VoiceThread Utilization as Speaking Skill Enhancement for Students in EFL Context

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Abstract

This study is aimed at enhancing students' speaking skills utilizing VoiceThread (VT) in EFL context since most of the students perceived that they got difficulties in speaking skills. Despite the difficulties in speaking, they perceived that mastering English speaking skills was essential to support their academic and career in the future. Due to the limitation in learning English in class causing limited time to develop speaking skills, VT is proposed as an additional instructional learning platform to support students' learning outside the class. Using Classroom Action Research (CAR), this study was carried out following the steps of CAR proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart, i.e. planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. The research subjects were 34 students of Elementary School Teacher Education Study Program who were taking English course as one of the compulsory courses in the university. In utilizing VT, some procedures were carried out: 1) introducing VT, 2) introducing vocabulary and grammar used in the materials, 3) listening to an example how to do the task, 4) giving comments, and 5) getting feedback. At the end, after utilizing VT, it is found that VT can help students enhance their ability in speaking English.

Keywords – VoiceThread; Speaking Skill Enhancement; students in EFL context.

1. Introduction

Speaking can be a stressful skill for students in mastering English due to its complexities (Gajek, 2018; Kralova & Tirpakova, 2019). Being able to master speaking, students have to consider the complexity, accuracy and fluency as they are some components of speaking (Huang, 2018). Furthermore, students should have good level of grammatical, discourse, and pragmatic competence of speaking in order to create a communicative speaking with other people. However, students' problems in enhancing their speaking skills relates to three things: affective problems, linguistic problems, and social problems (Afshar & Asakereh, 2016; Shen & Chiu, 2019). Shen and Chiu (2019) further described that affective problems related to students' feeling hindering their speaking, such as feeling anxious, unconfident, and afraid of making mistakes.

For linguistic problems, students frequently got difficulties in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. These three components correlates with the speaking skills since they can influence the fluency and accuracy of speaking. For instance, a study by Wahyuningsih and Afandi (2020) proved that one of the problems encountered by the students in EFL context was grammar mastery. The students thought that it was difficult for them to speak fluently because grammar hindered their speaking whenever they wanted to speak up. Besides, vocabulary mastery is important in language learning, specifically in speaking skills, since it contributes to the success of speaking skills (Akbarian, 2018; Elgort, 2018). This statement is then supported by some studies reported that vocabulary mastery significantly correlates to speaking skills (Suryatiningsih, 2016; Uchihara & Saito, 2017; Yusriati & Hasibuan, 2019; Putri & Refnaldi, 2020).

Then, in term of social problems, limited time in learning language and lacking of supportive environment to practice speaking intensively become the problems (Darancik, 2018; Safargalina, 2018). Having supportive environment in learning language will take an important role in students' learning because it provides much experience and exposure for them to practice the speaking skills intensively (Kralova & Tirpakova, 2019). However, in EFL context, limited time in

class is an undeniable fact causing pressure for teachers to reach a particular target or goal. Then, a good alternative to overcome this limitation is utilizing a technology to provide additional learning opportunity outside the class so that students can practice speaking.

Regarding the studies about students' problems in EFL context, the problems of the students participated in this study relates to affective, linguistics, and environmental problems. 30 of 34 students participated in this study revealed that they had low speaking skills because of some reasons, such as lack of vocabulary, appropriate pronunciation, and grammar, lack of practicing, lack of confidence, lack of fluency, and the influence of their surroundings. At the same time, when a pretest was administered to know students' speaking skills directly, the results showed that most of the students obtained score 1 in all aspects of speaking—grammar and vocabulary, discourse use, pronunciation, communicative interaction, in this case. Score 1 in each aspect indicates that the students' speaking skills are low since they hardly used appropriate vocabulary and simple grammar, responded the questions with short phrases and hesitation, had many mispronounced words, and got difficulty in responding some simple questions and needed help to answer.

