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The Effectiveness of Using the Voki Platform in Developing English Speaking Skills among Seventh-Grade Students in UNRWA Schools in the Gaza Governorates

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Abstract:

The study aimed to identify the effectiveness of using the Voki platform in developing English speaking skills among seventh-grade students in UNRWA preparatory schools in the Gaza Governorates. The study employed a quasi-experimental design. The sample consisted of 180 students, selected using simple random sampling and divided into two groups: an experimental group of 72 students and a control group of 108 students. The experimental group (the independent variable) used the Voki platform, while the control group received face-to-face training. The study instruments included an oral speaking skills test, a student questionnaire, and a training workshop.

The results showed the effectiveness of using the Voki platform in developing English speaking skills (fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, and interaction) among students, as there were statistically significant differences between the arithmetic means of the scores of the experimental and control groups, which are attributed to the effect of training through the Voki platform in developing English speaking skills, in favor of the experimental group. The study recommended the necessity of employing the Voki platform in teaching the English language to seventh-grade students and qualifying teachers to use it by holding training programs for them.

Keywords: Technology, Teaching, Teaching Platforms, Voki Platforms, English for Palestine, Artificial Intelligence, UNRWA.

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Introduction

The advent of technology has brought about a profound transformation in the field of education, notably by fostering collaborative practises, enhancing resource accessibility, and facilitating customised learning experiences. This shift represents a transition from the conventional sage-on-the-stage instructional method to a more interactive and student-centred approach supported by technology. For instance, this transformation is evident in the adoption of learning management systems (LMS) such as Canvas and Blackboard, which have greatly facilitated efficient discussions, resource sharing, and progress monitoring among students and educators.

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) have played a key role in promoting equity and accessibility in higher education. By offering learning opportunities online, individuals from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds can explore and enhance their knowledge across various fields (Christensen, 2013). Furthermore, technology in education has contributed to increasing both the quantity and quality of available educational resources.

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2010), open educational resources (OERs) have expanded the variety of learning materials, providing educators with more options to address students' diverse needs. Platforms such as Khan Academy and Coursera offer valuable video lectures and interactive lessons for complex topics. Moreover, emerging technologies, including virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR), have created immersive learning experiences that enhance student engagement (Dillahunt, Wang, & Teasley, 2019).

Another important aspect of technological advancement in education is its capacity to support personalised learning. According to Bergmann and Sams (2012), adaptive learning technologies have demonstrated positive effects on student outcomes. Platforms such as DreamBox and Smart Sparrow use algorithms to identify students' strengths and weaknesses and provide tailored learning experiences. Similarly, the use of mobile devices in classrooms has enabled flipped learning models, in which students study new material independently and then use class time for collaborative problem-solving and discussion. This approach enhances both individual and group learning.

Despite these advantages, foreign language teachers in Arab contexts face distinct challenges. A major difficulty stems from linguistic differences between Arabic and English. Al-Mahrooqi and Troudi (2014) noted that these differences encompass structure, alphabet, pronunciation, and vocabulary. Additionally, Arabic diglossia, in which Modern Standard Arabic

(MSA) coexists with local dialects, adds further complexity. Consequently, teachers must carefully navigate this linguistic gap to ensure effective English instruction.

In addition to linguistic barriers, cultural factors also affect language learning. Students in Arab countries may feel hesitant or resistant to learning English due to cultural and religious considerations, with some fearing that English may threaten their national identity. To address these challenges, educators should employ culturally responsive teaching that respects students' backgrounds and fosters inclusion. For example, incorporating culturally relevant materials and familiar themes can enhance student engagement and motivation (Abu-Rabia, 2000).

In recent years, cloud-based technologies, particularly the Voki platform, have provided innovative opportunities for developing speaking skills among Palestinian refugee students in preparatory schools. Voki enables learners to create speaking avatars, fostering an engaging and interactive language-learning environment (Chuang, 2016). This innovation can help address challenges such as overcrowded classrooms and limited resources by offering students additional opportunities to practise speaking. Moreover, it promotes creativity and a sense of ownership over the learning process.

Furthermore, speaking activities play a critical role in overall language development. Pakula (2019) argued that actively producing language allows students to identify gaps in their knowledge and improve through feedback. Similarly, interactive activities, such as group discussions or pair work, reinforce vocabulary and grammar acquisition (Long, 1996).

Many learners experience Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), which can significantly hinder their speaking confidence. Common causes include fear of making mistakes and peer pressure (Oteir & Al-Otaibi, 2019). Traditional classrooms often exacerbate this issue by providing limited opportunities for authentic communication and focusing primarily on grammar and vocabulary. Furthermore, teachers face challenges in objectively assessing speaking performance and delivering individualised feedback, particularly in large class settings.

Although several studies have explored platforms like Voki, research on its impact in the Palestinian context remains limited. Integrating Voki into preparatory schools can enhance collaboration, as students work together to create dialogues or interviews using their avatars and share them with peers (Chuang, 2016). These activities foster interaction, peer feedback, and a sense of community learning.

Voki offers a low-stress environment for language practise, particularly benefiting shy or anxious students who may find traditional speaking tasks intimidating. Through this platform, learners can practise privately and gradually build confidence. The engaging and playful nature of

Voki reduces anxiety and enhances motivation, supporting Palestinian refugee children in developing their speaking skills with greater confidence and enjoyment (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Based on the researcher's observations and a review of the literature, it is evident that seventh-grade students in UNRWA preparatory schools in the Gaza Governorates face significant difficulties in speaking, particularly in areas such as fluency, pronunciation, comprehension, vocabulary, and grammar. This situation highlighted the need to investigate the effectiveness of using the Voki platform in developing their speaking skills.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Main Question:

How effective is the use of the Voki platform in developing English-speaking skills among seventh-grade students in UNRWA schools in the Gaza Governorates?

Sub-questions:

1) What are the key speaking skills that Palestinian refugee children need to master in learning English?
2) What are the main features and characteristics of the Voki platform that make it suitable for developing speaking skills?
3) How effective is the Voki platform in improving the speaking skills of Palestinian refugee children?
4) What teaching strategies can be effectively integrated into the Voki platform to enhance students' speaking skills?
5) What recommendations can be proposed to English language teachers, the Ministry of Education, and other stakeholders to enhance English teaching practises?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study aims to:

1- Explore the key speaking skills that Palestinian refugee children need to develop in learning English.
2- Identify the main features and characteristics of the Voki platform that make it suitable for fostering speaking skills.

