Original Research Article

The Effect of Virtual classes on Saudi EFL Students' Speaking Skills

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Despite the widespread use of virtual classes in EFL teaching and learning and its success in many L1 and L2 countries, research on the impact of virtual classes on the development of speaking skills has not been touched upon satisfactorily in EFL settings, particularly in Saudi Arabia. To address this gap, the current study aims at exploring the effects of using the virtual classes on English majors' speaking skills, and examining their attitudes towards the use of virtual classes. The study was conducted with 70 English students at Qassim University who were assigned into two groups, control (35) and experimental (35), after ensuring of their homogeneity by administering the Quick Placement Test. The virtual classes were used in teaching the experimental group, while the traditional method was used with the control one in the first term of the academic year (2019-2020). Data were collected from the study participants using an oral speaking test, an attitudinal questionnaire, and Semi-structured interviews. The results indicated that there were statistically significant differences between both groups in favor of the experimental group, in pronunciation, fluency, comprehension, grammar, and vocabulary due to the virtual classes. However, using virtual method appeared to be a more fruitful tool since the mean score of the experimental group (30.36) was much higher than the mean score of the control group (20.37). The questionnaire and interview findings also revealed that students generally had positive attitudes towards using virtual classes particularly because they found it helpful in improving their speaking skills. In light of those findings, the researcher suggested some recommendations that are hoped to help syllabus designers, supervisors, and English language teachers in developing teaching speaking skills.

Introduction

Nowadays, English is the most spoken language in the world, not only as a first or as a second language, but also as a foreign language. People use English mainly to communicate with other people, which means to send and receive messages that will be understood by both speakers and receivers. With the development of informatization as well as globalization, it is evident that most people all over the world use English as a means of communication among them (Rao 2019). English dominance in international communication is not only reflected in the population using English, but more reflected in the application range of English. It is the most widely used language in the world in international trade, diplomacy, mass entertainment, tourism, medicine, education, technology, and scientific publications as well as publishing newspapers and other books (Khoshsima and Sayadi, 2016). Undoubtedly, English occupies a unique place as it is the language that is so extensively used and so firmly established as a dominant global language in the above- mentioned fields.

Due to the distinguished status of English on the international level, mastering English has become a prerequisite that everyone needs to master and learn. Thus, many Asian countries in general and Saudi Arabia, in particular, have paid great attention to prepare their young generation for effective and successful communication in English with the people of the world for various reasons (Huessin, 2014). In Saudi Arabia, the situation is not different where English has become a compulsory language subject from primary school until university. Saudi Arabia, being part of the Arab world, is also doing its best to make English an integral part of its education system. English is taught as a subject in public and private institutions, schools and universities. Accordingly, the main aim of teaching English in Saudi schools and universities is to equip the students with good and fluent communication skills in English so that they become able to enroll in the labor market and to attain the jobs chances, gaining knowledge, understanding others' cultures, studying overseas and traveling for pleasure (Khoshsima and Sayadi, 2016). To achieve these objectives, the teaching of English in Saudi Arabia is directed to develop students' competence in the four major language skills; listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Alhawiti, 2017).

Of all the four macro English skills, speaking is the most important one required for communication (Sanjay and Narayana 2020). Speaking is generally considered the most important aspect of learning a second/foreign language (Rao, 2019). Speaking is the means through which learners can make presentations, offer explanations, transmit information, describe things, make polite requests, and exchange ideas with others, or to express their opinions (Lui, 2014). The mastery of speaking skills in English is a priority for many second or foreign language learners. According to Aliakbari & Jamalvandi (2010), it is by this skill that learners are judged. According to Hashemi and Moghaddam (2014), being able to speak an international language is a must in the 21st century. Many learners think that to be able to speak in English means to know the English language. Lui (2014) claims that success in language learning is measured in terms of the ability to carry out a conversation in the target language. Consequently, learners often evaluate their success in language learning as well as the effectiveness of their English course based on how well they feel they have improved in their spoken language proficiency.

In spite of the importance often assigned to the speaking skills, it is widely acknowledged that currently learning to speak English in many countries is not successful despite studying for many years (Kassem, 2018). According to the findings from recent researches at the Asian context, it is found that many students study English for many years but they cannot apply the skills in real-life communicative situations effectively (Sanjay and Narayana, 2020; Al-Qahtani, 2019; Alhawiti, 2017; Yadav, 2016). Many learners of a foreign language usually do not like or are afraid of speaking in the target language, and most of the time they exhibit a passive attitude in class, since they do not have the opportunity to express themselves naturally and spontaneously (Hussein, 2016). Students cannot communicate verbally in English because of shyness, fear of making mistakes in front of others, inadequate vocabulary, or simply lacking the required knowledge. In fact, students in Saudi Arabia, like others, face difficulties in speaking (Hussein, 2016). A lot of students cannot produce a complete dialogue with others without making mistakes. They lack self – confidence as a result of failure to master speaking English (Al Turki, Aldraiweesh & kinshuck, 2016). Most of them wish that they had been taught speaking skills more properly at university.

Accordingly, the agony of EFL learners in speaking has drawn the attention of many educators and researchers to find out the reasons for EFL and L2 learners' weak performance in speaking skills. For example, Aljadili (2014) and Al-Jabry (2014) have attempted to investigate the causes behind the poor performance of students in speaking skills. They reported that the use of the inappropriate traditional teaching methods is one of the main reasons for students' weakness in speaking skills. The same finding has also been reported by Hussein (2016) who ascribed the speaking problems to the use of outdated approaches that have not provided sufficient opportunities for practicing the English language. There are few opportunities for students to practice their speaking skills outside the university to interact and communicate with peers and a teacher regardless of time or place. Accordingly, many language teachers, experts, and researchers are seeking to find a different means that helps in providing

sufficient speaking opportunities and environments for interaction and communication with peers and a teacher regardless of time or place. The online learning is one of the proposed means that helps teachers and students to interact as if they were in a face to face learning situation. Online learning has begun to be used all over the world and used various types of technologies such as videoconferencing, videotape, satellite broadcast, TV broadcast, Internet, virtual classes, and so on (Khoshsima and Sayadi, 2016). With more recent advancements of software and Internet technologies in the past 20 years, virtual environments have emerged as a new dimension of the teaching process, and educators are using them in education (Dalgarno, 2002; Nomass, 2012 and Balcikanli, 2012).

Generally, the development of network technology has caused traditional methods to be replaced by the virtual classes. "Virtual classrooms are one of the main components of synchronous settings that share certain similarities with real classrooms" (Cakiroglu, 2014, p. 1). According to Beatty (2010), the term "virtual classes" refers to an "electronic classroom" that can be expandable in time, space, and content". "Virtual classrooms are one of the main components of synchronous settings that share certain similarities with real classrooms" (Cakiroglu, 2014, p. 1). Hussein (2016) defines the virtual classroom as a system that provides the same opportunities for teaching and learning process, beyond the physical limits of the traditional classroom walls. It is called virtual because "it can relax the spatial constraints (users at different locations no matter how far about) and the temporal constraints (users interacting overtime via asynchronous communications)" (Beatty, 2010, p. 171). This study proposed to facilitate practicing speaking by utilizing the virtual classes.

Moreover, the widespread use of the virtual learning system in teaching and learning assists the progress of communication among learners, teachers, and sharing resources for knowledge (Cakiroglu, 2014). Using virtual classes can improve communication skills and have a positive influence on developing the speaking skill (Danesh, Bailey & Whisenand, 2015). Besides, virtual classrooms are encouraging because of many reasons: they don't have to be delivered at a certain time of the day; teachers can use different methods of communication at various times of the day in interacting and instructing students; students are organized into groups and time can be saved.

Statement of the Problem

Nowadays, being able to talk in a foreign language has become a vital goal in our lives. So, people have to learn the foreign language as well as they can, and be experts in four skills to communicate with other people around the world, and use language in their real lives. The conversational skills are being disregarded intensely in Saudi high schools and universities whereas the other language skills are considered more important (Al-Qahtani, 2019). However, most of the Saudi students think that the most difficult skill is speaking, and they find it difficult to speak accurately and correctly. They are not good in their speaking performances; the fact that affects their performance and academic achievements as well. They lack grammatical knowledge, correct pronunciation, and linguistic background needed to produce correct spoken language. As a result, they, most of the time, hesitate to participate or be involved in classroom debates and interactions; which leads to teacher domination of classroom discourse (Hussein, 2016 and Sayadi, 2016).

Based on the researcher's modest experience in the field of teaching the English language, he has observed that Saudi students lack the strategies/skills to cope with speaking skills. The researcher also noticed that most of the students hesitate and feel uncomfortable when they are being asked for presenting their own topics or speaking briefly about such topics in front of their classmates in speaking class. They perform poorly and are unable to speak freely. Students face great difficulties in speaking English. Besides. English majors' poor speaking is clearly observed in speaking classes and is strongly emphasized by students' low scores in speaking exams. The current teaching practices that do not provide students with enough opportunity to practice speaking or sufficient

feedback to improve the quality of their speaking might be, to a great extent, the reason for such poor speaking performance.

Over the last century, with the increasing technological development and the growing popularity of e-learning all over the world, the field of teaching and learning witnessed a huge change and shift on how higher education should be delivered. The adoption of internet and computer made a change in the form of new methodologies, adopted in teaching English (Sharma, 2019; Sarifa, 2018; ElNaggar, 2019; Islam& Billah, 2019; Menon, 2019; Elnadeef & Abdala, 2019; ElNaggar, 2020; Qadhi, 2018; DerKhachadourian, 2019; Baby & Saeed, 2020). Consequently, changing the instructional practices through the use of virtual classes is recommended as a way to deliver knowledge in a creative manner and to provide students with various opportunities to enhance their speaking skills (Namaziandost & Imani, 2020; Alshalan, 2019; Shamsi, Altaha & Gilanlioglu, 2019; Maulina, Hikmah & Pahamzah, 2019).

