



Using AI Technology to Improve the English-Speaking Proficiency of EFL Students in Kuwait

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Abstract: This study introduces a new mixed-methods methodological approach to improve the English-speaking proficiency of EFL university students in Kuwait. Although the English language has *de facto* official status in Kuwait (Dashti, 2015 p#), numerous studies (Alraban et al., 2016; Mahsain, 2014) have noted that English language proficiency in the country remains low. There is evidence to suggest, however, that AI-based technology may be beginning to have an impact on informal English language education in Kuwait (Sabih, 2024). This study therefore aims to present a methodological approach using the AI-based language learning platform ImmerseMe to answer the following research question: Can AI technology can be used to increase the English-speaking proficiency of EFL students in Kuwait? This study intends to contribute to a growing body of research on the effectiveness of AI learning in the EFL field, especially against the backdrop of the wide-reaching reforms taking place in the Gulf region.



1 Introduction and Literature Review – EFL in Kuwait

Kuwait is a country located in the Arabian Peninsula. The native and official language of the country is a dialectical form of Gulf Arabic. In the school system, students are taught a mixture of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and English (Sadek, 2022). There are three phases in the Kuwaiti primary education system: primary (grades 1-5, ages 6-10), intermediate (grades 6-9, ages 11-14), and secondary (grades 10-12, ages 15-17) (Timms & Pirls, 2019). English as a second language (taught throughout grades 1-12) has been a mandatory part of the Kuwaiti education system for the past 30 years and reflects wider trends in the increase in EFL education in the Gulf region (Alsafran et al., 2020). Kuwait has both private and public schools, and teaching differences between the two have influenced English language learning in the country.

There are a number of different factors that influence the status of EFL in Kuwait. English is a language of prestige, particularly in the economic sphere (Troudi & Al Hafidh, 2017; Alsafran et al., 2020). Mastery of the English language is linked to better career opportunities and is seen as a marker of good quality education and often functions as a motivator for parents to send their children to private schools (Alghasab, 2007; Algharabi & Taqi, 2018; Mahsain, 2014). Therefore, English proficiency is linked with career opportunities and professional success in Kuwait. This has contributed to an increase in English monolingual teaching mediums in recent years (Alsafran et al., 2020), with private schools offering English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI). However, these approaches have been criticised for their detrimental effects on MSA proficiency and negative impacts on the acquisition of both Arabic and English (Alenezi, 2010; Alghasab, 2017; Alsafran et al., 2020; Al-Fuzai, 2019). These studies illustrated that despite the importance of English for professional career success, the methods of achieving proficiency in the classroom have come under scrutiny.

Furthermore, as Kuwait continues to globalise as part of the ambitious goals set forth in New Kuwait Vision 2035, the younger generation are more invested in mastering English for more social reasons such as participation in global online youth culture (Algharabi & Taqi, 2018; Mahsain, 2014). Hayat and AlBader (2022) have explored the “McChicken” phenomenon, which is a term used by members of the older generation to refer to young people who have higher proficiency in English than in Kuwaiti Arabic. The



younger generation are more interested in code-switching than mastery of either Arabic or English. This has negatively impacted proficiency in both languages, reflective of the bilingual nature of Kuwaiti society (Hayat & AlBader, 2022). This shows how proficiency in English can bring either professional or social benefits to young Kuwaitis.

This outlines some of the core context behind the motivation and intention of this study. English language education in Kuwait is impacted by the discrepancy between private and public education, as well as concerns that introducing more robust English language learning opportunities into the curriculum will work to the detriment of MSA. In addition, many students in Kuwait may lack opportunities to practice their English-speaking skills before arriving to university, where a certain level of English proficiency is expected. Critical to this study, Kuwait is currently seeking to diversify the economy and improve the education sector as part of New Kuwait Vision 2035, seeking to globalise the country further. This positions this research, presenting a mixed-methods approach exploring the implementation of AI technology in improving EFL students speaking skills, as a valuable contribution to a complicated problem where despite the status of English as a prestige language that can offer social and career-based advantages, proficiency remains low (Alrabah et al., 2016). If students arrive to university with mixed levels of English language proficiency, this can potentially have a negative impact on motivation, regarded as a core aspect of successful language acquisition (Hadfield & Dörnyei, 2013). This study therefore presents a practical methodological approach, building on recent studies that suggest that the use of AI technology such as ChatGPT has been successful in the classroom (Al-Mutairi, 2024). Kuwait is therefore an ideal location to test this methodology and explore whether AI technology can impact English-speaking proficiency.