3- Assess the effectiveness of the Voki platform in improving the speaking skills of Palestinian refugee children
4- Clarify teaching strategies that can be effectively integrated into the Voki platform to enhance students' speaking skills.
5- Provide recommendations for English language teachers, the Ministry of Education, and other stakeholders to improve English teaching practises.

HYPOTHESES

1- There is no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the control group in the speaking test before and after the intervention.
2- There is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group in the pre-test and post-test of the speaking test, in favour of the post-test.
3- There is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the control group and the experimental group in the post-test of the speaking test, in favour of the experimental group.

LITERATURE REVIEW

LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TECHNOLOGY

Language learning and the integration of technology have become integral components of contemporary education, reshaping the ways in which students acquire and apply languages. This convergence represents a transformative force, breaking down barriers to communication and opening new horizons for learners worldwide. In today's globalised society, proficiency in multiple languages is not only advantageous but often essential. Language learning fosters cross-cultural understanding, facilitates international collaboration, and empowers individuals to engage meaningfully with the world.

According to Sosas (2021), technology plays a pivotal role in this process by democratizing access to language resources. Online courses, language apps, and interactive platforms provide learners with the flexibility to study at their own pace and in environments conducive to their preferences .Moreover, technology enables modified learning experiences, catering to individual learning styles, preferences, and paces. Adaptive software and AI-driven platforms can dynamically adjust content and challenges to match a learner's proficiency and progress. This individualised approach enhances engagement and retention, ensuring that education is tailored to the needs of each student.

For Palestinian seventh graders, the development of strong speaking skills is particularly significant. Effective communication in English empowers students in an increasingly globalised world, facilitating participation in international dialogues, opening opportunities for higher education abroad, and enhancing prospects for future careers (Hammad, 2022). In this context, the integration of technology, particularly platforms such as Voki, provides a dynamic and engaging approach to developing speaking skills. It aligns with students' familiarity with digital tools and offers opportunities for interactive language practise. Furthermore, technology serves as a bridge to connect learners with diverse linguistic communities, broadening their exposure to different English accents and cultural contexts.

BLENDED AND E-LEARNING APPS.

To enhance accessibility to educational activities such as test management or lesson delivery, the field of education has now introduced digital platforms known as e-learning or blended learning. They are known most by the collective Learning Management System (LMS). They offer educators convenient resources to centrally manage and administer courses, ensuring students have uninterrupted access. Consequently, the students are enabled to collaborate effectively on projects and actively participate in discussions with their peers.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic did not precipitate the inception of e-learning platforms and applications; however, it served as the primary catalyst for their pervasive adoption and widespread engagement by the public. The global health crisis has created a significant opportunity for non-specialised applications to become integrated within the e-learning landscape. These applications formerly focused exclusively on facilitating social communication across a range of methods and employing diverse policies. They previously lacked any direct affiliation or investment in remote learning; however, they have now emerged as prominent contenders in this domain.

One prominent example of such applications is WhatsApp, which has facilitated the establishment of online learning environments, enabling educators to engage a considerable number of students simultaneously and distribute multimedia content, such as videos, images, and educational resources. Facebook also made efforts to develop an educational platform that shared resemblances with Zoom. Regarding the existing platforms, YouTube, a highly recognised platform, has integrated live-streaming functionalities and offers ample storage for extended recordings. In addition, it is noteworthy to acknowledge the endeavours of Telegram, which is making significant strides towards establishing its presence and engaging in competition within these dynamic events.

Nevertheless, notwithstanding these factors, the dominance, potency, and governance in remote education remain within dedicated applications tailored explicitly for this objective. Some notable examples include Google Classroom, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Blackboard, Canvas, and the Moodle platform, within the wide range of available learning management systems (LMS) options. The following is a presentation of a concise summary of the most renowned applications in question.

VOKI PLATFORM

Web resources offer effective strategies for addressing a common problem encountered by students, assisting hesitant individuals in improving their communication skills. Undoubtedly, young people possess valuable perspectives on urgent challenges and can significantly contribute towards finding solutions. However, some students may lack confidence when sharing their ideas with the entire class, but may find it easier to express themselves online. Furthermore, some learners may need more time attempting to convey ideas in another language and to articulate thoughts correctly; this is where online communication proves advantageous.

Elverici (2024) stated that Voki is an online learning platform used as a virtual classroom to enhance communication and language learning. This platform allows teachers to create virtual Voki characters who speak and interact with students. Educators can customise a character's appearance, including figure, clothing, and voice. This is in great harmony with the student's desires and inclinations. The student who leans towards a singing character can choose Celine Dion as a character to represent. The student who leans towards animation can choose the character Cinderella or Prince Charles. The Voki platform is an effective way to attract students' attention and promote active participation in the virtual classroom, as it enables learners to present educational content innovatively and interestingly, where the virtual character speaks in the teacher's voice or in different voices to clarify concepts and explain lessons.

Moreover, the Voki platform allows students to interact with virtual characters by sending voice or written messages, which helps develop language communication and persuasive skills. It can also be used for audio discussions, presentations, pronunciation exercises, assessment of comprehension, and stimulating collaboration among students. Similarly, using Voki as a teaching tool, teachers can customise content, activities, and reviews according to students' needs. The platform also provides a wide range of options and tools that can be used to enhance interactive and fun learning (Aikina & Zubkova, 2015).

Using Voki characters allows students to enhance fluency and pronunciation through speech practise exercises. An expert recommends recording one's voice instead of typing

responses, allowing individuals to playback recordings privately and engage in safe practise sessions. Incorporating Voki into English language teaching facilitates student autonomy in creating and adapting content based on individual learning needs and abilities (Dilla & Sada, 2021).

