The Effects of using VoiceThread on Students' Listening Comprehension and Attitudes Toward using VoiceThread

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Abstract

The current study investigated the effects of the use of VoiceThread (VT) on the listening comprehension and attitudes of college students of Arabic as a foreign language. Thirty-five students in two 10-week classes of beginning Arabic participated in this study. The instruction in both classes was the same except that, for one group, the instruction was supplemented by the use of VT to enhance listening and speaking skills during the 10 weeks. Upon completion of the class, students using VT showed superior listening skills. Moreover, an Attitude and Engagement survey showed that the students enjoyed using VT and viewed it as a valuable tool that enhanced their language learning.

Introduction

The prevalence of technology in everyday life and its rising use in education make it increasingly important for learners to become proficient with the tools of technology in order to be fully prepared for today's world. In recent years, Web 2.0 tools in particular have been proclaimed to have the potential to enhance learning and increase student engagement in the classroom (e.g., Augustsson, 2010; Brunvand & Byrd, 2011; Ducate, Lomicka-Anderson & Moreno, 2011; Maloney, 2007; Smith & Dobson, 2009; Swan, Kratcoski, Schenker, & Van'T Hooft, 2007; Thorne & Payne, 2005). Web 2.0 tools offer "a set of internet services and practices that give a voice to individual users. Such services thereby encourage internet users to participate in various communities of knowledge building and knowledge sharing" (Crook, 2008, p. 8), offering users equitable opportunities to take part in course discussions with more confidence and less anxiety (Lee, 2014).

VoiceThread (VT) is one of these Web 2.0 tools. It provides voice to learners by enabling them to participate in asynchronous online forums using audio, video, and text. While the number of educators using VT is on the rise, the lion's share of studies on its use are commentaries and descriptions of how the technology works with little reliance on empirical evidence related to effectiveness (Crook, 2008). The few empirical studies that have investigated the use of VT have hardly touched on the teaching of world languages.

Accordingly, the principal aim of this study is twofold. The first is to find out whether or not students' use of VT in the foreign language classroom had any significant influence on the improvement of their listening comprehension in a foreign language; namely, Arabic. The second aim is to investigate students' perceptions of the use of VT on their learning of Arabic. The next section presents a review of literature on listening comprehension development in foreign language contexts, and the role of students' attitudes to innovations in language teaching.

1.   Literature Review

1.1   Listening Comprehension

Compared to other skills in second language learning, the development of listening comprehension has not received as much attention in the literature (Moyer, 2006; Vandergrift, 2007; Tschirner, 2016). Some have argued that enhancing listening comprehension requires the use of selective supportive strategies. After exploring listening and reading proficiencies of students from 21 U.S universities, Tschirner (2016) identified a need for more focus on "principled approaches" that improve listening proficiency in the undergraduate foreign language curriculum. He argues that foreign language teachers need to have specific ways for engaging students in activities especially designed to focus attention on listening for meaning.

Although listening comprehension has been traditionally viewed as a receptive skill, it actually involves "dynamic cognitive mental processes" Cheng, 2004, p. 544). To ensure that students comprehend messages, there must be an effort to have students reconstruct the messages being heard. Since listening is a receptive skill that goes hand in hand with speaking in everyday conversations, it was found that integrating listening with speaking is most helpful to learners (Tavil, 2010). In terms of ways to enhance students' listening skills, Elkhafaifi (2005) found that the most important factor in improving learners' listening comprehension is "repeated exposure to the listening passage" (p. 510). The use of VT in this study is aimed at allowing for both an integration of speaking and listening as well as repeated exposure to the listening texts.

1.2   Student Perceptions

Student perceptions have been found to directly affect their satisfaction and engagement in educationally related activities (Kuh, Linzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006). Students who are highly satisfied with their learning are more likely to engage in educational activities (Hu & Kuh, 2002; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004); this engagement becomes a "key factor as to whether they will survive and thrive" (Prince 2004, p. 140) as it can lead to desired outcomes like "improved learning", "academic success" (Diemer, Fernandez, & Streepey, 2012) and "personal development" (Hu & Kuh, 2002). For this present study, students' emotional engagement in terms of whether or not they had positive attitudes toward the use of VoiceThread in their learning of Arabic as a foreign language was examined. In addition, the study investigated students' perceptions of the effect of using VT on the efforts that students put into their learning.

