THE ROLE OF DIGITAL PLATFORMS IN ENHANCING ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILLS AMONG UZBEK LEARNERS

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The integration of digital technologies into English language teaching (ELT) has significantly changed how speaking skills are taught and practiced. Traditionally, English instruction in many Uzbek classrooms has been teacher-centered, focusing on grammar translation and controlled speaking drills. However, learner-centered education principles emphasize active participation, interaction, and autonomy, which are crucial for improving speaking skills (Bremner, 2021). Bremner notes that learner-centered education (LCE) involves "active participation… interaction… adapting to learners' needs… autonomy and formative assessment" (p. 4). Digital platforms provide opportunities to implement learner-centered practices by allowing students to take control of their learning pace, practice speaking beyond the classroom, and access authentic communication opportunities. Mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) tools such as Duolingo have demonstrated positive results, showing a "positive, moderate correlation between the amount of time spent on Duolingo and learning gains… [with students appreciating] flexibility and gamification aspects positively" (Loewen et al., 2019, p. 295). Similarly, mobile pronunciation apps offer learners personalized feedback and autonomous practice opportunities. Kaiser (2018) highlights that mobile-assisted pronunciation training (MAPT) provides "real-time feedback on oral performance, limitless and self-paced study, and reduced anxiety due to privacy" (p. 40). Uzbekistan's educational context faces challenges of limited resources and uneven access to technology, especially in rural areas. Hockly (2014) observes that even in low-resource environments, "effective technology use… utilizes a wide range of new and older technologies… keeping costs low and ensuring long-term sustainability" (p. 79). These insights suggest that despite infrastructural

limitations, digital platforms can significantly contribute to enhancing English speaking skills if applied strategically.

Digital platforms offer multiple pathways to improve English speaking skills, especially for learners in Uzbekistan, where traditional classroom methods often limit communicative practice. One major opportunity is the ability to extend speaking practice beyond class hours through ***mobile-assisted language learning (MALL)***. Loewen et al. (2019) emphasize that mobile learning "extends learning beyond the classroom, and learners are able to make autonomous decisions about where, when, and how to study an L2" (p. 294). This flexibility enables learners to engage with English in authentic and varied contexts, supporting fluency development. Gamified platforms like ***Duolingo*** or ***Busuu*** increase learner motivation through interactive tasks and rewards. Loewen et al. (2019) note that "participants generally viewed Duolingo's flexibility and gamification aspects positively; however, variability in motivation… was also expressed" (p. 295). For Uzbek learners, who may have limited exposure to English-speaking environments, these features create additional engagement opportunities and help sustain speaking practice. Pronunciation training apps represent another significant opportunity. Kaiser (2018) describes how mobile-assisted pronunciation training (MAPT) tools provide "options to be more individual for each learner's needs… real-time feedback on oral performance, and reduced anxiety due to privacy" (p. 40). Learners can repeatedly practice sounds and words at their own pace, receive instant feedback, and track progress, all of which are crucial for developing clear and confident speech. Even in ***low-resource contexts***, innovative use of digital tools is possible. Hockly (2014) reports that effective integration focuses on "cultural appropriacy of materials and approaches, using appropriate technologies, keeping costs low, and ensuring long-term sustainability" (p. 79). In Uzbekistan, this could mean prioritizing low-cost mobile apps, offline-capable tools, and blended learning models where online practice complements classroom interaction. Finally, digital technologies align well with learner-centered education. Bremner (2021) highlights that active participation and autonomy are key features of LCE

(p. 4), and digital platforms inherently support autonomy by allowing learners to choose when and how to practice speaking. Egbert (2018) adds that ***CALL*** (computer-assisted language learning) encourages learners to interact socially, receive feedback, and focus on meaningful language tasks, creating opportunities for more authentic speaking practice (p. 3).

Despite the clear opportunities, the integration of digital platforms for speaking skills development faces several *challenges* in the Uzbek context. One challenge is *unequal access to technology*. Hockly (2014) notes that discussions of educational technology often center on the "digital divide… [which refers to] the difference in access to technology between developed countries… and developing countries… [and] even within individual classrooms" (p. 79). In Uzbekistan, students in rural or low-income areas may lack smartphones, stable internet, or necessary digital literacy, limiting the reach of mobile-assisted learning tools. Another challenge is the *pedagogical readiness of teachers*. As Prabhu (1990) famously stated, "there is no best method" (p. 161), implying that methods and tools must be adapted to context. Teachers need training to effectively integrate digital speaking tools into curricula, design meaningful online speaking tasks, and provide guidance for autonomous learning. Without adequate training, technology may be underutilized or misused. Learner motivation also varies. While gamified platforms like Duolingo can engage students, Loewen et al. (2019) found "variability in motivation to study and frustration with instructional materials" (p. 295). This suggests that while digital tools can enhance speaking skills, they must be supplemented with teacher support and meaningful interaction opportunities. Pronunciation apps face issues with feedback reliability. Kaiser (2018) observed that "73.3% [of reviewed apps] provide no feedback to the learner and are essentially listen-and-repeat exercises" (p. 42). This means learners may need teacher guidance to select effective apps and use them correctly.

Digital platforms have strong potential to enhance English speaking skills among Uzbek learners by increasing access to authentic language input, providing flexible pronunciation training, and supporting autonomous practice.

Overall, digital platforms represent a transformative opportunity for English speaking skills development in Uzbekistan. However, careful planning, teacher readiness, and equitable access are crucial for their sustainable and effective implementation.

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