Dealing with much problems in EFL context does not mean students' speaking skills cannot be enhanced. Since teachers play an important role in giving exposure to students in class (Fisher & Frey, 2014; Safargalina, 2018), they have to change the teaching strategies in order to facilitate vast learning exposure and experience for students. Zemlyanova et al. (2021) stated that one of the problems in developing students' speaking skills was the lecturers' teaching strategies which paid more attention to reading and writing. Therefore, an active teaching strategy to help students enhance their speaking skills is required and carefully planned (Gajek, 2018). In this case, integrating technology would be a good solution since it provides flexibility in learning (Erickson, 2020). An interactive web called VoiceThread (VT) is proposed as the additional instructional learning media outside the classroom. VT which was first released in

2007 is an interactive web having some features to support learning outside the class. Utilizing VT, teachers are allowed to upload materials in the form of power point (PPT), picture, video, and audio. When the link is shared to students, the students can be encouraged to be critical in analyzing and evaluating a particular material by giving comments on the uploaded file (Glick, 2021). In this case, VT provides various formats of commenting, such as commenting in the form of text, voice, audio file, and webcam (Ching & Hsu, 2013; Pagkalinawan, 2021). The comments uploaded can also be deleted and re-uploaded. In addition, while giving comments on each slide, users can express their opinion freely by writing notes or giving some marks on the slide without leaving any notes or marks on that slide. Thus, when other users access the slide, they will not find any notes or marks left by the previous users.

The effectiveness of utilizing VT to aid students in learning language has been proven by some studies. For instance, a study conducted by Pagkalinawan (2021) showed that utilizing VT could help her students improve their language proficiency, especially speaking skills because it motivated and encouraged students to learn more actively, creatively in an exciting way. Moreover, utilizing VT has given more opportunity for students to practice their speaking skills despite the limited time provided in the class (Erickson, 2020). Another study by Ching and Hsu (2013) proved that VT was easy to use, and it allowed students to directly express opinion or comments without being misinterpreted by other students or teacher. Due to its opportunity to express opinion freely, students are likely to gain more confidence in speaking (Mango, 2017). The privacy feature provided by VT had allowed students to set private or public for the comments they had. Therefore, they do not have to be afraid of being judged by other students.

Overall, despite the complexities of speaking skills, students still perceive that speaking does matter for their future academic and career (Xie, 2016). Therefore, integrating technology—using VT—in the learning process is assumed as an effective alternative to provide more learning opportunity and experience

for students to practice their speaking skills outside the classroom. Since VT provides various features that help students' learning, it is likely for students to overcome their problems in speaking skills, such as lacking of vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, and feeling anxious. To prove that VT can help students enhance their speaking skills, this study is then aimed at investigating how its utilization can enhance students' speaking skills.

2. Method

This study is conducted using Classroom Action Research (CAR) design as the purpose of this study is to enhance non-EFL students' speaking skills. CAR design is conducted to solve a particular problem or issue in a class (Creswell, 2012; Gay, et al., 2012). In this study, I took role as a lecturer and a researcher, meaning that I was the one who taught the students and conduct research to know the students' speaking enhancement after utilizing VT. This design starts with identifying an issue, planning a solution for the issue, and then implementing a particular strategy to solve the problem (Creswell, 2012). In this study, the steps of conducting CAR follows the steps proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) stated in Latief (2014), i.e. planning, acting, observing, and reflection.

This study involved 34 students of the third semester of Elementary School Teacher Education Study Program who were taking English course as the compulsory course in the university. In conducting this study, I planned the study by first generating a learning plan (i.e. learning schedule, activities, materials, and assessment rubric in each meeting) and setting the criteria of success. In this case, the learning materials relates to students' daily life and surroundings and are in the form of video and power point equipped with an audio in some slides in order to make the learning become more authentic. The video and power points were made by myself the help of a video maker web since I could freely customize the video by adding feedback for students' speaking in the class, giving clear instructions for guiding them while doing the speaking practice, and giving

examples how to do the task. Then, I set the criteria of success. The criteria of success is in Table 1.