Educators who used VT in the classroom noted that students had a positive attitude toward its use for class projects (e.g., Smith &Dobson, 2009); they also found that it helped increase student motivation and engagement in the learning process. Bart (2011) noted that students who used VT in the classroom exceeded the participation requirements of the course. Similarly, Augustsson (2010)

credited VT with increasing student motivation and allowing them to be "more aware of themselves and the group they belonged to" (p. 204).

VoiceThread, like other asynchronous Web 2.0 tools, has features that allow students to express themselves with less anxiety and more confidence in an online setting. This allows all participants equal opportunity for interaction (Lee, 2014; Cleveland, 2012) and a greater connection to the course community (Lee, 2014).

Educators who reported positive results after using VT in the classroom come from a variety of disciplines. In business courses, Chan and Pallapu (2012) found VT to be an effective tool in business policy courses and noted that it had "potential applications for online learning and teaching that transcend the business curriculum." In language arts instruction in elementary schools, preliminary results showed that student teachers and their students enjoyed its use and intended to use it in their future classrooms (Smith & Dobson, 2009). While in an advanced Spanish course, Lee (2014) found that students' "social presence in peer-to-peer interaction via VT promoted autonomous learning by increasing student engagement and motivation" (p. 353).

In addition to the reported positive effects on student learning, Augustsson noted the positive effect of VT on teachers as it allows them "the ability to monitor students' active contribution during the course" (p. 2014, 2010) making it easier for the teachers to support students' success individually and in groups.

As was mentioned earlier, "there remains very little research activity guiding the effective application" of Web 2.0 tools like VT (Crook, 2008, p.5), and hence there is a need for studies "that can give authority to debate and that can address the conjecture and anecdote that the topic of Web 2.0 naturally encourages" (p. 7).

1.3   Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to examine the effect VThas on the development of listening comprehension in a 10-week college level class teaching Arabic as a Foreign Language. The class was designed for beginning level Arabic learners. This study also investigates the college students' attitudes toward the use of VT in their learning of Arabic as a foreign language. Accordingly, the research questions were the following:
1.   What are the effects of the use of VT on students' listening comprehension skills in Arabic?
2.   What are the students' attitudes toward the use of VoiceThread in the AFL classroom?

2.   Method

2.1   Participants

Participants in this study were enrolled in a first year Arabic college course in a four-year college in the Southwest of the US. A total of 35 students, all native speakers of English, took part in this study and responded to both the pretest and posttest. Eighteen students (11 males and 7 females) were enrolled in the control class. These students received Arabic instruction without the use of VT. A total of 17 students (9 males and 8 females) were enrolled in the treatment class, which used VT throughout the course as a way to develop listening comprehension and ultimately language learning.

Even though the control and the treatment classes were taught by different instructors, the basic instructional approach and material were identical for both classes. Instructors of both courses are experienced Arabic language teachers who have been teaching Arabic as a foreign language in US colleges for more than 10 years. Both instructors used similar teaching methods and followed the same syllabus and materials except for the use of VT for the treatment group. The researcher was also the instructor for the treatment group.

2.2   Procedure

Both the treatment and control classes met face to face each week for four hours over ten weeks in the Spring Quarter, 2014. Students who were enrolled in the treatment class were informed by the instructor that they were required to use VT to work on weekly VT assignments outside of class. Each assignment required students to record their voices in response to certain visual and audio prompts posted by the instructor for that particular VT (See Appendix C for an example of such an assignment). The assignments aimed at complementing the teaching and learning taking place in the face to face classroom. In addition to the detailed tutorial on the use of VT that the students could access on Blackboard, the instructor gave an in-class demonstration with examples and detailed instructions on the use of VT. On Friday of every week, for the duration of ten weeks, the instructor posted a new VT assignment that the students were required to complete by Monday of the following week. The timing of the assignments aimed at helping students practice their listening and speaking skills during the weekend when they were less likely to practice their Arabic speaking and listening. At the time of the pre-test, all the students in the study were expected to be at the Novice-low/ Novice-mid level in their Arabic skills (ACTFL, 2012).