The virtual classroom is a kind of learning and teaching tools available in the Blackboard program. Virtual classes include a variety of learning and teaching facilities, such as chat, whiteboard, break-out rooms, application sharing, synchronized web browsing, and feedback (Cakiroglu, 2014; Al-Asmari and Rabb, 2014; Nezam Hashem, 2014; AL-Nuaim, 2012). Many types of research state the advantages of using virtual classes in learning and teaching, such as removal of geographical barriers, facility to record the session, and its activities may reduce anxiety and enhance motivation, it has a significant effect in improving communication and collaboration (Yadav, 2016). Hence, the use of virtual classes can play a prominent role in improving college students' speaking.

Despite the arrival of virtual language learning in the last few years, those teaching in Saudi universities still use the traditional method of teaching speaking ability (Al Turki, Aldraiweesh and kinshuck, 2016; Al Gabry, 2014). Therefore, investigating the comparison of different methods of teaching speaking skills, regular and virtual, seems unavoidable in order to find the effect of both methods on the speaking ability of students. Hence, the researcher attempts to apply the virtual classes to help students interact comfortably and improve their speaking skills. Thus, the current study was designed to examine the effect of utilizing the virtual classes as a kind of learning and teaching tools available in the Blackboard program on enhancing speaking skills. Therefore, the study tries to discover the perceptions of students on (EFL) virtual classes.

Research Questions

The present study strives to answer the following questions:
   a) Do virtual classes affect the students' speaking performance in terms of elements of rubric a score (fluency, grammar, vocabulary, contents, and pronunciation)?
   b) Do virtual classes affect the speaking skills of undergraduate Saudi students majoring in English?
   c) What attitude do the students have towards using virtual classes in improving their speaking skills?

significance of the study

Many universities and colleges around the world now engage online classes and programs to allow access to higher education without geographical barriers (McBrien, Jones, and Cheng2009). The use of the computer considers as a part of the curriculum in schools and universities. The integration of Internet technology into EFL learning and teaching becomes widely used in Saudi Arabia's' universities. Virtual classes allow teachers and students to interact online synchronously by using many features such as communicating orally, exchanging texts through typing, audio chat, upload PowerPoint presentations, transmit video, and more (Yadav, 2016). As virtual classes use and integrate into learning and teaching, the author of this study feels it is essential to shedding light on perceptions of teachers and students regarding EFL virtual classrooms and its contributions in enhancing communication skills from the experiences of teachers and students on this site.

Operational Definition of Terms

The researcher includes some operational definition of the terms used in this
study. They are as follows:

Virtual classes: They are tools, techniques, and programs, which are used on the web and help the teacher to contact his students and provide them with materials, homework and other activities and help the learners to participate in discussions, reading the provided materials, and doing the homework and other activities (Mathew et al., 2019). According to Mosquera (2017), virtual learning environment (VLE) is a platform wherein teachers and students interact and share resources. the researcher adopts the definition given by Mosquera as the operational definition in the current study.

Blackboard Collaborate software program, a component of Learning Management System (LMS), is one of the latest technology platforms that is being widely adopted by many institutions across the world either as an additional resource for classroom instruction or as an instruction tool for distance education programs (Mathew et al., 2019).

Speaking: Speaking skill is the ability to use words in an ordinary voice; uttering
words; knowing and being able to use a language; expressing oneself in words;
making a speech." In short, the speaking skill is the ability to perform the linguistic
knowledge in the actual communication.

Components of Speaking

According to Nunan (2006), the elements of the speaking skill are summarized as follows:

Pronunciation is one of the elements of the speaking skill. pronunciation is the way for students to produce the utterance words clearly when they are speaking (Kline, 2001:69). English pronunciation does not amount to mastery of a list of sounds or isolated words. Instead, it amounts to learning and practicing the specifically English way of making a speaker's thoughts easy to follow (Gilbert, 2008:1).

Grammar is the second element of speaking skill. Grammar is the study of how words combine to form sentences. Grammar refers to the fundamental principles and structure of the language, including clear and correct sentence construction and the proper forms of words (Batko, 2004:24).

Vocabulary is the third element of the speaking skill. According to Turk (2003), vocabulary means the appropriate diction or the most important thing in a language especially in speaking; furthermore, knowing many vocabularies we will be easier to express our ideas, feeling and thoughts both in oral or written form. In spoken language, the vocabulary tends to be familiar and it is used in everyday conversation to understand the spoken discourse. A

Fluency is the fourth element of the speaking skill. According to Pollard (2008), fluency is very important in speaking. Fluency is defined as the ability to speak communicatively, fluently and accurately. Fluency usually refers to express oral language freely without interruption.

Comprehension is the last element of the speaking skill. Cohen et al. (2005) refers to comprehension as the ability to perceive and process stretches of discourse, to formulate representations of the meaning of sentences. Therefore, in speaking can be concluded that the comprehension refers to the speakers' understanding about what are they saying to the listeners to avoid misunderstanding information; besides, its function is to make it easy for the listeners to catch the information from the speaker.

The study

The Setting/Context

This study was conducted on the students of the English department, College of Arts and Sciences, Unizah, at Qassim University during the first semester of the academic year 2019-20. Qassim University is one of 25 government universities in the KSA located in Qassim region, in the middle of the country.

The decision of using the virtual classes fit in with a worldwide interest to move away from the traditional and didactic teaching approaches towards more innovative and technically supported ways of learning. According to the officials of Qassim University, the introduction of virtual classes is an important step towards a complete digitization of the university.

The Course

Students majoring in English at Qassim University are required to take two listening and speaking courses: Listening and Speaking1 and Listening and Speaking 2. Each of these courses is worth three credit hours, and both courses are intended for freshmen (students typically take L&S1 and L&S2 during their first and second semesters respectively). Before the introduction of virtual classes at Qassim University, these two courses were fully taught in a traditional face-to-face setting with instructors playing the audio material using their laptops or smartphones and speakers. Since the students' version of the textbook does not have a CD, students typically had no access to the audio material beyond the classroom setting. To increase students' exposure to English spoken by natives, some instructors supplemented the course material with audios from the internet. Few instructors reported assigning speeches, documentaries, interviews, and presentations to be watched at home and then discussed in class. Some of these instructors reported positive results to this approach. However, these efforts remained individualistic, uncoordinated, and unsystematic. According to the course description of listening and speaking 2, the key objectives for the course are to:
• expose students to discussions on concrete topics presented by native speakers
• improve students' note-taking skills.
• train students to communicate on concrete topics related to social relations, current events, and study matters.

The Project

According to Hussein (2016), it has been noted that the greatest advantage of using online technology in a language course is the possibility of extending the period of learning over a far greater timescale than would be possible with face-to-face teaching. In this study, the researcher attempts to adopt virtual classes in teaching the speaking course. Bearing in mind the course objectives listed above, the researcher decides to teach the speaking course via virtual classes for four specific goals:

a. extend students' exposure to English spoken by native speakers (via the audio material made available on blackboard)
b. improve students' note-taking skills
c. encourage student-instructor interaction via email, discussion board and blog
d. encourage student-student interaction and collaboration by creating groups and assigning weekly collaborative assignments

To achieve these goals, the supplementary course material (including the audios and videos) was sectioned into weekly modules and incrementally made available to students through virtual learning environment Blackboard. Students were alerted to the presence of new material and assignments via the announcement tool.

The class met three hours once a week via a virtual learning environment. Only one student reported an earlier use of Bb and for the sole purpose of accessing the course material. Therefore, during the first meeting, students

were introduced to the features of Bb which were to be used: announcements, blogs, discussion groups, file sharing, email as well as how to access course material from content area. Students were encouraged to check their Bb regularly (at least two days a week). At the beginning of the early face-to-face meetings, the instructor allowed a few minutes to the discussion of problems students faced while using Bb.

Generally, students were expected to spend three hours a week on Bb: two hours for the speaking-related activities and another for the listening assignments. However, students were encouraged to listen to the audios and watch the visuals for as many times as they thought it necessary. The instructor randomly assigned students to groups on Bb. While most listening assignments were designed to be performed individually, the speaking assignments required collaboration via the blog tool and/or the discussion board. For example, following a class discussion on presentation skills, students were asked to watch two specified presentations on YouTube and to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses by responding to a set of questions using the discussion board. In another assignment, students were asked to post the topics they intended to work on along with summaries of the main points using the blog tool and to comment on each other's entries in terms of relevance originality, researchability, and feasibility. To keep track of the time they spent on Bb, they were required to fill out log sheets weekly. These log sheets were collected two weeks before final exams and data was analyzed.

Research Methodology

The methodology of the research procedure included four major sections: research design, research participants and research instruments, and data collection and analysis.

Design of the Study

This is an experimental research in nature. Since the random selection of the subjects was impossible for the researcher, so the researcher made use of intact groups; therefore, the design, which could fit, was a quasi-experimental design with the help of pretest-posttest patterns. To accomplish the research objectives, a mixed-method research design (involving both quantitative and qualitative methods) was employed for data collection. According to this mixed-method approach, the research problem and objectives act as the starting point, which determines the choice between various quantitative and qualitative methods to accomplish specific research goals. Some quantitative and qualitative research tools were designed and administered: These are: the speaking skills test, a semi-structured interview and an attitudinal questionnaire.

