
The Impact of Online Learning in the Development of Speaking Skills

Persis Dineen Rodrigues

Centre for Languages, Taylor's University

Malachi Edwin Vethamani

*School of English, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences,
University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus*

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Abstract

The concept of language learning using technology has allowed both language instructors and learners to explore the effectiveness of the online learning approach. Such computer-mediated activities provide an online platform for ESL learners to further practise their language skills as their face-to-face contact learning hours are rather limited. Limited contact learning hours have an impact on ESL learners who desire to further develop their oral skills in classroom. This online learning approach encourages the learners to practise their oral conversations in an individualised learning environment at their own pace and time. It also encourages autonomous learning among these ESL learners. This paper aims to investigate the comparative results and learners' feedback on the effectiveness of the English Proficiency in Conversation (EPiC) online learning programme that influences the speaking performance of the EPiC group and non-EPiC group students in a 12-week Intensive English Programme (IEN). A total of 19 participants from Lower Intermediate and Intermediate levels took part in this study, and collection of data was carried out using both quantitative and qualitative methods. EPiC evaluation scores and IEN speaking marks were used as quantitative methods to show comparative speaking results. Semi-structured interviews and student learning journals were used to explore the learners' feedback on the effectiveness of EPiC online learning in the development of speaking skills. The findings from both research methods indicate that the EPiC group performed better than the non-EPiC group in terms of improvement in speaking grades, and vocabulary and listening skills despite unstable Internet connection. The implications of this study are that the use of this online learning programme shows greater language proficiency and stronger self-confidence among ESL learners in the development of speaking skills. These implications are further discussed along with suggestions for further research.

Key words: Blended learning, computer-mediated communication (CMC), e-learning, improvement in oral skills, individualised learning

* Corresponding author: Persis Dineen Rodrigues
Email: PersisDineen.Rodrigues@taylors.edu.my

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INTRODUCTION

The use of computer-mediated activity is undeniably helpful in making the learning process more effective and meaningful among ESL learners in terms of developing oral skills (Mahfouz & Ihmeideh, 2009). Current global development has provided more opportunities for instructors to adopt online learning approaches in helping learners to be more independent in their language learning. The impact of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in education has been proven in numerous studies because it enables teaching and learning to be more interesting, interactive, meaningful and motivating as well (Tinio, 2002; Chapelle, 2003; Kenning, 2007). ICT, for example, Web 2.0 applications, has made available more methods to learn a language. These applications may generate some important skills, namely oral communication, global awareness, critical thinking and information literacy (Dohn, 2009; Rotherham & Willingham, 2010; Buchem & Hamelmann, 2011).

With the availability of Web 2.0 applications, the present study aims to find out the effectiveness of online learning programmes in helping ESL learners at the tertiary level to further improve their speaking performance. To enable online speaking, Skype was used as a tool to provide new ways of communicating with different users. The general description of the particular online speaking programme is further discussed below.

English Proficiency in Conversation (EPiC) is a web-based programme that provides a learning environment where individuals can have one-on-one conversation with language coaches at their convenience. EPiC focuses on the development of oral skills. This online programme is provided by a division of Genashtim Innovative Learning which has been involved in online education since 2004 (<http://global.epiclanguage.com/>). Prior to starting the EPiC programme, all learners are required to sit for an online assessment. For this purpose, learners need to have good Internet connection and a Skype account. The structure of EPiC is learners need to undergo 50 minutes of coaching and provide feedback at the end of the session.

Apart from participating in the EPiC programme, the participants were also required to complete their usual Intensive English Programme (IEN) for 12 weeks at a private university in Malaysia. At Taylor's University, the Centre for Languages provides Intensive English programmes to individuals who wish to further develop their language proficiency skills. The programme is divided into six levels, and the duration for each level is six weeks. The six levels are Lower Elementary, Elementary, Lower Intermediate, Intermediate, Upper Intermediate and Advanced.

The IEN programme is structured to be fully compliant with the European Common Framework that reduces the amount of time spent for full-time study in this institution. Apart from the framework, the English requirement for academic purposes is clearly understood and supported by the current IEN programme. With regard to the IEN

programme, students are trained to master both language and academic skills in order to meet the challenges of tertiary level education.

In this study, participants were chosen from the Lower Intermediate level because of their adequate proficiency. In this case, the learning outcomes of speaking skills in Lower Intermediate level are also further defined. At the end of this level, students should be able to describe simple personal information; provide appropriate words to match the content of the questions; produce more complex sentences; and conduct basic inferring skills based on the given questions.

The same participants progressed to the next level, that is, Intermediate for another six weeks. Upon completing the Intermediate level, the participants should be able to describe habits and personal information; express opinion on a variety of issues; explain and extend ideas on a variety of issues; and organise and construct ideas to address question requirements.