Table 1. Criteria of Success

Group	Range of Score	Criteria of Success
Lower group	4-5	VT utilization will be successful if >50% of the students in lower group can increase their score up to 6 at least
Middle group	6-7	VT utilization will be successful if >50% of the students in middle group can increase their score up to 8 at least
Upper group	8-12	VT utilization will be successful if >50% of the students in upper group can increase their score up to 9 at least

The next stage, after the plan was settled, I continued to implement the plan. However, I first managed to have a meeting with the students to guide them how to register an account and use some features in VT since it was the first time for them knowing it. After that, the students were instructed to start practicing their speaking skills by giving comments or opinion on a video I had uploaded, containing some topics that had been learned in the class. In the beginning of the video, I exposed some vocabulary and grammar that would be used in the materials. Then, I began assigning them to give comments on a particular part. In this case, I put a sign in the video guiding students where to give comment. Besides, I told them to only use audio or video recording in doing the task so that they could get accustomed to speaking English. In addition, before doing the task, students were provided with an example how to do the task. At the end, they would get a feedback from me.

During the implementation of the plan, I also observed the students to know their speaking progress from the first until the fifth meeting. Using the speaking rubric used in the pretest, I assessed them and gave feedbacks on their recordings. At the end, reflection was conducted to analyze whether utilizing VT as additional instructional learning media in practice speaking could enhance students'

speaking skills. The reflection was conducted by analyzing the changes of students' speaking skills from pretest until the posttest was administered. The result of the data will then determine whether the strategy in enhancing students' speaking skills using VT is successful. Moreover, students' perceptions on the use of VT will support the result of the students' speaking skill enhancement.

3. Result and Discussion
The Result of Students' Speaking Skill Enhancement

The utilization of VT in class was conducted for 5 meetings. In this study, the results of students' speaking skills will be compared from pretest until posttest. Before analyzing the data, the students were grouped into three groups based on the result of pretest, i.e. lower group, middle group, and upper group. Students who belonged to the lower group got score 5-6 for all aspects of speaking test. The results of the pretest show that there were 24 students who belonged to the lower group. Then, there were 9 students in the middle group who got score 6-7 for all aspects of the speaking test. The last group, there was only 1 student in the upper group which range of the score was 8-12. The group of the students is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. The Group of Students based on Pretest Score

Group	Range of Score	Number of Students
Lower group	4-5	24 students
Middle group	6-7	9 students
Upper group	8-12	1 student

After the pretest was administered, the VT began to be utilized as the additional instructional media in helping students' speaking practice outside the class. I found some changes on students' speaking skills in every week. The changes are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Students' Speaking Skills Enhancement in Every Meeting

Group	Number of Students in Every Meeting						
	Pretest	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	Posttest
Lower group	24	22	18	16	15	6	5
Middle group	9	9	8	6	5	2	-
Upper group	1	1	-	-	-	-	-

From Table 3, it is found that the number of students belonged to lower and middle group decreases in each meeting. It indicates that the students can increase their speaking skills. It also means that the score in each aspect of speaking has increased. At the end of the meeting when the posttest was administered, it is found that there were 5 students who still belonged to the lower group. It means that there were about 19 students (79%) could pass the criteria of success (increasing score up to 6 at least).
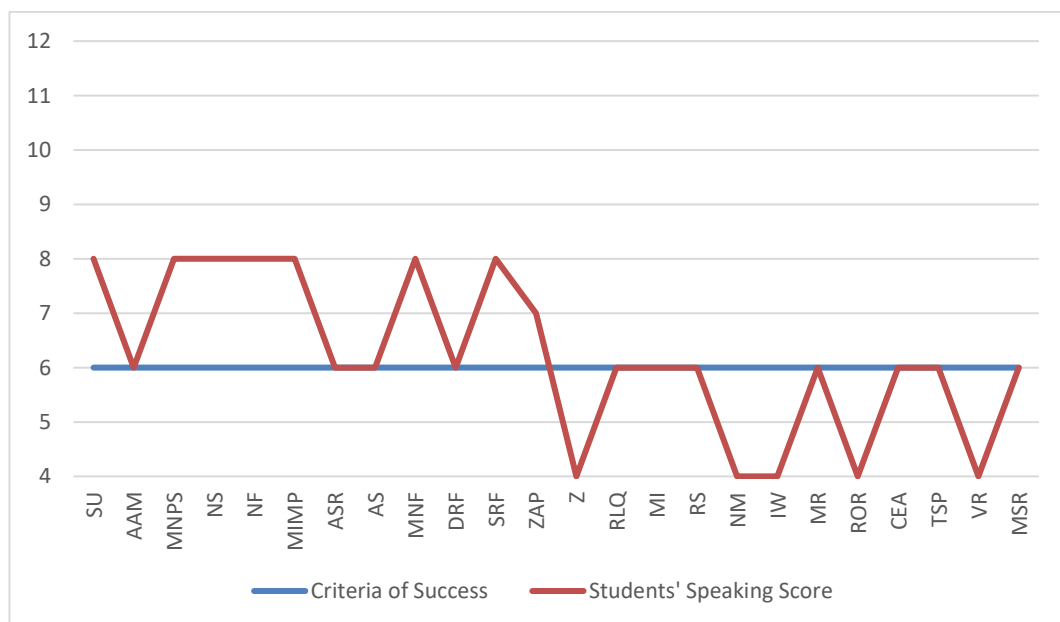

