

RESEARCH

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USING SPEAKING EPORTFOLIOS TO ENHANCE ORAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILLS AMONG ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDENTS

Uso de los portafolios electrónicos de expresión oral con el fin de mejorar las habilidades orales del Inglés por parte de estudiantes de Inglés como lengua extranjera

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how the implementation of ePortfolios as a high impact practice enhanced student oral language skills. A sample of 185 intermediate EFL students (151 females, 34 males) from a public university in Saudi Arabia built ePortfolios over the course of one semester. Data from voice recordings, focus groups, and a survey were collected and analyzed to evaluate students' learning experience. A major finding of the study was that students felt that ePortfolios helped promote their oral proficiency in English because of the linguistic feedback provided by the instructor and their peers. In addition, building ePortfolios increased students' motivation and confidence to speak English especially among females including low and high achievers. These findings have implications for teachers and curriculum developers in a variety of contexts.

Keywords: Assessment, Communication, EFL students, ePortfolios, High Impact Practices, Oral skills.

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RESUMEN

Este estudio examina cómo la implementación de portafolios electrónicos (ePortfolios) como una práctica de alto impacto (HIP) mejoró las habilidades orales de estudiantes de inglés. Una muestra de 185 estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera (151 mujeres, 34 hombres) de la Northern Border University confeccionaron ePortfolios en el transcurso de un semestre. Se recopilaron y analizaron datos de grabaciones de voz, grupos focales y encuestas con el fin de evaluar su experiencia de aprendizaje. Un resultado importante del estudio fue que los ePortfolios ayudaron a desarrollar las habilidades orales de los estudiantes de inglés debido a la retroalimentación lingüística proporcionada por el profesorado y sus compañeros. Además, la creación de ePortfolios aumentó la motivación y la confianza de los estudiantes para hablar inglés, especialmente entre las mujeres, independientemente de sus niveles de competencia. Estos resultados tienen implicaciones para el profesorado y las personas que diseñan y desarrollan planes de estudios en una variedad de contextos.

Palabras clave: Evaluación, Comunicación, Estudiantes de Inglés como lengua extranjera, ePortfolios, Prácticas de Alto Impacto (HIP), Destrezas orales.

USO DE PORTFÓLIOS ELETRÔNICOS DE EXPRESSÃO ORAL PARA MELHORAR AS HABILIDADES DE INGLÊS FALADO EM ESTUDANTES DE INGLÊS DA ARABIA SAUDITA

RESUMO

Este estudo examina como a implementação de portfólios eletrônicos (ePortfolios) como uma prática de alto impacto (HIP) melhorou as habilidades de fala dos alunos de inglês. Uma amostra de 185 estudantes de Inglês como Língua Estrangeira (151 mulheres, 34 homens) da Northern Border University compilou ePortfolios ao longo de um semestre. Dados de gravações de voz, grupos focais e pesquisas foram coletados e analisados para avaliar sua experiência de aprendizagem. Um resultado importante do estudo foi que os ePortfolios ajudaram a desenvolver as habilidades de fala dos alunos de inglês devido ao feedback linguístico fornecido pelos professores e seus colegas. Além disso, a criação de ePortfolios aumentou a motivação e a confiança dos alunos para falar inglês, especialmente entre as mulheres, independentemente de seus níveis de proficiência. Esses resultados têm implicações para professores e pessoas que projetam e desenvolvem currículos em diversos contextos.

Palavras chave: Alunos de Inglês como Língua Estrangeira - ePortfolios , Estágios de Alto Impacto (HIP) , Habilidades de Fala , Proficiência em Inglês

1. INTRODUCTION

ePortfolios refer to the digital tools that learners use to collect course materials, projects, and achievements, providing for evidence not only of coursework, but individual growth over a given time period (Dougherty & Coelho, 2017, p.1). ePortfolio content must include evidence of a student's development (Cambridge, 2010) and should be designed to "foster English learning rather than simply measure it" (Cheng et al, 2007, p. 186). ePortfolios help promote lifelong learning after graduation (Babae et al., 2021) as well as the development of employability competences (Heymann et al., 2022). In this article, ePortfolios refer to a collection of students' audio recordings that are managed and stored on the Blackboard platform (a course management software used at many universities world-wide) over the course of the semester.

In Saudi Arabia, there is a national impetus to improve graduates' communication skills in English in order to compete in the job market. Research has demonstrated, however, that student performance in English has not met the expectations. Most students are unable to survive in English-based university courses even though the Saudi government has invested heavily in English language education (Tanielian, 2017). While content knowledge is being taught successfully, communication skills are still lacking in universities around the world (McInnis et al., 2000). Electronic portfolios (ePortfolios), which is one example of a high impact practice (HIP), have emerged as a powerful tool that may help enhance communication competence.