In order to achieve the given learning outcomes for both levels, the students need more conversational practices outside the classroom. Time constraint and the large number of students are the two main reasons why speaking activities in the classroom are ineffective. These issues are further discussed in the following statement of problem.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

In Malaysia, English is used as a Second Language (ESL) from primary to tertiary level (Vethamani & Nair, 2007) and the language is also taught as a Foreign Language (EFL) to international students in institutions of higher learning (Nurtjahja & Sabani, 2007; Yee & Mokhtar, 2013). English proficiency among international language learners is still low. This can be seen among EFL learners whose English proficiency is below par. The learners usually struggle in getting their ideas across in English other than their own mother tongue due to various reasons (Zakaria, 2008).

Time constraint and the large number of students in a language classroom are the two main reasons why speaking or conversational activities in groups are ineffective in this study. As a result, students are also influenced by uncontrolled anxiety when they speak in front of their classmates (Kitano, 2001). EFL students are often shy in using English because they are frightened of making mistakes while speaking in front of other classmates. Hence, the students remain silent and at times, refuse to speak. This can be seen in EFL learners at National University of Laos. The learners are not confident in using English because of two main reasons: afraid of making mistakes and feeling shy (Souriyavongsa, Zainol Abidin & Leong, 2013).

This lack of practice for English speaking will affect their study performance as courses are conducted in English (Grgurovic, 2011). Hence, additional practice in an individualised

learning environment is recommended, because students would be able to practise their oral skills at their own pace and time and without worrying about an audience.

The English Proficiency in Conversation (EPiC) online programme was introduced to help students further improve their oral skills. However, the full potential and outcome of using this online speaking platform have not been empirically explored.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study aims to explore the effectiveness of an online learning approach that could affect the speaking proficiency of ESL learners in a 12-week Intensive English Programme (IEN). A comparative study was carried out between students who underwent the EPiC programme and students who did not undergo the similar online programme for developing speaking skills. The study investigated the following research questions:

- I. Are there any marked differences between EPiC students and non-EPiC students in the development of speaking skills?
- II. What was the feedback from students who underwent the EPiC online programme?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Online learning has expanded not only in the written discourse, but also in the oral discourse (Lamy & Hampel, 2007). The past decade has seen an increasing amount of research on the use of audio (Kenning, 2010) for international language learning. In addition to this related study, a number of compiled online language learning have emerged with the use of audio in various published journals such as *ReCALL*, *CALL*, *CALICO*, and *Language Learning Technology* (Belz & Thorne, 2005; Lamy & Hampel, 2007; O'Dowd, 2007; Thomas, 2008).

These studies involved online language learning (via audio) between language instructors and learners (Coburn, 2010; Hampel & Hauck, 2004; Ryobe, 2008); between learners and native speakers (Tudini, 2003; Mahfouz & Ihmeideh, 2009); and between peers (Yilmaz & Granena, 2010). An audio platform uses Skype (www.skype.com) as a means of communication between language learners and instructors to further develop learners' oral skills (Ryobe, 2008; Coburn, 2010). In Ryobe's (2008) research, Skype was used as a video chat to improve the proficiency of English language learners. Apart from engaging in Skype video chats, the learners were also motivated to further develop their intercultural awareness and expand their autonomous learning. Hence, this paper can be seen as relevant or applicable to language instructors, planners and policy makers who work in this specialised field.

E-learning is the confluence of many technology-based learning opportunities. It employs technologies as part of the delivery system and as a tool to assist with the representation of ideas (Hedberg & Ping, 2004). Yuen and Ma (2008) argued that online learning

continues to develop as an alternative to face-to-face instruction while the traditional classroom is still present. This approach is also known as blended learning. The blended learning approach has been adopted in various learning institutions, but many pre-service teachers still prefer a face-to-face class with online material (Ellis, Hanington, Ong, & Wilkinson, 2012). This e-learning approach is adopted in facilitating online language learning especially for speaking and conversations. Hence, allowing online facilitators to structure online communication helps generate a sense of community, and provide social cues in order to encourage social interactions and create trust (Mather, 2000).

Apart from online learning, content or curriculum in ICT education is digitally structured and customised to meet individual learner needs, skills, learning outcomes and interests. Concepts such as “just-in-time learning” and “learning anytime”, “anywhere” illustrate the dynamic learning environment and web-based learning communities that revolve and evolve around inquiry-based learning tasks (McCombs & Vakili, 2005). These important concepts allow learners to fully participate in an online learning environment with the aim of creating a self-learning approach. In the online section of a public speaking course, Linardopoulos (2010) found that the respondents had a positive and valuable learning experience. In this study, 80% of the respondents felt that they believe their public speaking skills through the online platform of the course developed to the same degree or more than if they had used a face-to-face platform.

Synchronous computer-mediated communication offers or provides the possibility to talk with proficient and expert speakers, which could improve both listening and speaking skills. Besides that, online speaking communication allows shy students to express themselves more freely as there is less teacher control and more authentic tasks. Egbert (2005) explained that online communication provides the learners with opportunities to orally communicate with other people in an environment that is conducive to learning.