Karakaş (2024) clarified that Voki is a well-designed educational technology tool that effectively supports learners' speaking, listening, and writing development. Moreover, it allows participants to engage in decision-making processes related to planning and completing their work inside and outside the classroom. Additionally, the Voki application provides for the design of various types of English language teaching and learning activities, such as:

- **Introducing oneself**: At the start of the academic year, students could create avatars that serve as an introduction to the class. These avatars are customised to resemble their real-life appearance closely, and students also provide personal information such as their location and interests. This activity allows students to express themselves and initiate conversations with their peers.
- **Storytelling**: Once students have finished reading a short story, their teacher assigns a task to retell the story from a different character's perspective. Students are asked to create an avatar representing their chosen character and record their retelling to accomplish the task. Using Voki avatars allows for a more natural presentation of the characters' dialogue and actions. Preparing to create a Voki avatar also encourages students to plan and organise their thoughts carefully, as they are limited by a set recording time. This exercise enhances their writing skills and develops their English-speaking abilities for various purposes and audiences across different genres.
- **Guess who?** To foster a sense of community and promote self-expression, students are kindly requested to introduce themselves using the interactive Voki platform. Subsequently, they are encouraged to share their creations with the teacher via email, who will then compile these submissions into a comprehensive collection. During class, this collection will be presented for fellow students to engage in an intriguing guessing game as they attempt to determine the authors of each Voki. Ultimately, this activity not only possesses the potential to spark fascinating discussions but also provides a valuable outlet for introspective individuals who may feel more inclined towards quieter forms of self-expression.

- **Describing weather**: Take your pick from various backgrounds showcasing an array of seasonal and climatic phenomena. After selecting a background, your avatar will eloquently articulate observations about the atmospheric conditions in the chosen image.
- **Giving instructions**: To add some variety to the classroom. The teacher utilises Voki to provide instructions. Ask questions. And introduce grammar patterns for this purpose. Prerecorded audio files can be easily uploaded to Voki.
- **Recording dialogues**: Pair work can involve conversations between avatars discussing various topics. It can also include engaging in argumentative discussions about different ideas. Additionally, pair work allows for presenting the outcomes of collaborative learning activities.
- **Acting out interviews**: The activity consists of two main steps: students record questions to interview their group mates, and then record answers to their peers' questions.
- **Recording reviews**: Students are encouraged to provide records of their classroom activities, reflect on their experiences, report on their progress in English learning and share their impressions of the content they have watched or read. This practise offers the advantage of saving time in oral speaking preparation during class and aids in organising students' ideas. Additionally, it helps to build a valuable collection of listening materials that can be further analysed and used for peer correction. Or serve other educational purposes.
- **Poetry**: Students can use avatars to recite brief poetry to enhance their speaking fluency. This method enables students to engage in a creative and interactive learning experience while focusing on improving their oral communication skills.
- **Famous people**: Students have the opportunity to create avatars that bear a resemblance to famous individuals they studied after conducting research. These avatars serve as a means to present essential information about these prominent figures and expound on their significance in history.
- **Advertising**: Students utilise Voki avatars to effectively convince their audience to take action, such as purchasing or choosing a candidate through voting.
- **Parodying**: Students can construct an avatar symbolising a renowned celebrity, politician, or historical figure. Furthermore, students can employ voice imitation to fashion a caricature of said individual.
- **Radio broadcasting**: In students' lives, there is a great task of honing their speaking voice to an extraordinary level, alongside constructing a captivating on-air persona.

- **Commenting**: students, with utmost respect, are kindly urged to give undivided attention to the recorded speech, ponder upon its essence, and gracefully articulate their valued opinions about this issue.

Incorporating Voki into the teaching and learning process makes both student work showcases and peer review opportunities possible. The unique aspects of Voki as an educational tool lie in its ability to facilitate speaking practise, listening comprehension tasks, role-play activities, and presentations across diverse age groups while catering to students at different levels of language proficiency.

Chen (2016) exemplified the benefit of using Voki in English classes in the Tomsk Polytechnic University experimental study, which gave the participants valuable practical experience. The purpose of this study is to examine the activities designed by the author to improve speaking skills and expand first-year students' vocabulary related to the topic "Travelling." A task was assigned to the students following their study of education materials on "Eating out" and "Types of holidays" to create Vokis and record brief reviews of restaurants and cafes they visited, as well as hotels they stayed at. Listening activities were conducted during which students heard the reviews of their peers and then picked a place they would like to visit and justified their selection.

In a separate activity, a distinct cohort of elementary-level students were assigned to document detailed directions for reaching a significant urban landmark while abstaining from explicitly disclosing the name of the destination. This task was assigned once the students had obtained the essential vocabulary and language patterns associated with providing directions, such as "proceed in a straight line," "turn left or right at the first junction," "take public transportation," "alight," and so on. Within the context of a listening exercise, students engaged in attentively listening to audio recordings produced by their classmates, with the objective of accurately identifying the specific landmarks being described (Bellés-Fortuño & Bellés-Calvera, 2018). These activities were performed in both instructional sessions and as independent tasks. Drawing from the significant insight garnered from the successful integration of Voki into English language instruction, the Tomsk Polytechnic University proposed the following practical recommendations to augment the efficacy of similar initiatives:

- ☒ Thoroughly articulate the goals and anticipate results of the endeavour.
- ☒ Guarantee consistently reliable internet connection.
- ☒ Deliver an overview of the assignment and a comprehensive demonstration of operating the Voki application.

- ☒ Guarantee comprehension of the assessment criteria among students, encompassing elements such as the duration of their oral presentation, logical cohesion, and linguistic precision.
- ☒ Extend suitable aid to students, rendering assistance in a manner that is helpful and not overly burdensome.
- ☒ Deliver prompt and valuable assessments on students' Voki creations.
- ☒ Employ the Voki samples generated by students as exemplars to acquaint individuals who are unfamiliar with the online platform.

By actively participating in educational endeavours that integrate the Voki platform into English language instruction, students can offer meaningful insights derived from their direct engagement with the service. The results of a survey encompassing a sample size of fifteen participants unveiled a multitude of significant advantages. A significant proportion of participants indicated that the integration of Voki resulted in increased motivation to engage in verbal communication in the desired language (87%), promoted creativity (67%), assisted in preparing for oral presentations (60%), heightened the level of excitement in the learning process (93%), improved the retention of vocabulary and language structures (67%), and allowed for personalized learning experiences (53%). The questionnaire analysis findings reinforced that learners had an exceptionally positive and valuable experience when utilising this online language acquisition service. It fostered a conducive and relaxed learning environment, effectively augmenting their oral communication proficiency.

METHODOLOGY

PARTICIPANTS AND SETTINGS

The main purpose of this study was to identify the effectiveness of using the Voki platform in developing English speaking skills among seventh-grade students in UNRWA schools in the Gaza Governorate.

