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Exploring English Speaking Difficulties and ICT-Based Interventions in Tertiary ELT

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Abstract

This passage highlights that speaking skill is essential for English proficiency and greatly impacts learners' academic achievements, job prospects, and social interactions. Despite formal education, many secondary and tertiary learners struggle with fluency and confidence in speaking English due to various linguistic, psychological, pedagogical, and socio-cultural barriers. These include limited vocabulary, grammatical errors, pronunciation issues, fear of mistakes, low confidence, and a lack of real speaking practice. Recently, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has shown promise as an effective teaching tool to overcome these challenges by offering interactive, learner-focused, and engaging speaking practice environments. This study investigates the main challenges learners encounter in developing English speaking skills and explores how ICT tools can improve their oral communication abilities. Employing a mixed-methods approach, data were gathered through questionnaires, speaking tests, and semi-structured interviews with tertiary-level students and English teachers. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis. The findings suggest that incorporating ICT into English teaching effectively addresses speaking difficulties and recommend systematic training for teachers alongside the integration of ICT-based speaking activities into the curriculum.

Keywords

English speaking skills, ICT tools, oral communication, language anxiety, English language teaching

Introduction

Speaking is often considered one of the most difficult skills for learners of English as a second or foreign language. Unlike reading or writing, speaking demands real-time language processing, including retrieving vocabulary, constructing grammar, pronouncing correctly, and using language appropriately in context. In academic and professional settings, strong speaking skills are crucial for presentations, discussions, interviews, and teamwork. Nevertheless, many English learners find it challenging to communicate verbally, even when they have sufficient grammar and vocabulary knowledge.

In traditional English language classrooms, teaching often focuses on reading and writing to meet exam demands, with speaking activities receiving limited emphasis. Consequently, learners have few chances for meaningful oral interaction. This problem is especially pronounced in foreign language contexts, where learners have minimal exposure to authentic English communication outside the classroom.

With the rapid advancement of digital technologies, ICT has become a vital component of education. ICT tools provide innovative opportunities for language teaching by facilitating interactive learning, multimodal input, immediate feedback, and access to authentic language use. Examples include mobile apps, online discussion platforms, video conferencing software, podcasts, and speech recognition systems, which offer learners flexible and engaging ways to practice speaking beyond traditional time and space limits.

This study aims to identify the key challenges learners face in developing English speaking skills and to assess the effectiveness of ICT tools in enhancing oral communication. By pinpointing difficulties and evaluating technology-based solutions, the research seeks to contribute to the advancement of pedagogical practices in English language teaching.

Research Objectives

The development of English speaking skills remains a significant challenge in English Language Teaching (ELT), especially at the tertiary level, where learners must communicate effectively in academic, professional, and social settings. Despite extensive English instruction, many learners struggle to attain oral proficiency due to various linguistic, psychological, and pedagogical factors. Traditional teacher-centered methods often limit opportunities for interactive speaking practice, which impedes oral communication development. Recently, the integration of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has gained attention as a promising solution, providing interactive, flexible, and learner-centered environments for speaking practice. This study aims to explore learners' speaking difficulties and examine the role of ICT tools in improving oral communication skills.

The first objective of this study is to identify the main difficulties learners face in developing English speaking skills. It examines barriers to effective oral communication, including linguistic challenges such as limited vocabulary, grammatical errors, pronunciation problems, and lack of fluency. Psychological factors like speaking anxiety, fear of mistakes, low confidence, and lack of motivation are also explored. Additionally, contextual and instructional issues—such as insufficient exposure to authentic language, limited opportunities for communicative interaction, and an overemphasis on writing skills in traditional classrooms are considered. By identifying these challenges, the study aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of the obstacles learners encounter in speaking English.