Egbert (2005) further elaborated that the main advantage of this practice is that “learners can interact socially and receive authentic oral input from peers and others” (p.42). The researcher added that peer interaction provides an online learning platform to practise “listening, speaking, and negotiating that other learners might not get” (p.42). In addition, learners can benefit from the feedback that they offer to each other in an implied way, especially when communication is taking place between native and non-native speakers or learners.

Another advantage of having synchronous computer-aided communication (CMC) in language learning is that it helps to increase one’s motivation and develop a cultural understanding of the target language. Abrams’ (2003) study has shown that online communication with native speakers has positive learning effects as it enables language learners to have oral communication with real audiences and provides them with authentic language experiences.

METHODOLOGY

This section describes the participants, research design, instruments and procedures used in this study. A quantitative method was adopted to compare the oral performance scores between students who underwent the EPiC programme and students who did not undergo the programme. In order to further investigate the students' feedback on the impact of EPiC programme, interviews were conducted as a qualitative means of obtaining data. Finally, the procedures used in collecting data are elaborated in Figure 1.

Participants

The study was carried out with 19 IEN students as participants. Eight were from China, seven were from Oman, two from Korea, one from Yemen and one from Tanzania. These 19 students had undergone Lower Intermediate for six weeks and Intermediate for another six weeks, starting from April to July. In the beginning, the study was carried out at the Lower Intermediate (LI) level based on the English Entrance Test (EET) results. Apart from the EET results, these LI students were chosen because they possessed sufficient command and understanding of the language unlike the Lower Elementary (LE) and Elementary (E) level students who generally had limited or basic understanding of the language. Of the 240 contact hours for the two levels, 30 hours of online speaking lessons and 210 hours of classroom lessons were completed by the EPiC students; meanwhile, the other group underwent the full number of contact hours without EPiC online sessions.

During the course of the study, six EPiC students failed the entire LI level (including other language skills: listening, grammar, reading and writing). As a result, these six failed students remained in LI level; whilst, the other 13 students who passed, moved on to the Intermediate level. These students continued their study in Lower Intermediate and Intermediate levels, respectively for another 15 hour sessions. The controlled group's oral scores were compared with the non-controlled group's scores (from different groups but within the same level).

Research Design

Creswell (2003) stated that researchers have the freedom to select the best methods, techniques and procedures that best explain their objectives and meet the needs of their research. Having reviewed the methods of research design on the effectiveness of online learning in spoken discourse thoroughly, a mixed mode of data collection was decided – quantitative and qualitative methods – to provide a complete picture of the impacts that influence the development of oral skills.

The quantitative method was used to determine any marked differences between EPiC and non-EPiC participants in the development of oral skills. Descriptive statistics in the form of percentage and grading system were used to make a comparative analysis between these two groups. Collecting standardised information from participants through quantitative methods (fixed design) is appropriate with the research question (Robson,

2002). The qualitative method examined further how other variables had a bearing on the development of oral skills among the EPiC participants.

Data were collected from semi-structured interviews, student learning journals, speaking assessment scores and EPiC evaluations of the participants. The research instruments are discussed below.

Instruments

Speaking scores (IEN academic performance) and EPiC coach evaluation scores were used as data for part of the quantitative method. The speaking scores covered both classroom participation and final examination marks. The distribution of speaking scores is represented in Table 1.

Table 1. Classroom participation and final examination marks

Classroom participation marks			Final examination marks (Speaking)	Total marks	Convert to:
Speaking 1	Speaking 2	Speaking 3			
20%	20%	20%	20%	80%	100%

The types of speaking activities that were carried out in classroom were pair work (role play), group presentation and individual presentation for both Lower Intermediate and Intermediate levels. The final examination, on the other hand, consisted of three parts for each level. Part one comprised simple questions (introduction) such as personal information, daily routine and so on for both levels. Part two included describing pictures (Lower Intermediate) and individual long turn questions (Intermediate). The final part consisted of comprehension questions for the Lower Intermediate level and discussion topics for the Intermediate level.

Apart from the speaking assessment scores, the EPiC coach evaluation scores were also included. The oral assessments were divided into three stages: pre-test, mid-test and final test. The breakdown of the evaluation scores is represented in Table 2.

Table 2. The breakdown of EPiC coach evaluation scores

Session	Item 1 (Listening)	Item 2 (Grammar)	Item 3 (Fluency)	Item 4 (Compre.)	Item 5 (Compre.)	Item 6 (Pronun.)	Average scores
1st (Pre)	0–9	0–9	0–9	0–9	0–9	0–9	The total scores of all the items are divided by 6 in order to give the average score.
15th (Mid)	0–9	0–9	0–9	0–9	0–9	0–9	The total scores of all the items are divided by 6 in order to give the average score.
30th (Final)	0–9	0–9	0–9	0–9	0–9	0–9	The total scores of all the items are divided by 6 in order to give the average score.

In each item, the scales from zero to nine are divided into four sub-categories: ‘zero to two’ is considered as not apparent (not perceived or not understood), ‘three to six’ is regarded as developing (to grow or strengthen), ‘seven to eight’ is considered as consolidating (to make firm or strong) and ‘nine’ demonstrates the level of established skill (accepted or recognised).

