

# What Matters in Online Speaking Classrooms?: Practical Implications



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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to propose practical implications of designing online speaking classrooms by presenting several issues and key aspects that need to be reevaluated by teachers or course designers. Several studies regarding factors motivating and hindering students' speaking performance in online modes have been conducted but they do not discuss the interrelationship between each factor. Drawing from previous references, the study breaks down certain conditions that should be fulfilled if students' positive attitudes and improved performance in online speaking classrooms should be achieved. Those conditions are related to the learning activities developed by the teacher, the choice of learning platforms, the exposure to inputs and resources, and the teacher's preparedness for technology operation. At the end of this article, practical solutions are proposed to manage related issues and hence recommend suggestions for speaking teachers to improve more effective online classroom activities accordingly. I believe when designed effectively, online speaking classrooms can be one solution's alternative to facilitate practice regardless of learners' education level and occupation.

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the COVID-19 pandemic started emerging in 2020 around the world, the government of Indonesia announced activity restrictions on a national level, including schools and universities. This resulted in an immediate change in the delivery of classroom activities online by formal academic institutions. They utilized online meeting platforms such as Zoom, Google Meets, Microsoft Teams, and Moodle as a replacement for physical classrooms where teachers or lecturers could meet students on screen. Along with time, this mode of teaching delivery has been normalized as another alternative offered for pursuing education. With the growing number of available online platforms, online classes started to be quite massively offered by informal education course institutions, following the trend.

There are many online language courses developed during the pandemic, e.g., *Speakguru*, *INGGO*, *Eng Breaking*, *Udemy*, *IELC*, *Cakap*, that specialize in speaking skills improvement for people of various levels of education and proficiency. Speaking is reckoned as the most paramount productive ability one should have when learning a foreign language (Cristina, P., et al. 2022). For some reason, the number of people in Indonesia in particular who have started to develop an interest in advancing their English-speaking skills has been increasing due to either academic or professional demands. Joining a speaking course in this context helps them practice speaking with peers and tutors. Online modes, therefore, help learners with limited time and distance barriers access the course as they

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do not need to spare more time commuting. They would mostly choose the schedule after working hours or during the break in their own space.

As implementing online classes is like breaking the old-school norms of learning, some adjustments need to be modeled. Media use is pivotal in that it should include innovative and thoughtful consideration in practice as classroom activity is highly dependent on computer and internet networks (Cristina, P., et al. 2022). For example, students in the classroom can see each other's faces in-person, hence a direct response is possible. This condition replicates natural interaction like what people commonly do daily that online learning does not. For that reason, online learning may cause students' lack of enthusiasm or engagement, and teachers of online learning should creatively create innovative learning models that can engage students on screen.

This paper discusses various research studies that reveal students' speaking performance through online learning platforms; however, the interrelationship among the factors contributing to success remains under-explored. Accordingly, this conceptual paper aims to examine higher education students' English speaking performance in online classes in order to evaluate the practice and to propose practical implications by primarily addressing three questions: 1) What are students' perceptions of English speaking programs in online class modes?, 2) How do students' perform in these programs?, and 3) What are practical implications that teachers and stakeholders can adopt for more effective online speaking classes?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

To establish a comprehensive understanding of the practical implementation of online speaking classrooms, it is essential to examine existing literature on this topic. Previous studies have explored various aspects, including pedagogical strategies, technological tools, student engagement, and assessment methods. By reviewing these works, this study aims to identify common trends, challenges, and gaps in the practical application of online speaking instruction. The following section presents an overview of relevant research, highlighting key findings that inform the current study and provide a foundation for further analysis.