The participants were divided into two groups; the control group received the traditional way of teaching speaking, and the experimental group received a virtual method. Both groups received the same topics, but by using different tools. The researcher taught both groups.

Variables of the study:

Independent variable: The independent variable refers to the treatment implemented in this study (the virtual classes and traditional instruction implemented with the experimental group versus the regular instruction received by the control group)

*Dependent Variable***:** Dependent variables were the subjects' scores on the English-speaking skill test and the scores of their responses to the items of the attitudinal questionnaire, and their responses to the interview questions.

Research Participants

An essential goal of this study was to understand the effects of a regular method and compared it to the virtual language learning technique on the speaking ability of Saudi EFL students. Seventy students participated in the present study. They were English majors at the English Language and Translation Department at University of

Qassim in the academic year 2019-2020 in KSA. Students' age in both groups ranged from eighteen to nineteen. They were enrolled in the "Listening and Speaking" class and met once a week.

Before the start of the experiment, seventy-six participants were asked to take a Quick Placement Test which is designed to determine the homogeneity of the groups to place them into appropriate classes. According to the results obtained by the students in the Quick Placement Test administered before the start of the experiment, seventy participants were selected out of seventy-six English majors based on their scores on the proficiency test. They were then randomly divided into two equal groups; the experimental group (35 students) was taught through the use of blended learning approach whereas the control group (35 students) was taught through the traditional lecture method. The students thus constituted two homogenous groups in terms of their English proficiency.

Instruments of the study
Since the study focuses on two factors, using virtual learning classes and students' attitudes toward that approach, four research instruments were adapted by the researcher. These four instruments were the Quick Placement Test (QPT), the speaking skills test, a semi-structured interview and an attitudinal questionnaire. By using a combination of Placement test, speaking tests, questionnaires, and interviews as evidence for the current study, the researcher was attempting to improve the trustworthiness of the findings.

Placement Test
To assess the general English knowledge of the participants, the researcher used the Quick Placement Test which is extracted from (Richards et al., 2008). This QPT test is being designed to determine the homogeneity of the groups (Richards et al., 2008). This test included 50 multiple-choice items of English language skills, and its total score was 50. The test should take around 50 minutes to complete. To make sure that the two groups were homogeneous; their performance was computed on the QPT through running descriptive statistics of means and standard deviations. A group of seventy-six students took part in the QPT test. The participants with the intermediate level of proficiency were selected. Based on the results of the test, seventy participants were selected out of seventy-six English majors.
The selected students were randomly assigned into two homogeneous groups of control and experimental to participate in the main study.

The Speaking Test
The second data collection instrument was the TOEIC speaking test in which learners' speaking abilities were graded and assessed before and after the implementation of the experiment to detect the effect of the virtual learning classes on the participants' speaking skills. The test covers the aspects of pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. The test duration was 20 minutes for each student. The English-Speaking Test was given in week one before starting the treatment and repeated in week eight. The data collected through the results of pre- and post-treatment tests were used to address the first research question investigating the effect of virtual class instruction in the study. The tests were conducted in the college by the researcher and a voluntary teacher. After the students finished the test and left the classroom, two raters scored their performance individually by using the current oral assessment rubric. Then the two raters (the researcher and another teacher) compared their grades and if there were more than 10 points difference between the grades, raters negotiated a common grade through discussing the performance.

Description of the test
The TOEIC speaking test is an academic English test produced by the institution of Educational Testing Service (ETS). Table (1) indicates that the test included six parts. In part 1of the test, the candidate will read aloud the given text. He will have 45 seconds to prepare. Then he will have 45 seconds to read the text aloud. In part 2 of the test (Describe a picture), the candidate will describe a given picture in as much detail as he can. He will have

30 seconds to prepare his response. Then he will have 45 seconds to speak about the picture. In the third part of the test, the candidate will answer three questions. For each question, he begins responding immediately after he hears it. No preparation time is provided. He will have 15 seconds to respond to questions 3, 4and 5. In this fourth part of the test, the candidate will answer three questions based on the information provided. He will have 30 seconds to read the information before the questions begin. For each question, the student begins responding immediately after he hears it. No additional preparation time is provided. The student will have 15 seconds to respond to questions 6 and 7, and 30 seconds to respond to question 8. In the fifth part of the test, the candidate will be presented with a problem and asked to propose a solution. He will have 30 seconds to prepare. Then he will have 60 seconds to speak. In the last part of the test, he will give his opinion about a specific topic. The topic was written on a card, and the participant should be sure to say as much as he can in the time allowed. He will have 15 seconds to prepare. Then he will have 60 seconds to speak.

One of the reasons for choosing this instrument was that it is accepted at an international scale. Leading Universities in USA, UK and Canada have recognized it as a reliable and valid test and it observed comprehensive criteria, including fluency, accuracy, communication, vocabulary, and pronunciation, to assess speaking skill which suited the very purpose of the study.

This is the TOEIC Speaking test. This test includes 10 questions that measure different aspects of the speaking ability. The test lasts approximately 20 minutes.

Table.1 Description of the TOEIC Speaking test

Question	Task	Evaluation Criteria
1	Read a text aloud	• pronunciation • intonation and stress
2	Describe a picture	All of the above, plus • grammar • vocabulary
3-5	Respond to questions	All of the above, plus comprehension
6-8	Respond to questions using information provided	All of the above, plus fluency
9	Propose a solution	All of the above
10	Express an opinion	All of the above

For each question type, the participant will be given specific directions, including the time allowed for preparation and speaking.

Scoring the test
The researcher and voluntary teacher scored the pre-test and post-test by using the checklist extracted from Mohammadipour and Rashid, (2015) and Hasan, (2014). The researcher and teacher met with each student for ten minutes, during which they asked questions from the speaking skills test. Throughout the test, the rater awards a certain mark out of 50 according to five criteria which are interpreted according to the following speaking assessment criteria: fluency, grammar, vocabulary, comprehension, and pronunciation. Assessment is based on performance in the whole test, and is not related to performance in particular parts of the test. The speaking assessment and evaluation were checked by a panel of teachers in the field of the English language.

Speaking Test Validity:
The speaking skills test was given to a panel of specialists in the field of applied linguistics and methodology to be professionally reviewed. Moreover, the jury members were asked to evaluate the test as a whole in terms of: (a) number of tasks and appropriateness to the functions measured, (b) suitability of the tasks to students' linguistic level and (c) suitability of the test to measure the intended skills. Based on the reviewers' feedback and comments, the researcher had to evaluate and fix whatever needed to be fixed and eliminate some items. By doing so, the validity of the test can be insured.

Speaking Test Reliability
The speaking skill test was tested on a pilot group. This group consisted of 39 students randomly selected from the section of the target level at the English department who were not members of two specified groups who participated in the study. A technique of a test-retest was used to ensure the reliability of the research instruments. The period between the test and the re-test was two weeks. The correlation coefficient of the test was calculated using Pearson's Correlation Coefficient and was found (85%) for the speaking skills test, which was considered statistically acceptable for the current study.

The administration of the Pre- Test and Post- Test
To assess students' speaking proficiency, the researcher designed a test. Both groups of participants will be given a Pre-Test and Post-Test to gauge their speaking performance. The pre-test will be conducted to both groups at the beginning of the study while the post-test will be conducted after the completion of the task-based listening activities. To see the difference achieved by both groups, a comparison of two means of the scores gained by both groups will be taken into consideration. The paired t-test will also be used to see whether the difference in the scores between the treatment and control groups is statistically significant.

Inter-Rater Reliability for the Speaking Test
The speaking skill test was administered on the control and experimental groups. The correlation coefficient of the test was calculated using Pearson's Correlation Coefficient.

Inter-Rater Reliability Pre-test
The inter-rater reliability for the two raters who rated the students on the pre-test of speaking is .92 (P = .000 < .05). Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). Correlation Coefficient was considered statistically acceptable for the current study.

Table 2: Inter-Rater Reliability Pre-test

	No. of Students	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)
Rater 1 Rater 2	60	.923	.000

Inter-Rater Reliability Post-test
The inter-rater reliability for the two raters who rated the students on the post-test of speaking is .88 (P = .000 < .05). Correlation Coefficient was considered statistically acceptable for the current study.

Table. 3 Inter-Rater Reliability Post-test

Rating	No. of Students	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)
Rater 1 Rater 2	60	.889	.000

The attitudinal questionnaire
In this study, a well-structured questionnaire divided into 3 sections was administered and given to 35 English majors after the implementation of the treatment. The objective of distributing the questionnaire was to identify the issues and challenges found in the implementation of virtual classes as well as students' attitudes towards the use of virtual learning classes. The questionnaire consisted of 54 items, and it was adapted from the perception questionnaires used in previous studies (i.e. Al-Qahtani, 2019 and Hussein, 2016). In this study, the questionnaire was used to obtain data to address the predetermined second research question. It was used to find out learners' opinions about virtual learning classes. The students were asked to indicate to what extent they agreed to the statements of the questionnaire. 2- point Likert scale was used for the questionnaire with number 1 indicating "disagree" and number 2 implying "agree". The questionnaire was only administered to the participants in the experimental group after the implementation of the treatment.

Questionnaire Validity
The face validity of the questionnaire was achieved through submitting it to ten experts who reported the suitability of the questionnaire for assessing students' attitudes. The reviewers suggested that some of the scale's items should be re-written or eliminated to be suitable for the study. Accordingly, the researcher agreed with the reviewers' suggestions to modify, and eliminate some items. As a result, the scale ended up with a 54-item attitude instrument.