The average scores demonstrate the proficiency level of the students. The average scores are structured according to different levels of proficiencies as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Average scores by the EPiC team

Average scores	Proficiency levels
0 – 2	Lower Beginner
3 – 4	Beginner
4 – 5	Upper Beginner
6 – 7	Intermediate
8	Upper Intermediate
9	Advanced

Note: These averages scores are based on the general ESL grading system.

Other components such as listening, reading, grammar and writing were not included in this study. The overall speaking scores of EPiC students were descriptively compared with those who were not involved in the study.

A qualitative method, semi-structured interview, was designed to obtain greater insights into the effectiveness of the EPiC programme in the development of oral skills which involved all 19 participants. The purpose of the semi-structured interview was to find out in detail the feedback of the students about the online programme. In studying all these factors, the researchers were able to gain a comprehensive understanding of the various reasons that influence the participants' oral development. Hence, qualitative methods are suitable for undertaking research questions that look at the "how", "why", and "in what situation" aspects. The flexible design is used to develop detailed and intensive knowledge of a small number of related cases (Robson, 2002).

The following list shows the eight questions formulated for the interview: Questions 1 to 2 were related to the participants' preference and frequency of online speaking sessions. Questions 3 to 4 dealt with the participants' development of oral skills. Questions 5 to 7 were related to the services provided by the EPiC team and also the present institution, respectively. Finally, question 8 solicited participants' recommendation to others who wished to improve their oral skills.

1. Do you like the EPiC online programme? Why?
2. How often do you take part in the EPiC online sessions?
3. In what ways does the EPiC online programme help you improve your speaking skills?
4. Apart from improving your speaking skills, what other skills do you develop from the EPiC programme?
5. What do you think of the EPiC coaches?
6. In terms of Information Technology (IT) support, what are the challenges you faced?
7. In terms of the EPiC support team, what are the other challenges you faced?
8. Would you recommend this online programme to your friends?

Apart from the semi-structured interviews, the participants were also given a weekly learning journal to explore their individual development in oral skills. In this weekly learning journal, the participants recorded the topics and the phrases they learnt during the sessions and their learning progress after each EPiC session. A sample of weekly learning journal is provided in the Appendix.

Procedure

Data were collected by researchers for about three month as shown in Figure 1 below.

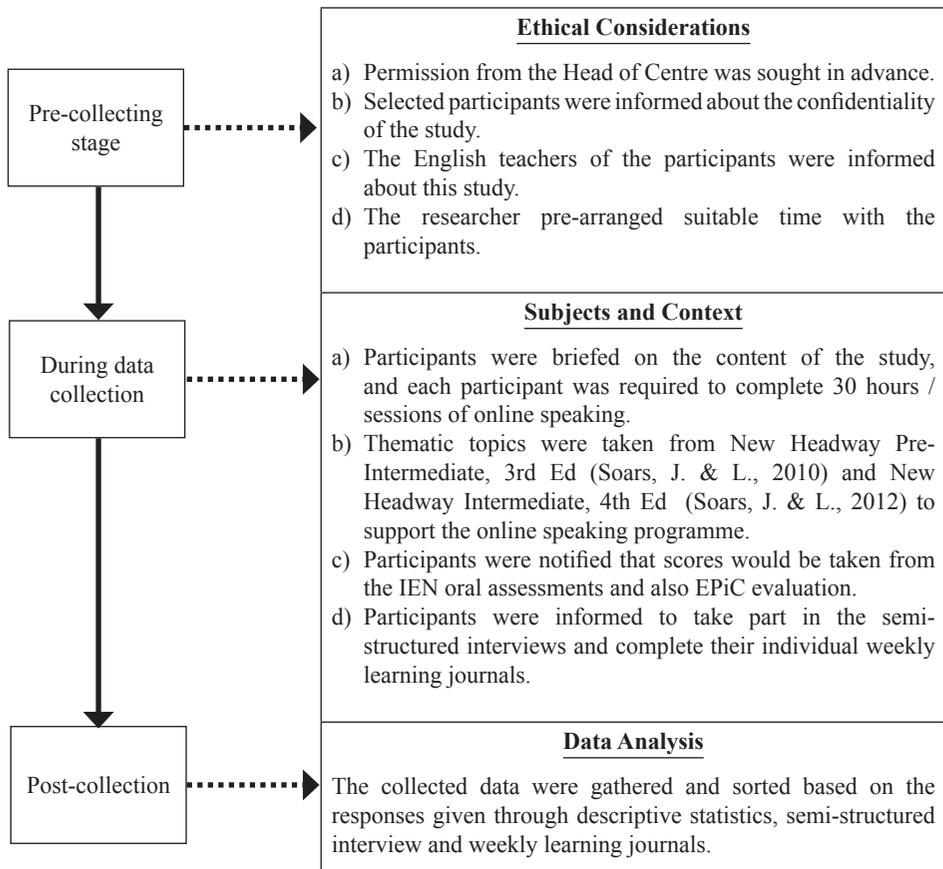


Figure 1. Data collection procedure

As seen in Figure 1, there were three main stages in data collection. The pre-collecting stage entailed addressing ethical considerations. Permission was sought from the Head of Centre to allow the Lower Intermediate and Intermediate students to participate in this study. Upon getting permission, the participants were notified about the nature of the study, confidentiality of their identity in data reporting, and that their examination scores or grades would not be affected by the study. A consent letter was also given to the participants to confirm their participation in this study. The English teachers of the centre were also notified of this study.

