

An Analysis into the Outside Classroom Opportunities for Practicing Oral English and Their Effect on EFL Learners' Fluency

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Abstract

This study was conducted to investigate and identify the most effective oral outside classroom opportunities for practicing English and their effect on EFL learners' oral fluency. An investigative questionnaire consisted of 10 questions was used to collect the related data. A random sample of 89 students from King Abdulaziz University responded to this questionnaire. One important finding of this study was most students preferred the oral opportunities in which they interacted with native speakers and believed these opportunities affected their fluency the most. Another significant finding was students favoured virtual opportunities more than authentic ones. A third finding was the activities in which students were obliged to use English had a noticeable effect on their oral fluency more than opportunities where they used their mother tongue. Interpretations for these findings were discussed and recommendations were suggested to encourage students to engage in effective oral opportunities to improve their English fluency.

Keywords: EFL Learners, English Fluency, Flipped Classroom, Oral Practice

1. Introduction

Mastering English fluency is a really hard task especially for non-native English speakers (Oxford Royale Academy, 2014; Lampariello, 2019). To effectively improve English fluency, learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) need to practice and practice as much as possible, especially if their purpose is to master the language (Castella, 2013; Hussein and Elttayef, 2017). In this regard, lack of engaging in English conversations is the biggest mistake EFL speakers could make. Most non-native speakers find problems in communicating with native speakers and often avoid having conversations with native speakers due to the fear of making mistakes while communicating, but find themselves comfortable with non-native speakers (Savaşçı, 2014; Naunton, 2012). As we all know English is the most used language in the world with about 1.5 billion speakers and that shows how important English is for communicating with people from all around the world (Crystal, 2006). In Saudi Arabia, English is used in some contexts such as shops, restaurants, etc. and it is a compulsory language in all stages of school (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). Whereas Arabic is the official language in Saudi Arabia and most locals use it for everything and this creates an obstacle for English learners to practice English properly and this affects their fluency as well due to the lack of practice.

Most Saudi graduates cannot communicate in English properly during their jobs, even though most schools and universities put a lot of focus on English courses. However, graduates still are not fluent in English at all. One of the reasons for this is students talk most of the time in Arabic and rarely communicate with each other in English and this makes students lack oral fluency due to the lack of training and practicing English (Azzuhrani, 2011). According (Hassan, 2017), Saudi Arabia has a low English proficiency and have a score of 43.65 which is considered one of the worst scores in the middle east and the 8th worst score in the world. Most Saudis completely rely on Arabic in their daily tasks and even when they communicate with foreigners, they still use Arabic because they feel more comfortable communicating in their mother tongue.

Practicing English is a necessity; Saudi students as non-native speakers of English need to communicate in English in various situations: at schools especially international ones, in workplaces and companies, in shopping centres, when they travel abroad, etc. This study aims to emphasize the importance of practicing English, identify the opportunities for practicing English and investigate how this can affect the EFL learners' oral fluency. The questions of this research study are as follows:

- 1- What are the various opportunities used by Saudi students for practicing oral English outside the classroom?
- 2- How do these opportunities affect Saudi students' oral fluency?

2. Methodology

This study aimed to identify the oral opportunities students used most outside the classroom. It also attempted to investigate how these opportunities affected students' oral fluency. An Internet survey was created by Google Forms to collect the targeted data. To have a strong and well-organized valid and reliable survey, the researcher formed a focus group of 5 experienced teachers and asked them to create its questions in the light of the research questions. Then the survey was given to two specialists to check the compatibility between the research questions and the survey questions and to make sure that the survey questions could tackle the research problem. The questions were diverse in type, the types used were Likert Scale, multiple choice, multiple-choice grid and checkboxes. After that the survey draft was piloted on a group of ten students and modified in the light of their answers. To make sure that the sample of the study was capable to answer the questionnaire questions, three introductory questions about the participants proficiency were added and incompetent students were excluded. The final draft of the questionnaire which consisted of ten questions was sent to King Abdulaziz University students using social media websites and a total of 89 participants were gathered. Google Forms and Microsoft Excel were used to analyse the data acquired from the questionnaire.

3. Findings

The findings were presented based on the two research questions (RQs) and all the results were percentage-based.

3.1. The first research question (RQ1) was as follows:

RQ1: What are the various opportunities used by Saudi students for practicing oral English outside the classroom?

Figure 1 below showed the percentages of the different opportunities used by students for practicing oral English outside the classroom. It is worth mentioning that the students could choose more than one opportunity.

