Developing Speaking Skills Using Virtual Speaking Buddy

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Abstract—This interdisciplinary study integrates ICT in education through the innovation of an interactive audio-based application as a tool to enhance English language speaking skills among less proficient students. Drawing on the sociocultural perspective of learning, the application named 'V-Buddy' has been developed and tested with a group of participants which consists of five primary school students and an English language teacher. The teacher was briefed of her role as a facilitator before the students were exposed to V-Buddy for eight weeks. Adopting one group pre-test and post-test experimental design as its methodology, the teacher was asked to evaluate the students' level of confidence to speak prior to and after their engagement with the V-Buddy. The teacher was also interviewed to obtain her feedback on V-Buddy whilst the students were asked to complete the Personal Report of Confidence (PRC). The analysis reveals that all the students developed higher confidence level after their engagement with V-Buddy and the teacher perceived it positively which suggests its potential to be used as a tool in developing speaking skills among less proficient students.

Keywords—Less proficient students, primary schools, second language learning, speaking skills, virtual speaking buddy.

1.1   Introduction

Good speaking skills are crucial for everyday situations and career opportunities. In Malaysia, English has long been considered as another important language besides

Bahasa Malaysia as it is widely used in various aspects of life, such as business, education and administration. However, most people experience some levels of speaking anxiety when they have to speak in a second language [1], especially if they have low level of proficiency [2]. This speaking anxiety can lead to the 'social phobia' [3] which is the fear that they will act in a humiliating way and that other people will judge them negatively. The presence of speaking anxiety in each individual explains why many second language learners are able to perform well in reading, writing and listening but having problems to orally use the language confidently. In Malaysia, the inability to speak in English confidently is not only faced by primary school students but also the degree holders which become one of the contributing factors to their unemployment [4]. V-Buddy, which is an audio-based application, is designed to propose a possible solution to overcome students' lack of confidence to speak in English. As argued by [5], recorded audio is 'a rich, flexible and engaging learning space'.

1.2   Sociocultural perspective on learning to speak

Socio-cultural theory is mainly associated with Lev Semenovich Vygotsky (1896-1934), the most influential socio-cultural theorist who 'systematically synthesized' the notions of culture, development, and learning [6]. One of the main claims in socio-cultural approach to learning as identified by [7] is that human action, on both the social and individual planes, is mediated by tools and signs. This claim is based on the concept of semiotic mediation proposed by [8]. According to [8],

language; various systems of counting; mnemonic techniques; algebraic symbol systems; works of art; writing; schemes, diagrams, maps and mechanical drawings; all sorts of conventional signs and so on' are all important in mediating social and individual functioning, and connecting the social and the individual (p.137).

Vygotsky's semiotic mediation thus suggests that knowledge is not something directly internalized but rather, is developed through the use of socially-created 'psychological tools' [9]. Vygotsky's notion of semiotic mediation contributes to the understanding of how the practice of developing students' confidence to speak in English explored in this study is mediated by the discourse that the participants engage in. Hence it is reasonable to hypothesize that providing a platform, such as V-Buddy for the students to talk to their virtual speaking buddy can gradually develop their confidence level to orally use the language. Once they have greater control of their confidence, the students will no longer feel anxious to use the language in face-to-face setting. Now simply start writing your text. When finished your paragraph click the style you wish to apply.

1.3   VirSbud Application

V-Buddy is not something that is totally new. There are several similar applications, such as the Talking Tom and Second Life which allow students to talk to their virtual buddy. However, the existing applications have their own limitations which make them inappropriate to be used as a tool to develop speaking skills among school

children. The Talking Tom, for example, will modify the students' voice and this raises difficulties for the teachers to keep track in the progress of students' confidence level. The teacher will not be able to identify whether the students are slightly nervous or extremely nervous when listening to the recorded voice in the Talking Tom due to nature of the app which does not present the authentic voice. As for the Second Life, it requires internet connection and some other high-tech systems thus is not practical enough to be used by the teacher as many students in this country especially those living in rural areas still do not have access to the internet.

All the limitations of the existing applications were taken into consideration in designing V-Buddy. Unlike the Talking Tom, V-Buddy will record and play the authentic voice of the students thus any wrong pronunciations and development in the confidence level can be easily identified by the teacher. In comparison to Second Life, V-Buddy is much less complicated to be used as it only requires the students to click on one of the animated characters presented to them and start talking.

2 Methodology

This study employed a pre-test and post-test experimental design to one group of learners. Using purposive sampling, V-Buddy was tested on five less proficient students (two males and three females) who are in their Standard Six. All of them are 12 years of age. They studied in the same school which is located in a rural area. Another participant in this study is their English language teacher, Miss Sara. She has a master's degree in Teaching English as Second Language (TESL) and has had five years of teaching experience.