In line with the Saudi national strategy, Northern Border University, which is a medium-sized mining-focused university, established in 2007, is acknowledging the need for more employable communication skills. The new strategic plan identified effective communication in Arabic and English (both orally and in writing) as one of the institutional core competencies (Northern Border University Strategic plan, 2020, p. 24). The university offers over 47 academic programs of study in the different faculties which include Education and Arts, Business Administration, Science, Engineering, Medicine, Applied Medical Science, Home Economics, and Nursing. A committee headed by the first author was created with the task of exploring ways to improve communicative competence among first year students from the department of languages and translation as a first step before implementing them in the rest of the academic programs. University officials have demanded devising new ways of enhancing students' communication skills using high impact practices (HIPs), which are recommended by Kuh (2008) since there is empirical evidence that such experiences can promote student engagement (López-Crespo et al., 2021) and success (Morreale et al., 2017). The researchers suggested integrating ePortfolios in English courses since previous research has documented the benefits of using ePortfolios in foreign language teaching (Bolliger & Shepherd, 2010; Castaneda & Rodríguez-Ganzález, 2011), including promotion of self-reflection and self-assessment. Speaking skill remains an underdeveloped area in language acquisition (Lee, 2019).

The current study sets out to contribute to the growing literature on HIPs by investigating how employing ePortfolios enhances oral communication among English as a foreign language (EFL) students at Northern Border University. In addition, the researchers examine whether students report a rich learning experience as a result of utilizing ePortfolios. To the researchers' best knowledge, the current study is the first of its kind to involve Saudi EFL students.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Benefits of implementing ePortfolios

Many studies have examined the positive effects of implementing ePortfolios. They are ideal for collecting students' work such as audio files or digital presentations, which are hard to assess in a paper-format (Dougherty & Coelho, 2017). ePortfolios provide evidence of progress and achievement over a given period of time (Song, 2021) and can be used as an assessment tool (Barrett, 2007; Huang & Hung, 2010; Pourdana & Tavassoli, 2022; Stiggins, 2005) and can be an efficient and effective way to evaluate students' work and provide individualized feedback on oral performance such as pronunciation corrections (Hsu et al., 2008). Kwak and Yin (2018) reported that students perceived ePortfolios as an effective tool for both assessing and learning. The teacher's feedback helped them identify the areas that needed improvement, which helped improve their learning and self-assessment abilities. Several scholars argued that ePortfolios motivate students to be engaged in the learning process and become independent learners (Chau & Cheng, 2010; Gebric et al., 2011; Ivanovna, 2017; Stefani et al., 2007). Chau and Cheng (2010) carried out a qualitative study to examine the use of ePortfolios as a tool to enhance independent learning and found that ePortfolios granted students control over their learning goals and personal planning. Within the same vein, Ivanovna, (2017) argued that ePortfolios can help students in planning and assessing their progress and empower the student by placing the responsibility for language learning on the shoulder of the learner rather than the teacher.

2.2. Challenges of implementing ePortfolios

The endeavor to implement ePortfolios is not free of challenges. Building ePortfolios can be a daunting task for students who may not be proficient with the technical aspect of platforms used to create ePortfolios (Fallowfield et al., 2019). Students' main concerns were twofold: the time involved in developing the ePortfolios and their ability to create a website that is "aesthetically pleasing" (Weber & Myrick, 2018, p.18). Mapundu & Musara (2019) reported that students felt that it took excessive time to build their ePortfolios. There were also concerns regarding privacy as observed by Cheng (2008); more than then 90% of the students who were interviewed indicated that they were reluctant to share their own work with their peers in order to receive feedback. Some higher-achiever students argued that sharing their work with their peers might lead to plagiarism. Some of the low-achievers, on the other hand, were reluctant to share their teachers' feedback and portfolio assessment results with their peers because of their level of performance.

Furthermore, students may require more technical support and guidance than expected (Ciesielkiewicz et al., 2019). Another challenge is that when ePortfolios were not implemented effectively, such as not providing students with clear objectives of ePortfolios and not giving clear instructions about the different steps students need to follow to build their ePortfolios, students may not react positively. Payne et al. (2020) reported that over one third of the students surveyed felt that building ePortfolios was a complete waste of time. The researchers argued that the results might be attributable to the failure of instructors to explain the purpose of the tools as effectively as they should. For teachers, challenges include the need to invest extra time in order to keep track of students' reflections and assessment of online assignments (Ciesielkiewicz et al., 2019).

2.3. The value of individualized feedback in implementing speaking ePortfolios

Research has documented the important role that teacher feedback plays in the development of second language proficiency among student performance (Yang et al., 2006). However, providing immediate feedback is unrealistic when the number of students in class is above 14. Hsu et al. (2008) recommended that instructors record oral feedback so that students can track their learning process. Peer feedback is grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory, which states that students learn a language through social interaction. Communicative interaction stimulates cognitive processes which are part of the learning process (Benson, 2015). Interaction involves negotiating meaning, gaining multiple perspectives, and cultivating skills, which may result in language improvement (Yanguas, 2010). Peer feedback is also rooted in Vygotsky's (1978) theory, zone of proximal development (ZPD), claiming that students can reach a higher level of learning via collaborative activities with peers (Lee, 2008). Hsu et al. (2019) assert that peer feedback may help enhance students' English speaking performance.

