

3. Remote Learning Under War Conditions: A Mixed-Methods Study of Improvement, Deterioration, and Stagnation in Speaking Proficiency Development

التعلم عن بعد في ظل ظروف الحرب:

دراسة متعددة الأساليب حول التحسن والتدهور والركود في تنمية مهارات التحدث



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Abstract:

A huge upheaval hits the education system during periods of turmoil that take place in any country, obliging officials to undergo a huge transition to online learning settings. The present study explores whether the oral proficiency of language learners improves, deteriorates or stagnates

when learning virtually under exceptional periods of crises such as war. A pretest–posttest study design was used to determine the speaking proficiency level of 57 intensive English learners who participated in remote language instruction over 9 weeks during the present 2026 war against Lebanon. A teacher–devised standardized speaking assessment based on CEFR communicative competence descriptors and adapted from IELTS–style oral proficiency tasks was administered as both a pretest and posttest. Standardized speaking assessments which evaluated the participants speaking analytically constituted the quantitative data, while qualitative data collected learners’ evaluation of online learning in terms of acquisition and challenges. Results did not reflect uniformity but rather mixed outcomes: some learners showed noticeable improvement (17.5%), others experienced stagnation (47.4%) or even decline (35.1%) due to the impactful crisis, namely, instability, fear, stress, reliance on technology, migration, loss of family members or acquaintances and learning conditions that contributed directly or indirectly to the language acquisition process. The findings pinpoint the multifaceted and complex relationship between crises such as war and language acquisition as well as highlight the urgent need for a makeover in teaching methodologies.

Keywords: Keywords: emergency learning – standardized speaking – CEFR communicative competence – IELTS–style oral proficiency tasks – pretest–post test study

المستخلص باللغة العربية:

يشهد النظام التعليمي اضطرابًا كبيرًا خلال فترات الأزمات التي تعصف بأي بلد، مما يُجبر المسؤولين على التحول بشكل جذري إلى بيئات التعلم الإلكتروني. تستكشف هذه الدراسة ما إذا كانت الكفاءة الشفوية لدى متعلمي اللغة تتحسن أو تتدهور أو تبقى ثابتة عند التعلم عن بُعد في ظل فترات الأزمات الاستثنائية مثل الحروب.

استُخدم تصميم دراسة قبلية–بعديّة لتحديد مستوى الكفاءة الشفوية لدى 57 متعلمًا للغة الإنجليزية، شاركوا في برنامج مكثف لتعليم اللغة عن بُعد لمدة 9 أسابيع خلال حرب عام 2026 على لبنان. تم تطبيق تقييم شفوي معياري صممه المعلمون، استنادًا إلى معايير الكفاءة التواصلية في الإطار

الأوروبي المرجعي الموحد للغات (CEFR)، ومُعدّل من مهام الكفاءة الشفوية على غرار اختبار IELTS، وذلك كاختبار قبلي وبعدي.

شكّلت التقييمات الشفوية المعيارية، التي قيّمت قدرة المشاركين على التحدث بشكل تحليلي، البيانات الكمية، بينما جمعت البيانات النوعية آراء المتعلمين حول التعلم الإلكتروني من حيث اكتساب اللغة والتحديات التي واجهوها.

لم تُظهر النتائج تجانساً، بل جاءت متباينة؛ إذ أظهر بعض المتعلمين تحسناً ملحوظاً (17.5%)، بينما عانى آخرون من ركود (47.4%) أو حتى تراجع (35.1%) نتيجة للظروف المرتبطة بالأزمة، مثل عدم الاستقرار، والخوف، والتوتر، والاعتماد على التكنولوجيا، والنزوح، وفقدان أفراد من الأسرة أو المعارف، إضافة إلى ظروف التعلم التي أثّرت بشكل مباشر أو غير مباشر على عملية اكتساب اللغة. تسلط هذه النتائج الضوء على العلاقة المعقدة والمتعددة الأبعاد بين الأزمات، كالحروب، واكتساب اللغة، كما تُبرز الحاجة الملحة إلى إعادة النظر في منهجيات التدريس وتطويرها بشكل جذري.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التعلم في حالات الطوارئ؛ التحدث المعياري؛ الكفاءة التواصلية وفقاً للإطار الأوروبي المرجعي الموحد للغات؛ مهام الكفاءة الشفوية على غرار اختبار IELTS ؛ دراسة ما قبل وما بعد الاختبار.