Data collection began with a briefing session to ensure all the participants understood the EPiC online learning flow (pre, during and post, technological and administrative supports), prior to the study. Each Lower Intermediate participant was told to complete 15 sessions of online speaking with one hour per session. Participants who passed Lower Intermediate level would continue with another 15 sessions in Intermediate level. In total, the participants were required to complete 30 hours of online speaking in order to capture their development of oral skills during the three-month study.

In order to support the online speaking lessons, thematic topics were taken from the current main textbooks: *New Headway Pre-Intermediate, 3rd Edition* and *Intermediate 4th Edition*. With the support of thematic topics, the participants were able to achieve the desired learning outcomes such as organising and creating a role play, creating a story, expressing their opinions or experiences, conducting interviews, asking for and giving advice, describing future plans, and producing an informative and a demonstrative speech. During the briefing, the participants were encouraged to seek any clarification that might arise. The participants were also told that there was no right or wrong answer in the weekly learning journal. During the interview sessions, the participants were encouraged to ask questions at any time. The interview sessions were carried out on a one-to-one basis. The duration of this interview ranged from 15 to 30 minutes. During the sessions, both tape recording and note-taking were done to ensure information given by the participants was not accidentally omitted. Tape recording enabled the researchers to recall or reanalyse the data after the event while, note-taking helped to detect central issues and record various contexts. The interview data were then transcribed.

In the final stage of data analysis, descriptive statistics were employed to analyse quantitative data. The oral performance scores are tabulated and answers from the participants are further elaborated in the following findings and discussion.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study are presented according to the two research questions: (i) To find out the differences in oral scores between EPiC students and non-EPiC students, and (ii) to determine the EPiC participants' feedback towards the online speaking programme.

Quantitative Findings (Oral Performance Scores)

In answering research question 1, the oral scores are presented in two parts. The first part describes the oral scores in both classroom activities and final examinations whilst the second part shows the average scores of oral performance given by the EPiC coaches. The first part of the quantitative findings is categorised into two different levels: Lower Intermediate for two different intakes and Intermediate (same intake). Due to low student numbers (Lower Intermediate A and B) in the month of April, two intakes were utilised to make comparisons. Therefore, the researchers needed to seek other Lower Intermediate students who did not undergo the online speaking programme from the February intake.

Part 1 (A): Lower Intermediate Level (Between February and April intake)

A comparison of speaking scores was carried out between Lower Intermediate students who underwent the online programme and other Lower Intermediate students who did not undergo the similar programme. Table 4 below depicts it.

Table 4. A comparison between EPiC (April) and non-EPiC participants (February) in the Lower Intermediate level

Grading (%)	Grades	Number of students without EPiC (February Intake)	Number of students with EPiC (April Intake)
80 – 100	A	0	3
75–79	A–	2	2
70–74	B+	5	3
65–69	B	4	2
60–64	B–	3	2
56–59	C+	1	2
50–55	C	2	1
0 – 49	F	1	1

Based on Table 4, the EPiC participants from the April intake showed better performance than the non-EPiC participants from the February intake. The grades were adopted based on the institution’s grading system. At this level, the number of EPiC participants who scored between 75% and 100% was 5. In contrast, only 2 non-EPiC participants scored between 75% and 79%. However, out of 19 EPiC participants, 2 were not fully involved in this study because of poor attendance records in both classroom and online learning sessions. These two participants showed less positive learning attitude towards language learning. This finding is similar to findings from a research on good Taiwanese language learners. Chou and Yen (2005) commented that most of the participants were related to “successful personalities” such as “persistent”, “positive”, “confident”, and “willing to face challenges”.

These combined oral scores were only based on their speaking assessments in class and in the finals. In order for the participants to pass the entire level, all components including listening, grammar, writing and reading must be on par. Nevertheless, 6 EPiC participants were unable to continue to the next level because they did not do well in the other non-speaking components. For this reason, the six participants had to repeat the Lower Intermediate level.

Part One (B): Lower Intermediate Level (June Intake)

As mentioned previously, the 6 EPiC students who failed the entire Lower Intermediate level were required to repeat it, and they continued participating in this study. A comparison of speaking scores was also carried out between the Lower Intermediate students who underwent the online programme and the other Lower Intermediate students who did not undergo the similar programme from the June intake. Table 5 below shows it.

