

“Empatico” Web Platform on Developing English Speaking Skills of Primary School Pupils

By

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Abstract:

This study was conducted to investigate the use of Empatico platform as a pedagogical technique in teaching English language, and its impact on students' oral production skills. For this purpose, one intact class ($N=30$) was chosen as a convenient sample from a primary school in El-Gharbia Governorate. This study has been conducted both qualitatively and quantitatively through the use of pre/post oral production tests, a reflection in-action sheet, and a reflection on-action sheet as data collection instruments. Data were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively (using paired-sample t-test). The quantitative results showed that there were statistically significant differences between students' pretest and posttest mean scores on all oral production sub-components (i.e., accuracy of English sounds pronunciation, language expression, vocabulary, grammatical structure, and speaking pauses, intonation and length of utterance as well as fluency) in favor of the posttests. Qualitative findings revealed that Empatico platform can provide learners with the communicative elements that allow them to use English to express their ideas freely. Students' responses to the reflection sheets showed that they appreciated the activities practiced and zoom sessions as an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) resource. This offers a glimpse of how useful authentic videos and subtitles are when encouraging students to learn English.

Keywords: *Empatico platform, EFL; oral production skills*

1. Introduction

In spite of the importance of the communicative ability and speaking proficiency, the majority of our studies for several reasons have problems with all speaking sub-skills. From the researcher experience as a teacher, as a supervisor of English and now as a teacher and stage director of a Language school for years, she found that students' motivation to speak is very low. When she asked them to speak about a certain topic which they have already learned and had a lot of information and vocabulary about it, she noticed that they were afraid to speak in English. They stated that they have a difficulty in speaking in English. When they present a topic, she found that only 10 students out of 30 are not afraid to speak in English. The biggest problem is that most of the students did not speak well at all. She made an interview with the students to ask them about their feelings toward speaking in English and the problems they face when they practice speaking. About 70-80% stated that they are afraid of speaking in English because they make many mistakes especially in vocabulary, pronunciation, English expressions and basic grammar. They do not have enough vocabulary to use. They do not know which tense they should use (they have problems with grammar). Although they have the ideas in their mother tongue, they cannot express them in English well. Above all, they do not speak in their school too much.

Empatico Is a platform to connect students globally, It is a free online learning tool that enables students to practice communication and leadership skills needed. It is designed specifically for 8-15 years old students to connect with other classrooms through video interaction. It aims to provide students with opportunity to connect with others around the world & walk away.

An interview as a pilot study was held with some English teachers in my school and other primary schools. They stated that their students have the same problems and difficulties in speaking in English. They do not know how to speak well and how to correct their mistakes. They avoid practice speaking because; they are afraid of and worried about making mistakes. They do not practice speaking too much.

The current study, therefore, was conducted to investigate the effects of Empatico platform on EFL Primary School students' oral production skills. The following are the main research questions:

1. To what extent will the utilization of the Empatico platform affect the overall speaking skill of the target students and from this main question, the following sub-questions can be derived:

A- To what extent will the utilization of the Empatico platform affect in the fluency (speaking pauses, intonation patterns, and length of utterance) of speaking English by the target students.

B- To what extent will the utilization of the Empatico platform affect in the accuracy (pronunciation of sounds, the use of grammatical structure, vocabulary & language expressions) of speaking English by the target students?

2. Literature review

2.1. Empatico

Is a platform to connect students globally, It is a free online learning tool that enables students to practice communication and leadership skills needed. It is designed specifically for 8-15 years old students to connect with other classrooms through video interaction. It aims to provide students with opportunity to connect with others around the world & walk away.

Empatico is a free tool for teachers to connect their classroom with other classrooms around the world through live video and activities designed to foster meaningful connections among students. Empatico empowers teachers and students to explore the world through experiences that spark curiosity, kindness, and empathy. Empatico activities help students practice social skills such as respectful communication, perspective taking, cooperation, and critical thinking, as they experience positive connections with peers around the world. All of our activities are research- and standards-based (<https://bit.ly/2Msvegt>), and they fit easily into existing curricula. Empatico activity plans can be followed step-by-step or tailored to meet your classroom's needs.