STUDY DESIGN

To achieve the experimental research design, the researcher created two groups: an experimental group that used the Voki Platform to practise English speaking skills and a control group that practised face-to-face. Both groups took a pre-test using the British Council's analytic speaking assessment scale to determine their initial levels (Douglas, 2004). After the course, a post-test using the same scale measured progress. A questionnaire was also used to assess the experimental group's attitudes toward Voki. The study was conducted at Deir El-Balah

Preparatory School for Boys (C) during the second semester of the 2022–2023 school year. Data were analyzed quantitatively using SPSS to compare pre- and post-test results.

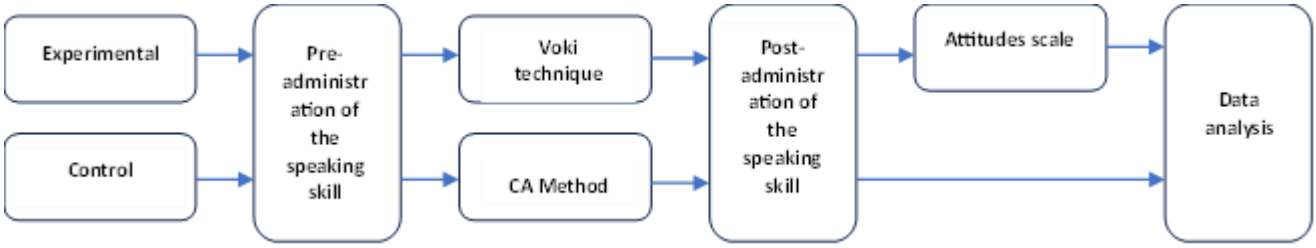

Figure (3:1): The quasi-experimental design of the study

Table (3.2): The distribution of the sample after some modification

Group	Counting
Control	108
Experimental	72
Total	180

The control group consisted of 108 students, equivalent to approximately two classes. They practised English speaking skills using the traditional way, F2F. The researcher utilised identical materials for teaching fluency and employed closely similar methods for both groups. The students have been told that they will practise English speaking skills face-to-face. To this end, they would be asked to do specific speaking tasks. The researcher used worksheets, exercises and homework assignments to achieve this purpose.

THE TEACHING MATERIALS

The researcher relied mainly on the topics provided by the seventh-grade textbook, which was decided by the Ministry of Education. However, the researcher depended on some materials provided by the British Council to train the students by providing them with the material through direct links. The researcher also put some booklets that include speaking topics, especially topics related to language in use.

STUDY INSTRUMENTS

ORAL SPEAKING SKILLS TEST

The question test was designed to evaluate the impact of using the Voki Platform on the development of oral speaking skills among seventh graders. According to the findings of Yeşilbağ and Korkmaz (2021), the use of the Voki application did not have a significant effect on students' listening, reading, and writing abilities, but it did show a positive impact on their speaking skills. This suggests that comprehension was an essential aspect of oral communication, and it should not be underestimated by English as a foreign language learner (EFL) .

Table (3.3): The speaking sub- skills and their relative weight				
No.	Skill	Questions	Items	percent
1)	Fluency	C	2	11%
2)	Pronunciation	B	4	22%
3)	Comprehension	A	5	28%
4)	Vocabulary	D	3	17%
5)	Grammar	E	4	22%
			18	100%

To evaluate the competence of English language proficiency, the researcher utilised a five-point scale. This proficiency scale spans from a score of 1, denoting minimal proficiency, to a score of 5, representing exceptional proficiency. Table 3.4 delineates the protocol for completing the English-speaking skills test. This table offers a visual depiction of the methodology employed in assessing and recording proficiency in spoken English.

Table 3.4 the protocol for completing the English-speaking skills test				
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
Very low proficiency	**low proficiency**	**Moderate proficiency**	**High proficiency**	**Very High proficiency**

The researcher evaluates participants' proficiency in spoken English by assigning a corresponding level on a five-point (pentagonal) scale, based on their observed performance. This scale serves as a standardised benchmark for assessing oral proficiency. Each level represents a distinct range of communicative competence, with Level 1 indicating limited proficiency and Level 5 reflecting exceptional proficiency.

To determine the appropriate proficiency level, the researcher conducts a comprehensive evaluation that includes systematic observation and careful analysis of multiple dimensions of linguistic performance. These dimensions encompass lexical range, grammatical accuracy, fluency, pronunciation, and overall coherence. The researcher then selects the level on the pentagonal scale that most accurately reflects the participant's demonstrated competence across these domains.

The study relied on a set of evaluation criteria widely recognised in the literature, including the following:

1. Number of pauses and hesitations during speech: to assess this aspect of fluency, the researcher analysed recorded oral responses and calculated both the frequency and duration of pauses and hesitation markers. Participants who demonstrated smooth, uninterrupted speech with fewer and shorter pauses were awarded higher fluency scores, whereas those whose speech contained frequent or prolonged pauses received lower ratings.
2. Speech rate per minute :The examiner calculated the average number of words produced within a specified time frame. A consistently steady and appropriate speech rate was considered an indicator of stronger fluency
3. Continuity: to assess continuity as a dimension of fluency, the researcher systematically evaluated each participant's ability to sustain speech throughout the speaking tasks. Recorded responses were analysed to identify interruptions, fragmentation, or disruptions in the logical flow of ideas. Particular attention was given to the participant's capacity to produce an extended, coherent stretch of discourse with clear progression and minimal breakdowns. Speech that remained continuous and logically connected without abrupt pauses or loss of thematic focus was awarded a higher continuity score. In contrast, frequent interruptions, disorganised sequencing of ideas, or noticeable breakdowns in discourse resulted in lower ratings for this sub-criterion of fluency.
4. Use of Transitional Phrases and Connected Speech: The researcher evaluated how effectively participants linked sentences and ideas through cohesive devices and transitional expressions. Higher scores were assigned to responses that demonstrated logical sequencing and smooth connections between utterances. Disjointed or poorly connected speech resulted in lower ratings.
5. Reduction of Fillers (such as "uh" and "um"): Recorded speech samples were analysed to determine the frequency of filler usage relative to the overall length of the response. Participants who relied minimally on fillers and maintained smoother delivery received higher scores, whereas frequent use of fillers negatively affected fluency ratings.
6. Prompt Response Time: The researcher measured the interval between the presentation of a question and the participant's initiation of a response. Immediate or minimally delayed responses were considered indicators of stronger fluency, while extended response latency resulted in lower scores.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To test the study hypotheses, paired samples and independent-samples t-tests were conducted on the speaking test scores. The results for each hypothesis are summarised in Tables 1–3 below.