Table 5. A comparison between the EPiC and non-EPiC participants in the Lower Intermediate level

Grading (%)	Grades	Number of students without EPiC	Number of students with EPiC
80 – 100	A	0	0
75–79	A–	0	1
70–74	B+	3	1
65–69	B	0	0
60–64	B–	4	3
56–59	C+	3	1
50–55	C	0	0
0 – 49	F	1	0

Table 5 shows that two EPiC participants scored B+ and above whereas there were only three non-EPiC students who scored B+. Another interesting point is that there was only one non-EPiC student who failed the speaking component. Unlike the EPiC group, the same six failed students finally passed the speaking component with the lowest grade C+. The EPiC programme affected the development of oral skills among the repeat EPiC students.

Part One (C): Intermediate Level (June Intake)

In this Intermediate level, the same 13 EPiC participants continued the study (see Table 4). The other six EPiC participants also continued the study but they would be in the previous level: Lower Intermediate (see Table 5). A comparison was carried out between these 19 EPiC participants with the other non-EPiC participants from the same levels but different groups: A and B in June intake. Table 6 portrays the speaking scores between the EPiC and non-EPiC students in the Intermediate level.

Table 6. A comparison between the EPiC and non-EPiC participants in the Intermediate level (June Intake)

Grading (%)	Grades	Number of students in Intermediate (A) Without EPiC	Number of students in Intermediate (B) With EPiC
80 – 100	A	3	4
75–79	A–	0	4
70–74	B+	1	0
65–69	B	2	3
60–64	B–	2	1
56–59	C+	0	0
50–55	C	0	1
0 – 49	F	1	0

As indicated in Table 6, 13 EPiC participants performed better than the non-EPiC participants in the Intermediate level. Out of 13 EPiC participants, 8 scored between 79% and 100%. On the other hand, 3 non-EPiC participants scored between 80% and 100%. The lowest grade for the controlled group was grade C; however, the lowest grade for the non-controlled group was grade F. In other words, it clearly shows that students who underwent the complete 15 hours of EPiC sessions, performed better than those who did not take the online speaking lessons.

Part Two (A): Oral Performance Scores by the EPiC Team

Apart from the speaking assessment scores, the average scores of oral performance given by the EPiC coaches are shown in Table 7. The oral assessment rating is based on general ESL grading system. There were in total 3 sessions of assessment: 1st, 15th and 30th.

Table 7. Oral assessment rating (tabulated by the EPiC team)

Oral Assessment Rating					
No	Student	1st Session (Pre)	15th Session (Mid)	30th Session (Final)	Remark
1	Student A1	5	6	6	
2	Student A2	5	6	7	
3	Student A3	5	6	7	
4	Student A4	5	6	7	
5	Student A5	4	5	N/A	**
6	Student A6	5	6	7	
7	Student A7	5	6	7	
8	Student A8	5	6	6	
9	Student A9	5		7	
10	Student A10	5	6	7	
11	Student A11	5	5	5	
12	Student A12	5	6	7	
13	Student A13	5	6	7	
14	Student B (ii)	5	5	N/A	**
15	Student A (i)	5	5	N/A	**
16	Student C (iii)	5	6	8	
17	Student D (iv)	4	5	6	
18	Student E (v)	6	7	8	
19	Student F (vi)	4	5	N/A	**

Note:** The evaluation is incomplete.

According to Table 7, all of the 19 Lower Intermediate participants had to sit for an oral assessment conducted by the EPiC coaches. The first session was carried out to gauge the participants' oral proficiency. In the first session, the participants were gauged based on the thematic topics from their Pre-Intermediate textbook. Based on the first result, 18 out of 19 participants obtained an average score of 4–5 (equivalent to Upper Beginner level). These 18 participants were able to provide simple responses in familiar situations although they made a lot of errors in terms of pronunciation and choice of words. Apart from that, the ability to understand simple questions and information was rather limited. After gauging the oral proficiency for each participant, the EPiC coaches were able to customise their online speaking lessons for the next sessions until the participants sat for another assessment.

As the EPiC participants moved on to the next 15th session (assessment), their average scores had gradually improved except for 3 participants due to their poor online attendance record. Of the 19 EPiC participants, 13 passed Lower Intermediate, and they moved on to the next sessions in the Intermediate level. The other 6 participants who failed Lower Intermediate level repeated the same level and continued with another 15 online speaking sessions in the Lower Intermediate level. Finally, when the 19 EPiC participants reached the 30th session (assessment), 12 out of 19 scored between 6 and 7. In other words, these participants were considered as Intermediate users. They were able to provide general meanings on familiar topics for basic everyday needs despite the influence of their first language. Two participants scored an average of 8 and they were categorised as Upper Intermediate users. These two participants were able to speak about most transactional needs and some social situations. In addition, they were able to use some complex sentence structures to elaborate the points and grammar was accurate, but it was inconsistent at times. On the other hand, 4 participants did not complete their last session; therefore, their last evaluation was based on the 15th session. These four participants obtained an average score of 5 (Upper Beginner). Finally, only one participant scored 5 for the 30th session.

Part Two (B): EPiC Coaches' Comments

Apart from the given average scores, comments were taken down by the EPiC coaches during the 1st, 15th and 30th sessions. Out of 19 participants, only 3 were chosen because of their respective remarkable achievements in spoken discourse. These three participants were given a code (an alphabet and a number) for ethical purposes.