### **Problems with Online ESL Speaking Classes**

Online classes have become the most plausible method of alternative learning approach when time and geographical distance become the main concerns. However, there are several issues arising from online classes. As this paper is limited to the discussion of online speaking classes, I would explore only the issue of speaking practice in online class modes. According to some research, the results of practicing speaking skills in online class modes are sometimes seen to be ineffective and causing problems (Fajri, M. & Indah, R. N., 2022; Wulandari, D., 2021; Zulfikar et al., 2023) due to several reasons, e.g., students being unable to see each other's faces, signal barriers, unsupported devices, and confidence issues. Based on my experience as a former online speaking tutor, I admit that learning speaking skills in an online environment often leads to disengagement, even when technical factors such as signal and internet connection are unstable. Unmotivated students tend to turn their cameras off due to a lack of confidence in facing each other's faces. When they did not show their faces, they did not feel the sense of accountability in responding to the instructor or participating in peer discussions. This restricted screen visibility and lack of physical presence by certain classmates can significantly impede effective interaction within the online classroom.

Furthermore, the challenge of online speaking classrooms can come from the educators themselves; teachers or tutors' limited integration of media in the instructional process. It was even reported in Benjelloun's study (2021) that students were not showing willingness and cooperation during classroom activity if the teachers themselves were not familiar with the technology in the first place. Demonstrating that they are still learning and adapting to technological advancement while instructing students in the classroom can be perceived by students as a lack of professionalism. As a matter of fact, media use can help teachers spark discussion among the students and prevent them from

getting bored (Cristina, P., et al. 2022). This is why choosing appropriate platforms and applications is a pivotal consideration for teachers.

## **METHODS**

This study uses qualitative content analysis to assess past studies on the actual implementation of online speaking courses. A systematic review was done to gather relevant literature from peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, and book chapters published during the previous decade. The selection procedure followed predetermined inclusion criteria, with an emphasis on studies on pedagogical tactics, technology tools, student participation, and evaluation methodologies in online speaking education. The sources were obtained from academic databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science, assuring adequate dataset for analysis.

Following the collection of relevant research, the data was structured and classified based on emergent themes linked to practical applications in online speaking education. Thematic analysis entails discovering patterns, repeating approaches, and prevailing views in literature. Instructional strategies, the impact of technology, student-teacher interaction, and the efficacy of improving speaking skill were all thoroughly investigated. Furthermore, research were compared to highlight parallels and contrasts in their findings, resulting in a more comprehensive picture of overall trends in online speaking pedagogy.

To ensure the accuracy of the study, a coding framework was created to systematically classify the gathered data. The findings were confirmed using a triangulation approach, which entailed cross-referencing numerous sources to ensure the coherence of detected themes. The analysis sought to uncover not just commonly accepted techniques, but also gaps in existing studies that require additional investigation. The study's findings add to a better understanding of how online speaking training was implemented, as well as practical implications for educators and curriculum makers.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Having reviewed the existing literature on the practical implementation of online speaking classrooms, this section presents the key findings derived from the content analysis. The results highlight emerging trends, commonly adopted instructional strategies, and the role of technological tools in enhancing students' speaking proficiency. Additionally, challenges and gaps identified in previous studies are discussed to provide a clearer understanding of the current state of online speaking instruction. The discussion further interprets these findings in relation to theoretical perspectives and pedagogical implications, offering insights into how they can inform future teaching practices and research in this area.

### **Student's Positive Perception and Performance in an Online Delivery Mode**

Students are the main subjects of pedagogy as they receive the highest number of benefits from the teaching-learning activities. Their perceptions towards online speaking classes should be seriously taken into consideration to reveal what they actually feel during online learning from the learners' perspective. By knowing their perspective, teachers can implement any relevant feedback or input for a better learning environment. There are several studies that confirm students' positive perceptions towards online speaking classes (see Abuhussein et al., 2023; Mohammed, 2022; Nabilla et al., 2022; Pramila & Thomas, 2019; Wahyudi et al., 2021). Mohammed's findings (2022) show that there was a high degree of satisfaction when the learning process was designed as student-centered and there was a clear explanation to access the materials on LMS. Students showed a positive attitude during the interview about activities that involve simultaneous discussions and consecutive interpreting (Mohammed, 2022). Secondary school students from Yuzulia's study (2021) also expressed that learning speaking in an online classroom felt more structured compared to face-to-face learning, and that they felt more confident participating in online discussions.