2.3   Instruments

2.3.1   Listening comprehension assessment.

In order to investigate the effects of VT on students' listening comprehension skills, the participants in both the treatment and control classes took a listening comprehension pre- and posttest (See Appendix A). At the time of the pretest, all the students who participated in the study had completed a total of 40 hours of Arabic instruction while at the time of the posttest, they had completed a total of 80 hours of instruction. The pretest and posttest were identical and consisted of 28 questions. The test consisted of a recorded conversation between two native speakers. The conversation was at the sentence- length level and tested listening comprehension one utterance at a time (as suggested by ACTFL 2012

guidelines for the listening comprehension at NH level). At the time of the testing students listened to the recorded conversation and during timed pauses, they were instructed to respond to the related questions in their listening comprehension tests which were all in English.

Listening items were designed by the researcher taking into consideration the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines in terms of what individuals can do with the language at the Novice-Mid level with the inclusion of a few items from the Novice-High level. Since successful listening comprehension tests include a variety of text type and length (Mayer, 2006), multiple-choice, multiple-choice cloze (MCC) and one open-ended question (Cheng 2004) were used (in multiple choice items, a wh- question structure is used while in the MCC questions, each item is in form of a statement (Cheng, 2004). Students were required to choose their answers for most items and to provide their responses in form of a list in one question. Participants completed all tasks in class. They were provided with 10 seconds to answer each question. However, for the question requiring a list, they were given 30 seconds. A point was assigned to each item in the questionnaire whether selected or provided by the students with the possibility of getting a total of 41 points. The listening comprehension questionnaire started with basic questions and gradually moved up to questions about basic house descriptions and daily routine.

2.3.2   Students' Attitude and Engagement questionnaire.

Students' perceptions of the use of VT and its impact on their learning were investigated through a 5-point Likert-type questionnaire based on Diemer et al.'s study (2012). The participants completed the questionnaire in class during the last week of classes and were instructed to state their level of agreement with each item ranging from 5= Strongly Agree (SA) to 1= Strongly Disagree (SD) (See Appendix B). In addition, the questionnaire also included open-ended questions on students' perceptions of VT and their learning engagement as a result of its use. The items in the questionnaire aimed at exploring students' perceptions of the effects of the use of VT on their learning and engagement. Three items aimed specifically

at investigating their emotional engagement (items 3, 4, 9) and two items focused on students' perceptions of their behavioral engagement in terms of whether or not they put more effort into their listening and speaking practice before posting their VoiceThreads (items 7 and 18).

2.4   Analysis

The students' responses to the listening comprehension assessment instrument and the attitude survey were compiled into a data sheet. The mean and standard deviation for the listening comprehension survey were calculated for both pretests. In order to determine whether or not there was a statistical difference between the two pretests, and between the two posttests of each group, statistical analyses were performed using SAS Version 9.4. The students' responses to open-ended questions in the attitude survey were coded and compiled according to emerging themes.

3.   Results

3.1   Listening Comprehension

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for both control and treatment groups on the pre- and post-comprehension tests.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the Pre- and Post-tests for both groups

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation (SD)
Pretest	Treatment	17	31.94	6.18
	Control	18	28.56	4.20
Posttest	Treatment	17	35.94	3.73
	Control	18	30.94	4.73

As is evident from the results in the table, both groups showed improvement in their listening comprehension. The mean for the pretest for the control group (N=18) is 28.56 (SD= 4.20), and for the treatment group (N=17) is 31.94 (SD= 6.18). The mean of the scores for the posttest for the control group is 30.94 (SD=4.73) and for the treatment group is 35.94 (SD=3.73).

In order to find out whether or not there was a significant difference between the results of both groups and within each group, the mixed models procedure was used and post hoc tests were done on least-squares means using Tukey adjustment for multiple comparisons. Table 2 shows the results of the pairwise comparison between the pre- and posttest for each group.