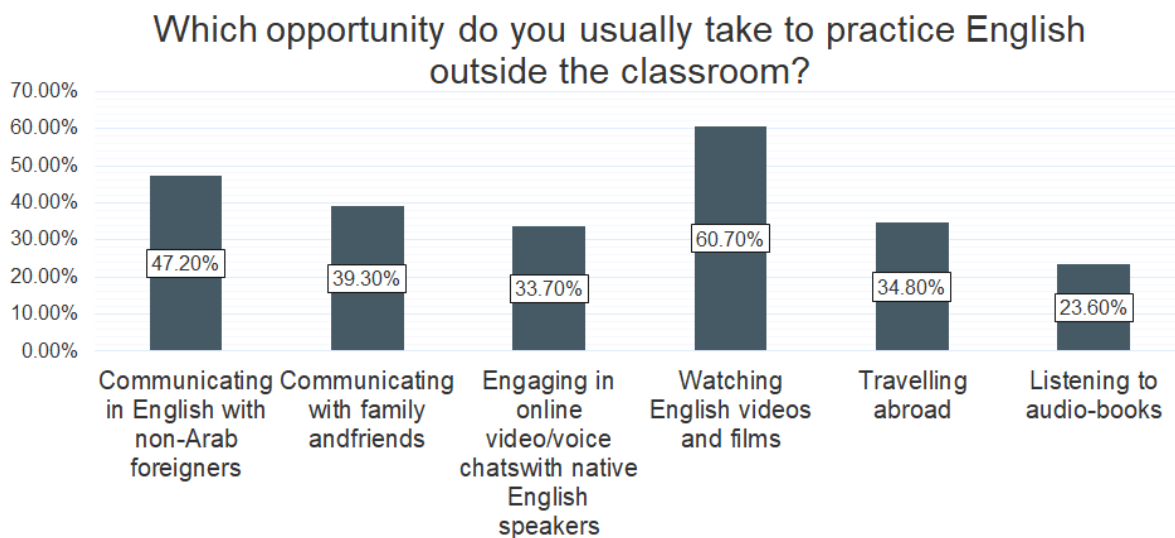


Figure 1

According to figure 1, the most common opportunity used by students was **watching English videos and films**, chosen by 54 students out of 89 (60.7%), followed by **communicating with non-Arab foreigners** with just under half of the participants (47.2%), 42 students. One of the noticeable opportunities was **communicating with family and friends**, chosen by 35 students (39.3%). **Travelling abroad** and **engaging in online video/voice chats with native English speakers** had almost similar percentages, 31 and 30 students (34.8%) and (33.7%), respectively. **Listening to audiobooks** was chosen by the least number of students, 21 (23.6%).

Figure 2 below showed the percentages of the most accessible opportunities chosen by the students for practicing oral English outside the classroom. Here the students were asked to choose only one opportunity.

Which opportunity is the most accessible for English learners?

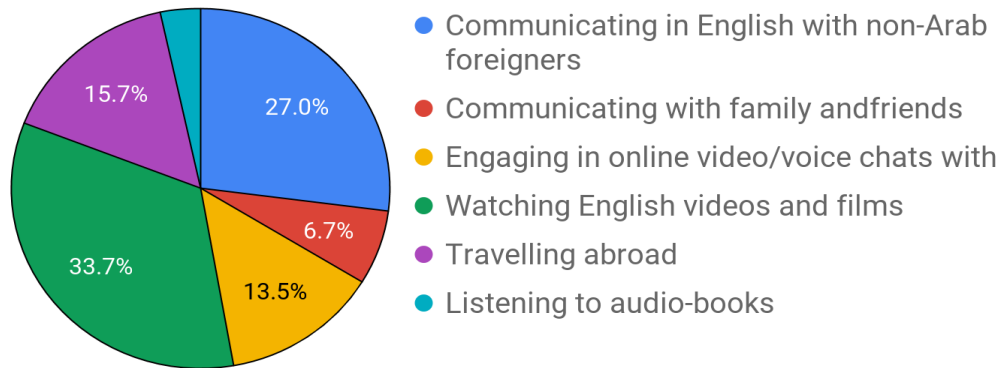


Figure 2

As displayed in figure 2, the most accessible opportunity voted by students was **watching English videos and films**, chosen by 30 students (33.7%), followed by **communicating with non-Arab foreigners**, voted by 24 students (27%). **Travelling abroad** and **engaging in online video/voice chats with native English speakers** came in the middle of the sequence with 14 and 12 students, (15.7%) and (13.5%), respectively. **Communicating with family and friends** was chosen by 6 students (6.7%) and **listening to audiobooks** was voted by 3 students (3.4%) and thus appeared in the end of the sequence.