2 ImmerseMe

There are currently multiple different AI language learning platforms available, all offering different approaches and focal points. In this study, the Virtual Reality (VR) platform ImmerseMe was used. ImmerseMe stimulates an interactional environment, offering speakers a more authentic setting to practice their language skills (Lowood, 2024). Through using VR technology, ImmerseMe allows students to put their language



skills to practice, for example, by practicing a dialogue in which they have to buy a train ticket. In language learning, speaking is frequently identified as the aspect of proficiency that causes most anxiety. Speakers not only have to translate internally, but also maintain a conversation at the same time (Chand, 2021). ImmerseMe places a distinct focus on speaking proficiency and this is the reason as to why it was chosen as the platform for this study.

In addition, the pedagogical approach of ImmerseMe is one based on constructivism (Cardwell, 2024), recognising that learners actively construct knowledge based on their experiences (Szabó & Csépes, 2022). While Kuwait has a large migrant population who may speak English as opposed to Arabic, they lack opportunities to practice their language skills with native speakers and are restricted to the classroom, which can limit the development of speaking skills using natural language. Exposure to native speakers is a privilege usually afforded to those who have direct experience living abroad in countries such as the United States (Kamal, 2015). ImmerseMe can remedy this situation by offering these students opportunities to engage in natural, real-life practical conversations. Existing studies have already found ImmerseMe to be successful. Meri-Yilan (2019) found through observation and interviews in a qualitative study that over half of the total participants felt they had learnt something new, especially in vocabulary acquisition and pronunciation. Papin (2019) also found that the VR environment of ImmerseMe was conducive to students learning French, improving their motivation. ImmerseMe offers a number of distinct phases that assist the student in attaining autonomy, thus boosting their confidence and independence in their language skills. These aspects identified ImmerseMe as a suitable approach exploring EFL speaking proficiency in Kuwait. Depending on educational background, students arriving to the university environment in Kuwait may feel more or less confident in their English-speaking proficiency. In addition, training to become EFL teachers is likely to place an additional pressure to perform and have a solid proficiency, which could be exacerbated by the high-pressure classroom environment. Thus, ImmerseMe was seen as a suitable approach to address these issues.

Findings on the efficiency of ImmerseMe are aligned with wider findings on the use of AI in L2 language learning. Studies have explored the use of personalised learning content (Chen et al., 2023; Jiang, 2022) and greater comfort with communication (Fryer



et al., 2020). However, some limitations to this methodological approach must be recognised. First and foremost, as stated by Al-Mutairi (2024), instructors in Kuwait only noted they would be interested in using AI technology in the classroom if they had appropriate training. This, coupled with the need for computers or other technological elements such as a stable internet connection, could provide barriers to access. Furthermore, Son et al. (2023) explored the use of chatbots for increasing language proficiency, finding a number of negative impacts. One of these related to Automatic Speech Recognition (ASR), which is used by ImmerseMe in speaking segments. They found that these may sometimes fail to recognise the speech of beginner learners, which can potentially lead to frustration and disappointment. This is related to results from Chen (2023), who found that ASR may have difficulty recognising all types of non-native speaker accents. Son et al. (2023) further found that the technological element of AI-based language learning may cause students to lose interest quickly, especially with a lack of human interaction. However, Wei (2023) found in a study of Duolingo that AI-powered language education could significantly improve motivation, provide a more 'refreshing' language learning experience, introduce personalised learning and improve language proficiency.

Overall, the negative and positive impacts of AI-based language learning were taken into consideration during the study. As Kuwait is seeking to modernise the education system and has expressed an openness to the implementation of AI in the education sector, the proposed approach was deemed to offer a novel intervention to existing problems of English language proficiency in the country. The difference between EFL offerings across private and public educational institutions in Kuwait can lead students to arrive to university with different English language proficiencies. This can be exacerbated if some students have spent time abroad. The idea of this study is to introduce an approach that can ensure students are on a level playing field, especially in regards to speaking proficiency. Being able to speak a language well can open up communicative possibilities, as well as improve confidence and allow students to better connect with the language outside of professionally motivated goals such as career advancement. Rather than rely on ImmerseMe's analytical data, the decision to include the perspective of participants was grounded in the idea that language learning is a process of co-construction between the learner and the instructor, and, to another



extent, the language itself. Furthermore, this study will offer a novel contribution to the literature by exploring the topic through a mixed-methods study that does not just collect quantitative data from the learning platform, but also collects qualitative data from the lived experiences of participants, thus offering insights that go beyond technological functionality.