Regarding performance, from a few research studies about the relevant discussion, learners' speaking skill performance who participated as students in online speaking classes has improved (see Ataiefar & Sadighi, 2017; Bashori et al., 2022). It enlightens teachers' concerns that even online conditions should not hinder students' speaking skill improvement compared to the traditional offline mode of learning. Teng & Zeng, (2022) particularly found that blended learning helps students improve their accuracy and fluency in oral competence for junior middle school students. The improvement in accuracy and fluency can be affected by self-paced learning where students can feel more freedom and independence in deciding their learning pattern at their most convenient time. Mohammed's study (2022) further also approved the significant improvement in students' speaking fluency when activities and syllabi for online learning are designed accordingly.

Discussions on students' positive attitudes and improved performance above signify the urgency to address the main elements that need to be particularly highlighted when implementing an online speaking classroom and corresponding to the learners' perception and performance. Based on previous literature, consequently, there are four main themes identified to address each proposed practical recommendation that resulted from the above-mentioned issues. The four main themes are online learning platforms, learning activities, exposure to input and learning resources, and teachers' readiness and skills in technology used.

### Online Learning Platform Effectiveness

The previous section has discussed the evidence that students reacted positively to the online classroom that utilizes the learning platform that is relatively easy to operate. In addition, students' successful speaking performance is also affected by the choice of speaking platforms. We do not want students to experience what students in Benjelloun (2021) study, in which they revealed negative attitudes during the online speaking class due to their unfamiliarity with online learning platforms. This is in line with Munandar et. Al.'s study (2022) that students enjoyed the classroom activity when the learning platforms were easy to operate.

In a study conducted by Mohammed (2022), the English teacher used NEO LMS as their main mode of learning/teaching resources. NEO LMS is designed for activities that align with Winkelman's TIM model of technology integration up to the highest level which is transformation. It facilitates activities that allow students to "create", as part of skills at the transformation level, more active production, e.g., debate, simulation, discussion, etc. Additionally, the activities on NEO LMS are presented based on each learning outcome, making its interface user-friendly. It is argued that a course layout needs to be user-friendly to optimize successful online language teaching and learning (Mohammed, 2022). Platforms' layout and interface are found to be one of the important elements in maintaining students' learning motivation and engagement. It relates heavily to speaking classrooms where students need to be motivated and engaged during the practice with peers as well as facilitators.

Assignment	Start	Due	Given	Max score	% of overall	No grades Submitted
المعاني من الإتيان ترجمة العربية		5 Nov 00:00	✓	10	7.7	4 / 4
Translation of the poem:Vocative ترجمة العربية		1 Nov	✓	10	7.7	15 / 5
أزمة المياه في كتب التور ترجمة العربية		20 Oct	✓	100	7.7	7 / 7
اجادة توزيع الأراضى - مناظرة الجدال Participation (Formative)	11 Aug 00:00	29 Sep 00:00	✓	10	7.7	1 / 1
Reading: Land Distribution in South Africa الترجمة العربية	17 Aug	16 Sep	✓	10	7.7	16 / 7
نصوص للترجمة والتكليف الترجمة العربية		3 Sep 00:00	✓	10	7.7	5 / 5
QUIZ 1		2 Sep	✗	21	7.7	
ممارسة جوية الملك ترجمة العربية		31 Aug	✓	10	7.7	3 / 6
توزيع الله - نصائح للترجمة والقراءة الترجمة العربية		23 Aug 00:00	✓	10	7.7	1
تجربة لكتاب حول اجادة توزيع الأراضى في جنوب إفريقيا الترجمة العربية		14 Aug 11:00	✓	10	7.7	8