Table 2. Pairwise comparison between each Group's pre- and post-tests

Score	Pretest			Post-test			Difference (Pre to Post test			P-value *
	Mean	95% CI		Mean	95% CI		Mean	95% CI		
		lower	upper		lower	upper		lower	upper	
Control	28.56	26.26	30.85	30.94	28.65	33.24	2.39	-0.45	5.23	0.125
Exp	31.94	29.58	34.31	35.94	33.58	38.31	4.00	1.07	6.93	0.004

The results in Table 2 show that the posttest scores are significantly higher than the pretest scores for the treatment group (p=0.004). However, there is no significant difference between the scores for the pre- and posttest for the control group (p=0.125). Table 3 compares students' scores across both the control and treatment groups.

Table 3. Comparison between students' pre- and post-test scores
across groups

Test	Control			Treatment			Difference*			P-value *
	Mean	95% CI		Mean	95% CI		Mean	95% CI		
		lower	upper		lower	upper		lower	upper	
Pre	28.56	26.26	30.85	31.94	29.58	34.31	3.39	-1.00	7.77	0.178
Post	30.94	28.65	33.24	35.94	33.58	38.31	5.00	0.61	9.38	0.020

The results in Table 3 indicate that there is no significant difference between the scores of the pretests for both groups (p=0.178); however, the results show that there is a significant difference between the scores of the posttests for both groups (p=0.02). An overall test for difference in the scores over time was conducted, and it showed a statistical significance; $F (1, 33) =17.94$, $p<0.001$. The main effect of the treatment group variable is statistically significant; $F (1,33) =8.54$, $p=0.006$. The Interaction term between time and groups is not statistically significant: $F (1, 33) =1.14$, $p=0.293$. These results indicate that there was a statistically significant difference in the treatment students' scores overtime.

3.2   Students' Attitudes

With respect to students' perceptions of the effects of the use of VT on their learning and engagement, the Attitude and Engagement survey indicated that: a) the majority of the treatment class agreed (4) or strongly agreed (5) that VT helped their language learning (M= 4.35) (Q1, 2, 5, 6, 8, 10-17), and b) VT had a positive effect on their emotional engagement as they enjoyed using it (M=4.24) (Q3, 4, 9); and as a result, these students reported that they put more effort into their learning (M=4.32) (Q7, 18).

The highest mean in the treatment students' questionnaire correlates with the perceived influence of the instructor's recorded VT on their learning (Q13, M=4.71). These students also indicated that they felt they learned from their classmates' threads (Q5,

M=4.06), and that they enjoyed listening to them (Q5, M=4.12). Fourteen out of 17 indicated their appreciation of having the chance to listen to other students' contributions before posting their own responses.

4.   Discussion

This study reported on the effects of the use of VoiceThread on the listening comprehension skills of college students enrolled in an AFL classroom. It also investigated students' attitudes toward use of VT as part of the course to enhance listening comprehension and improve learning. The data indicated that the use of VT on a weekly basis had a significant impact on students' listening comprehension after 10 weeks. Statistically significant pre- post differences were found for the listening abilities of the students who used VT when compared with a similar group of students taking the same AFL course, but who did not use VT.

The results also indicated that students had a positive attitude toward the use of VT, and they enjoyed using it as part of their learning. In terms of behavioral engagement, students reported that when they used VT, they put more effort into their learning; namely, they felt they increased their speaking practice and they put more effort in their recorded speech sessions.

The significant improvement in students' listening skills can be attributed to the fact that VT in this study provided a platform for what researchers have found to be effective for improving students' listening comprehension: repeated exposure to the listening text and the practice of both listening and speaking. Hence, results of this study align with and support results from other research studies that found that teaching speaking and listening together is effective in developing students' listening skills (e.g. Elkhafaiafi, 2005).

In addition, the study found that students reported lower anxiety levels when speaking the target language on the VT platform compared to speaking up in the classroom. According to the ACTFL guidelines, novice speakers "typically require repetition, rephrasing,

and/or a slowed rate of speech for comprehension" (ACTFL 2012). VT allowed Novice learners the possibility of repeated and unlimited listening to recordings left on VT by the instructor and other students. It also allowed them the opportunity to speak whenever they felt ready, after having practiced as many times as they wished.