Questionnaire Reliability:
To find out reliability degree of the questionnaire, the reliability coefficient (Cronbach alpha) was calculated as an indicator of homogeneity to the level of the instrument as a whole.
The attitudinal questionnaire was tested on thirty-nine students who were not members of two specified groups who participated in the study. A technique of a test-retest was used to ensure the reliability of the research instruments. The period between the pre and the post-application was two weeks. A statistical Alpha Cronbach calculation showed a higher level of reliability of 0.840, which is acceptable by the researchers.

Semi-structured interview
The fourth instrument used in the present study was semi-structured interviews that involve inquiries to gather information and support the results obtained from the speaking test and the questionnaires. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in the present study with ten participated students from the experimental group who were randomly selected by the researcher. They were interviewed face to face individually at the end of the experiment. This interview was conducted to investigate learners' perceptions of virtual class instruction after the treatment. The data from these interviews were used to respond to the third research question concerning students' perceptions of virtual class instruction.

Validity of the interview
In terms of the fourth study tool (interview) validity, the designed interview was submitted to some jury members specialized in TESOL (n=7) to check validity and consistency with research purposes. Based on the jury's suggestions, some amendments were made.

Procedures of the study
    a. Reviewing literature and previous studies related to the effects of virtual classes on learning. Besides, the researcher reviewed previous studies related to speaking skills.
    b. Preparing a lesson plan based on using the virtual classes in teaching the content of the specified units.
    c. Presenting the speaking skills list to some specialists, including professors of teaching methodology, supervisors of English language and experienced teachers to benefit from their experience.

    d. The preoral speaking test was applied to the control and the experimental groups in the first term of the academic year (2019- 2020). The results were recorded and statistically analyzed.

    e. The researcher made sure that both groups were equivalent through the pre-test and then experimented.

    f. The post speaking test and post anxiety scale were applied on the experimental and the control groups. The results were recorded and statistically analyzed.

    g. After the post-test, questionnaires were distributed among students in the experimental group to solicit their feedback regarding the use of virtual classes in the speaking course.

Finally, ten students were interviewed to explore their views regarding the use of virtual classes in learning the speaking class.

Statistical Analysis

To answer the research questions, the speaking skills test was administered as a pre-test and a post-test. The student scores from the pre-test and post-test were systematically uploaded into a computer for quantitative analyses. The Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) was adopted in the statistical analysis. Consequently, two independent t-tests were run for the difference between the mean scores of the experimental group and the control group on the pre-test as well as the post-test. A paired t-test was run to find the difference between the means of the scores on the following tests: the pre- and post-tests for the control group as well as for the experimental group to see if there was any difference between the performance of the subjects on the pre- and post-tests.

The data collected through the questionnaire were calculated by using frequencies and percentages and interpreted as levels to indicate how students perceived the use of virtual class instruction.

Finally, the researcher interviewed ten students to explore their views regarding the use of virtual classes in learning the speaking class.

Results and Discussion

In this section, the researcher offers the results according to the statistical analysis of the collected data. The findings of the study are presented in this section according to the research questions. Therefore, the researcher employed different statistic methods such as frequencies, percentages, and t-test (SPSS) to show the final results of the collected data. The results were presented in the form of statistical tables to clarify and present these data with analysis and interpretation.

Findings related to the first research question

1. Do virtual classes affect the students' speaking performance in terms of elements of rubric a score (fluency, grammar, vocabulary, contents and pronunciation)?

The study results regarding the first research question which explores the effect of the virtual classes on the students' speaking performance in terms of elements of the speaking rubric (i.e. pronunciation, comprehension, fluency, grammar, and vocabulary) were presented in tables 4,5 and 6). The control and experimental groups of students were taught in two different ways. A pre- and post-test was designed to investigate and compare the students' mean scores before and after the treatment. In this section, the researcher shows the mean performance and standard deviation of the two groups on the pre-test and post-test as relates to the components of the rating scale, i.e., pronunciation, comprehension, fluency, grammar, and vocabulary.

The score results for these aspects can be seen in table 1, 2, and 3 below.

Pre-test: Results of speaking components between the experimental group and the control group

Table 4 shows that there was no significant difference before the intervention in terms of pronunciation, comprehension, grammar, fluency as well as vocabulary. From the independent sample t-test results, the significant values were >.05. Table 4. Pre-test Results of English-speaking components between the experimental and the control groups

Pre-test	Group	N	Mean	SD	df	T-test	Sig.
Pronunciation	Control Group	35	4.00	.874	68	-.2404	.128
	Experimental Group	35	4.54	1.010			
comprehension	Control Group	35	4.31	1.231	68	-.1561	.730
	Experimental Group	35					
			4.80	1.368			
Grammar	Control Group	35	2.94	1.413	68	-1.519	.757
	Experimental Group	35	2.43	1.420			
Fluency	Control Group	35	3.97	1.248	68	-1.595	.643
	Experimental Group	35	3.51	1.147			
Vocabulary	Control Group	35	3.63	1.395	68	-.180	.392
	Experimental Group	35	3.69	1.295			

Table 4 shows that the mean score of the pre-test ranges from2.43 to 4.80 between the experimental group and the control for pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension, respectively. This indicates that the students' speaking proficiency is still low and they are having the following difficulties.
1. Pronunciation problems necessitate listening and occasionally lead to misunderstandings.
2. Students make frequent errors in grammar, rearrange words, and misorder words occasionally.
3. Students frequently used the wrong word, so conversation is somewhat limited.
4. Speed and fluency are rather strongly affected by language problems.
 5. Students understand what is said is at slower than average speeds.

 We can conclude that most of the students in English class in the second year have difficulties in speaking. Therefore, new interventions are required to overcome this problem. The researcher used virtual classes to teach speaking as an innovative technique in English class. The intervention aimed to improve students' proficiency and competence in speaking.

Post-test: *Results related to comparison of the mean of the speaking pre-test and post-test within the experimental group*
Table 5 shows that the mean scores of speaking components; pronunciation (4.54), comprehension (4.80), grammar (2.34), fluency (3.51), and vocabulary (3.69) in the pre-test are lower than the mean scores (7.71), (7.89) (3.77), (5.51) (6.03) in the post-test for the experimental group. These findings indicate that the objective of the study to investigate the impact of using the virtual classes on teaching students to speak English has been met. The scores of the experimental showed remarkable improvement in the post-test compared with that in the pre-test. The difference between the two tests is significantly in favor of the post-test. This indicates the importance of using the virtual classes.

Table 5: Pre and post-test mean scores of aspects of speaking performance of the experimental group.

Writing Aspect	test	N	Mean	SD	df	T-test	Sig.
Pronunciation	Pre-test	35	4.54	1.010	34	-14.246	.000
	Post-test	35	7.71	.957			
Comprehension	Pre-test	35	4.80	1.368	34	-9.768	.000
	Post-test	35	7.89	.993			
Grammar	Pre-test	35	2.34	1.420	34	-4.379	.082
	Post-test	35	3.77	1.629			
Fluency	Pre-test	35	3.51	1.147	34	-5.873	.061
	Post-test	35	5.51	2.063			
Vocabulary	Pre-test	35	3.69	1.255	34	-7.710	.002
	Post-test	35	6.03	2.051			

This improvement in pronunciation and comprehension use was attributed to the effectiveness of the virtual classes which helps students to develop self-learning strategies in an interesting way, to understand what is said by the speaker, to develop the utterances. The virtual classes also enable students to express themselves freely via speaking, to participate according to their competencies and learning styles. It took into account the individual differences among students, too. This showed the significance of the implementation of the virtual classes and the improvement of the experimental group students' achievement level.

Post-test Results of English speaking between the experimental and the control groups
From data in table 6, it is evident that students of the experimental group made a considerable progress in their speaking performance during the virtual classes course in terms of essay organization, language use, mechanics, content, and vocabulary aspects. In Table 6, the independent t-test of the post-test scores indicated that there were significant differences between the experimental and the control groups in terms of pronunciation, comprehension, grammar, fluency as well as vocabulary.

In Table 6, there was a significant difference after intervention for the experimental group in pronunciation. The post-test means the score of the control group was 4.54 while the experimental group was 7.71. There were also significant differences after intervention for the experimental group in language comprehension. The post-test means score of the control group was 4.71 while the experimental group was 7.89.

In Table 6, it is evident that the experimental group outperformed the control group in the fluency aspect. The post-test means score of the control group was 4.11 while the experimental group was 5.51.

Based on Table 6, the aspect of grammar has the lowest score of all other aspects. Students are relatively less able to perform well in the aspect of grammar. The post-test means score of control group was 2.43 while for the experimental group was 3.77. This aspect should gain special attention in the learning process. Some errors frequently encountered in students' speaking were in the use of vocabulary as well as fluency.

In the aspect of vocabulary, the post-test means score of the control group was 4.43, while the experimental group was 6.03. This finding showed that virtual learning was applied well. Discussions carried out by the students, the tasks of reading through browsing in the learning process, and the relevant topics presented by the teacher were several factors that increase the ability of students on the aspect of vocabulary.

The results in table 6 show that the experimental group performed better than the control group in terms of their speaking aspects.

Table 6. Post-test Results of English speaking between the experimental and the control groups

Post-test	Group	N	Mean	SD	df	T-test	Sig.
Pronunciation	Control Group Experimental Group	35 35	4.54 7.71	.950 . 957	68	-13.913	.911
Comprehension	Control Group Experimental Group	35 35	4.74 7.89	.950 .993	68	-13.528	.622
Grammar	Control Group Experimental Group	35 35	2.43 3.77	1.632 1.629	68	-3.446	.829
Fluency	Control Group Experimental Group	35 35	4.11 5.51	1.586 2.063	68	-3.182	.034
Vocabulary	Control Group Experimental Group	35 35	4.43 6.03	1.650 2.051	68	-3.596	.074

This considerable improvement in the speaking components is ascribed to the effectiveness of the virtual classes which help students to develop self- learning strategies, to identify the relations between the vocabulary elements, to express the ideas in various forms, and to reach conclusions from the ideas available. It also helps learners to express themselves freely through speaking and participate in such a way to reflect their standards of achievement. It took into consideration the individual differences among students, too. This signifies the effectiveness of the virtual classes.