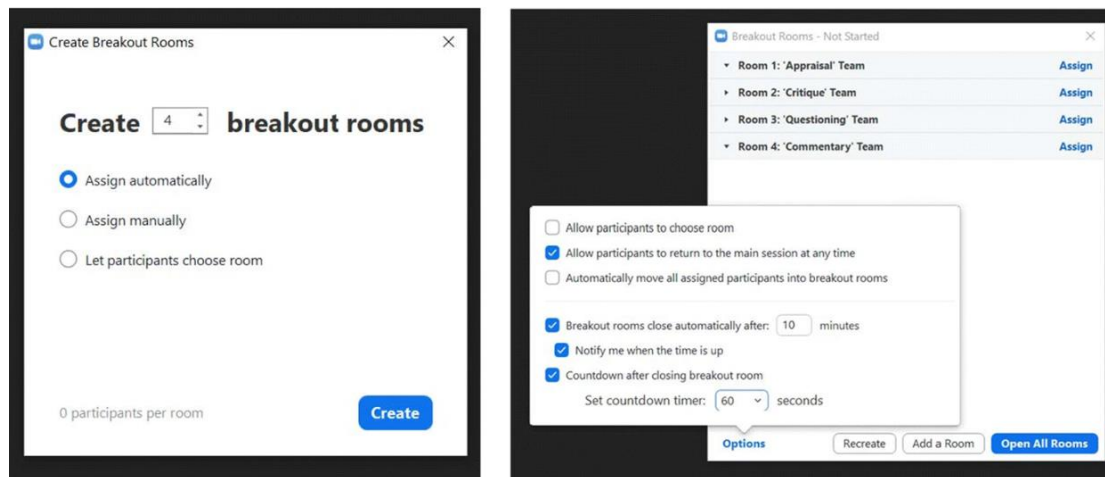
**Figure 1.** NEO LMS' display of assignments that is easy to navigate in a speaking classroom (Mohammed, 2022)

In the previous studies that implemented Zoom as the main platform of interaction, it was identified that the availability of the “breakout room” feature and its practical use for smaller group discussion is highly encouraged (Mohammed, 2022; Tsui & Tavares, 2021). In a breakout room, students can interact with classmates in a small group to practice speaking together. Students who experience anxiety or embarrassment working in a big group will be more supported and feel more at ease to voice their opinions. The use of a live meeting platform answers any criticism for classes that only operate the institution’s Learning Management System (LMS) to accommodate speaking classes. The integration of any web conferencing apps (i.e., Zoom, Microsoft Teams) and LMS is, therefore, needed to boost performance. The interface of LMS also influences students’ reception capability. This statement is in line with the previous recent studies’ claim (see Munandar et al., 2022; Teng & Zeng, 2022) that the presentation of online resources that employ visual-verbal modes eases students’ understanding of the received information. Microsoft Teams, more specifically, can effectively improve EFL learners’ English-speaking skills by emphasizing student-teacher and student-student interaction (Almutairi & Aljumah, 2023). This increased interaction enhances student involvement in the learning process and offers an effective means of improving English speaking skills.

### **Engaging and Student-centered Learning Activities**

The second aspect is related to learning activities. Students’ positive attitudes were also mentioned in Abuhussein et al.’s study (2023) in which students as the participants in that study enjoyed the experience of online learning and the given tasks. The activities they did during the online class helped them lessen their anxiety and embarrassment as they did not need to directly face the crowd which is their own classmates. Confidence, satisfaction, less anxiety and embarrassment are all indicators of positive reactions that educators must reckon with. Teachers who could modify the classroom into interactive activities and make use of online learning platforms would directly affect students’ positive attitudes toward them (Tsui & Tavares, 2021).

