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Exploring the potentials of intelligent personal assistants on EFL learners' speaking proficiency

ABSTRACT (50 words)

The study investigated the impact of IPAs on EFL learners' speaking proficiency outside the classroom and the differences between IPA-human interaction and human-only interaction. The results revealed that the out-of-class use of IPAs significantly improved learners' speaking proficiency, exhibiting positive effects similar to those of interacting with native English speakers.

ABSTRACT (300 words)

Promoting speaking proficiency in a second and foreign language has long been a very challenging and anxiety-provoking task. Due to limited class time, few opportunities for interactions and practices, many students are not comfortable in using L2 for oral communication. More recently, the emergence of Intelligent Personal Assistants (IPAs) seems to generate some new directions for improving learners' speaking proficiency. This study investigated the impact of IPAs on EFL learners' speaking proficiency outside the classroom and the differences between IPA-human interaction and human-only interaction. The participants were 91 college students, who were randomly divided into three groups: (1) those who interacted with IPAs on smartphones; (2) those who interacted with native English speakers; and (3) those who interacted with non-native English speakers. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed. The results revealed that the out-of-class use of IPAs significantly improved EFL learners' speaking proficiency, exhibiting a positive effect similar to that of interaction with native English speakers. The qualitative findings showed that the ubiquity of IPAs on smartphones increased learners' exposure to oral input, provided opportunities to practice speaking with immediate feedback, reduced anxiety, encouraged self-directed learning outside the classroom. The participants liked the different roles played by IPAs (i.e., interlocutor, narrator, interviewer, facilitator, and entertainer) and felt as though they were talking with a real foreigner because IPAs asked different questions and provided answers in myriad forms, which sparked the learners' interest and helped them obtain sufficient input to ensure that they persisted.

Keywords: intelligent personal assistants, L2 speaking, mobile devices