Teachers who are willing to make use of this web technology can make arrangements with Empatico platform, providing them with the topics that are to be tackled in classroom speaking sessions and the desired time. Empatico in turn makes arrangements with other language classroom around the world and informs the teacher of the exact time and the procedures necessary for connecting with other classrooms which are handling the same topic.

The teacher is to prepare for these interaction sessions; setting objectives for each one, roles of teachers and students, the type of questions to be addressed... etc. Each session is to be audio or video taped to be used in follow up sessions that follow the Empatico sessions.

In each follow up session the classroom teacher replays the Empatico video-taped session and discuss intensively the linguistic features that were specified as objectives for each session, e.g. new words and expressions that can be extracted from the session and studied by the students to add to language report, or some phonetic (e.g. pronunciation of sounds) or phonology features (e.g. word stress and intonation) and syntactical features or rather the study of formation of sentences (structures).

Empatico utilization in the suggested manner needs good planning, of course this can be achieved through using one of the famous instructional design models and following its' guide lines in designing a program that can organize the implementation of Empatico in language classrooms. Smith and Ragan (1999) model or Dick and Carrey (2009) model for instance, can be used for this purpose to ensure systematic design of the target program.

2.2. Instructional Design:

It is the process of determining the needs of the learners, defining the end goals and objectives of instruction, designing and planning assessment tasks, and designing teaching and learning activities to ensure the quality of instruction. this research may help curriculum designers to design and tailor different activities using Empatico in particular regarding speaking skill into EFL syllabus to be involved in students' books and recommended in teacher's guide.

2.3 Oral Production Skills

All human beings need to communicate in order to express their ideas, feelings and thoughts; this is the main reason why communicative activities should be integrated into the lesson. Students' spoken language is more productive when they are engaged in a dynamic learning environment that encourages them to do their tasks. It is well-known that all people need to understand spoken language in different situations, such as daily life, work,

school, community, among others. According to Moss and Ross-Feldman (2003), any activity which requires the learner to speak and listen to others includes the use of communication.

Activities with communicative purposes are helpful for breaking down barriers, finding information, expressing ideas about one self and learning about culture. Jeyasala (2014) asserts that teachers should encourage students' communicative competence all the time, and besides their limitations to use language fluently and accurately, they should provide them with spaces to interact with others or to immerse them in speaking activities that enhance their ability to use the target language. Providing students with real communicative contexts is the best option teachers can make, because students can exchange real information, so language and phrases will emerge according to the situation. It is also necessary that students have a lot of exposure to the language; the linguistic input they receive should provide them with opportunities to produce and use the language at any situation, motivation then plays a very important role in encouraging students to verbally communicate. According to Richards (2008), learning the language does not always guarantee the learner will be able to use the language fluently.

Consequently, the lack of fluency can be the result of rigid formal training in language learning; another reason can be the lack of strategies to involve students in communicative activities. Learners should be encouraged to take the initiative to participate and dare to express their ideas, it does not matter whether they use the language properly, but at least, they need to try and improve it through constant practice.

Experts also asserts that communicative competence involves the following aspects of language knowledge: knowing how to use the language in different situations, knowing how to vary the use of the language according to settings and participants (formal and informal speech), being able to understand different types of texts, and knowing how to maintain communication despite any limitation the speaker might have.

3. Method

3.1 Study Design

This study was conducted using a quantitative/qualitative research method with a quasi-experimental design. To help fulfill this aim, a one group pre/posttest quasi-experimental design was carried out. For data analysis, this study utilized quantitative method based on statistical analysis of the results of administering the program , and a qualitative method for showing how and why the results occurred as sort of justification of the quantitative results. The participants had pre/post oral production tests together with a rating rubric to measure and compare their performance before and after the treatment. Moreover, they had reflection-in-action sheets and reflection-on action sheets during and after the study to find out the student's attitudes towards the Empatico platform sessions.

3.2 Participants

This study was conducted on fifth year primary school students. One intact class was chosen at a convenient sampling technique from a primary school in El-Gharbia Governorate in the second term of the year 2023/2024. A group of 30 EFL learners were chosen based on some specific criteria to form a treatment group which studied the target program. Participants' ages ranged from 10 to 14 years old. They have been studying English. Their English oral production skills are around average (with same major problems in pronunciation, vocabulary, expressions, grammar, and fluency).

