
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Revisiting the Text to Speech Tool in EFL Learning in the Light of the Recent Rise in the Accessibility of the Technology

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| ABSTRACT

This exploratory article is much of “revisiting” the Text-to-Speech (TTS) tool as an EFL learning resource, in the light of the recent hike in its accessibility in form of apps in personal devices and social media platforms. The article presumes that this recent convenience of the TTS technology has the potential of boosting the reading zeal among the population of the Arabic speaking EFL learners. The potential referred to here emanates from the TTS tool distancing itself from the printed vs. digital reading debate with its in-between reading and listening stance. However, with no concurrent studies to cope up and update this recent convenience of the TTS, little is known about its scale and forms of impact on the population of the Arabic speaking EFL learners. In the course of the discussion therefore, the article attempts to highlight the latest version of the technology, its pro-EFL learning potentials as well as to preview the paradigm the technology can be utilized. The article concludes with the secondary role of TTS in shifting the now “visual orientation” of the Arabic speaking EFL learners, towards reading at all. It as well previews how a pro-EFL learning TTS literature would contain and look like in order to offset the emotional engagement that the printed texts provide.

| KEYWORDS

Text-to-Speech tool – Narration - Arabic speaking EFL learners – Reading zeal

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

The adage, “we are the nation of ‘read’ who barely read!” is popular self-critic among the Arab population by which they insinuate the irony of their poor appetite for reading. The self-critic is perceived even more bitterly for word “read” in the adage is the first word in the Holy Quran where Allah commands Muslims. In fact, this lukewarm relationship with reading is not only in English language, but Arabic too (Al-Nafisah, 2011). The formidable stats that an average Arab individual reads just 6 pages a year, by the Arab Thought Foundation; 2000, report isn’t surprising. To realize how abject the situation is, just take their Chinese counterparts totaling around 8 books per person yearly; the Iranians 6.36 books read per year; and the Nigerians 8 books read per year. It isn’t that to surmise therefore, how far worse the situation of the Arabic speaking EFL learners is. More important though, is how to get youngsters enthusiastic to read no matter what, in Arabic or in English language. The urge is far beyond reading as hobby or an academic task, it is about learning, nurturing and honing our personality. Not long ago many young Arabs fell victims to thwarting statements like that by Zuhriyah & et al (2026) that reading digital materials on devices divert attention from the content, limits mobility and strains the eyes.

1.2. Problem Statement

By the time bedtime stories is a ritual that is consensually proven to contribute to shaping the mind of children, it is not so commonly popular in the Arab culture and societies. Not even after the schooling came as the second chance where reading continues the role of developing the cognitive abilities, are the Arab youngsters or adults showing that zeal for reading. Now the last chance: the literature –both Arabic and English, have been digitalized, globalized and even personalized; are the Arabs seizing the opportunity? Indeed, answering this question requires first “revisiting” the connection between digital reading and print reading –already addressed in many studies. It as well requires investigating –if at all, the text-to-voice (TTS) vocalized literature EFL learning resource generates the emotional engagement that the print texts do. If this last assumption is be confirmed, then comes the question of what particular TTS literature that could be introduced to the Arabic speaking EFL learners that may appeal to them and offset for the print literature that they have missed reading.

1.3. Objective of The Article

The main objective of this article is to reexamine the Text-to-Speech (TTS) tool’s latest version in relation with EFL learning. This involves exploring how the now more convenient and wider accessible TTS apps are being utilized, or else, neglected by the EFL learners. It as well attempts to propose and preview the ideal pro-EFL learning TTS literature content that might generate the emotional engagement of the reader with reading at all.

1.4. Questions of The Article

- Does the TTS literature convey the emotional experience and engagement that the printed one does?
- Has the recent wide availability of the TTS EFL learning resource boosted the zeal for reading?
- Were there a pro-EFL learning TTS literature to be introduce, how would it look like?

2. Literature Review

The Text-to-Speech (TTS) or better known as “voiceover, as well as “read aloud” tool is a computer assistive technology that converts written text into spoken audio (Amini, Amini & Naseri, 2019). The TTS tool was initially introduced in 1968 at the Electro-technical Laboratory in Japan, then initially utilized as a Voice Assistants & Systems function in GPS navigation, public announcement systems, and other virtual assistance apps. Technically, the TTS is produced by first recording the human by a specialized performance art using vocal techniques combined with a textual sensing technique that eventually yields voice acting (Bamberg, 2011). This process though, requires IT technology, microphone technique, and vocal versatility that at early stage developed unique character voices creating a 60-90 second demo reel. Soon after that early stage, the auditioning on platforms made the accessibility of the TTS wider with the global platforms like Voices or Voice123. Ever since the TTS tool is employed in such a dynamic apps of near bringing characters to life in several different fields including animation, video games, commercials, and audiobooks (Ahmadian, 2013). The recent update, 2000s-present, of the TTS technology was marked by a transition from the robotic-sounding synthesis process to the modern AI-aided neural-powered systems that are now offering near-human voice quality. The late AI-aided TTS technology has enabled producing the voice of specific person and at an unrecognizable degree of matching that fully replicates the human one