In the first assessment, student A10 was hesitant to speak due to his limited vocabulary. When student A10 was assessed in the 15th session, the student was able to ask questions and express himself in simple and short sentences. In addition, the participant had developed his listening skills. In the last 30th assessment, his level of confidence had improved. The participant was able to ask relevant questions, apply appropriate words and construct proper sentence structures. His consistent online attendance showed great influence on his progress of English proficiency.

In the beginning, student C (iii) had difficulty in creating his own sentences using the key vocabulary. Having a positive learning attitude, the participant was eager to learn and was open to corrections. Hence, in the 15th assessment, the participant was much more confident in learning the language, and he was able to follow instructions and absorb new concepts with minimal problems. In the last session, student C (iii) was able to pronounce most of the words or phrases. Although the student was given adequate pronunciation drills and vocabulary enrichment, it would still depend on the student's memory.

Student E (v) was very much influenced by her first language although in time, she was able to self-correct her pronunciations. In order to develop fluency, grammar and

vocabulary knowledge are needed. In the 15th assessment, the participant had sustained a long conversation in English despite her limited vocabulary and grammar (Subject-Verb agreement and tenses). At the end of the 30th assessment, the participant was able to express her ideas well due to her strong determination in learning the language. The participant was able to use appropriate words and provide relevant answers although her speech was influenced by her first language (accent).

Qualitative Findings (Students' Feedback)

The findings of the second research question are organised into five sections – Benefits of EPiC, Improvement in Listening and Vocabulary, EPiC Team, Students' Convenience and Internet connection. These findings were obtained from the interview sessions and the participants' weekly learning journals.

Benefits Of EPiC

Out of 19 students, 17 felt that the EPiC programme was beneficial in helping them improve their oral skills. One of 17 participants expressed that the EPiC programme was a good method to practise in English conversation. Nevertheless, two other participants did not feel that the online programme was useful because they did not see the value of helping them improve further. One of them felt that the EPiC coaches repeated similar topics for almost every online session. After clarifying with the EPiC team, it was common for the EPiC coaches to repeat some topics because they needed to ensure that the participants were familiar with the topics before moving on to other topics.

Improvement in Listening and Vocabulary

Besides developing their speaking skills, 12 participants felt that their listening skills were improved. With the improvement of listening skills, the participants were able to comprehend the given topics with related phrases. One of the 12 participants claimed that his listening skills were much better than before, because he was able to understand the gist of the conversations, and was able to provide appropriate responses as well. During the EPiC sessions, all the 19 EPiC participants learnt additional words which were related to the given topics. The participants felt that their vocabulary had expanded because they were able to apply those related phrases within the particular context. This finding is similar to Ryobe's research (2009) where the listening and vocabulary skills of students improved in an online learning environment.

Feedback on the EPiC Coaches

With regard to the EPiC coaches, the participants were comfortable and satisfied with the coaches' warm personalities, because the coaches were helpful, patient, kind and friendly. Apart from the coaches, the monitoring and scheduling teams were also efficient in helping the participants solve their IT and Internet problems, and schedule online booking. It usually took less than 2 hours to solve such issues. Nonetheless, every situation depended on the seriousness or complexity of the issue. For this reason,

sometimes it takes one day to solve the issues. As Dimova (2007) argued, computers can only operate what they are well-programmed for because computers are machines. Computers, therefore, cannot handle unexpected situations such as sudden hitches in the operational system and poor connection to the Internet.

Students' Convenience

Most of the participants preferred to complete their online sessions at home because it was more convenient (out of their classroom hours) and comfortable (less noise and distraction). By doing so, they felt more focused on their online lessons. Out of 19 participants, 3 felt that 15 hours were too much to be completed within the 6 weeks. These 3 participants suggested 10 hours for one level would be reasonable, because they contended they had other projects or assignments to submit as well. On the other hand, others felt 15 hours were just right for the whole 6 weeks.

Internet Connection

Lastly, the Internet connection was rather challenging for some participants because of unstable connection in the campus (hostel area). For this reason, a speed test was initially done for all the EPiC participants at their respective homes or hostels. The speed test results were forwarded to the EPiC team for investigation. Apart from the speed test, the participants were advised not to simply change their venue without informing the EPiC team, as it was part of the requirement. However, some participants changed the venue without informing both the researchers and EPiC team. As a result, this affected the EPiC online lessons. The internet connection issue can also be found in Ryobe's (2009) research on using Skype as a supplementary platform for oral communication practice. Ryobe (2009) highlighted that his respondents also faced similar poor Internet connection during the Skype session. This concurs with the study undertaken by Thang, Mahmud and Razak (2012) that revealed Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) students experienced Internet connection issues in their respective residential colleges. Similarly, undergraduates in a public university also experienced Internet issues on campus while doing their online learning courses (Pang, Lee, Tan & Shukery, 2005). However, only a few students in this current study claimed that the connection was unstable.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The implications of the study are discussed in relation to the effectiveness of the online programme in the development of oral skills. The EPiC online programme has significantly developed the oral skills among ESL learners in terms of theoretical, methodological and pedagogical implications.