3.3 Instruments

3.3.1 The Oral Production Pre/Post-Tests and the Scoring Rubric.

Two different parallel forms of oral production tests, used as pre/posttests, were prepared and administered. Some questions were to elicit personal information of students. First, they were asked to introduce themselves, and talk about their hobbies. Some questions related to their study topics were also included in the interview to check progress in their oral production skills following the rating rubric criteria. Face-to-face interviews were conducted and recorded in order to gain further details. All the questions were answered by the students while they have been audio recorded. When conducting the interview; the researcher explained to the interviewees the aim

and the appropriate way to answer the questions. Second, students were shown a picture to describe.

The scoring rubric included (2) general skills: fluency and accuracy. In addition, accuracy was divided into (4) sub-skills: grammar, vocabulary, language expressions, and pronunciation of sounds. Fluency was divided into (3) sub-skills: speaking pauses, intonation and length of utterance.. The rating rubric commenced with a letter to the jury explaining the title of the study, and its objectives. Moreover, in formulating the skills, care has been taken to be clear, specific and precise, and each term includes one skill.

3.3.2 Reflection-in-action and on-action sheets. In the given reflection sheets, students were required to respond to a set of questions that reflect his/her feelings towards the Empatico platform program. Their responses to the questions on the sheet were used to improve work in the following sessions and in justifying the results of the experiment in the end of it.

3.3.3 Reflection-on-Action sheets. After studying the program, some questions were written to be answered by participants with the aim of collecting their views about Empatico platform and willingness to use them in learning English which can help analyze the results of the study.

3.4 Treatment and Data Collection

The treatment lasted for (24) sessions over (10) weeks, (45) minutes each. The researcher as an English teacher acted as a facilitator, initiator, a guide, a coach, a mental supporter, a participant in addition to being a motivator. Moreover, a teacher must be a consultant helping the students to be more engaged in learning as they love to be given the opportunity and power to speak and discover new things by themselves. Rather than being passive recipients of information, teachers had to urge pupils to participate through discussion with other classes around the world, a topic to search and discuss about. Implementation procedures were as follows:

Warm-up

This stage was called ice-breaking stage which was achieved through holding an introductory session to the students. It was held directly after the researcher had told the students about in the warm up session the treatment and how it is different from their

daily regular classroom teaching, at this introductory session, the researcher told the students about the topic: its objectives, how to organize their ideas. Increasingly, the researcher viewed the target videos from the Empatico platform library to use them for the purpose of the treatment. Hence, the participants were enthusiastic to participate in the treatment and discuss with each other first. In the second session, the researcher began teaching the treatment group on the mechanism of dealing with Empatico zoom session with the other classes and its components.

The Administration Step

The researcher started with the administration of the pre-test. Then, the researcher told the group about the weekly teaching times. They used to meet them two days a week according to the school timetable. The meeting or teaching time lasted for about forty five minutes two times a week. After that, the teacher started teaching the Empatico platform treatment as follows:

Empatico Lesson Plan

Each lesson plan followed the same sequence of the adopted program components. Empatico platform treatment included some of English oral production skills which are;

- 1- Accuracy**, the production and use of appropriate and correct pronunciation, word structure, words, grammar, and expressions.
- 2- Fluency**, the production and use of appropriate and correct speaking pauses, and speaking duration.

– Introduction

This step provided background information and assigned the roles that students would play.

– Task

The aim of this step was about what the students should do and would accomplish by the end of the Empatico platform treatment.

– Process

In this step, the students were told about the steps they should follow to carry out their tasks and finish them successfully.

– **Resources**

The participants were provided with some resources to carry out their tasks competently and successfully such as: the platform page, the links, the hyperlinked icons and handouts.

– **Evaluation:**

The participants were discussed about their answers and writings after each session as a kind of feedback to get the participants evaluate their learning.

– **Conclusion**

This aimed at reminding and students were asked to speak about what they had done throughout the program. In this stage, the teacher gave them reinforcement and encouragement for what they had accomplished.

4. Results

4.1 Quantitative Results

Students' pre/posttest scores were analyzed and compared using the paired samples t-test. Table 1 presents t-test data.