Most studies that examined the impact of ePortfolios on language learning, especially on writing and speaking, have highlighted the importance of feedback provided to learners whether it was from the instructor only (Kwak & Yin, 2018; Cabrera-Solano, 2020) or from both the instructor and peers (Jiraporn & Khampusaen, 2018; Safari & Koosha, 2016; Wang & Chang, 2010). For example, Safari and Koosha (2016) reported that students acknowledge the value of providing peer-feedback since they helped them recognize their own mistakes while observing their peers' performances. Similarly, Wang and Chang (2010) found that oral portfolios allowed students to learn from their peers and instructors.

2.4. Previous studies on ePortfolios for speaking skills

Several studies were carried out to examine the use of ePortfolios with the purpose of improving EFL learners' oral communication skills. In Taiwan, Huang and Hung (2010) investigated the impact of ePortfolios on fifty-one EFL students' oral speaking performance, consisting of recordings of students' opinions on assigned topics once every two weeks. Results showed that the students were able to achieve better performances in terms of the amount of language production and lexical richness because students were able to practice speaking English before uploading

their works onto their ePortfolios, which increased language production. Specifically, students had to practice framing and orally presenting their opinions on different topics in the target language. Similar findings were reported by Cepik and Yastibas (2013), who examined the effects of ePortfolios on the speaking skills of a group of Turkish EFL students. Students recorded their audio and video assignments and uploaded them to a platform (lore.com). Data generated from ePortfolios, interviews, and self-assessment have proved the effectiveness of engaging students in generating ePortfolios as a tool to enhance oral speaking skills.

In the Iranian context, Safari and Koosha (2016) used ePortfolios as an alternative assessment in order to examine their effects on intermediate and advanced EFL learners' speaking skills of 72 male and female students aged 14-18 enrolled at a language institute. Results showed that the use of ePortfolios allowed students to evaluate themselves and identify areas of potential improvement, which helped students to become more autonomous learners. They witnessed an improvement in their speaking performance as a result of making the necessary corrections. The authors asserted that students' gaining awareness of language learning was critical to the improvement of speaking skills.

Students' experience of using ePortfolios in Thailand was reported by Jiraporn and Khampusaen (2018). The researchers carried out a study to assess the speaking ability of a group of Thai EFL nursing students throughout the course of one semester through using ePortfolios. Participants were instructed to video tape themselves while completing their speaking tasks and upload the videos to their personal ePortfolios to a platform. The results indicated that ePortfolios were effective in providing an assessment of students' speaking ability. Most participating students reported a positive experience when they used ePortfolios. One student indicated that ePortfolios gave him the chance to practice speaking; whenever he finds mistakes he revises and resubmits his assignments. He added that he spent time outside of class practicing English speaking. He believed that ePortfolios decreased his shyness of speaking and gave him more confidence in his abilities. Another student stated that ePortfolios motivated them to speak English because they could track their English-speaking progress.

Students' perceptions of using electronic speaking portfolios by EFL students in the Korean context was examined by Kwak and Yin (2018). The researchers examined students' perceptions of using a speaking ePortfolio as an assessment and learning tool among 17 undergraduate students enrolled in a speaking course. Participants were instructed to create and post video clips of their speaking activities and keep a weekly reflective journal about their experience over the course of one semester posted on the webpage <https://section.blog.naver.com/>. Overall, students reported a positive experience using ePortfolios; they thought such a learning tool was effective in helping them diagnose their actual speaking abilities and track their progress. Students reported practicing their speaking four to five times and spending 30-40 minutes on task before recording their speaking. The outcomes of the study provide evidence for the positive role that ePortfolios can play in enhancing language proficiency.

In a more recent study involving EFL university-level students from Ecuador, Cabrera-Solano (2020) investigated how the use ePortfolios promoted students' speaking skills. Participants were engaged in speaking activities by creating audio and video recordings about a variety of topics over the course of one semester. Students' recordings were stored on Google Drive. They received personalized written and oral feedback regarding their speaking performance. The author used a mixed-method approach which consisted of pre- and post-questionnaires, observation sheets, and speaking rubrics to collect and analyze data. Results showed that ePortfolios helped hone students' pronunciation and speaking skills and boosted students' motivation to practice English. Students enjoyed the experience of recording audio clips and videos which took place in different locations at the university campus and other places in town.

Several studies have showed that ePortfolios fostered peer-feedback (Huang & Hung; 2010; Safari & Koosha, 2016; Wang & Chang, 2010). Such feedback helped students recognize their strengths and weaknesses as they observed their peers' performances or visited their ePortfolios and offered feedback. In addition, the same studies have also reported increased motivation and more positive attitude towards English and reduced levels of anxiety (Cepik & Yatibas, 2013). For example, in their study, Cepik and Yatibas, (2013) found that students were eager to speak when nobody was watching and had the option to upload multiple attempts. Witnessing more engagement on the part of students is crucial to the learning process. Bowman et al. (2016) argue that using ePortfolios enables students to develop an awareness of their skills and abilities. This validates the call of scholars to implement ePortfolios as a HIP.