Findings related to the second research question
Results related to comparison of the pre-test mean scores of the control and experimental groups
The second section will be a report on the findings from the analysis of data to answer the second research question: "Would virtual classes affect speaking skills of undergraduate Saudi students majoring in English?". In this section, the researcher shows the mean performance and standard deviation of the two groups on the pre-test and post-test.

Before implementing the virtual classes to the experimental group, a TOEIC speaking test is administered to both the control and the experimental groups as a pretest. Raw scores were statistically calculated. Then, an

independent t-test is run to compare the mean scores of the experimental and control groups on the pre-test of speaking. An independent t-test showed no statistical differences in mean scores of both groups as shown in table (7) below. The results indicated that the mean score of the experimental group was 18.53 with a standard deviation of 3.788, and the mean score of the control group was 18.31 with a standard deviation of 3.549. This result showed that the difference in the mean scores between the experimental group and the control group was not statistically insignificant. The t-observed value is .241 (Table 7). This score of the t-value is lower than the critical value of 2 at 68 degrees of freedom. As evident in the table, the result showed t = .241, df = 68, and Sig. =.699, indicating that there was no significant difference between the two groups before the experiment started, and the two groups started with the same proficiency level. Based on these results, it can be concluded that there is not any significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental and control groups on the pre-test of speaking. That is to say that the two groups were homogenous in terms of their speaking ability before the administration of virtual class teaching to the experimental group. These findings are presented in Table (7).

Table 7: Pre-test means scores of overall speaking performance

Group	N	Mean	SD	df	T-test	Sig.
Control Group	35	18.31	3.660	68	-.241	.699
Experimental Group	35	18.53	3.788			

The data in table (7) indicate that the results of the independent samples T-test is consistent with the first hypothesis stating that there is no significant difference between the experimental group and the control group in terms of their performance on the speaking pre-tests. It should also be taken into account that the scores of the students of both groups were fairly low and this may be due to the fact that neither the experimental group nor the control group was exposed to any approach in teaching speaking skills before starting the treatment. The results of the comparison of the pre-test scores between the control group and the experimental group in the speaking skills test before experimentation are also graphically shown in Figure3.
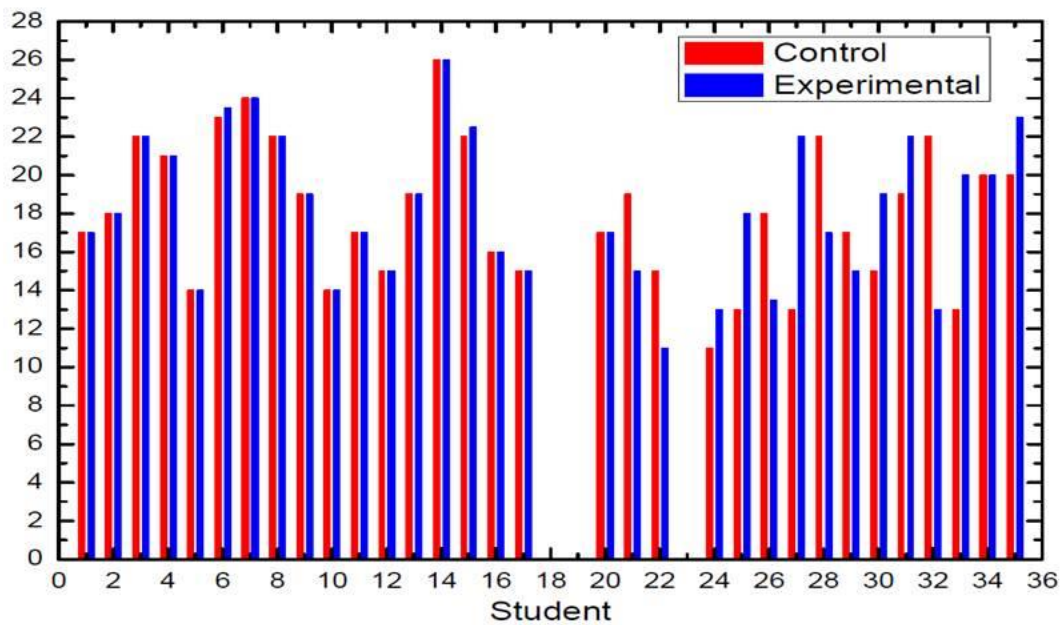

Figure 1: The Pre-test Scores of the Control Group and Experimental Group in the Speaking Skills Test

It could vividly be seen in figure (1) that there is no significant difference between the control group and the experimental group in the speaking skills pre-test. It can be seen in figure (1) that the starting point of the two groups was low average. Their performance was identified as low due to their lack of exposure to opportunities for practicing English speaking.

Results Related to Comparison of the Mean of the Speaking Pre-test and Post-test within the Group
To see how much improvement each group had from the pre-test to the post-test, paired-samples t-tests were conducted. Table (8) shows descriptive statistics for the results of the pre- and post-tests for both groups. After analyzing the data through the SPSS software version 18, the results obtained from the descriptive statistics indicated that the mean score of the learners on the pretest was less than that of the posttest. Before the intervention, the speaking mean scores of students in the control group and experimental group were 18.31 and 18.53 from 50 points, and those scores increased to 20.37and 30.86 respectively after the intervention. It is noticed that the standard deviation of the two groups also changed a little bit. From t-test analysis, there is no significant difference between means of scores obtained by the control group in terms of their performance on the pre-posttest of speaking performance.

After having analyzed the Experimental group students' scores on both speaking tests, we came up with the following findings. From t-test analysis, the post-test mean scores were significantly higher than the pre-test mean scores in the experimental group (T = -20.094). Regarding the development of the speaking skill, results obtained from the pre/post oral tests showed evidence of an increment in the participant's scores in the second (post) test given to the learners at the end of the course. This means that the students in the experimental group improved their speaking performance. However, it is noted that students who received virtual class instruction outperformed the control group who did traditional teaching. This considerable improvement shown by the subjects of the experimental group is due to the effect of the exposure to the virtual class instruction, which included presentation and practice on the speaking components. This indicates that the participants in the experimental group indeed benefited from the virtual class instruction. This implies that the students in the experimental group improved their speaking significantly after they were taught with the virtual class instruction.

Table 8: Comparison of the mean of the speaking pre-test and post-test within the group

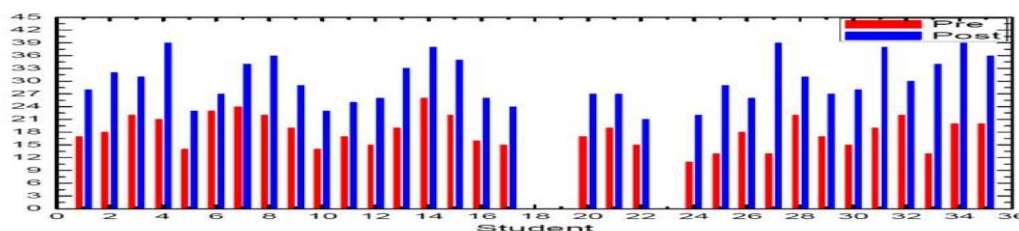| Group	Test	N	Mean	SD	df	T-test	Sig.
Control Group	Pre-test Post-test	35 35	8.31 20.37	3.660 4.551	34	-4.071	.000
Experimental Group	Pre-test Post-test	35 35	8.53 0.86	3.788 5.801	34		.000

Figure 2: The Pre-test and Post-test Scores within the experimental group

As could be seen in figure 2, the difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of the experimental group was a significant one. The progress that occurred from pre-test to post-test can be observed in figure 2. In the beginning, the group had a low performance qualified as inadequate, but after the group's exposure to the treatment, there was a significant increase in reaching a substantial mean score. Therefore, the difference was considerable between the pretest and posttest.

Results related to Comparison of the Post-Test Mean Scores of the Control and Experimental Groups

1: Does virtual classes instruction have any effect on the speaking ability of Saudi EFL language learners?

After the intervention between those having traditional instruction and those doing virtual class instruction, a post-test on the participants' speaking performance was readministered. An independent t-test is run to compare the mean scores of the experimental and control groups on the post-test of speaking to probe whether administration of virtual classes instruction has any significant effect on the experimental groups' speaking ability. As is shown in table (9) below, using the t-test revealed that there is a significant difference between means of the scores of the control group and those of the experimental group in this test. The result indicated that the post-test mean score of the experimental group (M = 30.86, SD = 5.801) was higher than that of the control group (M = 20.73, SD = 4.551). This result revealed a statistically significant difference in the test scores at the level of .05 as shown in Table (6). The t-observed value is -8.413- (Table 9). This score of the t-value is higher than the critical value of 2 at 58 degrees of freedom. Mean scores and standard deviations for the performance of both groups on the post-test of speaking showed that the experimental group students had better performance compared with their counterparts in the control group. Therefore, it can be concluded that students who adopted the virtual class instruction in the experimental group achieved a significant improvement in the speaking test scores than the students in the control group who received regular instruction only.