1. Introduction

Aggravated conflicts that escalate on a large-scale during times of crises remarkably disturb educational systems whether in school or university settings. This results in closures and forced emergency shifts to online learning. During such circumstances, digital education becomes the only resort which manifests itself as an obligatory rather than a non-compulsory pedagogical option. It is true that online learning comes to the rescue safeguarding continuity of teaching and learning, yet it raises basic questions about efficacy, particularly in language speaking development (UNESCO, 2023; OECD, 2024).

Language acquisition is a complex process that cannot be accomplished without the presence of a learning environment that fosters sustained communication chances, interaction with peers as a whole class, in pairs or in groups, and continuous feedback (Derakhshan et al., 2021). In environments governed by a crisis, learners unwillingly fail to achieve

the intended learning outcomes of the language course confronting a myriad of challenges, including intimidation, stress, residence instability, and reduced access to the elements of instruction as audiovisual material, hands on activities, real life interaction, the need to resort to recording or even asynchronous learning in some cases (Panter–Brick et al., 2022). Unfortunately, the whole process of acquisition, retention and retrieval get interrupted thus affecting the desired proficiency level of each university language course.

This study explores whether intensive university level learners experience improvement, stagnation, or decline in their oral proficiency while being directly affected by the war implications during online learning; it also detects the fundamental dynamics shaping these consequences.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Language Learning During a Crisis

According to UNESCO (2023) and World Bank (2022), learning in conflict zones has been globally recognized as a humanitarian emergency or disaster of huge concern. During warfare and hostilities not only access to a typical education setting gets disturbed but also the level and permanence or sustainability of learning processes get agitated (UNESCO, 2023; World Bank, 2022). A long period of instability due to interrupted instruction lessens learning efficacy and students start experiencing slowed progress academically (OECD, 2024).

Among all subjects, in language learning gets the most affected when acquisition disruption takes place. The consequences are severe because according to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory language acquisition depends on richness in the stimulus, interaction, and scaffolding. The zone of approximate development which is key to language acquisition becomes almost null during times of emergencies because there are not enough chances to practice through guided exposure and interaction. Hence, linguistic development becomes at risk and might be delayed.

Cummins (2021) emphasizes that unstable environments make language development primarily susceptible and prone to failure because exposure to real life interaction is reduced. Likewise, modern studies assert that learners in conflict–stricken zones are often subjected to inconsistent exposure to comprehensible and authentic input in the target language. This in return reduces fluency development and speaking proficiency (Save the Children, 2023).

Moreover, crisis–affected environments primarily concentrate on survival mechanisms and psychological coping where education stops being a priority (Masten & Narayan, 2012). This supports trauma–sensitive pedagogical models, which suggest that prolonged stress causes malfunction of short–term memory, attention span, and linguistic processing capacity (Panter–Brick et al., 2022).

2.2 Emergency online teaching and its effectiveness

According to Hodges et al. (2020), the term “emergency remote teaching” has been widely used to refer to the abrupt transition to remote learning during critical situations and not “Planned online teaching” (Hodges et al., 2020, para.4). This discrepancy is precarious because emergency systems often lack instructional planning, curriculum design, teacher training, and digital infrastructure.

Contemporary research illustrates that although remote learning can be viable and support continuity, its efficacy and value differ considerably depending on the quality of pedagogical implementation (Bozkurt et al., 2022). Martin et al. (2023) found that when online teaching is structured with ample opportunities for interaction, learners will benefit from educational gains and academic progress that match the traditional face–to–face instruction. On the contrary, unstructured environments that are loosely structured in scope often come with drastic implications such as limited interaction as well as undesired and unproductive information overload.