Paired-samples t-test for control group speaking scores (pre-test vs. post-test).						
Group	**n**	**Mean**	**SD**	***t***	**df**	***p***
Control Pre-test	108	8.69	3.64			
Control Post-test	108	12.19	2.88	21.92	107	< .001

A paired-samples t-test showed that the control group's mean score increased from 8.69 (SD = 3.64) at pre-test to 12.19 (SD = 2.88) at post-test, $t(107) = 21.92$, $p < .001$. This indicates a statistically significant improvement in the control group's speaking performance, contrary to H1's prediction of no change.

Paired-samples t-test for experimental group speaking scores (pre-test vs. post-test).						
Group	**n**	**Mean**	**SD**	***t***	**df**	***p***
Experimental Pre-test	72	9.63	3.03			
Experimental Post-test	72	14.64	2.05	19.59	71	< .001

For the experimental group, the mean score rose from 9.63 (SD = 3.03) on the pre-test to 14.64 (SD = 2.05) on the post-test. This increase was statistically significant, $t(71) = 19.59$, $p < .001$, confirming H2: the experimental group showed a significant improvement in speaking scores after the Voki intervention.

Independent-samples t-test comparing post-test scores of control and experimental groups						
Group	**n**	**Mean**	**SD**	***t***	**df**	***p***
Control (Post-test)	108	12.19	2.88	6.68	178	< .001
Experimental (Post-test)	72	14.64	2.05			

An independent samples t-test compared the two groups' post-test scores. The experimental group (M = 14.64, SD = 2.05) scored significantly higher than the control group (M = 12.19, SD = 2.88), $t(178) = 6.68$, $p < .001$. This significant difference supports H3, indicating that the experimental group outperformed the control group on the post-test.

The current study's results support the findings of many previous studies on the use of Voki for speaking practise. Overall, the seventh-grade students who used the Voki platform

showed significantly greater improvement in English speaking skills than those who learned through traditional methods. This outcome aligns with earlier research conducted in various contexts, all of which reported that the use of Voki can enhance oral proficiency. For example, Kieu (2021) found that Vietnamese high school students who used Voki made significant gains in speaking performance, especially in fluency and pronunciation, compared to a control group. Girgin and Kabarole (2021) likewise observed in Iran that students practicing with Voki improved their speaking proficiency more than those in a traditional classroom.

In the present study, the Voki group's post-test scores in fluency, vocabulary, grammar (structure), and pronunciation were all higher than the control group's scores. This broad improvement across multiple speaking sub-skills confirms what prior Voki studies have suggested: integrating the platform leads to comprehensive gains in speaking ability. The agreement between our findings and those of Bellés-Calvera and Bellés-Fortuno (2018), Kieu (2021), and others indicates a consistent pattern – using talking avatars for practise helps learners become more fluent, accurate, and expressive speakers.

A key point of convergence is the effect of Voki on pronunciation and fluency. In our study, pronunciation was initially the weakest skill; however, after using Voki, it improved markedly—the experimental group's pronunciation scores rose significantly, whereas the control group showed only minimal gains in that area. This finding mirrors that of Bellés-Calvera and Bellés-Fortuño (2018), who reported that Spanish university students who used Voki demonstrated clear improvement in producing difficult English sounds. Similarly, Aktas (2023) found that Turkish EFL learners who used Voki became more intelligible in their pronunciation and spoke more confidently. Kieu (2021) also noted that Voki practise led to greater fluency and clearer speech in Vietnam.

The current results echo these outcomes: our students who practised speaking through avatars became more fluent and improved their pronunciation significantly, in line with what previous studies have documented. This agreement across different studies strengthens the evidence that Voki is effective in developing the foundational speaking skills of fluency and pronunciation. It appears that giving learners the opportunity to repeatedly record and listen to spoken language through avatars helps them refine their pronunciation and speak more smoothly, as earlier researchers have observed.

Another area of agreement is the positive impact of Voki on learners' confidence and anxiety. The Palestinian refugee students in our experiment initially exhibited hesitation in speaking; however, over the course of using Voki, they became more comfortable and willing to

participate. Teachers observed that even shy students began participating once they spoke "from behind" a virtual avatar. This aligns closely with numerous reports in the literature. Bellés-Calvera and Bellés-Fortuño (2018) noted that their students developed a "positive attitude" toward speaking practise because the avatars provided a "safe, private way to practise," thereby reducing the fear of making mistakes. Likewise, Kieu (2021) reported that students found Voki "fun and enjoyable" and that using avatars at home lowered their shyness, allowing them to speak more freely. Nurul and Nurul (2024) also found a "marked reduction in communication apprehension" (speaking anxiety) among Malaysian undergraduates who used Voki in a project-based learning setting.

In the same vein, Aktas (2023) observed that Turkish learners' nervousness about speaking dropped when they practised with Voki; these students spoke with greater confidence and less anxiety. The current study confirms these findings. Our participants reported feeling less afraid of speaking English by the end of the programme, and their increased ease was evident in their improved fluency. The reduction in speaking anxiety in our context is especially significant given that these were young refugee students who often lack confidence in English. Yet, with Voki, they gained self-assurance similar to that seen in university students and high school students elsewhere. This consistency suggests that Voki's anxiety-reducing effect is robust and not limited by age or context. When learners can practise speaking in a low-pressure, game-like environment, they become more confident—a conclusion strongly supported by prior studies and now reinforced by our results.