The second objective is to examine learners' attitudes toward using ICT tools for speaking practice. Learners' perceptions, beliefs, and motivation significantly influence the successful adoption of technology in language learning. This objective explores how learners view the usefulness, accessibility, and effectiveness of ICT tools such as language learning apps, video conferencing platforms, multimedia resources, speech recognition software, and online discussion forums. It also investigates whether ICT-based speaking activities help reduce anxiety, boost engagement, and encourage autonomous learning. Understanding these attitudes is crucial for determining how effectively ICT tools can be integrated into speaking instruction.

The third objective of the study is to analyze the effectiveness of ICT tools in enhancing learners' speaking skills. This involves assessing the impact of ICT integration on key aspects of speaking proficiency, including fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, vocabulary, and overall communicative competence. By comparing learners' performance before and after engaging in ICT-supported speaking activities, the study aims to determine whether technology-enhanced instruction results in measurable improvements. Additionally, it explores how ICT tools enable interactive and authentic speaking experiences that are often difficult to achieve in traditional classrooms.

The final objective is to propose pedagogical recommendations for integrating ICT into speaking instruction. Drawing on findings related to learners' challenges, attitudes, and outcomes, the study offers practical, context-sensitive guidance for educators. This includes effective instructional strategies, task design, and defining teacher roles in ICT-enhanced classrooms. It also highlights the importance of teacher training, curriculum integration, and balanced technology use to ensure ICT supports, rather than replaces, meaningful human interaction in language learning.

Research Questions

In alignment with the study's objectives, the research seeks to answer the following questions:

* What are the major difficulties learners face in developing English speaking skills?

* What are learners' attitudes toward using ICT tools for speaking practice?
* To what extent do ICT tools enhance learners' English speaking skills?
* What pedagogical implications can be drawn for the effective integration of ICT tools into speaking instruction?

Let me know if you need help expanding or refining these questions.

Method - Research Design

This study utilized a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to investigate learners' speaking difficulties and evaluate the effectiveness of ICT tools in enhancing speaking skills at the tertiary level. According to APA 7th edition guidelines, mixed-methods research is suitable for addressing complex educational issues by capturing both numerical trends and in-depth perspectives (American Psychological Association, 2020).

The quantitative strand focused on assessing changes in learners' speaking performance before and after ICT-based speaking instruction, emphasizing objective measures such as fluency, pronunciation, grammatical accuracy, lexical range, and coherence. The qualitative strand explored students' and teachers' perceptions, experiences, and attitudes toward using ICT tools in speaking instruction, providing contextual depth to complement the quantitative results.

A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was employed, with quantitative and qualitative data collected simultaneously, analyzed separately, and then integrated during interpretation. This approach enhanced data triangulation, thereby increasing the validity and credibility of the findings through cross-verification from multiple sources.

Participants

The study involved 120 undergraduate students enrolled in tertiary-level English language courses and 10 English language teachers from a higher education institution. Participant selection was guided by the study's objectives and adhered to ethical standards outlined in the APA 7th edition guidelines.

Student Participants

The student participants were aged between 18 and 22 years and came from various academic disciplines. Their English proficiency ranged from lower-intermediate to upper-intermediate, determined by institutional placement criteria. Participants were chosen through simple random sampling to give each student an equal opportunity to be included, minimizing sampling bias.

Participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained before data collection. Students were assured that their responses would remain confidential and be used exclusively for research purposes. To ensure anonymity, participant identities were assigned numerical codes throughout the data analysis and reporting process.

Teacher Participants

The teacher participants included 10 English language instructors with teaching experience ranging from 5 to 18 years in tertiary education. They were selected through purposive sampling, as the study specifically required instructors who actively taught speaking skills and had experience incorporating ICT tools into their classroom instruction. Their involvement provided valuable pedagogical insights into both instructional practices and institutional aspects of ICT-supported speaking instruction.

Instruments

In accordance with APA 7th edition guidelines, multiple data collection instruments were utilized to ensure methodological rigor and facilitate triangulation.