To enhance speaking development in language education, there are many strategies that are fostered through online platforms. Among these are capitalizing speaking fluency through synchronous communication tools where students can perform talks, give speeches, present oral work, engage in debates, interviews and receive immediate feedback. Moreover, they can enhance their pronunciation through practice AI-assisted. Nevertheless, Lai and Tai (2021) argue that the efficacy of interactive communication quality is often compromised in digital environments, which in return reduces opportunities for more natural and spontaneous oral expression.

Not only this, but another imperative issue remains significantly impactful; it is the digital divide among learners. The most learners who would be at a disadvantage are those living in unstable regions. They confront many barriers in this regard such as unreliable and inconsistent internet access, lack of devices such as mobiles, iPads, desktops or laptops, and electricity shortages. All of these hinder active participation (World Bank, 2022; OECD, 2024). All these infrastructural constraints subsidize unfair opportunities among the learners with a huge variation in learning outcomes, underpinning disparity in access to educational resources.

2.3 Psychological, Emotional, and Cognitive Factors Impacting Learning Under Stress

Education in crisis-stricken environments primarily has its influence on learners' emotional well-being and their resilience, which in turn influences intellectual performance. Recent studies in psychological development show that continued and lengthy exposure to conflict increase shall worsen anxiety, undermine motivation, and impacts attention span (Masten & Narayan, 2012).

According to Derakhshan et al. (2021), modern research highlights that increased anguish, sorrow, grief, and fear due to unstable living conditions during times of emergencies, diminish the volition of learners

to take part in capitalizing their communication skills and be effective contributors to their own learning growth. This is mainly manifested in speaking tasks such as giving speeches, participating in discussions, or giving a PowerPoint presentation, where learners must accomplish tasks, activities, or classwork under exceptional pressure.

Panter–Brick et al. (2022) additionally clarify that lingering stress impairs memory consolidation processes and control on cognitive functions such as problem solving and decision making, both of which are instrumental for language learning mechanisms. UNICEF (2024) reports that learners in such emergency environments and contexts are frequently educationally disengaged. This is because where psychological strain burdens them and lead to less active participation even when access to education is obtainable.

Furthermore, Save the Children (2023) highlights that learning in a safe environment is indispensable for restoration of cognitive functioning. Without a learning setting conducive to emotional stability and wellbeing, learners won't be in a favorable learning environment. Thus, their chances to benefit from instructional input are reduced no matter how professional the medium of instruction and teaching methodology are.

2.4 Role of Interaction and Feedback in Speaking Development

The development of a learner's speaking proficiency primarily relies on scaffolded interaction with ample feedback, educative and curative input, as well as conversational settings including role–plays, debates, and engagement in scenarios full of realia to make learning more realistic and meaningful to learners (Sato & Ballinger, 2022). This is not to forget that the Sociocultural theory affirms that language emerges through social interaction in purposeful and contextually rich environments (Lantolf & Thorne, 2020).

Remote learning settings can partly replicate or reproduce interaction through live streaming of video conferencing tools with all speaking skills of a teacher revealed such as verbal, non-verbal and paraverbal skills; however, research illustrates that interaction has the tendency to be more structured and less natural than face-to-face communication (Lai & Tai, 2021). This noticeable decrease in speaking impulsiveness may bound oral proficiency development.

Besides, the quality, personalization and immediacy of a teacher's or digital tool's feedback are key to improvement. Martin et al. (2023) confirm that timely feedback contributes at large to language proficiency improvement in remote language learning settings.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study incorporated a mixed-methods quasi-experimental design using a pretest-posttest approach. The framework was selected to provide both measurable analytical performance results and comprehensive perceptions of the experiences of participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

The study was run over the first ten weeks of online instruction in a university setting instruction of intensive English language II which is the second and last level of intensive English. The course is designed for upper intermediate/advanced students who need to further develop their skills to enable them to cope with college-level courses. Students taking the course focus on accuracy, as well as fluency, and develop their English language skills. The design of the study aimed to simultaneously report students' linguistic development (quantitative) as well as survey students experience, input, feedback, reflections, and contextual learning conditions (qualitative).