Following several studies (see Arvanitis, 2019; Muhammad, 2022; Suwantarathip & Wichadee, 2010), one method to ensure successful and expected results is the application of a learner-centered method. As Huang (2021) suggests, students mostly depend on structured learning procedures and activities designed by teachers to participate in online classrooms. Therefore, developing engaging learner-centered activities is a competency required of a teacher. An example of a learner-centered method that plays a pivotal role in practice is simulation activities. Simulation activities actively engage students in realistic, practice-based learning experiences. Teachers give structured procedures, guidelines, step-by-step procedures that facilitate students’ interaction and comprehension. NEO LMS which is proven effective in helping students improve their fluency and pronunciation features a platform where students can write, chat, and speak to each other (Mohammed, 2022). Students would be more stimulated to try and learn when they are facilitated to chat with each other during the learning activities. Similarly, several studies also discovered that group discussion can facilitate the sharing of ideas and trigger student interactions (Benjelloun, 2021; Huang, 2021; Mohammed, 2022; Tsui & Tavares, 2021). Therefore, an ideal online learning environment can be achieved by not only integrating technology but also maximizing instructional design (Harasim, 2017; Mohammed, 2022).



**Figure 2.** Breakout rooms on Zoom to accommodate smaller group discussions (Tsui & Tavares, 2021)

Breakout rooms could be one of the good examples of a built-in feature provided by Zoom, considering its practicality to accommodate focused learning activities. The figure above illustrated how breakout rooms can divide students into one class into separate smaller groups. During the practice, teachers should ensure that their students feel encouraged and included in the learning process. For example, the teacher at Tsui and Tavares's study (2021) encouraged students to turn their camera showing their face on and frequently called them out during the class. This method works as a reminder that the students are included in one learning community, and this accordingly received positive reception. Effective communication is said to be essential for successful classroom management in online settings as it encourages students to participate more actively (Herlambang, 2024).

Another learning activity that is worthy of discussion due to its proven effectiveness is *Think-Pair-Share*. In a study conducted at a public school of higher education in Morocco, Benjelloun (2021) revealed that students' speaking performance at his online speaking class increased significantly after being treated using *Think-Pair-Share* method. *Think-Pair-Share* activities allow students to think individually, share their thoughts with a partner, then share their upgraded ideas with the whole classmates. The process happens in sequence, so it basically stimulates group discussion in a classroom. Hence, online speaking class teachers are encouraged to use this method to accommodate group discussion as part of the learning activities.

Based on the synthesis above, looking at the pattern, student-centered learning and group discussions are the most recommended learning activities administered at online speaking classes. (Huang, 2021) further suggested that game-based learning (e.g., Survival) is also proven to help one of the participants enhance their speaking skill. She emphasized on student-centered activities, e.g., group discussion and group presentation. There is a continued expectation that students will have a sense of belonging in the '*classroomunity*' as well as more form-oriented feedback (Huang, 2021). Huang's idea is supported by Mohammed (2022) who also figured out the effectiveness of a like approach, named project-based learning, that is based on a task completion with group members; hence facilitating peer interaction during learning activities.

### Meaningful Exposure to Input and Learning Resources

The third aspect that I identify is related to how students are exposed to the learning resources. Several studies have discussed the relevance between students' speaking performance in an online class with the inputs given by the teacher (see Harasim, 2017; Huang, 2021; Mohammed, 2022; Wahyudi et al., 2021). The learning resources and media should be made interesting and appealing to increase learners' motivation (Wahyudi et al., 2021). Therefore, controlled and engaging online materials are

veritably significant in improving students' language learning. In a study conducted by Huang (2021), participants argued that online learning is efficient due to easy access to information. They used multi-modes of inputs, such as textual and visual inputs, that are mutually agreed to contribute to students' understanding of information (McCarty et al., 2017 in Huang, 2021).

In addition, students recognize that exposure to authentic input, e.g., TV broadcasts, conversations, and discussions are good resources to learn a language effectively (Mohammed, 2022). In the context of secondary schools, online YouTube videos are also expected to provide more enhancement in students' drilling and role-playing activities (Mardiani & Dirgantara, 2022). Providing authentic examples in classrooms is a suggested approach as students are able to feel the adjacency between the learning process and daily interaction. In this way, in terms of practicability, students are more likely to apply the learned expressions directly.