Questionnaire

A structured questionnaire was administered to student participants to gather quantitative data on speaking difficulties, anxiety levels, confidence, and attitudes toward ICT-based speaking activities. The questionnaire consisted of four sections: demographic information, perceived speaking difficulties, speaking anxiety and confidence, and attitudes toward ICT tools.

Responses were recorded using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Before full deployment, the questionnaire was pilot-tested with a small group of students to assess clarity, reliability, and content validity. Feedback from the pilot study led to minor revisions in item wording.

Speaking Performance Test

To assess learners' English speaking proficiency and evaluate the impact of ICT-supported instruc-

tion, pretest and posttest speaking performance tasks were administered. This approach allowed for a systematic comparison of learners' speaking abilities before and after exposure to ICT-based activities, providing empirical evidence of learning gains attributed to the intervention. The speaking performance tasks were designed to measure learners' ability to use English effectively in realistic and academically relevant communicative contexts.

The tasks included a variety of formats: individual monologues, role-plays, short oral presentations, and interactive group discussions. Individual monologues required learners to speak on familiar academic or general topics within a set time, enabling assessment of fluency, coherence, and vocabulary without external support. Role-plays simulated authentic communicative situations such as academic discussions, interviews, and problem-solving, promoting spontaneous interaction and pragmatic language use. Short presentations assessed learners' skills in organizing ideas logically, using appropriate academic language, and delivering content confidently. Interactive group discussions evaluated turn-taking, responsiveness, and the ability to negotiate meaning in real-time communication. Together, these tasks reflected authentic speaking scenarios typical of tertiary academic settings.

Students' performances were scored using a standardized analytic speaking rubric to ensure objective and consistent evaluation. The rubric covered five key components of speaking proficiency: fluency, pronunciation, grammatical accuracy, vocabulary use, and coherence. Fluency was assessed based on speech smoothness, delivery rate, and pause usage. Pronunciation focused on intelligibility, stress, and intonation patterns. Grammatical accuracy evaluated correct use of sentence structures and morphology. Vocabulary use measured lexical range, appropriateness, and precision. Coherence considered the logical organization of ideas and effective use of discourse markers. Each criterion was rated on a predefined scale, allowing detailed diagnostic feedback on learners' speaking performance.

To enhance assessment reliability, two trained raters independently evaluated all speaking performances. Before scoring, rater calibration sessions were held to familiarize raters with the rubric and align their understanding of the scoring criteria. Sample recordings were reviewed and discussed to reduce subjective bias and ensure consistent rating. Interrater reliability was established by comparing scores from both raters, with any discrepancies resolved through discussion and consensus. This rigorous process strengthened the credibility and validity of the speaking performance data.

Semi-Structured Interviews

In addition to the speaking performance test, semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain deeper qualitative insights into learners' and teachers' experiences with ICT-based speaking instruction. While the quantitative data provided measurable evidence of improvement, the interviews offered a nuanced understanding of participants' perceptions, attitudes, and challenges regarding ICT integration in speaking instruction.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select interviewees, including 20 students from diverse proficiency levels and backgrounds, along with all 10 teachers involved in the ICT-enhanced speaking instruction. This ensured a broad range of perspectives relevant to the study's aims. Semi-structured interview protocols for both groups featured open-ended questions, allowing elaboration while maintaining consistency.

Student interviews explored perceptions of ICT tools such as language learning apps, multimedia resources, and online interaction platforms. Participants reflected on how these tools affected their confidence, motivation, and anxiety during speaking activities, as well as perceived improvements in fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, and overall satisfaction with ICT-supported learning.

Teacher interviews focused on instructional practices and pedagogical views related to ICT use. Teachers discussed the tools employed, strategies for facilitating speaking activities, and observed impacts on learners' oral skills. They also addressed challenges like technical issues, time constraints, and professional development needs, providing insights into practical aspects of ICT implementation.