3 Methodological Approach

This study adopted a subjectivist ontological approach. The reason for this being that language learning is a uniquely subjective experience, dependent on a number of socially constructed elements (Bryman, 2012). The study consisted of 10 participants from the English Department or the Curriculum and Teaching Methods Department at The Public Authority for Applied Education and Training (PAAET). The rationale for choosing a relatively small number of participants was due to the exploratory nature of the study and the intention to collect rigorous and comprehensive data to assess the possibility for further exploration with a larger number of participants. There were several different data collection methods, including quantitative data (ImmerseMe, self-reported proficiency data) and qualitative data (action research and semi-structured interviews). This was deemed as the best approach to address the shortcomings of each data collection method.

Participants had to have approximately a B1 level on the CEFR framework to participate, thus ensuring that they would have some level of awareness of their shortcomings or concerns related to their English language speaking proficiency. The participants in the study were training to be English teachers and it was deemed necessary that they had experience with curriculum design or English instruction through having taken relevant courses. The recruitment of participants was discussed with PAAET beforehand and all ethical guidelines and approval processes of the institution were followed. Participants were able to withdraw participation at any time and informed consent was a requirement for participation. No identifiable information was featured in the final report and all data relating to the study was stored on an encrypted drive. Participants were informed that the data collected during the study would be destroyed after publication.



The intention of the study is to propose new directions and avenues for research into AI-based language learning software and how it can assist in contexts similar to that of Kuwait. It was important that the participants were able to express themselves. For this reason, a mixed-methods approach was chosen to provide a concrete overview of the EFL panorama as experienced by the participants. The motivation for the study was further grounded in my personal experience as an English teacher for around 10 years, thus necessitating a reflexive element. The study would not sufficiently achieve its goals if it relied solely on qualitative data and data-driven approaches. Hence, an approach that integrated both qualitative and quantitative methods was deemed the best approach.

The concurrent mixed-methods approach (Creswell, 2009) to the study occurred in three distinct phases. The three phases approach was adopted as it was deemed necessary to track any changes in the proficiency of the participants and ensure data robustness by taking into consideration functional challenges or aspects of using AI learning tools during the implementation stage. Should the study only focus on pre-use and post-use data, there would be no insight into any potential technical challenges. The predominant approach was that of the case study, outlined by Yin (2018) and including a mix of both quantitative and qualitative data. The case study approach requires the collection of multiple different data sources, which are then synthesised into a comprehensive source of data. The specific case under investigation in this study was the impacts of AI technology on the English-speaking proficiency of EFL university students in Kuwait. As this study has practical implications for the education sector in Kuwait, the Action Research (AR) approach (Burns, 1999; Creswell, 2005) was adopted due to its suitability for assessing educational and pedagogical rigour in proposing change through practice.

The first research phases consisted of the following:

1. Gathering of initial data from participants to assess how they feel about their current English learning situation. This included gathering self-reported data and proficiency data in accordance with the CEFR framework (initial problem)



2. Assessment of initial attitudes towards the use of AI technology in EFL settings (exploration of AI impact on proficiency)
3. Reflection on initial issues to identify key areas for development

The intention of this initial research phase was to collect preliminary data on the participants and their experience of English language learning. Participants were asked to self-report their English level, including whether they felt confident in their skills. This information made it possible to choose the correct level for each participant on the AI platform.

The second research stage involved using ImmerseMe:

1. Ensuring that the tasks in ImmerseMe were appropriate for each participant
2. Conduction of learning sessions with the participants using ImmerseMe
3. Collection of analytical data from ImmerseMe
4. Reflection on the use of ImmerseMe

This stage involved the use of ImmerseMe, which will be discussed further.

4 Data

collected during this stage involved a mixture of researcher observation and analytical data from ImmerseMe. Another key issue that needed to be evaluated during this stage of the research was the level of training and competency required on the part of the instructor to deliver AI-based language learning interventions, as this was identified in previous literature as one of the potential barriers to implementation in educational settings (Al-Mutairi, 2024).