Figure 1. Speaking Score Enhancement of Lower Group

In the middle group, the number of the students who could increase score up to 8 at least was none in the first meeting. However, when the posttest was conducted, 9 students in the middle group could manage themselves to increase

their speaking score to at least 8. The result then indicates that 100% of the students in the middle group has passed the criteria of success (increasing score up to 8 at least).
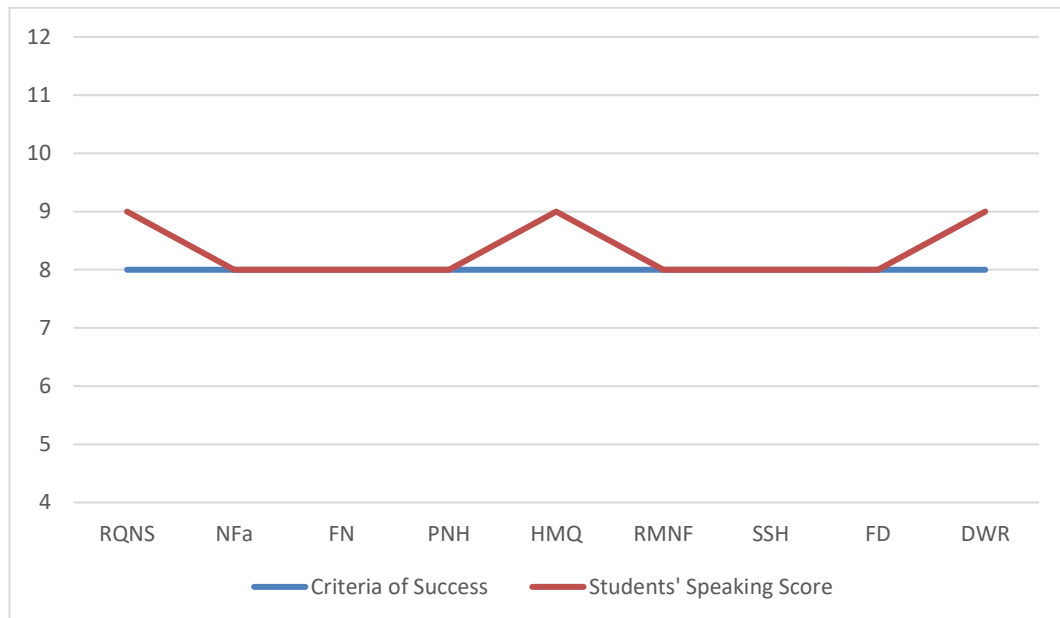