Table (1)

"t" test between the mean scores of the experimental group on the pre-and post-tests on the overall speaking skill

skills	Group	Descriptive Statistics			T-Value	D.F	Sig.	η^2	Effect Size
		N	Mean	Std. Deviation					
overall speaking skill	Pre	30	7.70	2.037	29.908	29	.000	0.98	Large
	Post	30	25.43	3.692					

Table (1) indicates that the mean scores of the experimental group in the post- test assessment are considerably higher than those in the pre-test assessment in the skills, where the "t-value" is (29.908) which is significant at the (0.01) level. Thus, the third hypothesis is confirmed, and this indicates the effectiveness of the suggested strategy. The following diagram illustrates these results:

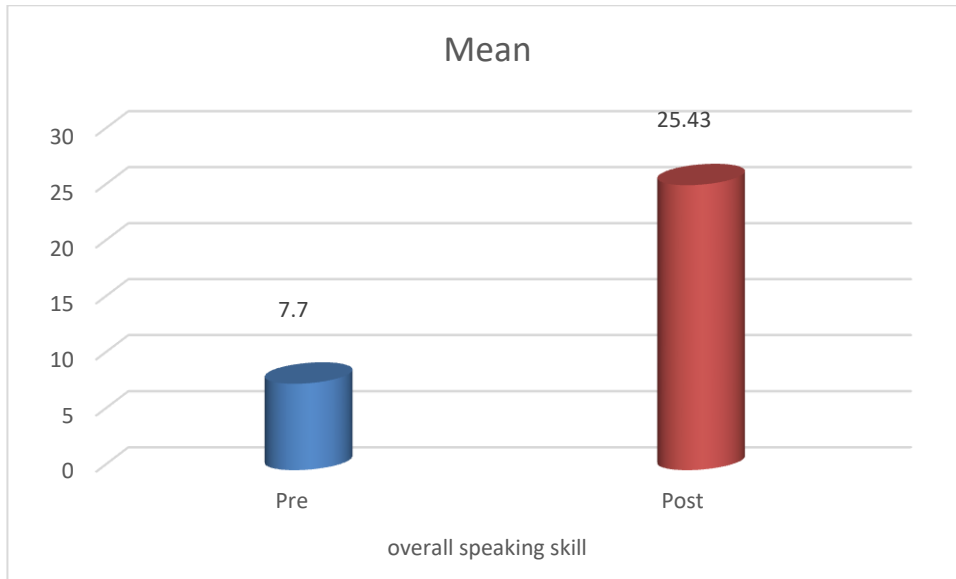


Figure 1

The Pre-Post Differences in the Skills speaking Test Findings of the second Hypothesis

4.2 Qualitative Results

4.2.1 Analysis of Reflection-in-Action Sheets.

- **Students' opinions with respect to what they liked and did not like in the previous sessions:**

By reviewing students' responses to this question the researcher found that all students' views moves around how they liked this strategy; this strategy made a difference before and after regarding oral proficiency. In addition they liked the activities which they did such as the discussions, collecting data, and the role play. On the other hand, they indicated that was so easy to use the platform and using new technologies in education and being exposed for different culture for the first time, they also complained that they need more time to practice oral production skills.

The participants' point of views in terms of the activities.

The purpose of the activities was to provide the participants with opportunities to observe language patterns and to discover new cultures. Therefore, these tasks were introduced only after analyzing a given session of Empatico, guided by the teacher and accompanied by the use of the smart board, where they can discuss with other classes in different topics.

The participants' points of views in the first and second administration of the reflection-in-action sheets showed that all the

students found activities useful and were motivated by these tasks, as indicated by two students:

Student1: "The most difficult part was prepared and discovers vocabulary and new idioms, but this was good. I was encouraged to look for their meanings and learn more"

Student2: "Meeting new friends from around the world, and this got me to make new friends and discover new things". While unfamiliar vocabulary could have been a source of difficulty, it was reported to be an incentive for the two participants to learn the new vocabulary they encountered.