The enhancement of student motivation and engagement is another point on which our findings agree with the literature. Throughout the intervention, we noticed that the students were highly motivated to use Voki; they enjoyed creating their avatars and were eager to record their voices. This enthusiastic engagement likely led them to practise more often and put more effort into speaking tasks. Yeşilbağ and Korkmaz (2018) describe a similar outcome: their study showed that Voki "significantly increased students' motivation and willingness to speak" by providing a playful, less judgmental platform for oral practise. Students in that Malaysian study reported higher interest and "less fear" during speaking tasks when using Voki. Our students exhibited the same pattern—they found the avatar activities fun and were less worried about being judged, which kept them motivated. Moreover, Yeşilbağ and Korkmaz observed that because Voki allowed students to practise without time or location limits, they practised more frequently and saw more durable improvements in speaking. In our case, the school setting and limited internet meant practise was mostly in class; however, the principle held true: the Voki group essentially received

extra speaking rehearsal that the control group did not. This extra practise time, as Bas and Yıldırım (2018) point out, can explain why Voki users achieved higher proficiency gains. In Bas and Yıldırım's Turkish study, students with Voki support not only scored better on speaking tests but were also more willing to speak spontaneously, indicating increased confidence. We observed a comparable outcome—our Voki participants became more proactive in speaking activities and used English more readily. Thus, the motivational benefits documented in prior studies were clearly evident in our classroom as well. Voki's engaging format appears to encourage consistent practise and active participation, which in turn leads to skill improvement—a sequence confirmed by both earlier research and the present evidence.

While the overall trends are in strong agreement, there are a few nuanced differences between our findings and some previous studies. One difference lies in the context and participant profile. Many of the earlier studies were conducted with older learners or in more resource-rich environments (e.g. university students in Spain or Malaysia, or high school students in Vietnam and Turkey), whereas our study focused on younger adolescents in a UNRWA refugee school. Despite this contextual gap in the literature, the positive effects of Voki in our research were very similar to those reported elsewhere. This suggests that Voki's impact transcends differences in age and setting. Our work essentially fills the gap noted by previous scholars who pointed out that no study had examined Voki with Palestinian refugee children before.

The study finds that even in a challenging environment with crowded classes and limited technology, students benefited from the Voki platform much like their peers in other countries. This is not a contradiction of prior research, but rather an extension of it: it confirms that the benefits of avatar-based speaking practise can be realised in a new demographic and educational context. In other words, what Bellés-Calvera and Bellés-Fortuño (2018) demonstrated in a European university setting and what Kieu (2021) observed in an Asian high school setting are also observable in a Middle Eastern refugee school setting—a powerful point of agreement that broadens the applicability of those studies' conclusions.

Another subtle divergence relates to which specific skills improved the most. Previous studies often emphasised pronunciation and fluency as the main areas of improvement with Voki. Our findings concur that these were significantly enhanced, but we also noted substantial gains in vocabulary and grammatical structure for the Voki group. This could be due to our study's comprehensive approach to speaking tasks, in which students practised full dialogues and storytelling, implicitly working on vocabulary usage and sentence structure. The control group in our study, which learned via traditional methods, did show some progress in vocabulary and

grammar over four months. This indicates that normal instruction can develop certain aspects of language knowledge (an expected outcome and not something earlier research often highlighted in detail). However, the experimental group's improvements in those same areas were greater, and their fluency and pronunciation development far outstripped that of the control group.

This partially agrees with Bas and Yıldırım (2018), who found that a Voki-supported class received additional practise, leading to greater speaking gains than a class with only in-class practise. It also echoes Kieu's (2021) controlled study results, which showed that the Voki group outperformed the non-Voki group in speaking outcomes. The fact that our control group showed any significant improvement simply reflects that all students were learning and practising English to some extent; importantly, however, the Voki group had an advantage in every skill domain, reinforcing the consensus that technology-enhanced practise accelerates language development beyond the baseline gains achieved through traditional teaching. No previous study has reported a negative impact of Voki on speaking skills, and our study is no exception—we found only positive contributions, with the differences being a matter of degree and context rather than contradictory outcomes.

RESULTS

FLUENCY

The study found that students' speaking fluency improved significantly after using the Voki platform. In the pre-test, many students spoke haltingly, with frequent pauses. By the post-test, the experimental group was speaking more smoothly and at a more natural pace. Their fluency scores increased notably—on average, the Voki group's fluency ratings rose by roughly one point on the grading scale (out of five) from pre-test to post-test. By contrast, the control group, which did not use Voki, showed only a slight improvement in fluency over the same period. This indicates that practising with Voki helped learners become more fluent speakers, likely by giving them additional opportunities to speak and reducing their hesitation. Several students mentioned in the questionnaire that recording their voices and listening to the avatar made speaking English feel easier over time. They felt more comfortable stringing words together and reported that they could express themselves with fewer pauses than before.

These results for fluency are consistent with findings in other contexts. In a study with high school EFL students, Kieu (2021) also observed that using Voki led to a clear improvement in speaking performance—the experimental group's speaking test scores increased significantly more than the control group's, especially in measures of fluency. Similarly, a Malaysian study integrating Voki into oral presentations found that students who used Voki spoke more fluently

than those in traditional classes. The increased fluency in our study echoes these outcomes. As in those studies, the Palestinian students' fluency benefited from the additional speaking practise and low-pressure environment that Voki provided. The platform's engaging format encouraged them to speak more often, which naturally improved their speaking flow. This alignment with previous research suggests that Voki is effective in boosting oral fluency across different learning contexts.

VOCABULARY

The use of Voki also had a positive impact on students' English vocabulary usage. Before the intervention, students had a limited range of active vocabulary and often repeated basic words. After practising with the speaking avatars, the experimental group was able to use a wider variety of words and phrases in the post-test. Many students incorporated the new vocabulary they had learned during the Voki activities. For example, when creating avatar dialogues on various topics, they looked up unfamiliar words to make their speech more expressive. By the end of the programme, students were not only remembering more words but also using them in the correct context while speaking. The vocabulary improvement was evident in their post-test performances, which showed richer word choice compared to the pre-test. The control group also learned some new words through regular instruction, but their gains were more modest. In the survey, several students noted that Voki made learning new vocabulary enjoyable—they liked customising their avatar's script, which motivated them to find and practise using new expressions.

This finding aligns with the idea that engaging in speaking practise reinforces vocabulary acquisition. Research on interactive language tasks has shown that producing language helps learners notice gaps in their vocabulary and fill them through feedback and practise. In the context of Voki, our students practised speaking by crafting their own messages, which likely encouraged them to learn and use new words. A related study by Yeşilbağ and Korkmaz (2018) found that students who used Voki became more interested in speaking and practised more frequently, leading to better long-term retention of vocabulary. In other words, the frequent use of new words in a fun, low-stress setting helped those learners remember vocabulary more effectively over time. Our results mirror this outcome—repeated practise with the Voki avatars not only expanded students' active vocabulary but also helped consolidate those new words in memory. While vocabulary was initially one of the stronger areas for students, the additional improvement observed with Voki confirms that technology-enhanced speaking activities can enrich learners' lexical resources, as also suggested in prior studies.