The above two charts tried to answer RQ1 and showed almost similar sequence in choosing the opportunities of practicing oral English outside the classroom and the most accessible opportunities for those students. However, a strange result appeared in figure 2, **communicating with family and friends** came number 5 out of 6 in the accessibility sequence whereas it appeared as number 3 out of 6 in the opportunities sequence students chose to practice English outside the classroom as shown in figure 1. The other 5 options appeared in the same order.

3.2. The second research question (RQ2) was as follows:

RQ2: How do these opportunities affect Saudi students’ oral fluency?

Figure 3 below showed the percentages of the improvement the students noticed on their oral fluency due to practicing oral English outside the classroom.

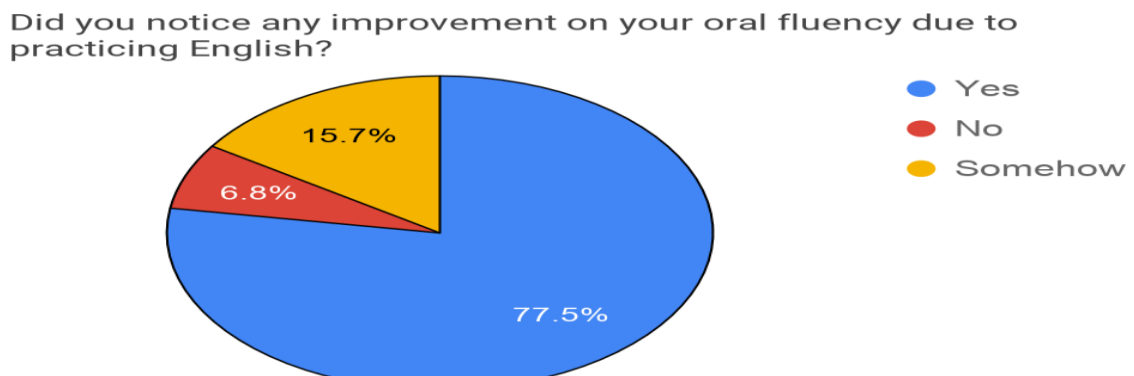


Figure 3

As shown in figure 3 above the majority of students, 69 out of 89, (77.5%) noticed improvement on their oral fluency due to practicing oral English outside the classroom, followed by 14 students (15.7%) voted for “Somehow”, and only 6 students voted for “No” (6.8%).

Figure 4 below displayed the percentages of two types of conversation that had influence on students’ oral fluency.

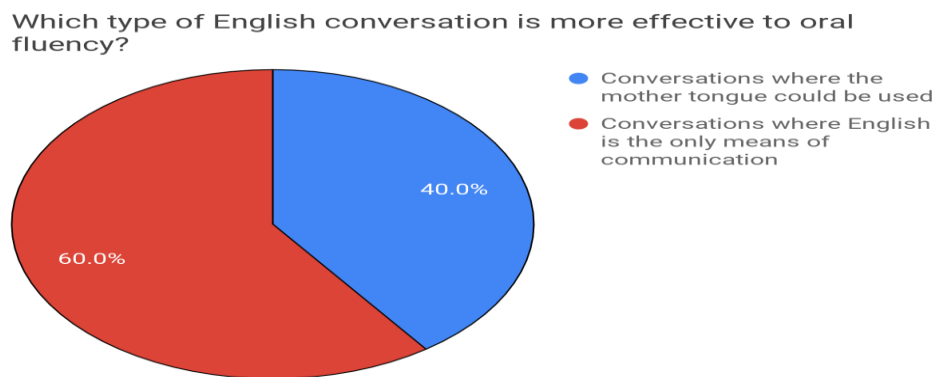


Figure 4

Concerning which type of conversation was more effective to oral fluency, less than two thirds of the students, 53 out of 89, (60%) chose the conversations where English was the only means of communication, and more than one third of the students (40%), 36 students chose the conversations where the mother tongue was used.

In conclusion, charts 3 & 4 above showed that most students agreed that opportunities of practicing oral English outside the classroom could improve their oral fluency and they believed that conversations where the mother tongue was not used were more beneficial to achieve better improvement in oral fluency. However, a considerable percentage (40%), 36 students out of 89 preferred the conversations where the mother tongue was used.