The results of the Attitude and Engagement survey corroborated the results from the listening comprehension test. Both the quantitative portion of the Attitude and Engagement survey as well as the qualitative section in the open-ended section indicated that in addition to enjoying using VT, the students found it helpful in improving their listening and speaking abilities as well as in facilitating their participation in listening and speaking activities.

4.1   Listening Comprehension Supports Speaking

Students' perceptions as investigated in the survey agreed with the higher scores they achieved in the listening comprehension posttest in comparison with the control group. Students all Agreed or strongly Agreed that VT helped them develop their listening (Q16, M=4.65) and speaking skills (Q14, M=4.71).   While participants indicated that they benefited from listening to the recordings of their classmates, they reported benefiting most from having access to their instructor's recordings (Q13, M=4.71). This may be due to students' perceptions of their instructor as the expert in the classroom and of their efforts to model the instructor's utterances.

The 16 students who answered the open-ended questions indicated that VT helped their learning, with 13 of them specifically mentioning getting better at speaking and/or listening comprehension as a result of using it: "VoiceThread helped me speak and understand Arabic better", "it improved my flow of Arabic speaking", "it improved my hearing or comprehending what other students were saying in Arabic" and "it allowed me to practice my speaking and to learn from others".

4.2   Listening Comprehension and Classroom Participation

Participants all Agreed or Strongly Agreed that VT helped them participate in speaking activities (M=4.65). The qualitative data from students' responses to the open-ended questions shed light on why students believed that VT enhanced their participation. Students' anxiety level was low since they could do "repeated trials" and post their contributions "without pressure" whenever they felt ready, having at their fingertips the recorded VoiceThreads of their instructor and classmates. Here are a few responses from students who reported what they liked about VT: "the ability to take your time before you speak and the comfort of being in your own home", "I am nervous about speaking in class so this allows me to practice", "you can listen to others' record(ings) so you know what to say or how to say it", "the ability to practice before submitting. Also being able to listen to others".

This study agrees with the conclusions of other research studies that indicate the capacity of Web 2.0 tools like VT to allow for more equal chances of participation in comparison with traditional class settings. However, because VT is asynchronous, and does not allow for practice of spontaneous conversation; its sole use for speaking practice is not recommended. It is important to note that VT is only a tool, and that careful planning and design of VT assignments are important. Educators are encouraged to provide learners with enough guidelines so they feel confident using VT while still allowing them enough freedom to draw on their creative side. Assignments need to complement the curriculum to enhance what the students are already learning in the classroom.

A limitation of the study is the relatively small sample size of 35 participants. Further studies with larger sample sizes investigating the use of VT on the teaching and learning of world languages may shed more light on its potential benefits in the FL classroom not only on listening comprehension but also on other language skills as well.

5   **Conclusion**

This study provided empirical evidence that VoiceThread can be used as an effective web 2.0 tool to enhance students' listening skills in the FL classroom. The data indicated that VT provided a safe and low-anxiety platform for students to practice their listening and speaking regardless of their levels of confidence.

The increased understanding of how teachers integrate technology in their disciplines—as in the present study--may serve to guide other teachers to implement similar technology tools in their own classrooms, which could benefit educators in general and L2 teachers in particular.

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Appendix A

Listening Comprehension Test

Please choose the correct answer from the following according to the conversation you hear:

1. The speakers greeted each other by saying:
   a. Good morning, how are you?   b. Hi, how are you? c. Good   afternoon, how are you?
2. The interviewer asked Farah if she is
   a. American   b. Arab   c. a student
3. The interviewer asked Farah
   a. where she lives.   b. where she is from.   c. how she is doing
4. Farah answered by saying
   a. she lives in Cairo   b. she is from Cairo   c. she is tired
5. The interviewer asked
   a. Where is your house?   b. Where is Cairo?   c. Why are you tired?
6. What does Farah do?
   a. She is a teacher   b. a student   c. a manager
7. What field is she in?
   a. management   b. literature   c. political science