In other cases, students also enjoy multi-modal inputs as learning resources because it can accommodate varied learning styles amongst students (Huang, 2021; Mohammed, 2022). Multi-modal inputs as a series of learning activities also help students focus and engage with the materials. In Mohammed's (2022) class for Arabic learners, he used YouTube videos combined with images, texts, and recordings as his teaching resource for speaking and conversational exercises as a prior activity in a project-based learning environment. However, it is necessary to point out that the whole series of learning activities in any form and platform should not neglect the role of feedback. Teacher feedback after smaller room discussions is preferred as one of the most effective inputs students could learn from (Huang, 2021; Mohammed, 2022; Teng & Zeng, 2022). Teachers should give constructive feedback so that students can reflect on the proposed aspects they should improve.

### **Teachers' Professional Readiness and Skills**

The last aspect that should be considered regarding online speaking classes is teachers' preparedness to tackle technological devices. Teachers' readiness to operate technological aids also affects students' perception of online learning (Cristina, P., et al. 2022; Huang, 2021). Students argued that when teachers look disoriented and awkward operating the platform, it would give off an unfavorable impression about the entire program. As a consequence, teachers who are assigned to teach speaking in an online mode should be well-prepared at operating the learning platforms as well as navigating the features in advance, at least prior to managing the online class. Similarly, in a study conducted by Tsui & Tavares (2021), it is revealed that the teacher who could manage to move around within Zoom's feature, organize the online classroom, and involve students for a certain role, received warm responses from the students.

Additionally, teachers' skills in managing an online classroom are critical to the success of virtual learning environments. Ghufon (2002) found that teachers encounter various problems when managing online classrooms, one of which is fostering a vibrant online learning community. This finding aligns with Bloomberg's (2020) research, which highlights the persistent challenge of creating a learning community as a central issue in online education. Meanwhile, one of the most crucial ideas in technology-assisted learning for a long time has been the idea of online learning communities. Educators, in this case, should be creative to make the most of features available in online learning platforms to facilitate active student participation and interaction among classmates. Before conducting actual online speaking classes, teachers are highly encouraged to make a pre-class trial as a simulated classroom environment, in which the class would contain other fellow educators or facilitators who take on the role of students. This mock classroom setup allows teachers to familiarize themselves with the technology tools, functions, and features of the online classroom. Feedback from fellow teachers who have experienced the virtual environment from a learner's perspective will also help teachers to anticipate potential issues and adapt to their teaching approaches.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the main objective of this paper is to provide the practical implications of creating virtual speaking classes by outlining various concerns and key factors that instructors and course designers should reconsider. Those aspects are associated with learning activities designed by the teacher, the choice of learning platforms used during the learning process, exposure to inputs and resources, and teachers' readiness for the technology device operation.

Related to those key elements, this paper has proposed several practical implementations for online speaking teachers. First, teachers should wisely choose in-class activities that focus on a learner-centered learning approach. Second, teachers should choose online speaking platforms that are relatively easy to operate by the learners. Third, teachers should give more authentic inputs that are still relevant to current trends and generations. Fourth, teachers should demonstrate their readiness and ability to operate learning devices, platforms, and applications to maintain students' trust in the classroom. Rather than merely focusing on the forms and materials, teachers should care more about these elements so that online-speaking classrooms can be effective and gain maximum results. Hence, the implementation of its practice can be normalized and adapted by more education institutions.

Finally, this paper also presents several recommendations for future research in the field of online speaking classroom management. First, both online speaking classroom instructors and future researchers should collaborate to investigate further to what extent the offered suggestions can improve students' speaking performance significantly. Second, future researchers whose expertise is in technology-integrated learning can also explore further potential online learning platforms that particularly can be utilized in guided speaking-based classrooms. I am highly confident that online speaking practice could substitute classroom classes and that it should be normally implemented by English courses to help anyone in need.

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