All interviews were conducted in quiet, comfortable settings, audio-recorded with informed consent, and transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms were assigned to maintain confidentiality. Thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring themes related to speaking development and the pedagogical role of ICT. Integrating qualitative interview data with quantitative performance results enabled methodological triangulation, enhancing the

study's validity and robustness.

Several ICT tools were incorporated into speaking instruction to enhance various aspects of oral communication:

Mobile applications supported pronunciation, vocabulary development, and fluency practice by providing audio models and immediate feedback.

Video conferencing platforms enabled online discussions, collaborative speaking tasks, and oral presentations, fostering authentic interaction.

Digital storytelling tools allowed learners to participate in narrative speaking tasks by combining spoken language with multimedia elements.

Speech recognition software offered automated pronunciation feedback, helping learners identify errors and track their progress independently.

Together, these tools promoted learner autonomy, engagement, and increased opportunities for meaningful speaking practice.

Data Analysis - Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data from questionnaires and speaking performance tests were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including means, frequencies, and percentage distributions. Pretest and posttest speaking scores were compared to identify changes in learners' speaking performance after ICT integration.

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data from interview transcripts were examined through thematic analysis, involving systematic coding, categorization, and theme development. Key recurring themes related to motivation, confidence, engagement, and instructional challenges were identified. To enhance trustworthiness, participant validation was conducted by sharing summarized findings with selected participants.

Results

The study's results offer comprehensive evidence of both the linguistic and affective challenges faced by tertiary-level learners in developing English speaking skills, as well as the positive effects of integrating ICT tools into speaking instruction. The findings from the questionnaire, speaking performance tests, and semi-structured interviews are presented below.

Questionnaire Results

Analysis of the questionnaire data showed that learners faced multiple, interconnected challenges in developing English speaking proficiency. A significant majority (78%) reported fear of making mistakes, indicating high speaking anxiety, which often led to hesitation, avoidance of participation, and reluctance to speak in front of peers or teachers. Similarly, 72% expressed a lack of confidence, highlighting the critical role of affective factors in speaking performance.

In terms of linguistic challenges, about 65% identified limited vocabulary as a major barrier, noting that difficulty recalling appropriate words disrupted fluency and caused frequent pauses or code-switching. Pronunciation difficulties were reported by 61%, and grammatical accuracy by 58%, indicating struggles with core linguistic skills alongside psychological barriers.

Attitudes toward ICT-based speaking activities were largely positive. Over 80% agreed that ICT tools made speaking practice more engaging and less intimidating than traditional methods. Most students also reported that technology-based tasks encouraged more frequent participation and allowed practice without fear of immediate negative evaluation.

Speaking Performance Test Results

The pretest and posttest speaking assessments showed significant improvement in learners' speaking skills after integrating ICT tools. On a five-point analytic scale, the average fluency score rose from 2.8 to 3.9, reflecting better continuous and coherent speech with less hesitation and fewer long pauses. Pronunciation also improved notably, with scores increasing from 2.6 to 3.8, demonstrating clearer articulation, enhanced stress and intonation, and greater accuracy-especially among students using mobile apps and speech recognition software for practice.

Grammatical accuracy and lexical range also advanced, contributing to an overall speaking performance increase from 2.9 to 4.0. These findings indicate that ICT-supported teaching positively impacted multiple aspects of speaking competence. Learners who frequently engaged with ICT tools consistently outperformed

those with less interaction, underscoring the value of sustained use of technology.

Additionally, classroom observations revealed heightened learner participation during speaking activities, with students showing increased willingness to respond, participate in discussions, and give presentations, signaling greater confidence and reduced anxiety.

Interview Findings

The qualitative findings from semi-structured interviews strongly aligned with the quantitative results. Students reported that ICT tools fostered a non-threatening, supportive environment, enabling them to practice speaking without fear of embarrassment. Many highlighted the benefits of repeating tasks, listening to models, and receiving immediate feedback, which facilitated error identification and gradual improvement.

