Digital natives: how digital technologies can influence speaking proficiency

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According to the data reported on the official website of IELTS (2020), Chinese IELTS test-takers' speaking mean score is just 5.39, ranking the country second to last among all the 40 countries listed. Chinese students' poor performance on the speaking section of the IELTS test demonstrates a particular need in identifying effective ways to help improve their oral proficiency. Nowadays technologies have become an indispensable part that facilitates learners' experience rather than just a supplementary tool during the learning process, so educators need to update their knowledge of the latest digital tools that can be applied in language teaching.

The development of technology encourages me to hold an insightful observation into the impact that technologies can make on language learning in an effective and innovative way. This is the reason why I got so excited when I received the invitation to participate in the proPIC programme, from which I can obtain the latest news about digital education and most excitingly, I can study abroad for one week at the University of Barcelona in Spain. Before the study week, some e-portfolio training was given in the study session at Newcastle University and I learned about some approaches to teaching and learning with technologies, continuing professional development, and more. Unfortunately, due to the outbreak of COVID-19, the trip to Spain was canceled. However, as a postgraduate student from a TESOL program at Newcastle University, there are so many other ways for me to continue my interest. Hence, I created an English website for improving students' oral proficiency based on the framework of task-based language teaching. It is at the very initial stage of my website and I will create more related content in the future. I will also share my beliefs into what makes an effective teacher.

During this summer, I conducted an empirical study into the topic. This paper investigated students' perceptions regarding using available technologies to enhance their English oral proficiency with a mixed-method approach. Forty-two participants (including seven students who attended the pilot studies) studying English as a foreign language (EFL) from a university in the Northwest of China were recruited in the study. This study was carried out with a questionnaire survey and semi-interview, with the quantitative data analysis processed by Microsoft Excel and SPSS 20.0, and qualitative data analysed with thematic analysis. The researcher of this current study thinks this may be the first empirical study investigating students' perception towards using technologies to improve English oral proficiency in the Foreign Language Department of this university for at least the past ten years, after checking with two teachers who have been working there as English instructors for over 18 and 12 years respectively. Liu (2014) studied students' perceptions of learning through the use of computers outside of the classroom in three Chinese universities respectively in Southeast China, Southwest China and Northeast China. Nevertheless, most of the related studies specifically looked into one type of specific technology such as WeChat (Xue & Churchill, 2019), Blogs (Hung & Huang, 2016); and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) (Zhang et al., 2017).

The findings demonstrated that students held a positive attitude towards the effects on oral proficiency that technologies had. To be more specific, it showed that 20 (57.1%) from the 35 participants agreed or strongly agreed that "talking on the phone in English with someone from China or another country has improved my pronunciation". In general, for the 12 groups of questions, all of them achieved over 50% of the participants admitting the positive effects brought by technologies except for group 11 (playing English computer games, 37.1% and below), group 12 (other use of technology not mentioned, 42.9% and below), and question 27 in group five (posting to social media has improved my speaking accuracy, 45.7%). Additionally, students perceived that some specific types of technologies were particularly beneficial to their English pronunciation, accuracy, and fluency. Students also acknowledged that they encountered some challenges while utilising these technologies such as internet connection, a lack of English proficiency, and a lack of opportunities. Regarding the implication, students may refer to the research results to identify suitable technologies to improve their English oral proficiency, and teachers may obtain new insights from these findings into how to fulfil their teaching objectives more effectively. This empirical study helps me develop a deeper understanding of how a teacher can apply appropriate

1. The link of the website: http://speakingforfun.weebly.com

strategies to enhance the skills targeted, in addition to the theoretical training I received from the proPIC project regarding helping the teachers develop the professionalism through innovative digital tools.

This empirical study will no doubt benefit students and college teachers from the current university where participants are from. Additionally, it also provides an alternative and in-depth insight regarding taking advantage of technologies to strengthen students' oral proficiency to English language departments in other universities, particularly for the ones in the region of Northwest of China. It can also offer some pedagogical insights to educators whose students are in a similar learning context. As was discussed in Tutorial 2 of the proPIC programme, today's learners are called digital natives because they are raised with technology. Teachers have to hold a clear idea of their positions on technologies.

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