The emotional engagement of the reader to the reading text has long been taken to be the empathetic and personal connection a reader forms with the text (Ahmadian, 2013). It is much deeper than the reader feeling the study rather than living it; visualize its characters, feel the story's mood, and relate content to his/her own lives. According to Al-Jarf (2022) the stories which the readers heard in their childhood have this lasting memory as the effect of the emotional engagement. If a reader reflected on those childhood stories, they are likely to have the features of the characters, the aroma of the place and even a “pinch” of the event in his feelings. Adults too, experience the emotional engagement and experience from reading according to Alshumaimeri & Alshememry (2023). In fact, every average adult preserves the emotional engagement from as early as the boyhood from the textbooks of the school, extracurricular reading materials as well as form his own personal experience with a book he has read. Such experience likely involves emotional response including excitement, sadness, admiration, etc. For adults, this emotional engagement is found to enhance inspiration, and comprehension, motivation. For Zuhriyah & et al (2026) though, the lasting effect could turn the reader to a different person and the experience of reading into a meaningful rather than just decoding the text. From the perspective of the Arab readers Saadia (2023) adds, it is not only about the content of the book, but it is as well about its physical touch, scent of the papers and the feeling of watching it on the bookcase.

Narration as an act of storytelling, involves the narrator acting the view and the voice of the written story (Al-Jarf, 2022). Meaning, it is the voice and the tone of the narrator here that touch the listeners’ minds and set their imagination. Setting the imagination

by the expression of Karnoouh-Vertalier (1997) is structuring the information logically, allowing the readers to "see" the story-world, and fostering their empathy with the characters. Now that the stories are fairytales and other fictional forms of literature, it contains personified inanimate as well as unseen real humans. This quality of narration requires is crucial either for the distinct voice of narrator or the audience have become familiar with by time and context. That is why the influence of the voice and tone of the narrator is expressed differently by Zuhriyah & et al (2026) as a "ghost reader" that infiltrates the mind of the actual reader. On the other hand, the movies and other audio-visual reproduction of the stories, in this sense, have negatively impacted the printed literature thereof (Saadia, 2023). Today one can barely thing of a poplar piece or from of literature -Arabic or foreign, that hasn't been reproduced in a motion picture. This is at a time when globally the print books still reserve their national significance as the symbol of the nation's knowledge, culture and a public getaway. Now that the libraries themselves "have gone online" in what is termed as "e-biray" or the books becoming in the digitalized from, our argument takes a sharp curve in a positive way. This digitalization of libraries, can as well be viewed as a transformation rather than a competition to the printed books. Today the global printed books readership can access the online platforms such as TTSReader and NaturalReader, and listen to their books of their liking being read (Amini, Amini & Naseri, 2019).

3. Method

As an exploratory article by definition, i.e., friendly and barely structured, Stebbins; 2001, the discussion is in form of open take of the topic in hand with the co-authors involving their thoughts and analysis. This friendless of the discussion though, isn't void of reviewing and citing the supporting literature as expected in educational articles. On this regard the scope of the reviewed literature comprises both as early as mid-2000s that marked the advent of the TTS technology, and its current status quo.