Table 9. Post-test means scores of overall Speaking performance

Group	N	Mean	SD	df	T-test	Sig.
Control Group	35	20.73	4.551	68	-8.413	.000
Experimental Group	35	30.86	5.801			

This finding proved that there was a statistically significant difference between mean scores of the experimental group students and the control group students at (05.0) regarding their oral performance, favoring the experimental group students. Since the control group shares with the experimental group all other variables in the study, the significant improvement in the experimental group students' speaking performance in the test utilized in the study can be attributed to the effectiveness of utilizing virtual classes in teaching the speaking skills. This is also shown in figure (3) below.
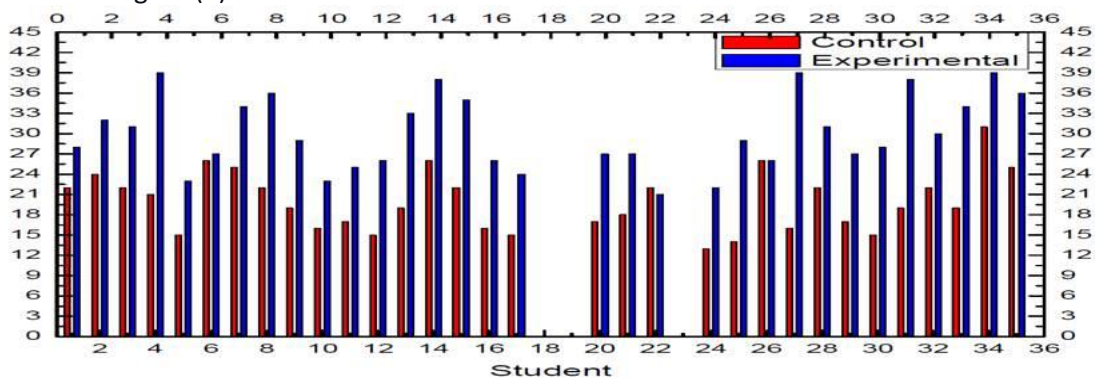

Figure 3: The Mean Scores of the Experimental, and Control Groups on the Post-test

As illustrated in figure (3), there is a considerable difference between the two groups favoring the experimental group. The performance of this group could be considered as remarkable. This result means that virtual classes instruction is effective in developing the Saudi students' speaking skills

This finding is supported by Lee (2002), Jurkowitz's (2008) research studies in which they found that a Virtual learning environment encourages fluency and helps to enhance accuracy and rich lexical density. Satar and Özdener (2008) also found out that "learners had more rapid progress in speaking skill through virtual learning environment and were able to use their new foreign language in real-world situations with reasonable levels of proficiency". A few explanations for this finding seem appropriate. It can be argued that the virtual learning environment provides a non-threatening, positive, and comfortable environment, and thereby learners produce more language with a high degree of accuracy and rich lexical density. The virtual learning environment is based on the belief that students can learn more effectively when the learning environment is comfortable for them; the virtual learning environment is comfortable, cooperative, and non-threatening. The environment's condition is one of the great differences between Face to Face interaction and Virtual learning environment.

The questionnaire
Results of the second tool of the study (questionnaire) related to the second question:
The data used to answer the third research question were gathered from the questionnaires and the interviews which were delivered to the experimental group students by the end of the treatment. The questionnaire was used to explore student perceptions of virtual classes. The questionnaire consisted of four sections. The first section collected data related to the students' accessibility to the internet and the usability of virtual classes. The second section explored the students' perceptions of the effectiveness of virtual classes in improving language skills, while the third section explored their opinion on the system's effectiveness in enhancing student-student and student-teacher communication. The fourth section explores perspectives on virtual learning classes in EFL speaking course. The last section investigated the drawbacks of using virtual classes in EFL teaching and learning. Students were asked to rate the questions as "agree, disagree". The results of the questionnaire were analyzed in terms of frequency and percentage to find out the students' attitudes towards the use of virtual classes in learning to speak.

The students' attitudes towards accessibility and usability of virtual classes
The first section collected data dealt with the students' accessibility to the internet and usability of virtual classes. Based on the overall results shown in Table (10), it was obvious that students had positive attitudes towards accessibility and usability of virtual classes.

Table 10. Accessibility and Usability of Virtual Classes

Statements	Agree		Disagree	
	No	%	No.	%
1 I was able to use virtual class with ease.	26	74.2	9	24.8
2 I always have access to an internet-connected computer.	32	91.4	3	8.6
3 Course material was well organized on the virtual class.	18	51.4	17	48.6
4 The training I received on how to use virtual class was adequate.	28	80	7	20
5 I was able to participate in synchronous activities with ease.	19	54.3	16	45.7
6.More internet-connected computer labs are needed on campus.	11	31.4	24	68.6
7. Further training on how to use virtual class would have helped me benefit more from virtual class.	7	20	28	80
8. participation in synchronous activities was difficult due to time constraints.	6	17.1	29	82.9

9. Technical aspects of virtual class discouraged me from using it more frequently.	9	25.7	26	74.3
10. I had to seek further help on how to use of virtual class	5	14.2	30	85.8

Table 10. shows that access to an internet-connected computer rated the highest percentage (91.4%) followed by satisfaction with the Bb training (80%) and students' perception of the degree of ease of using Bb (74.2%). These findings confirm the results reported by Huessin (2016) who indicated that the majority of respondents realize that virtual classes facilitate their learning and teaching process in the same manner when compared to face-to-face classes and do not cause difficulties that may handicap the educational process. Similarly, Al-Qahtani (2019) reached to the conclusion that the student can use the internet to learn and get information which helps them to communicate with teachers easily. Similarly, these findings go in accordance with that reached by Jason (2001) that reported that students view the use of the virtual classroom as an ease of accessibility. It is much easier with the information posted on the Web because it is available 24 hours a day. Distance learning courses can be done anywhere and at any time. Students can view this information without having to contact the instructor.
Students' perceptions of the level of ease of participating in synchronous activities (54.3%), and the organization of course material on Bb (51.4%) were moderate.

On the other hand, the percentages for all the negative statements in Table 7, with the exception for statement 6 related to the need for more internet-connected computer labs (31.4%), fall in the low category.

Together, Table 10 shows that, in general, students found virtual classes easy to use and conveniently accessible. However, the moderate rates for the degree of ease with which they were able to participate in synchronous sessions, the organization of course material on virtual classes and the need for more on-campus computer labs show that these areas need serious consideration and significant improvement.

Effectiveness of Virtual Classes in improving language skills
Table 11 below shows that students believed virtual classes to be most beneficial in helping them improve their speaking, pronunciation and listening skills (80%, 74.2% and 71.4% respectively). This order reflects the primary learning objectives for the course: to improve students' speaking skills. This finding was similar to that reached by Al-Qahtani (2019) who report that virtual classes can enhance listening and speaking skills by using messenger calls, zoom, blogs, discussion, and chats.

The percentages for reading and vocabulary (65.7% and 62% respectively) also rated high, while students rated improvement in grammar and writing as moderate (36% and 40% respectively). These findings were consistent with the results of Soliman (2014) and Khoshsima and Sayadi (2016) that reported that the virtual learning system improve students' language skills as they practice reading, listening, speaking and writing via the different E-learning resources and tasks.

Table 11. Effectiveness of Virtual Classes in improving language skills

Statements	Agree		Disagree	
	No	%	No.	%
11.Pronunciation	26	74.2	9	24.8
12.Listening	25	71.4	10	28.6
13.Speaking	28	80	7	20
14.Reading	23	65.7	12	34.3
15.Writing	14	40	21	60
16.Grammar	13	37.1	22	62.9
17.Vocabulary	22	62.9	13	37.1

Effectiveness of Virtual Classes in improving student-student and student-instructor interaction
Table 12 below displays the participants' responses to statements concerned with the impact of virtual classes on improving student-instructor and student-student communication.

An important objective for the adoption of Bb was to promote student-instructor communication on the one hand and student-student communication, on the other. Table 12 shows that students found the instructor's feedback on their Bb posts highly beneficial (85%) and that Bb was very effective in connecting them with their instructor (80%). This finding is consistent with the results reached by Mathew, Sreehari, and Al-Rubaat, (2019) who see that the use of the virtual platform provides opportunities for teacher-learner interaction during off-campus periods as well as a platform where students can access their test-scores. On the other hand, the participants were less satisfied with the student-student communication (51.4%) and the feedback they received from their peers (40%). Benefiting from reading peer's posts and from responding to these posts rated low (34.3% and 30% respectively). A close look at the students' comments to posts made by their peers helps explain these responses: for the most part students' feedback was positive and rather brief. Quite often, students only responded with phrases such as "good topic," "nice work" and "I agree with you."

Table 12. the impact of virtual classes on improving student-instructor and student-student communication.

Statements	Agree		Disagree	
	No	%	No.	%
18. Virtual class helped me better communicate with my instructor.	28	80	7	20
19. Virtual class helped me better communicate with my classmates.	18	51.4	17	48.6
20. I found my instructor's feedback on my posts beneficial.	30	85.7	5	14.3
21. I found my classmate's feedback on my posts beneficial.	14	40	21	60
22. I benefited from reading material posted by other students.	12	34.3	23	65.7
23. Responding to other students' posts improved my critical thinking.	11	31.4	24	68.6

Students' perceptions towards using virtual classes in EFL speaking course
Students' responses to the positive statements included in Table 13 reflect an overall positive attitude towards the adoption of virtual classes in the speaking course. After the end of the treatment, it seems that the students found virtual learning classes to be useful (65.7%), easy and convenient (80%), enjoyable (74.3%), interesting (85.7%), and helpful (88.6%). These findings are in line with that of Mathew et al. (2019) who report that virtual learning environment is ease and convenience concerning the lecture times. On the contrary, this finding differs from that reached by Kassem (2018) who report that their students do not enjoy the courses in the online system. He indicated that a small number of the students strongly disagree that online course is enjoyable despite the appropriateness of the design and materials used in an online course as they state. This finding suggests that the reason why students do not see the online course as enjoyable may be related to difficulties of the activities taking place in the online course.