4. Discussion

The aim of this study is to identify which oral English opportunities outside the classroom are the best and to investigate how these opportunities affect students' oral fluency.

The first question of the study tries to find out which types of oral English opportunities learners practice most outside the classroom and to compare this with which opportunities are the most accessible. The findings of the study show the following sequence concerning the opportunities practiced most by the students: **watching English videos and films, communicating with non-Arab foreigners, communicating with family and friends, travelling abroad, engaging in online video/voice chats with native English speakers and listening to audiobooks.** Regarding the most accessible opportunities, the results of the study show the following sequence: **watching English videos and films, communicating with non-Arab foreigners, travelling abroad, engaging in online video/voice chats with native English speakers, communicating with family and friends** and **listening to audiobooks.** The sequence is the same as shown except for the place where the students put **communicating with family and friends**, which is a strange result. This means that the students prefer, practice and learn from this opportunity although they find it less accessible than the other opportunities. We can conclude that the students suffer from a kind of difficulty in keeping in touch with their family members and friends. It is mainly the social media and its virtual world that could stand behind this eccentric result (Walubita, & Akakandelwa1, 2018; Grusec, & Hastings, 2007). There could be other reasons that participate in forming the phenomenon of the family breakup that most people suffer from nowadays. Such phenomenon needs separate research studies to investigate its reasons and suggest recommended solutions.

Watching English videos and films is the most accessible and the most practiced by the students and it recently takes the place where the family should be. This opportunity is the most effective one that improves the students' oral English fluency. Its accessibility, availability and animation and liveliness are possibly the main motive that motivates the students to choose and learn from it. And this can help us understand why the students choose **listening to audiobooks** opportunity to be the last one although it is accessible; it is probably because it lacks the attractiveness of the animation and liveliness and the availability the previous opportunity has.

As for **communicating with non-Arab foreigners** opportunity, it occupies the second position in both sequences, the most accessible and the most practiced. This could be referred to the high number on non-Arab foreigners who live in the students' society and who use English as a lingua franca. But again, this opportunity's place is unusual; it replaces the family and friend's position as a result of the recede of the role of the family recently (Akakandelwa1 & Walubita, 2018; Grusec & Hastings, 2007). This phenomenon also needs more deep research and investigation.

Travelling abroad and **engaging in online video/voice chats with native English speakers** opportunities come late in the sequence. Regarding the travelling abroad, it is possibly because it needs money and time, and concerning the online chats with native speakers, it is probably because of being not always available and needing money as well.

Generally speaking, most students prefer the opportunities where they can practice English from home; it could be because that it is a comfortable environment for students to learn in. A high number of students also prefer opportunities that do not have any direct interaction with other people, and this could possibly mean that students feel embarrassed or afraid of practicing English with other English speakers (Savaşçı, 2014; Juhana, 2012). One more point to note is that English students tend to prefer the opportunities that can be entertaining for them more than the other opportunities. It is also worth noticing that most of the opportunities learners think are the most accessible are the opportunities that can be done online and not in real life. This could possibly mean that English learners prefer the opportunities that combine learning and entertainment and also can be done at home without the need to go out (Cavanagh, 2019).

The second question of the study tries to explore how these opportunities affect learners' oral fluency. As expected, the majority of the students notices improvement due to practicing English outside the classroom and this indicates that the students are aware of the importance of practicing English and how it affects their oral fluency. The most likely explanation for the students who do not notice improvement at all is that they are probably already very proficient at English and used English all the time; that is probably why they haven't noticed any improvement. Or it could be because they are not interested in improving their oral English fluency. As mentioned in the results chapter, less than two thirds of the students think that the opportunities where English is the only means of communication is more effective to oral fluency. This could possibly mean that the conversations where students are obligated to use English through is more effective to their oral fluency than the conversations where they use their mother tongue. But still, a considerable percentage of students think that using the mother tongue is helpful for improving their oral English fluency; of course, this is a controversial issue which has a long historical literature.

5. Conclusion

Practicing English outside the classroom is a hard task to do especially in non-English countries (Elttayef & Hussein, 2017). This study shows that most students are aware of the importance of practicing English and it also provides ways that can attract students to practice English. In addition, it identifies the types of conversations that can affect oral fluency the most. This research material can motivate us to encourage English students to practice the language and help students be more proficient in English in general and in oral fluency in particular.

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