2.1 Research procedure

The research procedure can be divided into four phases. Phase 1 is the recruitment of participants. Five less proficient students who are in their Standard Six were identified. All the five students came from the same school which is located in a rural area. Cooperation from their English language teacher to contribute as the facilitator in V-Buddy project was sought before informed consents were obtained from the students' parents. Phase 2 is the training of the facilitator. This is one of the most important phases in this study as the teacher plays a crucial role in the success of V-Buddy project. Eight hours were allocated for this training where the teacher was trained how to: i) evaluate students' confidence level prior to engagement with V-Buddy using the rating scale 1 to 5 with 5 score as the highest level of confidence (PRE-TEST); ii) engage students in V-Buddy project (INTERVENTION); iii) evaluate students' confidence level after the students had engaged with V-Buddy for eight weeks (POST-TEST).

Phase 3 is the engagement with V-Buddy. Students were engaged in the project for eight weeks. In the first meeting, the teacher evaluated the confidence level of each student and then introduced the concept of V-Buddy. In the second meeting onwards, the teacher taught them specific vocabulary and sentence structures to be used when

talking to their speaking buddy. For instance, the teacher chose the word chaos as the word of the day and taught the students different ways of using the word in a sentence. Then the students were asked to speak to their buddy for three to five minutes using the words chaos as the prompt. These speaking sessions were done weekly in the students' leisure time outside the school hours. Throughout the eight weeks, seven sessions were recorded and shown to the teacher for feedback.

Phase 4 is the post-evaluation. A week after the students received their feedback for the last recording session, the teacher evaluated the students' confidence level when talking face-to-face to their friends. The friends are the other four students who were engaged in V-Buddy project. The teacher gave one word prompt to each student and they need to speak for three to five minutes. Their confidence level was rated by the teacher from scale 1 to 5 with the score 5 as the highest level of confidence. During this phase, the students were also asked to complete the Personal Report of Confidence and the teacher was interviewed to obtain her feedback on V-Buddy project.

3 Findings and Discussion

3.1 Pre and post-tests of students' confidence level

All the five students scored higher points in the post evaluation conducted by the teacher which suggests that they have developed higher confidence level after their engagement with V-Buddy. Table 1 below shows the scores for the pre and post-tests as evaluated by the teacher.

Table 1. Scores of pre and post tests

Students	Pre	post
Mukhriz	2	4
Amril	3	5
Sufia	1	3
Amalin	2	4
Arissa	2	4

All the students scored two grades higher in the post-test despite their different scores in the pre-test which suggest that V-Buddy can be effectively used for students with different levels of low proficiency. Sufia who has an extremely poor level of proficiency (rated 1 in the pre-test) improved two points higher (rated 3 in the post-test). Similarly, Amril who has a moderate level of proficiency (rated 3 in the pre-test) prior to his engagement with V-Buddy scored two points higher in the post-test to develop excellent proficiency level (rated 5 in post-test).

The finding that the students developed their confidence level after being engaged with V-Buddy resonates with [10] who found that majority of the participants in their study gained higher confidence level to use English after being exposed to interactive approaches in learning the language. V-Buddy is interactive in two ways. Firstly, users are engaged in conversations with their virtual speaking buddy and secondly,

users are engaged in feedback sessions with their teacher. The interactive nature of this application enables the students to practise and improve their speaking skills. In addition, the use of computer-assisted language learning created an enjoyable learning experience as reported by several researchers, such as [11]. This enjoyable learning environment encouraged the students to keep speaking to their virtual buddy in their attempts to develop the confidence level.

3.2 Personal Report of Confidence (PRC)

All the five students reported to have built up their confidence to speak face-to-face to in front of their peers and teacher after their engagement with V-Buddy as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Participants' Personal Report of Confidence

Items / Students	Mukhriz	Amril	Sufia	Amalin	Arissa
I was in constant fear of not having enough vocabulary to speak	X	X	X	X	X
At the conclusion of the speech I felt I'd had a pleasant experience	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
My thoughts became confused and jumbled when I spoke before the audience	X	X	X	X	X
Although I might have felt nervous before I began to speak, I soon forgot my fears and enjoyed the experience	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔

It is important for the students to develop this perceived confidence as it will combat their anxiety to speak. As proposed by [12] who is the proponent of the self-fulfilling prophecy theory, individuals' perception of their ability plays a crucial role in their success in everything they do.

4 Conclusion

Interactive audio-based application has potential to be used as a tool to develop students' confidence level to speak in English. However, it is important for the stakeholders to bear in mind that technology is just a tool [13]. Its effectiveness is very much influenced by how strategic the teacher is in using this tool with their students. Hence it is especially important for the teacher to be made clear of their responsibilities when engaging the students with V-Buddy. Future research can perhaps compare two groups of students with two different teachers to investigate the effects of different ways of facilitating the students on the efficiency of interactive audio-based application, such as V-Buddy.

5   Acknowledgment

6   References

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