Virtual learning classroom motivates to complete assignments on time (77.1% respectively). This finding supports the result reached by Hussein (2016) who reports that the virtual students are motivated to do their assignments via Blackboard.
Reducing stress (80%) and increasing confidence to participate in class discussions (74.3%) were rated moderate. These findings were similar to that of Al-Qahtani (2019) who pointed out that some students felt more confident in virtual classes because they can talk better than face to face classes without feeling embarrassed. This allows them to communicate better. Similarly, Hussein (2016) reported that virtual classes give the students the

opportunities to speak and ask questions and enhance critical comprehension. Virtual classes activate all students 'participation and give time and chance for all. "The students feel relax, talking and communicating.

Table 13. Learners' Perspectives on Virtual Learning Classes in EFL Speaking Course

Statements	Agree		Disagree	
	No	%	No.	%
24. Using Virtual class has made this course less stressful.	17	48.6	18	51.4
25. Using virtual class has made this course more enjoyable.	19	54.3	16	45.7
26. Using virtual class made me feel more confident to participate in class discussions.	26	74.3	9	25.7
27. Virtual classes should be used in all classes.	28	80	7	20
28. Using virtual class has motivated me to finish and submit my assignments on time.	27	77.1	8	22.9
29. I find that applying virtual classes to speaking course is useful.	23	65.7	12	34.3
30. Virtual classes motivate me to speak more in collaborative learning activities.	31	88.6	4	11.4
31. In virtual learning classroom, I have the freedom to ask my teacher what I do not understand.	31	88.6	4	11.4
32. A virtual learning classroom enriches the interaction between students and teachers.	23	65.7	12	34.3
33. virtual classes made the speaking course more interesting.	30	85.7	5	4.3
34. I find that applying a virtual learning classroom in my speaking course is time-saving.	23	65.7	12	34.3
35.I find that applying virtual classes to speaking course is helpful.	31	88.6	4	11.4
36.I find that applying virtual learning classroom to speaking course is Easy and convenient.	28	80	7	20
37.Virtual classes provide sufficient opportunities for speaking practice.	22	62.3	13	37.7
38.Virtual classes help me improve my overall speaking skills.	28	80	7	20
39.I can communicate with other students in this subject electronically (email, chats, messenger ….. etc).	26	74.3	9	25.7
40.Virtual classes reduce my fear of speaking in front of my classmates.	28	80	7	20
41.I preferred the English-speaking course to be taught through virtual classes.	29	74.3	6	25.7

As for applying virtual classes to speaking course, 80% of the experimental group students found it easy and convenient. These findings, together with those of Hussein (2016), signal that students generally find it easy and convenient to access online learning materials that are part of a virtual learning environment. Consequently, using virtual classes with speaking students can provide a learning environment with good student access to their in-class and online learning materials.

More than two-thirds of the respondents (65.7%) reported that learners interacted with their teacher out of virtual class timings via e-mail, Facebook, and kakoo in virtual classes system. This result is in harmony with Al

Turki, Aldraiweesh & Kinshuck (2016) who also observed that web-based academic courses enhanced not only peer interaction but also students' interaction with their instructors. They add that one of the advantages of the virtual learning classroom was in the flexibility of communication and interactions with instructors.

Regarding whether the virtual learning classroom saves time or not, the results highlight positive responses where our participants (65.7%) agreed. This explains that virtual learning classroom saves time as the students do not have to travel to campus and can complete their virtual learning from anywhere (Al Gabry et al., 2014). Learners expressed that up to date announcements not only familiarize them with cancellation of or changes in schedule regarding classes, tests, discussions, or assignments but also save their time. Otherwise it is taxing for learners to come to university only to find that the class is canceled.

Regarding the students' perceptions of the virtual learning classroom, the students' responses showed that virtual learning classroom encouraged them to speak more (88.6%), and helped them improve their speaking skills. This finding is consistent with the results of Hussein (2016) and Al-Qahtani (2019) where students' performance in speaking had improved when web-based instruction replaced the traditional instruction.

Regarding their interaction with each other, many participants (74.3%) can communicate with each other in this subject electronically (email, chats, messenger, Imo …. etc). This finding is different from that reached by Al Turki,, Aldraiweesh and Kinshuck (2016) who found that the high school students in their study preferred to communicate with their teachers face -to- face and thus rated questionnaire items on electronic communication lower.

Likewise, 28 out of the 35 students (40%) in their survey indicated that virtual classes reduce their fear of speaking in front of their classmates. Moreover, 74.3% of the experimental group participants feel more confident to participate in class discussions when using the virtual learning classes. This can partly be due to the freedom that the virtual learning classroom allowed EFL students, which enabled them to make choices in a non-threatening environment. This finding is also in harmony with Satar, and Ozdener, (2008) who confirmed the same perception that on grounds of the virtual learning classroom, which did not punish oral mistakes, the students felt less inhibited and more able to improve their performance gradually. This highlights the powerful effect of the virtual learning classroom environment on student behavioral reactions and as a result learning outcome. Thus, the virtual learning classroom did not punish learners' speaking mistakes subconsciously assisted the students to shift their focus from performance to learning and mastery where there is no room to worry about failure.

Thirty one out of thirty-five students (88.6%) indicated that in virtual learning classroom they have the freedom to ask their teacher what they do not understand. Although the students themselves did not directly comment on the value of being able to ask questions through the virtual learning classroom, it is notable from their actions that the virtual learning classroom design did enable the possibility to freely ask questions, express concerns, or seek advice. This finding has been reached by Hussein (2016) who confirmed that high percentage of his students showed their satisfaction with the virtual learning classroom which enables them to ask their teacher for clarification and for advice.

By and large, 26 out of 30 students (74.3%) preferred the English-speaking course to be taught through a virtual learning classroom. This finding has been confirmed by Kassem (2018) who stated that the participants preferred the English-speaking course to be managed through virtual learning activities. Besides, many students (80 %) would like to use the virtual learning classroom in learning other English courses. In short, the participants were quite satisfied with the virtual learning classroom. Based on their less motivating learning attitudes in the English-speaking classes, these results could be considered as a good sign to promote their English speaking in a more effective virtual learning classroom environment in the future.

As can be seen from Table 10, the students in the experimental group had favorable attitudes towards enhancing their speaking skills through virtual learning classroom. Moreover, students felt that this virtual environment could both facilitate and enhance their learning experience. It helped them develop their speaking skills.

Students have generally expressed positive views about their experience of virtual learning classroom, which confirms the findings of other literature (Alhawiti 2017; Yadav, 2016; Aljadili, 2014); Zourob, 2014).

EFL students' perceptions of the limitations of the virtual speaking classes experience
In an attempt to explore the EFL students' perceptions of the limitations of the virtual speaking classes experience, 25.7% of the students see that virtual class is boring. On the other hand, 74.3% of the students disagree. Only 34.3% of the students agree the challenges I faced in using virtual class made it less helpful. 25.7% of the students agree that virtual classes did not help them improve their grades, whereas 74.3% of the students disagree. Ten statements were allotted to address this component. A quick look at table 14 indicates that there are some negative impressions towards virtual classes for English courses from the viewpoints of students. The responses of the informants about negative expressions of virtual classes are slow internet connectivity (74.3%), teachers don't reply to emails (34.3%), and lack of face to face interactions (42.9%). Moreover, the instructions aren't easy to follow (28.6%), frustrating to use (34.3%). Besides, the negative points as to make social isolation (37.1%), the materials of virtual classes aren't well organized (40%). The other drawbacks of negative expressions are wasting of time (37.1%), lead students to cheating and other unethical practices (40%). This finding is congruent with that reached by Hussein (2016) who stated that virtual learning classroom has been said to encourage student laziness since it makes it easy for them to take short cuts and not put effort into their speaking.

Table 14. Students' attitude towards using Virtual classes (drawbacks)

Statements	Agree		Disagree	
	No	%	No.	%
42. Using a virtual class is boring.	26	74.3	9	25.7
43. The challenges I faced in using virtual class made it less helpful.	23	65.7	12	34.3
44. Virtual class did not help me improve my grades	26	74.3	9	25.7
45. Virtual class lacks face to face interactions.	15	42.9	20	57.1
46. Slow internet connectivity is a problem for virtual classes.	9	25.7	26	74.3
47. My teachers do not reply to my emails quickly.	23	65.7	12	34.3
48. Virtual class materials aren't well organized.	14	40	21	60
49. The instructor isn't on time for all activities.	19	54.3	16	45.7
50. Using virtual class has made the course more frustrating.	12	34.3	23	65.7
51. Virtual Class is a waste of time.	13	37.1	22	61.9
52. Virtual class can lead students to cheating and other unethical practices.	14	40	21	60
53. Virtual class instructions aren't easy to follow.	10	28.6	25	71.4
54. Virtual class makes me socially isolated.	13	37.1	22	72.9

Generally, the findings of this questionnaire revealed that the majority of students have positive feelings toward their experience with virtual classes. The virtual classes enabled students to speak well. It also used various activities which suited all students' levels. Furthermore, the interesting way that was used in the virtual classes to present the questions with, sounds and colors helped students to participate eagerly and without hesitation. This finding confirms the effectiveness of using the virtual classes on developing the students' speaking skills. This

result agreed with the results of almost all the previous studies like; Al-Qahtani (2019), Al-Jabry, et al. (2014) and Halawi, and McCarthy (2008). Such previous studies report that more than half of their students prefer virtual classes to face-to-face classes in their learning.