The final stage included the following:

1. Conduction of semi-structured interviews with the participants to assess their personal experiences
2. Compilation and collation of data collected at each distinct stage
3. Analysis of the data and assessment of the findings
4. Identification of potential avenues for future research



The introduction of semi-structured interviews at this point in the research was to evaluate the lived experiences of the participants as they used ImmerseMe, as well as to assess whether they felt there had been a change to their English-speaking proficiency. The use of a three-phase research process ensured that the data was robust and considered for various different factors. The use of solely qualitative or quantitative data would have given a limited viewpoint on the topic and would have reduced the practical applications of the findings in this study. Thus, the research approach adopted in the study ensured that the data collected was robust and comprehensive, offering an informative and exploratory approach to assessing the efficiency of AI technology in improving the speaking proficiency of Kuwaiti EFL students.

Preliminary findings from a separate quantitative survey methodology conducted to investigate the perceived effectiveness and improvements in speaking skills through AI technology have offered some insight into the potential findings of the study. A survey with 79 participants found that those who perceived AI tools as effective and engaging for English language learning were more likely to experience improvements in their speaking skills. These participants resonated with the personalised elements of the AI learning platform, therefore aligning the findings with previous studies such as that of Wei (2023), who found that the personalised elements of Duolingo offered students a more “refreshing” experience when compared to traditional classroom learning. In the survey, features such as real-time correction, interactive design and learner autonomy were found to foster engagement and measurable improvement. This is especially important in the Kuwaiti context, where motivation has been identified as a significant barrier to successful English language acquisition (Hadfield & Dörnyei, 2013).

Interestingly, however, students who were more engaged with AI tools and more likely to perceive them as effective also experienced a higher number of drawbacks. A possible justification for this is that the higher level of exposure resulted in increased awareness of limitations of the use of AI tools as well as a greater use of critical thinking skills. Despite this, the experience of drawbacks was positively associated with improved performance, thus offering a contribution to the research on AI tools that challenges some of the notions in traditional learning environments as drawbacks are instead associated with lower motivation (Hadfield & Dörnyei, 2013). Overall, the findings supported existing findings (Al-Mutairi, 2024; Chen et al., 2023) in the use of AI



technology in language learning settings, namely that both positive and negative elements co-exist, warranting further investigation into the topic.

5 Conclusion

With de facto official status in Kuwait, English is a language of prestige. However, there are a number of issues that remain in the learning and teaching of English. One of the most pertinent of these is the fact that the prestige status of the English language is largely understood to be related to career and professional opportunities that only mastery of the language can bring. These pressures, sometimes exacerbated by parents who wish for their children to succeed, can cause significant levels of anxiety and stress, which, coupled with a limited English language education, can lead to negative proficiency outcomes for students. Whereas the younger generation are now seeking to learn English to engage in global youth culture, the current education system in Kuwait is not reflective of this, remaining difficult to strike a balance between the traditional values and culture embodied in MSA compared to the global appeal of English.

This study has introduced a methodological approach for exploring EFL and the problem of English-speaking proficiency in Kuwait, mixing traditional observation and reflection-based methodological approaches such as the case study and action research with the new approach of using AI technology. AI technology is increasingly becoming an important part of social life, especially for younger generations who have grown up with technology such as smartphones. With this in mind, it is important to consider the possibility that AI technology can move beyond informal learning to more formal learning in the classroom setting, making it possible to reduce traditional barriers in achieving English speaking proficiency. It is hoped that such an approach will allow students to move and extend their desire to learn English beyond professional and career opportunities, thus enhancing their motivation and confidence in speaking English. In addition, the use of less traditional methodologies for English teaching could be beneficial in differentiating EFL teaching from Arabic teaching, as it introduces students to new learning styles without sacrificing traditional Arabic teaching methods.

Preliminary findings from a separate survey methodology exploring perceived effectiveness of AI-based interventions in the EFL setting have found that perceived AI



effectiveness had a bearing on improvement. This offers another avenue for exploration through the investigation of whether pre-existing attitudes towards AI-based language learning interventions function in a similar way to motivation in more traditional language learning settings.

There are many countries, particularly in the Gulf region, that find themselves in a similar situation to Kuwait in regards to EFL education. Where this study provides a specific snapshot into the situation in Kuwait, the methodological approach can be applied to other EFL contexts where there is a need for educational transformation to ensure that students feel confident and natural in their English-speaking abilities as the world continues to globalise.

6 References

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