Several students appreciated the ability to practice at their own pace via digital platforms, especially those needing extra time to formulate responses. Video conferencing was noted for enhancing interaction and collaboration, while digital storytelling tools motivated creativity and coherence in oral expression.

Teachers shared similar views, observing increased learner engagement, better pronunciation, and greater willingness to participate in class speaking activities. They also found that ICT tools enabled more personalized feedback and improved progress monitoring. However, some teachers mentioned challenges like technical issues and a need for additional training, stressing the importance of strong institutional support for effective ICT integration.

Discussion

The study's findings confirm that challenges in developing English speaking skills among tertiary learners stem from both linguistic and affective factors. Fear of mistakes, anxiety, and low confidence were key barriers, aligning with prior research on foreign language anxiety and its detrimental effects on speaking performance.

Traditional teacher-centered methods, which often prioritize grammar and writing over meaningful oral interaction, may inadvertently elevate anxiety by focusing on accuracy rather than communication. This imbalance contributes to learners' reluctance to speak and limited exposure to authentic language use.

The notable improvement in speaking skills following ICT integration underscores the effectiveness of technology-enhanced language learning in addressing these issues. ICT tools fostered interactive, learner-centered environments that boosted autonomy, motivation, and confidence. Features like repeated practice and immediate feedback helped reduce fear of negative evaluation and encouraged risk-taking in language use.

Speech recognition software and mobile apps were particularly effective in enhancing pronunciation and fluency by enabling learners to self-monitor and adjust their output. Digital storytelling tools supported coherence and organization, aligning well with communicative and task-based teaching approaches.

Moreover, ICT tools helped bridge classroom learning with real-world communication. Video conferencing provided authentic interaction and collaborative speaking opportunities, consistent with constructivist principles emphasizing active, meaningful engagement.

Both students and teachers expressed positive attitudes toward ICT use, noting transformed classroom dynamics where learners became more active and teachers took on facilitative roles. However, the study highlights the necessity of adequate teacher training and institutional support to fully realize the pedagogical benefits of ICT. Without these, the potential of technology-enhanced instruction may be limited.

Conclusion

The present study investigated the challenges tertiary-level learners face in developing English speaking skills and assessed the role of ICT tools in enhancing oral communication. Despite extensive formal instruction, many learners struggle with linguistic challenges such as limited vocabulary, pronunciation issues, lack of fluency, and grammatical errors. Psychological

barriers—including fear of mistakes, anxiety, and low confidence—also hinder active participation in speaking tasks, limiting opportunities for meaningful practice.

The study's key contribution lies in demonstrating the positive impact of ICT integration on speaking skills. Learners showed significant improvements in fluency, pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and overall communicative competence after ICT-supported instruction. Technology-enhanced activities provided greater exposure to authentic language input and interactive practice often missing in traditional classrooms.

Beyond performance gains, ICT tools fostered increased learner confidence, reduced anxiety, and greater willingness to engage in speaking tasks. Digital platforms created supportive, low -pressure environments where learners could practice at their own pace and receive immediate feedback, promoting autonomy and sustained motivation.

Furthermore, ICT-supported instruction addressed limitations of conventional teaching methods by enabling learner-centered, communicative practices with collaborative and real-time interactions. This better aligned speaking skills development with real-world academic and professional demands.

Pedagogically, the study recommends systematic ICT integration in speaking instruction, emphasizing task design, alignment with learning objectives, and balancing technology with face-to-face interaction. Teacher training and institutional support are crucial for effective implementation, including adequate infrastructure and ongoing professional development.

The study's limitations include its focus on a specific context, limited sample size, and short ICT intervention period. Future research should explore long-term effects, diverse proficiency levels and contexts, and evaluate specific ICT tools such as speech recognition, AI applications, and virtual reality.

In conclusion, thoughtfully integrated ICT tools can transform speaking instruction by addressing both linguistic and affective challenges, offering a promising approach to improving speaking competence among tertiary English learners.

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