In terms of difficulties caused by tasks, the majority of the participants (98%) strongly disagreed that they had difficulties due to time and effort spent on analyzing language data or due to search techniques. As a result, participants did not experience significant difficulties during the sessions.

this research may help curriculum designers to design and tailor different activities using Empatico in particular regarding speaking skill and the other skills too, into EFL syllabus to be involved in students' books and recommended in teacher's guide

4.2.2 Analysis of Reflection-on-Action Sheets.

The description obtained from the reflection-on-action sheet's result will be reported. It was focused on main target such as their opinion about the e-learning process, and their willingness to integrate the Empatico platform inside the classroom.

Q1. Are you with the use Empatico platform whole program inside the classroom for pedagogical purposes?

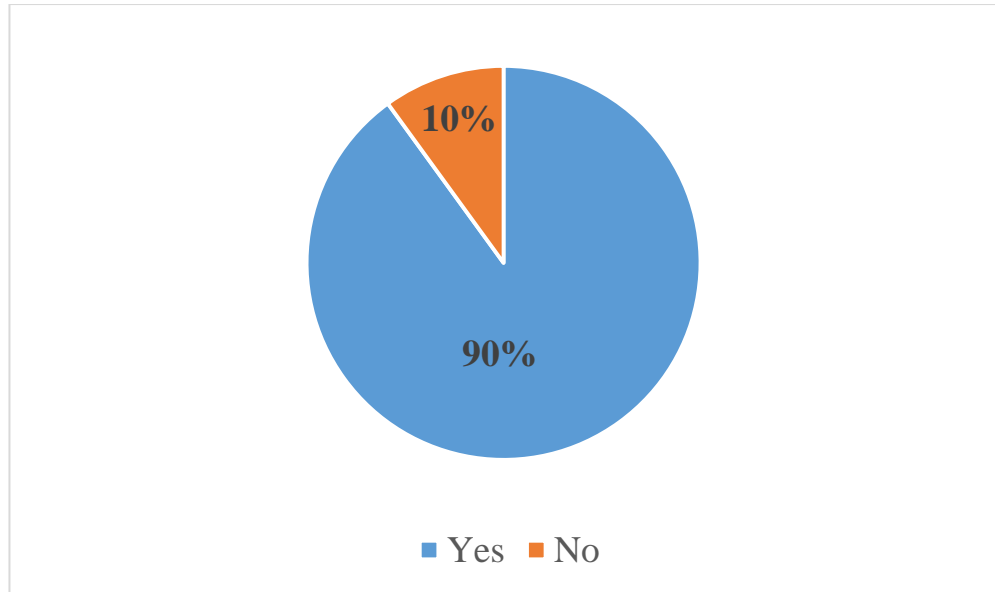
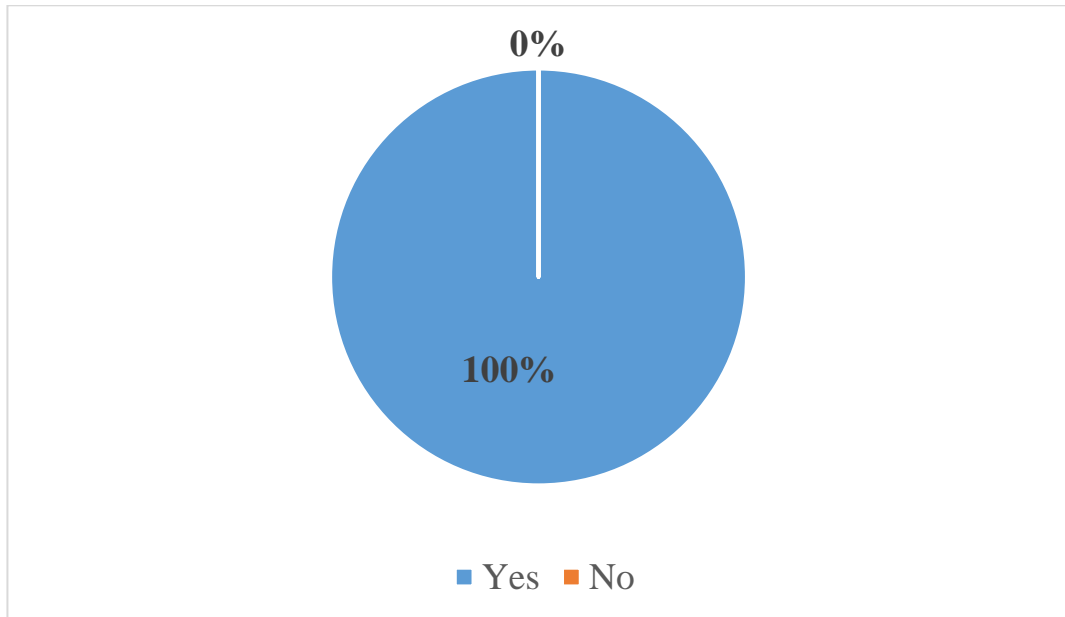