GRAMMAR AND STRUCTURE

The study revealed notable improvements in students' grammar and sentence structure when speaking, especially in the experimental group. Initially, many students made grammatical errors

or used very simple, fragmentary sentences in the pre-test. They struggled with correct verb tenses, word order, and forming longer sentences. After the intervention with Voki, students began to speak in more complete and grammatically correct sentences. In the post-test, the experimental group's spoken responses showed better use of grammatical structures – for instance, they used the past tense and plural forms more accurately, and they combined ideas into longer sentences using connectors. This suggests that practising via Voki helped students apply grammar rules during real speaking tasks. One reason for this improvement could be that Voki allows multiple recordings and playbacks. Students could record their voice, notice mistakes (like a missing ending or wrong word form), and try again. Indeed, some students mentioned that hearing their own recordings made them more aware of grammar mistakes and motivated them to self-correct.

The control group did show some natural development in grammar over time, but their progress was less pronounced. Many control students continued to exhibit repetitive errors in the post-test, whereas the Voki group had worked through some of these issues during practise. Overall, the experimental group became more capable of constructing coherent, correct sentences after using the platform.

These results on grammatical development are supported by insights from language learning research. Interactive speaking practise is known to strengthen learners' grasp of grammar because it provides immediate context and feedback. Long's Interaction Hypothesis, for example, suggests that when learners engage in conversations, they notice their errors and can adjust their output, leading to more accurate language use. In our study, Voki essentially created a mini-interactive environment for each student to practise constructing sentences. The improvement we saw in students using proper grammar in speech resonates with previous findings that targeted speaking interventions can enhance grammatical accuracy.

PRONUNCIATION

Pronunciation was the area in which students initially struggled the most, and it showed some of the most remarkable improvements after using Voki. In the pre-test, many Palestinian students pronounced English words inaccurately or unclearly—for instance, they had difficulty with certain English sounds that do not exist in Arabic, and their stress and intonation patterns were often unnatural. By the end of the study, the experimental group demonstrated much clearer and more accurate pronunciation. In the post-test, these students articulated words more distinctly and used more appropriate stress and rhythm in their speech. Some previously mispronounced sounds were corrected; for example, students improved in pronouncing the English "p" and "v" sounds, which are often challenging. This progress can be attributed in part to the features of Voki.

The platform exposed learners to correct pronunciation through its artificial voices and also allowed students to record themselves as many times as needed. Learners reported that listening to the avatar's near-native pronunciation and comparing it with their own helped them adjust their speech. Shy students found it easier to practise tricky words behind the "mask" of a cartoon avatar, repeating them until they achieved accuracy. As a result, the experimental group's pronunciation scores increased significantly from pre-test to post-test. In contrast, the control group showed only minimal gains in pronunciation during the same period, likely because they had fewer opportunities for focused pronunciation practise. The difference was evident—by the post-test, Voki users were generally easier to understand and sounded more confident in their pronunciation than those who learned through traditional methods.

The pronounced gains in pronunciation align strongly with findings from other studies that have utilised Voki for speaking practise. For example, a study in Turkey found that students who practised speaking with Voki became notably more intelligible in English—their pronunciation improved, and they spoke more clearly than before. Kieu (2021) similarly reported that Vietnamese students using Voki showed significant improvement in pronunciation alongside fluency, outperforming peers who learned without this tool. These parallels suggest that the Voki platform offers an effective environment for honing pronunciation skills. By allowing repeated private practise and providing a model for pronunciation, Voki addresses one of the toughest challenges in EFL learning. Our qualitative findings (students feeling less embarrassed and practising more) echo the conclusions of Aktas (2023), in which learners noted that Voki made speaking practise more engaging and less intimidating, leading to greater participation and better pronunciation outcomes. In line with those studies, our results highlight that when students can experiment with pronunciation in a low-stress setting, they make noticeable progress. This adds to the growing body of evidence that technology-enhanced speaking tools can help learners refine their pronunciation in ways that traditional classrooms sometimes struggle to achieve.

CONFIDENCE

The Voki platform had a clear and positive effect on the students' confidence in speaking English. At the start of the study, many students in both groups were nervous about speaking. They often spoke very quietly or hesitated because they were afraid of making mistakes or being laughed at by their peers. Over the course of the intervention, the experimental group became significantly more confident speakers. With Voki, students practised speaking through avatars, which made them feel less exposed. They gradually overcame some of their fear of public speaking. By the time of the post-test, these students appeared more self-assured: they volunteered to speak more

often, maintained better eye contact (when speaking without the avatar in the exam setting), and recovered from mistakes without freezing up. The questionnaire results support this observation – a large majority of the experimental group agreed that using Voki increased their confidence to speak English. They mentioned that because they could rehearse with their avatar in private, they felt more prepared and less anxious when speaking in front of others. One student wrote that *"Voki helped me not be afraid; I can try speaking as much as I want with my character, so now I'm not scared in class."* In contrast, students in the control group did not report such a boost in confidence. Any improvement in their comfort with speaking was minor, likely just from the normal progression of practising in class. The difference was that the Voki group had a noticeable transformation – formerly shy students were speaking up in class and even helping each other by the end of the program, showing a newfound self-confidence in their English-speaking ability.

The increase in confidence observed in our study is in line with several previous studies on technology-assisted speaking practise. Kieu (2021) found that students' **"shyness and nervousness…diminished as their confidence increased"** when they practised speaking with Voki. In that study, as in ours, giving learners a non-threatening space to speak (via a Web 2.0 tool) had a tangible impact on lowering their anxiety. Likewise, research from Turkey reported that learners who used Voki felt far less nervous and spoke more confidently than those who didn't use the tool. These students attributed their increased confidence to the fun, low-pressure practise that the talking avatars provided. Our participants' feedback closely mirrors these accounts – they found the avatar approach enjoyable and felt safe making mistakes, which is crucial for building speaking confidence.

Another study in Malaysia by Nurul Ajleaa and Farihah (2024) noted a marked reduction in communication apprehension (fear of speaking) among university students using Voki and similar apps, with students reporting higher self-confidence in speaking tasks. Across different age groups and cultural contexts, the trend is the same: using Voki can help language learners shed some of their insecurities. The current study reinforces that evidence. By the end of the Voki intervention, our students exhibited behaviour and test performance indicative of greater self-confidence – a key affective outcome that supports more frequent and willing speaking practise moving forward.