8.   What did the speaker ask Farah?
        a. where are you going?   b. where do you live?   c. where
        is your car?
9.   What did Farah answer?
        a. in the university   b. far from the university   c.
        next to the university
10.   Where does Farah live?
        a. in an apartment   b. in a house   c. in the dorm
11.   What does she say about where she lives?
        a. small two bedrooms, two bathrooms   b. big, three
        bedrooms, and two bathrooms   c. small one bedroom and
        one bathroom
12.   What did the interviewer ask?
        a. do you have friends?   b. do you like dogs and cats?   c.
        do you have cats and dogs?
13.   Farah answers that
        a.. she has two dogs and two cats?   b. she likes cats and dogs
        c. she has many friends
14.   What did the interviewer ask?
        a. where do you live?   b. whom do you live with?
        C. what is your mother's name?
15.   Farah answers
        a. I live near the university   b. I live with my friend, her
        name is Lisa   c. My mother's name is Lisa
16.   The interviewer asks:
        a. Where does your family live?   B. Where do you live? C.
        whom do you live with?
17.   Farah replies that
        a. she lives in Egypt   b. Her family lives in Egypt
        c. She lives with her family
18.   How many people are in Farah's family?
        a. Her mother, father, two brothers and four sisters   b. Her
        mother, father, three brothers and four sisters   c. Her
        mother father, one brother and four sisters
19.   The interviewer asked
        a. Do you have a car?   B. Do you have a bike?   C. Do
        you have a computer?
20.   Farah answered

a. I have a car   b. I have a bike   c. I do not have a car
21.   Interviewer asked:
        a. Do you have a car?   B. Do you have a bike?   C. Do you have a computer?
22.   Farah answered
        a. I have a car   b. I have a bike   c. I do not have a car
23.   Interviewer asked
        a. Is this your bag?   B. Is this your class?   C. Is this your office?
24.   When asked what is in it, Farah mentioned the following items (circle all that she mentioned)
        Book, table, chair, pen, computer, desk, notebook
25.   Where does Farah usually eat?
        a. the university   b. home   c. restaurant
26.   Circle all the items she likes to eat
        Rice, bread, salad, fruits, vegetables, meat
27.   Circle all the hobbies that Farah mentioned
        Playing soccer, swimming, running, reading, watching TV, cooking
28.   Farah does the following every day (write down all the actions you can identify)

                1. _____
                2. _____
                3. _____
                4. _____
                5. _____
                6. _____
                7. _____

Thank you for your time.

APPENDIX B

Attitude and Engagement Questionnaire

5= Strongly agree   4= Agree   3= Neutral   2= Disagree   1=Strongly Disagree

		5 SA	4 A	3 N	2 DA	1 SD
1	VoiceThread helped my learning in this class					
2	VoiceThread helped me participate in speaking activities					
3	VoiceThread is easy to use					
4	I like using VoiceThread for language learning					
5	Listening to other students' VoiceThreads helped in my language learning					
6	Listening to my own recording helped in my language learning					
7	I practiced my speaking assignment over and over before recording it on VoiceThread					
8	Recording my voice helped me develop my speaking skills					
9	I enjoyed listening to / watching my classmates' VoiceThreads					
10	Summarizing other students' VoiceThreads on Blackboard helped with my language learning					
11	VoiceThread served as a learning aid in this class					
12	VoiceThread helped develop my Arabic pronunciation					
13	My instructor's VoiceThread recordings helped my learning					
14	VoiceThread helped develop my **Speaking** skills					
15	VoiceThread helped develop my **Writing** skills					
16	VoiceThread helped develop my **Listening** skills					
17	VoiceThread helped develop my **Reading** skills					
18	My recordings on VoiceThread are more well thought out than my Arabic speaking face-to-face					

APPENDIX C

Sample VoiceThread Assignment

Click on the link above or copy and paste to your browser. After you sign in, click on the class group on the left of your screen to see this week's VoiceThread.

Before you start, review the conjugation of the present tense with the following pronouns: I, he, and she.

There is a family tree on the VoiceThread. Pretend you are one of the persons on the family tree and record your voice giving information about yourself and two other members of your family. Circle each person as you talk about him/her.

Record three complete sentences about yourself and four sentences about two other members. It is important that you use a verb with each of your sentences.

Verbs and sample texts provided on the VoiceThread are to help you come up with your own sentences. Feel free to use them but you do not have to only use the ones I provided.

Feel free to listen to my own recording as well as those of your classmates as many times as you wish before making your own contribution.