Despite the evidence provided by research regarding the value of implementing ePortfolios, studies that examine the impact of ePortfolios for speaking skills are still limited, as most of the research in second language acquisition have focused on ePortfolios for writing (Barrot, 2020; Godwin-Jones, 2003; Hsu et al. 2008; Huang & Hung, 2010). Furthermore, studies on the implementation of ePortfolios as a tool to enhance speaking skills in the EFL Saudi context are lacking, which is the research gap that this study addresses. Thus, the study reports on Saudi EFL students' experience of using ePortfolios for enhancing their speaking skills. In particular, the study addressed the process of building speaking ePortfolio entries which included recording, editing, and revising their oral tasks based on the feedback provided by the instructor and peers, on the development of students' oral communication skills as perceived by students. Additionally, the study sets out to explore students' perceptions of building speaking ePortfolios which are uploaded to the University Blackboard platform.

3. METHOD

3.1. Research design

This study uses a mixed method research design (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). For the quantitative part, an 11-item, 5 point Likert-scale survey adapted from Cabrera-Solano (2020), which was administered at the end of the semester, was used to measure students' perceptions of using ePortfolios as a tool to enhance oral communication skills. For the qualitative part, focus group interviews were conducted in order to examine students' experiences of how using ePortfolios helped enhance their oral communication skills. The researchers asked students open-ended interview questions (see Appendix A). This enabled the researchers to obtain a better understanding of the students' experiences using speaking ePortfolios (Patton, 2015).

3.2. Research questions

The current study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. Do EFL students perceive speaking ePortfolios supported by instructor and peer feedback to be an effective learning tool to enhance communication skills?

RQ2. Is there a difference between low and high achievers' perceptions regarding speaking ePortfolios?

RQ3. Is there a difference between male and female students' perceptions regarding speaking ePortfolios?

3.3. Context and participants

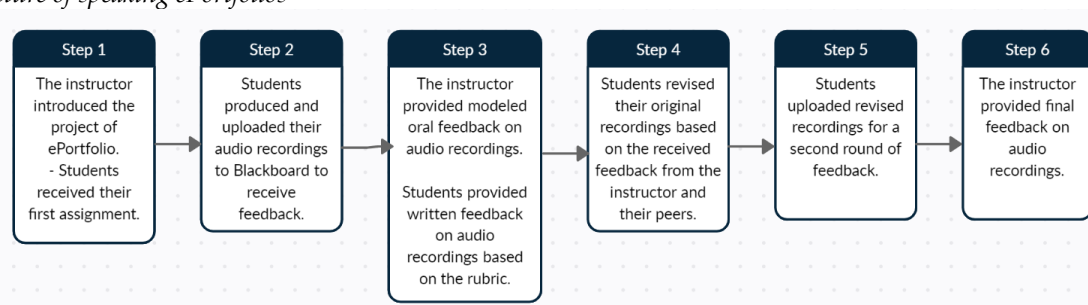
This study took place during the spring semester of 2021 at Northern Border University. The University piloted the use of ePortfolios in seven sections of English listening and speaking courses, a required course for all incoming freshmen. Participants were 185 undergraduate freshmen students (151 females, 82%, 34 males, 18%) aged between 18 and 20. This gender distribution was almost identical to the overall gender distribution of all students in the program, so it was determined that this sample was representative from the perspective of gender. The participants are representative of their peers in other universities in the Kingdom since prior to their admission to the program they had to take the same number of English courses during college preparatory semester which includes mandatory courses for all freshmen students. Universities in Saudi Arabia are gender-segregated; thus, one female instructor taught five sections of female students, and one male instructor taught the remaining two sections, which included all male students. Based on the proficiency test the English proficiency of the participants was at the intermediate level corresponding to the B1 and B2 levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR; Council of Europe, 2001). Generally, students do not have opportunities to use English outside of class, as they live in a small town where there are very few English speakers with Arabic used for daily communication. None of the participants had prior experience with ePortfolios.

The 11-item survey (see Table 1) asked students a number of questions regarding the different elements of using ePortfolios, including whether ePortfolios were motivating and engaging, helped them improve their language production, and whether the feedback they received was useful. Furthermore, all students were invited to participate in focus groups on a voluntary basis. Students who decided to join the discussion joined the focus group meeting on Blackboard. An average number of 14 students participated in each focus group which lasted around 50 minutes. Questions pertaining to students' experience in building their ePortfolios and how they benefited from using ePortfolios guided the discussion. Specifically, the researchers asked participants about the linguistic benefits they may have gained, their motivation and engagement while building their ePortfolios and providing and receiving feedback, and any challenges they encountered.