Figure 2. Speaking Score Enhancement of Middle Group

Meanwhile for the student in the upper group, he could not increase his score from 8 to 9 in the first and second meeting. Then, he could manage himself to increase his speaking score to 9 in the third and fourth meeting, 10 in the fifth meeting, and 11 in the posttest. It then means that he has passed the criteria of success.
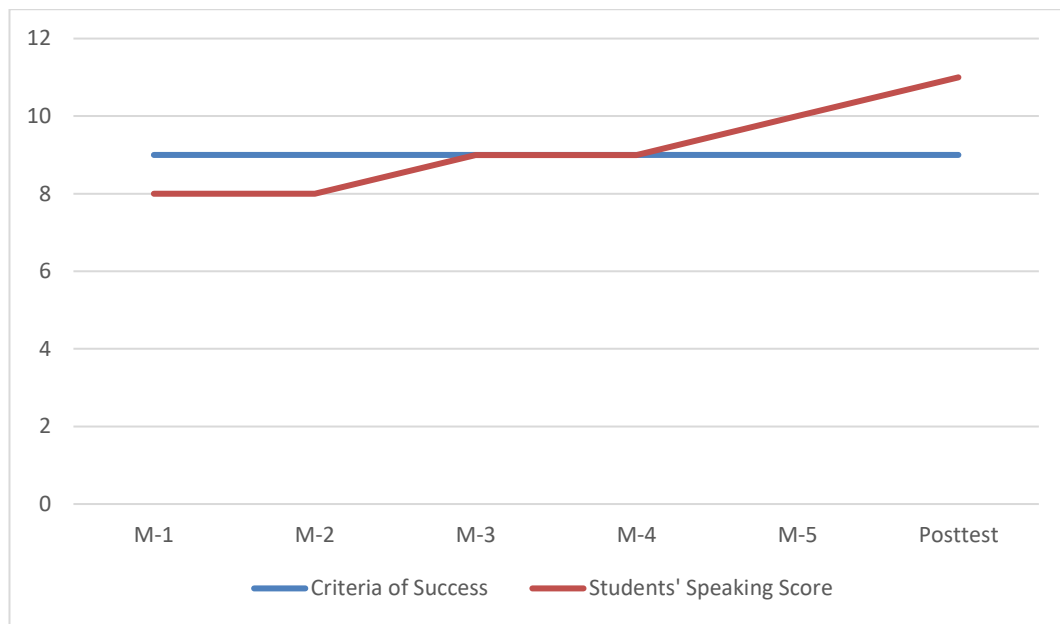
Figure 3. Speaking Score Enhancement of the Student in Upper Group from Meeting 1 up to Posttest

Regarding the results of the speaking score, it can be concluded that VT utilization can help students enhance their speaking skills as the score of speaking tasks from the first meeting until the fifth meeting increases. The result of this study is supported by a study conducted by Zemlyanova et al. (2021) and Pagkalinawan (2021) showing that VT could be utilized to improve students' speaking skills. The features in VT provide them with great opportunity to explore their knowledge and engage in more meaningful learning so that they can show the enhancement of their performance, especially in speaking (Kirby & Hulan, 2016; Erickson, 2020).

Students' Perceptions towards VoiceThread Utilization

At the end of the posttest, a questionnaire in the form of Google Form was distributed to students aiming at knowing students' perceptions towards the use of VT as the additional instructional media. The questions consisted of five questions: 2 close-ended and 3 open-ended questions. The questions are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Questions Asking Students' Perceptions on VT Utilization	
Types of Question	**Question**
Close-ended question	Do you think VT is easy to access and use?
	Do you think VT can help you enhance your speaking skills?
Open-ended question	What do you think about VT utilization in speaking class?
	Why do you think VT is easy/ difficult to access and use?
	Why do you think VT can/ cannot help you enhance your speaking skills?

For the question asking the easiness of VT utilization, it is found that 25 of 34 students (74%) perceived VT was easy to use and access. This question still relates to the question asking about the reasons why VT is easy to access and use. Some students perceived that VT was easy to use and access because they had been introduced and guided step by step before its implementation. On the other hand, 9 students perceived it was difficult to use because they had to click the shared links from me many time before they finally could access it. In this case, they mentioned that it was due to the unstable signal causing them had to log in again for many times. In contrast to the result of this study, the study conducted by Kirby and Hulan (2016) stated that some students utilizing VT perceived that it was quite challenging because they had not gotten accustomed to utilizing it; as a result, they required more time to create and respond to a discussion using VT than using discussion boards.