Figure1. Students' point of view about the use of Empatico platform whole program inside the classroom

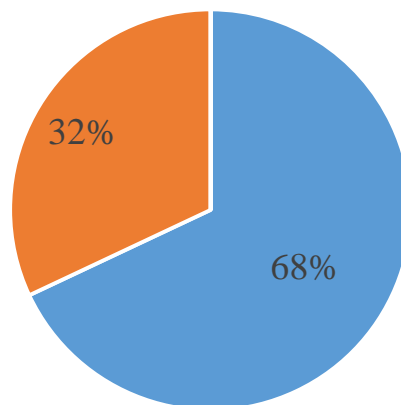
The treatment group with the average of (90%) said “yes” for its use, and only (10%) were against.

Q2. Do you think that Empatico platform whole program can help you improve your speaking skill?



It can be noticed that in the treatment group (100%) of the participant's claim that the use Empatico platform whole program would improve their speaking skills; (100%) of the answers were “Yes”.

Q3. Do you think that using Empatico platform in order to have a better proficiency, and exposed to different culture speakers are useful?

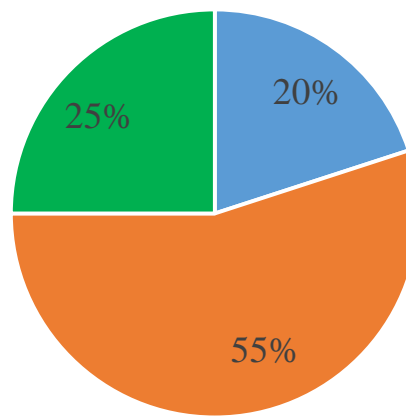


■ Strongly agree ■ Agree ■ Disagree

Figure 3. Students' agreement on the exposure to a different culture speakers'

In the treatment group it is clear that the majority of the students strongly agreed (68%) on the idea of being exposed to a different culture speakers videos' since they know it importance and the rest are in-between with (32%) agreement. the rest of the group said that it would be useful for EFL students in order to learn the right pronunciation of words as well as their use.

4. Empatico platform would improve more your:



■ Vocabulary ■ Speaking Skill ■ Listening Skill

Figure 4. What would Empatico platform whole program improve the most?

As the Figure of this question reveals, (20%) of the participants state that Empatico platform would promote more their vocabulary, in addition to the tone ,the accent, or even the new idioms and topics that help to improve speaking skill; (55%) opted for this choice, at the end only (25%) thought that it would help more their speaking skill. To justify their answers, some participants said that when it was all about vocabulary; it introduces them to new words and idioms from different cultures where they will had to look it up in order to memorize it, meanwhile for the speaking skill it helps them to check how the speech is being delivered, and finally listening skill is the most important skill when it comes to exercises of listening and comprehension.

Q5. Do you think that there is a difference between students who use Empatico platform whole program inside the classroom and those who do not?

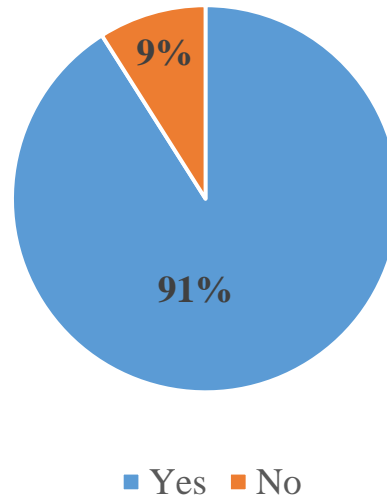


Figure 5. Students' agreement on the diversity between learners who used Empatico platform whole program and those who do not

It was found that (91%) of the answers agreed about using Empatico platform, and only (9%) didn't agree to, one of the participants said: "when use Empatico platform, you become more familiar with the right accent, and you become familiar to other speakers' thoughts". In addition, another participant mentioned that while discussing with other class you learn to become more confident and so to feel at ease while talking in front of an audience. Coming to the opposite side of the answers, a participant said that Empatico platform is not the only way to practice your English; other added that each one has his/her own learning style.