3.2 Participants

Participants comprised 57 language learners affected by war-stricken disruptions in Lebanon. They were enrolled in Intensive English II at a university and were taught speaking by the same instructor. The location of the university allowed for neither on campus nor hybrid teaching; the mode of instruction was limited to online learning. An interval of the first 9 weeks of the semesters between March 4, 2026 and April 29, 2026 was the time during which the study was conducted. The sample of students included 26 females and 31 males, with an age range between 19 and 21. The selection of participants was done using purposive sampling, making sure that all of them had experienced crisis-induced educational disruption.

This approach is in parallel with current research in education performed in emergency settings (UNESCO, 2023).

3.3 Instruments

3.3.1 Speaking Assessment Tool

To assess students' speaking skills, teachers created a test based on how well they can communicate, using ideas from the CEFR and similar to the IELTS oral test. This test was given to students at the beginning and end of the course. When evaluating how well students spoke, teachers looked at several things: how smoothly they spoke, how well they pronounced words, their grammar, vocabulary, how well their ideas flowed, and how they interacted with others. The test evaluated: Pronunciation accuracy, Fluency and coherence, diction or word choice range, and mechanics. The grading criteria was based on models used to assess how well people can communicate in a language, as described by Sato and Ballinger in 2022.

3.3.2 Online Learning Platform

All speaking classes were given synchronously via Microsoft Teams with

4 speaking sessions per week, 60 minutes each. Tasks and activities that foster speaking included delivering a variety of speeches such as the personal and argumentative ones, interviews, debates, whole class discussions, recording their answers orally on Moodle **in response to an open-ended question.**

3.3.3 Qualitative Instruments

Researcher collected information using interviews and questionnaires without sticking to a strict script, but had a clear focus: What's the learning environment like? How stressed do students feel? Can they access the technology they need? Are they noticing any improvement with their language skills? And, above all, are they motivated and engaged?

3.3.4 Pretest Phase

Part 1: Personal Interaction (2 minutes)

At the beginning of the semester, a casual on one-to-one basis interviews were held online with the participants. The purpose was to determine the language proficiency of the participants at the beginning of the intensive English language course onset. The aim is to start in the form of warm-up questions targeting everyday conversational English. Sample questions included the following:

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. Why are you studying English?
3. What do you usually do in your free time?
4. What's something you enjoy learning?

Part 2: Individual Long Turn (3 minutes)

The purpose in this phase is to determine whether students can talk at length about a topic while keeping their ideas organized while narrating a story clearly using expressive word choice.

Prompt:

Describe a challenge you faced during online learning or during a tough time at school.

Exemplary answers should include what the challenge was, how it affected you, how you dealt with it, and what you learned from it.

Part 3: Discussion / Critical Thinking (3 minutes)

This section focuses on proper expression of opinions and bigger ideas while using coherent, cohesive, expressive, and critical thinking answers. Participants must exhibit speaking ability in expressing and backing up opinions, making arguments, and communicating interactively.

Sample questions include:

Do you think online learning works well for university students?

What are some pros and cons of using technology in education?

Should students rely more on digital learning in the future? Why?

3.3.5 Posttest Phase

The setup is the same as the pretest, but the questions are different; they are parallel in topic but not redundant.

Part 1: Personal Interaction (2 minutes)

Sample questions include:

Tell me about your goals for the future.

What motivates you to get better at English?

What kind of learning environment suits you best?

What skills matter most for university students today?

Part 2: Individual Long Turn (3 minutes)

Prompts:

Talk about an experience that helped you improve your communication or learning skills. Say:

what the experience was, who was involved, what skills you improved, and why this experience

mattered to you.

Part 3: Discussion / Critical Thinking (3 minutes)

Sample Questions:

How important are communication skills for university and work life?

Do intensive English courses actually help students get better?

What makes someone a strong communicator?

3.3.6 Analytic Scoring Rubric

Participants' speaking proficiency will be assessed in five areas, each out of 5:

Criterion	Points
Fluency & Coherence	5
Word choice/Diction	5
Mechanics	5
Pronunciation	5
Interaction & Response Quality	5

Total possible score: 25

3.3.7 Standardization Procedures

To keep things fair and reliable, we make sure:

1. the same examiner runs the test for everyone
2. timing is consistent
3. all instructions are the same
4. everyone's in a similar environment
5. we use the same scoring rubric
6. test questions are matched in difficulty
7. everything's recorded for review

3.3.8 Instrumentation

We designed a standardized speaking test as an 8–10 minute semi-structured oral interview, divided into three parts:

- Personal Interaction (2 minutes)
- Individual Long Turn (3 minutes)
- Discussion / Critical Thinking (3 minutes)

The posttest followed the same format as the pretest but used parallel prompts to keep the tasks equally challenging, both cognitively and linguistically.