3.4. Procedures

Due to Covid-19 all classes met online once a week for three hours in spring 2021. During the first week of classes, the instructor introduced the project of speaking ePortfolios and briefed the students about its purpose and the steps involved in building an individual ePortfolio (Figure 1). Throughout the semester, each student must give a presentation about a topic of their choosing or from a list of topics suggested by the instructor. Topics included discussing a typical daily routine, favorite activities over the weekend, among others such as best life decision, life during Covid-19 lockdown, most enjoyable type of holiday, annoying habits, serious environmental problems in Saudi Arabia, importance of social networks, most important new stories in the last year, if you were the king. Students were instructed to audio record their presentations and upload their recordings to Blackboard in order to be assessed by the instructor and for viewing and commenting. During class sessions, the instructor played a number of recordings to model how to provide feedback on the content and linguistic aspects of the recordings. Students were encouraged to provide feedback for their peers after listening to the recorded presentations. Such feedback included comments about whether the content was clear and interesting. Other feedback included evaluating the pronunciation and accent of the presenter and whether they noticed any grammatical mistakes that needed to be corrected. Such guidance was necessary in order to generate useful feedback for English speaking development. Then students were divided into small groups and instructed to comment on their peers' contributions, using a four-part rubric for guidance: fluency, grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation and accent. Then students revised their recordings based on the feedback received and uploaded the revised recordings. The groups included high achievers and low achievers to ensure that everyone had access to peer feedback. Despite this limitation, students' comments on the content were valued and increased in volume as they got exposure to a growing number of their peers' recordings. Then students were asked to upload the revised version of their speech after receiving individual feedback from their instructor and their peers in order to build their ePortfolios. In order to gauge students' opinions regarding their

experience of building ePortfolios as a way to enhance their communication skills, participants were invited to respond to an online survey and participated in focus group discussions of at the end of the course. All students voluntarily completed the survey and 75% participated in the focus group discussions. The full participation of the students was probably due to the multiple messages from the head of department who encouraged students to fill out the survey as a way to voice their opinions about their experiences regarding the use of ePortfolios, which is considered as a pioneer project for the department.

Figure 1*Structure of speaking ePortfolios*

Source: Own elaboration.

3.5. Data collection and analysis

The authors used a data-validation variant of a convergent parallel mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The quantitative data aims at gauging participants' perceptions regarding the use of ePortfolios. The qualitative data which was collected via focus group discussions is used to analyze participants' experiences of building and using ePortfolios as a tool to enhance their oral communication skills. Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) assert that qualitative items "provide the researcher with emergent themes and interesting quotes that can be used to validate and embellish the quantitative survey findings" (p.81).

After the approval of the University's Institutional Review Board, Quantitative and qualitative data were gathered from the online 11-item survey and focus group discussions. Answers to these items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 'strongly disagree' to 5 'strongly agree,' and the Coefficient alpha for these items was .96. Additionally, the researchers invited students to one-hour focus groups. Focus group discussions were conducted with a group of students from each section (a total of seven groups). The researchers asked open-ended interview questions in order to garner rich responses from the participants (see appendix for focus group prompts). Similar questions were used in previous studies (e.g. Bolliger & Shepherd, 2010; Lee, 2019). Specifically, the researchers attempted to elicit students' insights into their use of voice recordings, the value of ePortfolios for improving oral communication skills, their ideas for improvements for ePortfolio use in the program, and any challenges they faced in developing their ePortfolios. Students were also encouraged to raise other topics related to the use of ePortfolios in order to give the researchers a better understanding of students' perceptions of their experiences. Focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed by one of the researchers. The

process of analyzing the transcripts from the focus group discussions included identifying common themes derived from the interviewees' responses to questions pertaining to ePortfolios. Using thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2019), the researchers analyzed the transcripts from the focus group data to determine the key points and codes, which were then classified into themes. To enhance the reliability of data analysis of interview transcripts, researchers used the intercoder reliability test. Intercoder reliability is 'a numerical measure of the agreement between different coders regarding how the same data should be coded' (O'Connor & Joffe 2020, p.1). The researchers coded all transcripts and then compared each other's codes through NVivo 12 for Windows which is a qualitative data analysis software package. This process identified a number of dominant themes, including benefits of tracking progress, improved communication and gained confidence, appreciation for feedback, as well as challenges. Our analysis of the focus group discussions was based on Miles and Huberman's (1994) model, which discusses transcription, theme identification, and revision of results based on peer examination.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Students' reactions to the use of speaking ePortfolio for developing oral skills are reported in Table 1. Survey results are used to support the four dominant themes that emerged when analyzing the focus group discussions: tracked progress and personal assessment, improved communication skills and gained confidence, appreciation for feedback, and challenges, which answer RQ1.

Table 1

Student reactions to the use of speaking ePortfolio for developing oral skills (n = 185)

Statements	Mean	SD
1. The use of speaking e-Portfolio was motivating.	3.95	1.12
2. The use of Blackboard was effective to organize and post my ePortfolio entries.	4.06	1.2
3. Creating ePortfolio entries facilitated the practice of speaking.	4.02	1.05
4. Creating speaking ePortfolio allowed me to improve grammar and vocabulary in oral production.	4.06	1.01
5. Creating speaking ePortfolio allowed me to improve pronunciation and fluency in oral production.	4.21	.90
6. Listening to my peers' recordings and their feedback was beneficial to me.	3.70	1.16
7. I found speaking tasks interesting and engaging.	3.85	1.10
8. The linguistic feedback received from the instructor was informative and helpful.	3.94	1.15
9. Speaking ePortfolios are a good tool for assessing my overall performance in speaking by the instructor.	4.14	.97
10. Listening to my speaking ePortfolio entries later helped me track my progress and identify areas of improvement.	4.18	.96
11. Would you like to continue using speaking ePortfolio to improve oral skills in future courses.	3.91	1.05

Mean of survey items	4.02	.94
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Source: Own elaboration.