4. Discussion

How apt is the Arabic speaking population to utilizing the latest and more convenient TTS tool, seems to be about the users more than it is about the technology. It is evident that today's latest technological capability of the TTS does not only support EFL learning, but it also contributes to the readers' return to the original printed form of the literature. On the other hand, there are no updating studies that size up who are making use of the TTS tool; neither in Arabic language or English reading. None but clues from here and there that give a glimpse of the situation. One clue to share on this regard is the fact that the anti-learning habit of aimlessly browsing the internet and social media, YouTube in particular, still top list of the topics of research. As the pessimistic view of Saadia (2023) stating, "There is no reason to think our youth or even most of our adults will change the abuse of their devices or change their habit of gaming and entertainment". Overcoming this pessimistic perspective to a more optimistic one, a light shines at the end of the tunnel. This population of Arabs have their favorite football commentators (narrators), favorite news presenters, social media influencers, cultural figures, etc. Is it not just all it takes to have these "favorite" voices read one's favorite story or whatever text? It is indeed theoretically true especially for the fact the idea of having a narrator reading a text these is not completely alien to these people. For example, most Saudis prefer the folkloric poetry known as "nabati" to be read by one of few popular poetry readers more than themselves reading it. This reality aligns with the emphasis by Bamberg (2011) that the setting-tone match of the narration could touch the listener's feeling just as much as his unique voice does. Not to mention of course the influence of narrator's personality and what it means to the listener. As an example, out of a personal experience, the co-authors of this article may share from their childhood dating back to the 1980s. It is Uncle Mokhtar, the narrator of then popular radio program "Ruknul Alafal" that translates "Children Space" who still influence the Sudanese generation of that period. In the global context, Al-Nafisah (2011) argues that, those who read the Shakespearian plays were influenced by his character more than those who attended them in theaters. This means those who watched the Shakespearian plays on the "silver screen" decades later their engagement is polemic at the least. Now that the latest version of TTS is convenient enough for the EFL learner, both individuals and institutions, to produce a literature narrated by their favorite narrators, we may be able preview this scenario.

As of how such pro-EFL learning TTS literature may be previewed, one has to consider a few requisites. First, the relevance of the literature to the EFL learners' culture, Arabic in this case, is crucial for its acceptance and this is for several reasons. Agreeably, the printed literature is the source from which the other reproduced forms originate. However, this shouldn't be a reason to exclude the other unwritten fables. This is since from the perspective of Ahmadian (2013) any literature that has roots into the folkloric heritage and sentiments of the population inherently has the chance of lasting in people's memory. On this regard, this article shares the scope of literature that the previewed TTS learning resource may include, in the table below:

Suggested Scope of Pro-EFL Learning TTS Literature

Scope of Literature	Instances
Folklore legends and myths	Stories and novels
Medieval narration	Historic events and characters
Language and literature	Grammar, poetry, oration, art

Knowledge and science	Discoveries, inventions, geography
Traditions and values	Social norms, proverbs, festivity
Universal topics	The environment, technology, globalization

Now, previewing how this proposed pro-EFL learning TTS literature would play out is not expected to be without challenges. First, and as Alghothani (2010) earlier interjected, the reproduced films and other audio-visual comics have already “spoiled” the intrigue of narration. The article writer is indeed referring to the narration’s only listening “input” to people’s emotions and tastes. This challenge of the reproduced audio-visual literature is the worst of all especially for the post-2010 Arab generations who have missed every chance of “re-tasting” the original literature. Neither is it possible to counter the already prevalent reproduced literature after it had surpassed the satellite TV films, to the current YouTube and other social media outlets.

Instances of the Pro-EFL Learning TTS literature

Arabic Literature	English Literature
Joha tales	Don Quixote tales
Ibn Batota voyages	Marco polo voyages
Arab symbols of acumen and wisdom	English symbols of acumen and wisdom
Arabic humor and buzzes	English humor and buzzes
Popular Arabic Literature Translated to English	
Ancient civilizations	
Stories of the prophets	
Atlas of the World	
Sindbad adventures	
The Arabian Nights	
Aladdin	

Based on this fact, it can be understood why the TV series Omar Ibn Al-Khattab film, has collected much controversy among the Arab societies. Despite the film’s unprecedented popularity throughout the Arab societies, it collected critics that relate to the argument of this article. The main subject of critics the film received was it has “deformed” the abstractness of the historic characters that the Muslims have held high above personification, clerics such as Sheikh Osman Al-Khamis;2022. Other critics included the film doesn’t really convey the audience to that era of 6th AD century; namely, the setting, the archaic Arabic language or the people’s clothing.

4. Conclusion

A few conclusions can be drawn from discussing the Text-to-Speech (TTS) as an EFL learning resource in its today’s peak of convince for the users. First, if a customized pro-EFL learning TTS literature is introduced, it may at least help in alleviating –if not shifting, the now “visual orientation” of the Arabic speaking EFL learners, towards reading. The visual orientation of the learners; namely, browsing the online audio-visual contents like YouTube, is said to have distanced them even further from reading. Hence, if achieved, such visual-to-listening shift in the learner’s habit would bring them closer to reading because of the stance of TTS as a listening-reading juncture. Secondly, such pro-EFL learning TTS literature should mainly be Arabic literature translated to English besides some familiar universal literature. The reason behind this emphasis on the nature of this suggested literature is this how the emotional engagement of the EFL learners can be enthused. However, the question remains whether or not the influences of such re-introduced literature would be able to invalidate the influence of the reproduced forms thereof, i.e., the movies and other audio-visual versions.

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