In term of students' perception towards the utilization of VT for the speaking skills, the students' answers could be grouped into two main answer, i.e. easy to use and fun. As a new learning tool for the students, VT utilization gets positive respond from the students. The reasons why it is easy to use is that it is user friendly. They did not need to download and install big application in their smartphone since it was more practical to be accessed in the laptop. They just had to access the web and logged in to their account to join the class. Not only user friendly, some of them also mentioned that using VT was fun because they found

that VT provided them with various features, such as video, audio, and text, which allowed them to try any features while practicing speaking. They also found that the features were useful to support them expressing their opinions while giving comments on a particular slide. Therefore, VT can be assumed as a learning tool which is easy to use and enjoyable for students to learn language (Ching & Hsu, 2013; Mango, 2017).

Another question is asking whether VT can help them enhance their speaking skills as well as the reasons. 33 of 34 students said "yes", and the rest said "no". The students who said "yes" revealed that VT could help them enhance their speaking skills because they could learn how to do the task correctly and how to pronounce some vocabulary correctly from the recordings of their classmates. The recordings uploaded by me also contributed to the process of improving students' speaking skills. Because they could access VT whenever they wanted, they also had much time to repeat listening and speaking for many times. Moreover, they were happy for they could get feedback directly from their classmates and me without being embarrassed. The students' perceptions towards the benefits of using VT for their speaking skills led to another inference that VT can be a reflective tool and a medium for learning evaluation because they can reflect their speaking by themselves or from the feedback given by their classmates or lecturer (Kent, 2017; Bodis, 2020; Glick, 2021). For students in EFL context, feedback is beneficial because students can learn more from their mistakes, see the progress of their speaking skills enhancement (Gajek, 2018), and give much exposure or input for improving the speaking skills, especially on the components of speaking skills, such as pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary (Safargalina, 2018). Moreover, students can be motivated and confidence in learning through feedback (Yuan & Kim, 2015). In contrast to the 33 students, a student stated that VT might be able to engage her on speaking practice, but the web appearance were quite monotonous for her to learn. Similar with the result of a study by Kirby and Hulan (2016), utilizing VT might be able to engage students to be more active in learning, but not for the interest. It can be assumed that VT

utilization is likely to be boring if the materials are not innovatively and attractively developed.

4. Conclusion

As an additional instructional media outside the class, VT has given a great opportunity for my students and me to go beyond the limitation in learning English which is only taught 100 minutes in a week. In this study, VT is used as an additional instructional media outside the class. In implementing VT in English course to enhance students' speaking skills, there are some steps carried out. First, VT was introduced to the students. Second, the students began utilizing VT. In this stage, the students were first exposed to grammar and vocabulary used in the materials. Before doing the task, they could listen to the example provided on how to do the task. They could give comments using a recording, uploading an audio file, or using the webcam in a particular slide or minute having a sign instructing where they could comment. Then, they got feedback from me as the lecturer.

By utilizing VT, it is more practical to conduct language learning—speaking skills in this case—outside the class so that the students have more exposure or input for their English skills. Besides, various features in the form of text, audio file, recording, and video have provides opportunity for students to experience different atmosphere while learning. Regarding the result of this study, it can be included that VT is a fruitful tool to practice speaking skill because it can enhance students' speaking skills. The enhancement can be seen from the increase score of some students from the first meeting until the posttest was administered.

Moreover, VT utilization has gained positive responses from the students. The data from the questionnaire distributed after the implementation of VT show that most students perceived that VT could help them enhance their speaking skills because they could learn from their classmates' comments, get feedbacks from classmates or friends, and do many repetitions on speaking. Besides, VT was easy to use and access because once they practiced using it, they could operate it well without any confusion even though some of them get difficulty in logging in

to the account due to unstable signal. The last, but not least, VT is user friendly and fun. As a result, utilizing it made the students engage more on learning speaking.

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