4.1. Tracked progress and personal assessment

Many students appreciated the ability to continually record their progress to help students set personal goals of reaching a higher level of proficiency, especially for low achievers who expressed their desire to match the proficiency levels of the class high achievers. The majority of students thought their ePortfolio entries helped them track their progress and identify areas of improvement (statement 10). One student noted: "My ePortfolio helped me to go back to my early assignments and compare them with my current ones. It's nice to see how the amount of progress that I made. I still have work to do but I'm pleased with curve of improvement." (Student #3, Focus Group 4). Thus, ePortfolios resultantly served as a tool that heightened their motivation and reduced their levels of anxiety. For instance, one student commented: "knowing that I have a chance to make the necessary corrections before receiving the final grade is a huge advantage of ePortfolios. Getting assessed on the revised version of my recordings only has reduced the stress related to completing assignments." (Student #12, Focus Group 5). Similar findings were found by Kwak and Yin's (2018) study where speaking ePortfolios helped Korean students to improve their speaking proficiency and track their progress.

4.2. Perceived improvement in communication skills and gained confidence

Overall, students found speaking ePortfolios to be effective instruments that helped enhance their oral communication skills over the course of the semester. As shown in Table 1, most students stated that creating ePortfolio entries motivated them to practice speaking (statements 1 and 3) especially since the speaking tasks were interesting and engaging (statement 7). Participants witnessed an improvement in the different aspects of the language such as grammar and vocabulary (statement 4), pronunciation and overall oral production (statement 5). Knowing that their audio recordings may be played by the instructor for the entire class pushed students to make extra efforts in order to produce quality work. One student explained: "The process of being engaged in multiple audio recording attempts helped me learn the right pronunciation, learn about my mistakes and how to avoid them. I think that it will be hard for any student to improve his/her pronunciation without producing multiple recordings of ones work." (Student #6, Focus Group 2). The same opinion was reported by another student: "multiple recordings are key to improvement even though they may be time consuming. Each new recording is an opportunity to reach perfect pronunciation." (Student #3, Focus Group 4).

During the focus group discussions, several students made comments about how the process of recording their speech helped them reduce the large number of mistakes

they used to make. One student commented: “at the beginning I used to make all kinds of mistakes especially in pronunciation because I never had the chance to speak in English when I was at high school. Then I was able to avoid many of my mistakes and felt more comfortable speaking with much less hesitancy.” (Student #3, Focus Group 4). Another student highlighted the same progress: “as I compare my first ePortfolio with the last one I notice a huge difference in the quality of my speaking. I make very few mistakes related to tenses and verb conjugation. I’m not bragging about my performance but rather sharing what I feel good about my linguistic abilities right now.” (Student #8, Focus Group 4). The results are aligned with the findings of previous studies (Lee, 2019; Lys, 2013), which reported that digital recordings of oral tasks helped improve students’ accuracy and enhanced oral fluency. Similarly, Cabrera-Solano (2020) found that digital portfolios were effective to enhance EFL students’ pronunciation and fluency and increased their motivation to practice oral skills in English.

Other students emphasized how ePortfolio bolstered their confidence in their ability to speak English inside and outside the classroom. One student stated that: “My ePortfolio increased my ability to record my speech and upload it to Blackboard and helped me improve my speaking abilities which in return increased my confidence especially that I’m a very shy person who does not feel comfortable talking to others. (Student #1, Focus Group 1). A similar comment was shared by another student who noticed “being able to build all these ePortfolio entries has definitely helped increase my confidence.” (Student #13, Focus Group 4). It is worth mentioning that most of female students at Saudi Universities tend to be shy so that speaking in front of the class can be a challenging experience. Therefore, the process of recording voices instead of speaking live in class was considered a safer option for them. Over time, some students were able to overcome their shyness as they gained increased confidence in themselves. One student said: “I think that spending a lot of time working on my speaking tasks has made speaking a much easier task than before. I don’t have to worry about who is watching me when I speak which makes me so nervous.” (Student #1, Focus Group 5).

Many students appreciated the ability to check their recordings before final submission to the instructor. One student noted that “building my own ePortfolio allowed to record my speech more than once and submit good voice recordings. This gave me confidence to speak” (Student #3, Focus Group 1). Some students thought that examining their ePortfolios made them proud of themselves and how they managed to overcome the psychological barriers of speaking in English to an audience. For example, one student said: “I started to engage with English speakers outside class. In fact, I get really excited when I meet someone who speaks English.

