recorded my voice. I don't mind if my classmates listened to my recordings but other people are not allowed."

This is mainly a concern that can be contextualized with the traditions that shape cultural norms in the UAE. Although this case represents a minority of students, it should still be respected and students should not be put in a situation where their recordings are made public without their consent. In fact, another student from the class refused to share and sent her recording via Whatsapp in one occasion and by email in another.

5. Discussion

5.1 Validation and explanation of overall results

Both qualitative and quantitative results provided evidence that students benefitted from the OSAs. The results showed that students' overall perceptions of their own performance is improved. They felt that they had improved speaking skills and fluency, better IELTS preparation, improved self-confidence, collaboration, peer learning, and increased learner autonomy through error detection and self-correction. These themes emerged in the questionnaire and were recurrent in the interviews. The technical issues

were indicated in the questionnaire but students, as explained in the interviews, managed to overcome them through collaboration and sharing of expertise. The cultural barrier that was questioned through statements 13 and 14 in the questionnaire showed a small number of students who had reservations about the assignments. In the interviews, however, more in-depth knowledge was gained regarding the reason why one student hesitated to do the assignments at first. Having some students with cultural reservations to OSAs is explained in the light of two important facts. Al-Hunayyan & Al-Sharhan (2009) explain this aspect as "Arabic countries have some rich cultures and religious beliefs, which may be violated seriously in the light of the current trends in virtual learning" (p. 2). In this study, the student Mariam needed to discuss the assignment with her parents to assess whether there might be such violation of cultural norms. The conclusion of this discussion was that there is no violation of culture if the recordings remain private to class members. Dunbar, 1991 explains that technologies carry the characteristics of the countries in which they were developed, which carries an implication that a cultural mismatch might occur where the technology is being implemented. Akinyemi (2003) point to the importance of taking the socio-cultural factor in consideration when introducing new technologies. To sum up, the caution and hesitation towards technology use in education is widely documented and explains the caution and hesitation of Mariam and her parents.

The second reason why the cultural issue was pointed by few students only is because the assignments under study were carried out by a female instructor with female students. Male instructors teaching female students would normally hesitate before asking students to do a similar assignment in this context. On the other hand, a female instructor can implement this type of assignments with male students without much worry regarding cultural values. This point is documented in another study in the same context where lecturers explain their concerns towards implementing technology in such a culturally conservative context (AlOkaily, 2016). This is an area worthy of further research to better inform instructors on what instructional technology they can implement within the cultural restrictions of UAE and Arab society particularly gender related research.

6. Conclusion and Limitations

On several occasions, students reported the same factor in a number of different ways. Some aspects of the experience were mentioned as challenges, e.g. having to repeat the recording several times, being conscious of mistakes,

and having technical difficulties. The same aspects were mentioned a second time as benefits, and a third time indicating that overcoming these challenges is what made them improve their skills. This shows that the design of the assignment (figure 2) is successful and students acknowledged how it benefited them.

The findings of this study are context specific involving female students taught by a female instructor. Different results may emerge in other contexts such as that of male students taught by a male instructor, male students taught by a female instructor, a mixed gender class or different geographical or sociocultural context.

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