3.3.9 Scoring Procedure

We used an analytic rubric (out of 25 points) to assess performance across five areas:

- Fluency & Coherence
- Word choice/Diction
- Mechanics
- Pronunciation
- Interaction & Response Quality

Each participant got a total score out of 25 on both the pretest and posttest.

3.3.10 Standardization Procedures

To keep things valid and reliable, we took these steps:

1. The same examiner ran every interview
2. Timing and instructions never changed
3. Everyone took the test in the same environment
4. The difficulty level was matched across all tests
5. We recorded all interviews
6. We used the same scoring rubric throughout

3.3.11 Qualitative Interview Procedure

Beyond the numbers, we also ran semi-structured interviews to dig deeper into how learners felt about their speaking progress. We purposely picked participants with different patterns: some improved, some stagnated, some declined. Each interview lasted 10–15 minutes and included open-ended questions on learning experiences, speaking anxiety, opportunities for interaction, motivation, and challenges in both online and in-person settings. All interviews were audio recorded, then transcribed word-for-word. We analyzed the content to spot recurring themes related to cognitive, emotional, and contextual factors shaping speaking growth.

4 Data Analysis

4.1 Quantitative Analysis

Scores from both tests were compared. Using basic statistics, it was easy to determine whether the participants showed any improvements, if some stayed about the same proficiency, or if scores dropped.

4.2 Qualitative Analysis

Using Braun and Clarke's method (2021), the responses of the participants were examined. The goal was to notice any patterns, like emotional

struggles, obstacles to access, how engaged they felt, or how useful they thought the experience was.

4.3 Quantitative Results and Statistical Analysis

Looking at the pretest and posttest scores, there were clear shifts in performance over the 9 weeks of online speaking instruction.

Of 57 participants:

27 students (47.4%) didn't change much; they stagnated

20 students (35.1%) declined

10 students (17.5%) improved

So, more than half the group either made no progress or got worse, and only a small portion showed improvement. Overall, speaking proficiency barely improved in this online teaching setting.

When breaking down the data by skill, the most noticeable drops happened in:

- Fluency & Coherence
- Interaction & Response Quality
- Word choice/ Diction (Lexical Resource)

Basically, interactive and spontaneous speaking suffered the most, unlike more controlled, accuracy-based abilities. Participants had more restrained control on their paraverbal skills including tone, pitch, speed, and intonation as well as non-verbal skills including facial expressions and gestures.

4.4 Qualitative Results

The interviews echoed these patterns. Participants often pointed to:

- Few chances for real-time, unscripted conversation
- Loss of confidence in speaking

- Feeling mentally overwhelmed during speaking tasks
- Not enough practical, real-life speaking experience

These issues were closely tied to stagnating or declining oral skills, strengthening what the numbers already showed.

5 Conclusion

Even with structured lessons and consistent assessments, most learners didn't move forward in their speaking ability. The findings make it clear: instructional approaches and learning conditions weren't strong enough to really support steady progress in oral skills. This might call for a shift in instructional procedures during remote teaching of speaking.

5.1 Pedagogical Implications

The study sends a clear signal to educators. There's a pressing need to:

- Build in more interactive, communicative speaking tasks
- Incorporate more real-world, task-based language use
- Use teaching strategies that support and respond to learners' emotional needs
- Keep up with regular, formative speaking assessments

Taken together, these steps could help learners build fluency, improve their ability to interact, and strengthen overall communication skills, especially in similar learning environments.

5.2 Ethical Considerations

Everyone took part in this experiment voluntarily, and all info was kept private. Because the study happened during a crisis, extra attention was paid to making sure participants felt safe and supported both psychologically and emotionally (UNICEF, 2024).

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