The other day I talked to my doctor in English. I felt really good about my ability to communicate with foreigners” (Student #1, Focus Group 2). Another student said: “I was quite nervous at the beginning, but I believe that can speak English easily right now.” (Student #1, Focus Group 6). These findings corroborate the results reported by Wang and Jeffrey (2016) who found that the majority of participants who were college-level students in China reported very high levels of engagement and motivation and witnessed significant improvement in their English as a result of the ePortfolio assessment.

4.3. Appreciation for feedback

When asked about the importance of receiving feedback regarding their work most participants expressed their appreciation for the feedback they received from their instructor and their peers each week. They found the feedback very useful because it helped them learn from their mistakes in order to make consistent progress in terms of linguistic accuracy. For example, one student explained, “I found the feedback useful since it allows us to avoid making mistake again” (Student #1, Focus Group 1). Another student mentioned that “Playing ePortfolios entries helped me to recognize mistakes and avoid them in the future” (Student #1, Focus Group 4). Some students felt that their work was valued since their peers provided them with constructive feedback without embarrassing comments as their intention was to help them improve. For instance, one participant observed “Receiving feedback helped me feel that confident and started to speak English with a certain level of fluently (Student #1, Focus Group 7). The key role played by feedback in enhancing participants’ speaking abilities is aligned with several studies (Cabrera-Solano, 2020; Jiraporn & Khampusaen, 2018; Kwak & Yin, 2018; Safari & Koosha, 2016) which highlighted the positive impact of feedback on students’ speaking skills.

4.4. Challenges

The most commonly expressed challenges included the technical difficulties experienced by a number of students. Some participants faced difficulties uploading their recordings to the Blackboard platform. For some reasons, the instructor was not able to see some of the students’ recordings. These students got frustrated and worried about being penalized for late submission. They had to find other ways to submit their recordings such as emailing their instructor or sharing them via WhatsApp. One student attributed to “lack of compatibility between devices that use Huawei OS system Blackboard” (Student #10, Focus Group 2). In addition, uploading files was sometimes difficult for students who had slow internet. Managing the technology was challenging for some students. One student wrote: “the most challenging aspect of my experience was creating the ePortfolio using Blackboard as I don’t have a strong IT background. I had to seek the assistance of my

classmates with navigating Blackboard to create the e-Portfolio. It took me a while to get it". (Student #3, Focus Group 1).

Some students acknowledged such a challenge helped them improve their technology skills. The students "now are comfortable using Blackboard and are very familiar with its features and can navigate the platform with ease, especially the course wiki" (Student #11, Focus Group 5). Another student wrote: "This is the first time that I use the advanced features of Blackboard in order to develop my ePortfolio, which has been challenging and rewarding. I can see the benefits of having my own ePortfolio. I think that the expertise that I gained will highly benefit me in the future" (Student #14, Focus Group 6). These comments regarding the technical difficulties were expected as they are common issues reported by previous studies (e.g. Kwak & Yin, 2018; Lee, 2019). A few students find it difficult to provide feedback to peers. They are not sure if their feedback was helpful or accurate. "It can be difficult to review and assess other people's work. Having to examine someone's speech and determine areas of improvement can be difficult, as they may be incorrect" (Student #3, Focus Group 7).

RQ2 addresses the potential difference between low and high achievers' perceptions regarding speaking ePortfolios. Low-achieving students have been identified by their instructors as needing academic support, whether the students performed poorly on assessments or during classroom work. Additionally, low-achieving students were those below-level grades and making little or no academic progress. High achieving students were students who performed very well on assessments and classroom work as measured by class grades and teacher evaluations. Based on the grading scheme of the University, students with scores below 70% were classified as low achievers. Students with scores of 90% and above were classified as high achievers. The perceptions of low achievers who earned a letter grade of D (69%) or below ($M = 51.38$, $SD = 0.643$, $n = 29$) were compared to high achievers who earned a letter grade of C (70%) or above ($M = 88.39$, $SD = 8.128$, $n = 154$) using *t*-test. The assumption of homogeneity was tested and satisfied based on Levene's *F* test, $F(181) = 0.17$, $p = .897$. The independent samples *t*-test was associated with a statistically non-significant effect, $t(38) = 1.15$, $p = .251$, $d = 0.17$. These findings suggest that both groups of low and high achievers have the same positive perceptions towards speaking ePortfolios. Participants appreciated the use of speaking ePortfolios regardless of their proficiency levels. The insignificant role played by proficiency level in shaping students' perceptions is mirrored in Kwak and Yin (2018) who did not report any difference between high and low achievers' positive experiences when engaged in building ePortfolios.