Analysis of Semi-Structured Interviews
The information obtained from the semi-structured interviews were mostly supportive of that obtained from questionnaires. The following discussion provides an informed summary of the important ideas:

What are the most important benefits for using the virtual classes?
Almost all interviewees pointed out that the unrestricted availability of the audio and visual material was extremely helpful in allowing them to learn at their own pace and convenience: "*I like to learn whenever and wherever I want*," one participant remarked. A good number of participants also pointed out that using virtual classes made the course more enjoyable. In the words of one student "*checking virtual classes always makes me excited to find what the teacher and the other students posted*." Though students' ranked improvement in communication among peers as low, during interviews this issue was often mentioned as one of the important benefits of virtual classes: "*I usually don't know students in my classes, but in this class, I am happy because I make good friends*." Another student maintained, "*My classmates' comments on my posts are not helping me, and I did not know how to help them. But I am happy because I now know the students in my virtual classes group very well*." It seems that while the use of virtual classes helped students socialize with other classmates, it was not facilitated well enough to successfully utilize their academic interaction.

In line with the results from the questionnaire, improvement in language skills, particularly listening and pronunciation, were also viewed as important advantages. Besides, interest in searching the Web for material related to the course topics was also brought up an important benefit: "*Whenever any of my group members posted something about her topic, I try to find more by reading on the net*," one of the interviewees stated.

What Difficulties did students encountered in using the virtual classes
On the topic of difficulties encountered in the virtual speaking course, the students made several comments during their interviews. According to the views of the interviewees, it is clear that only a small number of students found it difficult to access the blended course. In addition to this, some interviewees admitted that giving and receiving feedback to their peers' speaking were also uneasy for them. Students justified their opinion by specifying such difficulties related to peer feedback activities as their lack of confidence to give feedback to their classmates' speaking, their limited time to give feedback to many peers' speaking as well as the insufficient quantity of peer feedback to help improve their speaking. Most noticeably, the majority of students who took part in the virtual speaking course agreed that they had some technical problems when participating in the virtual course for the first time. It seems that students needed more through and continuous training on how to use the system. Another difficulty was related to the time restrictions for submitting assignments via Bb as some interviewees felt it puts the student under undesirable stress. One participant commented on this issue by saying "The *first time was the worst. I knew that I was supposed to submit my assignment on that day, but things happen. I didn't submit my assignment on time, and I get zero. I was going to cancel (drop) the course.*" These technical problems included students' lack of confidence about their technology skills, lack of necessary facilities, and need for more technical supports from the teacher and so on.

What suggestions do you have for improvement?
One important suggestion, that students brought up, is related to the way groups were assigned. Students preferred to be allowed to form their groups instead of being grouped by the instructor. They also suggested having more open-access and internet-connected computer labs on campus. According to one student this is important because "*sometimes I am ashamed [shy] to ask my instructor, and I don't have anyone to help me at home, so if I can go with my friend to the computer lab, I can ask him to help me.*" As for the synchronous

discussions, some participants said they needed better training: "*I logged on to my Bb account,*" *one participant said,* "*then I create a thread and said hi. No one answered. Then I read the instructions again, and found the discussion board. But I was late*." Students also expressed their desire to have more of the synchronous sessions provided that they replace some of the face-to-face time. In the words of one student "*Sometimes I don't feel like going to university. Why I can't stay home and take a class*?"

However, the results of group interviews provided concrete evidence that students became more personally engaged with their peers and class setting. Virtual classes significantly enhanced students' motivation, attitude, and environmental setting and ultimately on their speaking competence. The virtual learning classes generated positive results for EFL classes in Saudi Arabian EFL classes.

Discussion

The study was conducted to determine whether the virtual learning classes of an EFL classroom could help improve the students' speaking skills. As it was noticed, the study came up with some notable results deserving further considerations and discussions. The present study found that students in the experimental group who were taught using the virtual classes scored significantly higher than the control group students who were taught using traditional in-class speaking instruction only. The use of the virtual classes was significantly more effective than using traditional speaking instruction alone. virtual classes seem to be an important factor in enhancing EFL students' speaking skills. It helped enhance their speaking ability and resulted in a significant improvement in their post-test scores.

The responses from the questionnaire and interview regarding students' perceptions towards using the virtual classes were wholly positive and are compatible with the findings of the post-test. The experimental group students felt interesting and confident in learning and practicing the speaking skill. The students' responses questionnaire and interview also indicated that the virtual classes had a positive effect on their attitude towards the speaking process. It enhanced their self-esteem, motivation, and sense of achievement and improvement. The students enjoyed speaking and were motivated to practice speaking skills. Virtual classes encouraged speaking and exchange of ideas. Besides, results showed that the students highly appreciated and benefited from the virtual classes employed in the course in varying ways: it helped increase student-student and student-teacher interactions, reduce or even eliminate communication anxiety, motivate them to become (more) independent and autonomous learners, and enhance their academic English speaking ability, and so on.

The researcher ascribes the improvement in the students' speaking ability to the following reasons:

a. The virtual classes were presented easily and interestingly. It does not require advanced computer skills and students enjoy working using the web.
b. The direct feedback given to students influenced motivating the students with different achievement levels.
c. The interaction and communication among students themselves and with teachers might influence students' speaking positively.
d. Students might consider the virtual classes as a new experience, so they exerted their efforts to learn using this method.
e. Therefore, the increase in the scores shows that appropriate use of virtual classes activities such as using BBS, chat program, instant messengers, and having feedback session had positive effects on overall speaking ability of the Saudi university students who participated in this study.

The nature of the virtual classes is very interesting for students as it is related to the internet and deals with the multimedia. The researcher observed that students

create a positive attitude towards technology. The learning process should be given the power to design its simple training fit well with the students' psychological state. The virtual classes overcome this state by providing students with neat images, amazing colorful pages, suitable size, colors for the text, and other appropriate links. The virtual classrooms are interesting; Learners are more enthusiastic because the learning atmosphere attracts their attention strongly. All that help students to concentrate on participation rather than feeling afraid. Students raced in exchanging information and ideas. Their anxiety from speaking decreased as they practiced something favorable for them. The presence of technology with its various facilities simplified the students' point of view about speaking. Also, the distance between them and the teacher allows them to feel calm and try to prepare themselves for speaking bravely without hesitation. The virtual environments may represent a relaxed learning environment that could initially reduce anxiety, and be advantageous for second language learners. The findings agreed with the findings of some previous studies such as: Satar and Ozdener (2008), which showed that both voice chat and text chat groups increased in speaking proficiency.

The findings of the current study goes in accordance with that of Al-Qahtani (2019) who reported that that the majority of teachers agree with the significant role of virtual classrooms in enhancing communication skills, especially in these aspects: the availability of time, enhancing listening and speaking comprehension, the useful features of virtual classes setting, timely feedback and enabling powerful environment for interaction and participation.

Similar findings are found in research conducted by McBrien, Jones, & Cheng (2009). The researchers state that the synchronous online system offers different modes of communication that increase the amount of interaction and enhance communication. Besides, the study conducted by Cakiroglu (2014) about evaluating students' perspectives about virtual classrooms found that in the aspect of assessing communication between teachers and students, he received a highly satisfactory percentage.

It was also observed that the Saudi English students gained a relatively substantial amount of improvement in organizing information, pronunciation, grammar, fluency, and vocabulary English language sub-skills. These findings of the present study agree with many previous studies results that proved an effective role and impact of the virtual classes on the teaching and learning process worldwide. These are: Al-Qahtani (2019); Mathew, Sreehari, and Al-Rubaat, (2019); Alhawiti (2017); Yadav (2016); Aljadili (2014); Zourob (2014); Nezam Hashem, (2014) Nomass (2012) and Balcikanli (2012); Iqbal et al (2010); Sarica & Cavus (2008); Seferoglu (2007); Mehr et al. (2013), Wang and Newlin, (2001), Clark, and Berge. (2006) and Hay et al. (2004). These studies indicated that using virtual classes has a positive effect on teaching English speaking skills and could enhance students' speaking skills.

Conclusion

The purpose of the current study was to investigate the effect of using virtual classes on Saudi EFL students' speaking skills. Next, it attempted to report on the students' perceptions of adopting virtual classes into the learning of a speaking course at the Qassim University. To achieve such purposes, 70 students at the department of English participate in this study. Data of the study were collected through using the speaking test, the questionnaire, and the semi-structured interviews. The study findings showed that the experimental group achieved a significant improvement in their speaking performance on the post-speaking test than the control group. This means that the virtual classes had superiority over the traditional method in teaching speaking skills. The findings of the questionnaire and interviews also revealed that the participants have a favorable opinion on the adoption of virtual classes especially in terms of accessibility, an extension of class time, connection with the instructor, and improvement of target language skills. The virtual classes also provided students with enjoyment, pleasure, enthusiasm, and variation, which were the magic keys for positive and effective participation. Moreover, the results of the study suggest that virtual classes can be an effective aid to improve speaking skills. The findings

of this study indicate that the amount of language output after the treatment was greater for the experimental group.

Recommendation for further studies

The researcher suggests the following ideas and titles for further studies.
   a. The effectiveness of virtual classes on developing students' communicative skills.
   b. The effectiveness of virtual classes on developing the students' writing skills.
   c. Using virtual classes for oral communication in English as a Foreign Language.
   d. The effectiveness of virtual classes on teaching problem-solving.
   e. This study can be replicated under the same conditions as was explained in the procedure section. Results of replication studies may provide further support for the efficacy of the virtual learning environment.

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