5. Discussion

The results will be discussed in this section in terms of speaking competency overall as well as the two major speaking skills, fluency and accuracy. Overall post-test on speaking The Speaking platform sessions treatment increased students' overall speaking competency, according to the t-test findings. This indicates that the treatment group significantly improved their general

speaking skills. In order to improve the treatment group students' speaking performance, the treatment may have been successful.

It is significant that all the factors that led to a notable improvement in the speaking aspects (fluency and accuracy) also contributed to the experimental group students' overall FL speaking ability. Using Empatico platform gave students plenty of opportunities to talk freely in a relaxed environment. This may have enabled students to speak fluently. Also, different topics helped students apply grammatical rules in various contexts. They acquired good vocabulary and used it in discussions. Their pronunciation improved and they were more confident in practicing pronunciation.

Furthermore, they knew how to express themselves according to the situation. Students were able to comprehend different messages without much difficulty. Speaking ability may have developed significantly as a result of cooperative tasks. As seen by their posttest performance, they gained more self-confidence to talk fluently and freely. Planning session also helped students develop and prepare suitable situations and more language that was more complicated and fluent.

Moreover, students reported that they enjoyed the consciousness raising activities as they felt more responsible for their learning, they made friends through Empatico sessions by taking each other e-mails and face book pages and sometimes phone number. Furthermore, the discussion at the planning for the session stage helped to create interest in doing the task and activated topic related vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and word stress. This increased students' motivation, involvement, and willingness to practice speaking and do the required activities.

The teacher acted as a facilitator during the group discussion in preparing for the session, encouraging the students to correct one other's language usage and search for suitable expressions that suits the other school culture without interfering. Students had the opportunity to perform in front of students of other school no matter what's their nationality. The students were forced to execute the whole task performance in front of an audience at the post-task stage in addition to presenting the final task results.

Students enjoyed talking and make friends in different nationalities, making presentations and expressing their viewpoints and talking about their culture. Some students were unwilling to

participate at the beginning of the experiment but after sometimes they began to get used to presentations and even timid students were willing to participate. Using Empatico increased the chance that pattern identification was more likely to be integrated into the learner's interlanguage system.

Some students were reluctant to participate at the beginning of the treatment but after sometimes they began to get used to presentations and even shy students were willing to participate Elmansy (2020), Hamam (2017) Such post-task increased the chance that pattern identification was more likely to be integrated into the learner's inter-language system. Accordingly, it helped students build confidence with their learning. At this stage, students were motivated to be active and autonomous learners. They were also triggered to practice the speaking skills learned in a more active way. These activities stressed students' common points of weakness in terms of speaking sub-skills, and addressed them appropriately. Consequently, students' overall oral production as well as sub-skills improved, Eid (2015), they increased the amount of student talking time, discussion and opportunities for students to speak with each other. Moreover, interaction between students served as an important mediator in classroom learning process, Ashour (2014), and Diyyab (2013).

Accordingly, it helped students build confidence with their learning. At this stage, students were encouraged to be active and autonomous learners. Additionally, they were motivated to put their newly acquired speaking abilities into more conscious, purposeful practice. These sessions identified and correctly targeted the students' main points of speaking sub-skill deficiency. As a result, both the pupils' general speaking ability and speaking specificity increased. They enhanced the amount of time students spent conversing, having discussions, and having opportunities to interact with one another. Additionally, student contact was a key mediator in the learning process in the classroom.

The self- correction also might have enabled students to correct the expressions in different topics and situations in actual speaking performance afterwards. Students discovered their errors by themselves and this helped them learn new words pronunciation easily and effectively. Besides, the post task activities clarified students' errors. This result agrees with some researchers. These

results are in agreement with those of Salem (2019), Farid (2019), and Hamza (2019).



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