The third research question examines students' perceptions regarding speaking ePortfolios in terms of gender. Results of the two-independent samples t-test show that the survey mean scores differ between females ($M = 3.91$, $SD = .97$, $n = 151$) and males ($M = 4.53$, $SD = .11$, $n = 32$) at the .05 level of significance ($t = 3.46$, $df = 181$, $p = .01$). On average, male students tend to have more positive attitudes towards the use of speaking ePortfolio for developing oral skills than female students. These differences in perceptions could be attributed to affective factors such as self-confidence and anxiety. For example, in a longitudinal study Thompson and Sylvén (2018) reported that female students in Sweden displayed higher levels of English anxiety and lower levels of second language self-confidence than their male peers even though they were more motivated and made more efforts to learn English. In addition, previous studies provide empirical evidence that the female participants experienced higher levels of anxiety than their male counterparts (e.g., Arnaiz & Guillen, 2012; Park & French, 2013) including the Saudi context (c.f. Bensalem, 2018; Bensalem, 2019). Even though students did not have to speak directly to an audience knowing their recordings would be assessed by their peers and their instructor may have triggered their anxiety.

5. IMPLICATIONS

The findings reported by this study have implications. Speaking ePortfolios may motivate students to be engaged in the learning process and result in better speaking quality (Lee, 2019). Instructing students to voice record their speaking activities allowed them to spend more time on the task and enhance students' awareness of the target language. The use of ePortfolio helped students develop their oral communication skills through linguistic scaffolding provided by the instructor and their peers. Furthermore, the creation of e-portfolios gave learners certain autonomy and made them fully involved in their learning process. Finally, instructors who opt for ePortfolio adoption need to be aware that they need to be organized and ready to commit to time-intensive work. The adoption of such a tool is worth the effort, though. Students need to have opportunities to demonstrate the knowledge and skills they are gaining (Peet et al., 2011).

6. CONCLUSION AND POTENTIAL FUTURE RESEARCH

This study reports on students' perceptions of using ePortfolios as a tool to enhance their oral language skills. The data indicate that despite the challenges students reported positive experiences since they thought that ePortfolios helped promote their oral proficiency and increased their motivation to learn English in the Saudi context. This finding is consistent with previous research carried out by Cabrera-Solano (2020), Huang and Hung (2010), Jiraporn and Khampusaen (2018), Kwak and Yin (2018), and Safari and Koosha (2016), in which participants indicated that ePortfolios could be used to help improve their oral skills in English.

This research is not without limitations. First, the implementation of ePortfolios lasted for only 8 weeks given the late start of the semester. Therefore, such a short period of time may not be enough to determine with certainty the effectiveness of recordings on students' oral communication skills as perceived by students. Future studies should examine the impact of ePortfolios over a longer period of time. Second, the course was offered online due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The lack of face-to-face interaction between the instructor and students may have somehow affected the outcomes of the study. Conducting the same study in a face-to-face environment may have yielded different insights. Third, the study scope remains somewhat limited since it reported only the positive impact of ePortfolios from the students' perspective. A future study should consider measuring the impact of ePortfolios on students' speaking skills using proper tests. Fourth, the study did not have a control group taught with traditional methods. A future study might explore two cohorts—one group who use audio recordings for creating ePortfolios and a second group completes regular tasks without building ePortfolios. A comparison of students' linguistic output of both the control group and the experimental groups that use ePortfolios.

In addition, since one of the instructors was very popular among students, there could have been a desire by the students to please the researcher during the focus group discussions by praising the work that was done by the instructor over the course of the semester. As a means of addressing this concern, the students were told the purpose of the focus group interviews was not to evaluate the work of their instructor but rather the implementation of a new method of teaching adopted by the University. Finally, while feedback provided by peers was essential in the learning process some students were not able to comment on the recordings because of the lack of their linguistic knowledge. Perhaps peer feedback could be more effective with advanced level students.

The study data from the survey and focus group interviews revealed that the majority of students reported that producing their speaking ePortfolio helped them enhance their oral communication skills and made them enjoy their learning experience. As students examined their speaking portfolios entries they compiled over the course of the semester they were able to appreciate the progress they made in terms of pronunciation, vocabulary, structure and overall ability to communicate in English. Participants reported an increase of their motivation and confidence in themselves as their levels of anxiety decreased. Consistent feedback provided by the instructor and peers helped students diagnose areas that need further development. Gender proved to be a significant factor that resulted in male students having more positive attitudes towards building speaking ePortfolios to improve their oral communication skills than their female peers. In addition, low and high achieving students shared the same perceptions regarding the usefulness of ePortfolios as a tool to enhance their oral communication skills.

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Appendix A

Sample focus group questions

1. Describe your overall experience of recording your speaking activities and building an ePortfolio? Did your ePortfolio help you improve your pronunciation and develop your speaking skills? If so, how?
2. How much has using ePortfolio helped you to become more engaged with the course content? How much has using e-portfolios helped you to become more motivated to participate?
3. Did the use of ePortfolios increase your confidence in communicating in English?
4. Did you encounter any problems creating your recordings and uploading them to Blackboard?
5. Comment on the speaking tasks. Did you find the topics interesting? Why and why not?
6. Share your views about peer comments and teacher feedback. Was listening to teacher's feedback useful? Did it help you pay more attention to your mistakes and consequently improve your grammar and vocabulary?
7. Would you like to continue using digital portfolios for enhancing EFL speaking skills? Would you like more courses to use e-portfolios?

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