Theoretically, the one-to-one online conversation in this study helped the learners gain much confidence in speaking the language despite the influence of accent from their first language. This finding is consistent with Gebhard and Nagamine's study (2005) on online language learning. The researchers emphasised that online language learning

helps improve linguistic proficiency and subsequently, increases self-confidence among learners. With the support of EPiC online programme, the learners are more motivated to speak more words or sentences within 12 weeks. Slesongsom and Suppasetsee (2012) also agreed that online chatting could further motivate students to produce more phrases within 10 weeks. This finding has proven that language learners, whose motivational levels are higher, are most likely to have a strong determination to improve their oral skills (Lambert & Gardner, 1972).

Apart from the development of speaking skills, listening and comprehension abilities were shown to have greatly improved among the EPiC learners. The learners took risks and made mistakes in providing answers during the EPiC sessions, because they knew that they had to construct simple conversations with the coaches within that one hour. Based on the nature of the communicative task, the EPiC participants employed social strategies to practise their English conversations. The effectiveness of EPiC online learning minimised the use of memory strategies among the learners, because the learners would rather practise English conversations in a more natural way. The implication of this study is in line with Olah's (2006) research on Japanese ESL students using social strategies to communicate with others in a natural setting. Nevertheless, the challenge of this EPiC online programme lies in the behavioristic nature, because it involves roleplaying, listening and reviewing previous lessons. These previous lessons require learners to repeat the speaking materials which may cause them to lose interest in doing behaviouristic role plays. These findings can be used in improving pedagogical or instructional skills for both classroom and online speaking instructors.

The effectiveness of EPiC online learning can also be used in helping both classroom and online instructors prepare appropriate curricular materials for spoken discourse. This is because every learner has different language learning abilities. In order to encourage learner autonomy, curricular materials that allow independent learning such as online materials and those that use multimedia should be developed. These implications concur with Coburn (2010) who recommended increasing audio conferencing in language learning among the Norwegian learners. Furthermore, the researcher argued the importance of designing appropriate online tasks must be carefully considered to ensure that learning outcomes are achievable.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Based on the implications of this study, it is recommended that online speaking programmes should be incorporated in English language proficiency programmes because it benefits the development of oral skills among ESL learners. Despite the behaviouristic nature of the online programme, it is crucial to develop and implement constructive role plays (Shen & Suwanthep, 2011). If the EPiC programme is implemented in language proficiency programmes, communicative tasks are recommended to facilitate the online speaking lessons. More research is needed to explore the role of communicative tasks

being used in an online speaking platform among ESL learners as part of language learning strategy.

It should be noted too that this study is rather small as it only involved 19 participants. Hence, it is recommended that a more extensive sampling is utilised to validate the current findings and also to provide more insights across the six levels of Intensive English programme. Further investigation could lead to a better understanding of the language learning strategies employed by learners from all the six levels of Intensive English programme.

In conclusion, this study successfully answered two significant research questions that explored the effectiveness of online speaking programme in positively impacting students' oral skill development. It is hoped that the study will help future researchers in exploring more comparative studies in online spoken discourse using different digital contexts such as Google Hangout. Apart from online platforms, future studies could explore anxiety levels as one-to-one environments help to create a safe learning zone where learners could feel more comfortable making errors in their conversations when their peers are not around to pass judgment.

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The importance of speaking skills for EFL learners. Mrs Ishrat Aamer Qureshi Student of Diploma TEFL. Roll No : AP504192

Department of English, Alama Iqbal Open University, Pakistan. ishrataamer@hotmail.com. 1/10. 1. Abstract This research paper brings to light, the importance of speaking skills. The researcher adopts a communicative approach for the enhancement of speaking skills of her students in the class. The researcher pays special attention on the problem of the students who are structurally competent but can not communicate appropriately. Learning styles impact the development of learning solutions. A person's learning style may be influenced by age, ethnicity and cultural background, which must be factored into the development process. For example, a study by Wainhouse Research found that there are small differences in the way different ages prefer to learn. The kinds of programs that are most successful today will continue to be most successful in the future – programs that blend online, virtual and face-to-face learning. Businesses may want to jump on the AI bandwagon because it's such a hot topic, but they have to identify what they want to do with it," advises Mary Beth Ainsworth, global product marketing manager of artificial intelligence and text analytics at SAS. Key Words: pronunciation, phonetics, speaking skills, movies, songs, word stress, sentence stress The Impact of English Movies and Songs on Enhancing the English Pronunciation and Speaking Skills Introduction: English language is one of the most powerful and well-known languages in the whole world. 3. Using English TV shows, movies, and songs is expected to have positive impact on the pronunciation and speaking skills of the senior English majors at Hebron University. Review of Literature In a poll launched online two years ago ("Is pronunciation a priority" Accordingly, the extent of difficulty of learning English depends greatly on its relation to