MOTIVATION

The findings also show that the Voki platform significantly boosted students' motivation and enthusiasm to practise speaking. Learning to speak a foreign language can be challenging, and at the beginning, many students were not very eager to participate in speaking activities. Traditional drills and dialogues sometimes felt intimidating or boring to them. However,

introducing Voki changed this dynamic. The experimental group became noticeably more interested and active in speaking tasks once they started using the avatars. Students looked forward to creating their own avatar characters and experimenting with them. This gamified element turned speaking practise into something fun rather than a chore. According to the questionnaire responses, a large portion of students agreed that Voki made learning English more enjoyable. They indicated that they were excited to record messages for their avatars, and this excitement translated into greater willingness to speak in English.

One student mentioned that using Voki was like "playing a game while learning," which kept him engaged. Another said she felt proud sharing her avatar's recordings with friends, motivating her to make more. Overall, motivation levels in the experimental group were high: students were practising even outside of class hours, using the computer lab or their phones to perfect their avatar presentations. In contrast, the control group's motivation remained average; those students participated in required speaking exercises but showed less voluntary effort. Thus, Voki proved to be a strong motivator, encouraging learners to spend more time and energy on speaking practise than they normally would.

This surge in motivation aligns with results from earlier studies that examined the impact of Voki on learner engagement. Yeşilbağ and Korkmaz (2018) reported that integrating Voki into classroom activities **"significantly increased students' motivation and willingness to speak"** in English. Students in their study felt less fear and more interest in speaking tasks when using an avatar, similar to how our students became more eager and less anxious. The playful, creative aspect of designing and voicing an avatar seems to tap into learners' intrinsic motivation. Additionally, researchers have noted that because tools like Voki allow practise "anytime and anywhere," students often practise more frequently than they would in a conventional setting. This was evidenced in our case by students voluntarily using Voki outside class, which undoubtedly contributed to their improvement. Another related study from Iran observed that learners using Voki became more active in speaking and were **"less hesitant to initiate speech,"** suggesting the platform made speaking more enjoyable and lowered their inhibitions. This corresponds with our findings – as the fear barrier dropped, motivation rose.

Students were no longer dragging their feet when asked to speak; instead, they approached speaking tasks with curiosity and even excitement. In summary, the qualitative and quantitative evidence from our study and others clearly indicates that Voki can transform the classroom atmosphere: it turns speaking practise into an engaging activity, thereby greatly enhancing student motivation. This increased motivation is not just a feel-good factor; it leads to more practise and

persistence, which ultimately drives the gains seen in fluency, pronunciation, and other speaking skills. The convergence of our results with previous research strengthens the case for using innovative platforms like Voki to motivate learners, particularly those who may be disinterested or anxious in traditional language classrooms.

CONCLUSION

The study findings presented herein illustrate the notable influence of the Voki platform on the oral proficiency of Palestinian refugee children attending UNRWA preparatory schools. The findings clearly demonstrate that the employment of the Voki platform by the Experimental Group led to significant enhancements in their proficiency across all linguistic domains, encompassing fluency, vocabulary, grammatical structure, and pronunciation. This underscores the efficacy of incorporating technology-enabled language instruction, particularly when integrated with a platform such as Voki.

Furthermore, the empirical results substantiated that the incorporation of Voki into the educational setting resulted in an enhancement of students' self-efficacy, confidence, and motivation towards the acquisition of English language skills. The platform's interactive and dynamic features enabled students to effectively address their shyness and alleviate the anxiety associated with public speaking. They experienced heightened confidence and motivation towards engaging in oral tasks, as they assigned their errors to the virtual personas of Voki rather than associating them with themselves or their classmates. The utilisation of the Voki platform facilitated the enhancement of their language proficiency by providing them with an opportunity to receive feedback and practise their oral tasks.

The findings of this study are consistent with prior research that advocates for the incorporation of technology in language education to augment both language competency and motivation. The customised learning opportunities provided by Voki, combined with the prompt feedback and abundant language resources, have played a key role in the platform's efficacy in enhancing students' oral communication abilities.

Moreover, the findings of this study underscore the superior efficacy of the Voki platform in comparison to conventional language teaching approaches for enhancing oral communication abilities. The interactive and customizable functionalities embodied by Voki have fostered an instructional paradigm that prioritises student engagement and customizability, effectively catering to the unique needs and learning preferences of each learner within the realm of language acquisition. The incorporation of gamification elements and the inclusion of collaborative opportunities within the platform have notably bolstered student engagement and motivation.

Based on these findings, it is evident that the incorporation of the Voki platform into language instruction is a notably efficient and commendable strategy for augmenting the oral proficiency of Palestinian refugee children enrolled in UNRWA preparatory schools. The platform's ability to enhance students' language proficiency, self-confidence, and motivation demonstrates its capacity to empower learners and cultivate an enabling setting for the advancement of language skills.

This study carries significant ramifications for educational practise and policy, as it highlights the criticality of integrating technology into language education to effectively address the varying requirements of students and foster their progression in language acquisition. The integration of platforms such as Voki presents a valuable opportunity to reconcile conventional instructional practises with contemporary technological innovations, delivering a compelling and immersive educational encounter. Recommendations

In light of the results and conclusions of this study, the

A. Prioritise professional growth: Participate in extensive training sessions and workshops to enhance competence in utilising the Voki platform proficiently for language instruction, facilitating tailored learning opportunities for students.
B. Promote the integration of technology: Stay updated on the advantages of incorporating technology in the field of education, such as platforms like Voki, and advocate for its conscientious utilisation to enhance language acquisition for children.
C. Promote awareness: Organise awareness campaigns to highlight the advantages of technology in education, focusing on the positive impact of Voki in developing speaking skills among students.
D. Encourage professional development: Ensure teachers have access to relevant training and workshops to build their expertise in utilising Voki effectively for language instruction.
E. Foster a technology-friendly environment: Ensure that schools have adequate technological infrastructure, including devices and computer labs, to facilitate seamless implementation of Voki.
F. Develop technology integration guidelines: Create comprehensive guidelines for effectively integrating technology, including platforms like Voki, into language instruction across schools.

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