EXPLORING EFL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF USING ELSA SPEAK AS A TOOL FOR ENHANCING SPEAKING SKILLS THROUGH INDEPENDENT LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative phenomenological study investigates the perceptions and experiences of EFL vocational high school students in using the ELSA Speak application to improve their speaking skills. The research involved 25 tenth-grade students from a vocational school in Mojokerto, East Java, Indonesia. To collect data, questionnaires and interviews are employed. The findings indicate that ELSA Speak positively influenced students' motivation, self-confidence, and pronunciation accuracy, largely due to its instant feedback and supportive, non-judgmental environment. Moreover, students appreciated the app's flexibility and ease of integration into their daily routines, which enabled them to engage in self-paced learning beyond the constraints of traditional classrooms. Nonetheless, they also encountered challenges such as speech recognition inaccuracies, reliance on internet connectivity, and subscription-related limitations. While students found the app effective for improving technical aspects of speaking, they viewed it as a complementary resource rather than a replacement for classroom interaction. The study recommends integrating ELSA Speak into the language learning curriculum for focused skill practice, while also addressing technical and accessibility issues to enhance its effectiveness.

Keywords: Experiences, ELSA, Perception, Speaking Skill, Independent Learning

INTRODUCTION

English speaking proficiency is a vital component of effective global communication, academic success, and career advancement in the 21st century. As English continues to dominate international discourse, the ability to communicate fluently and accurately has become a prerequisite for participation in global opportunities (Richards, 2008; Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). However, students in rural vocational schools in Indonesia often encounter significant barriers to developing speaking proficiency. These challenges include limited access to qualified English teachers, minimal exposure to authentic English-speaking environments, and a lack of resources for regular practice (Astuti & Lammers, 2017). Such constraints hinder students from achieving communicative competence, particularly in speaking, which is often regarded as one of the most difficult language skills to master (Tuan & Mai, 2015).

In response to these challenges, digital innovations, particularly those driven by Artificial Intelligence (AI), have emerged as promising tools for enhancing English language learning. Among these, the ELSA Speak application has gained attention for its ability to provide instant, individualized feedback and pronunciation training through AI-driven speech recognition technology. Research shows that AI tools can foster learner autonomy, increase engagement, and offer personalized learning experiences (Khailifa & Ginting, 2024; Mavroudi & Angeli, 2022). Furthermore, Pale et al. (2023) found that both teachers and students held favorable views toward mobile-assisted language learning (MALL), recognizing its potential to complement traditional pedagogies and increase learning efficiency. However, debates remain concerning the accessibility, ethical considerations, and digital literacy required for effective AI tool adoption, especially in under-resourced educational settings (Creswell et al., 2023).

Due to limited classroom hours and the growing emphasis on learner independence, vocational schools have started integrating mobile-assisted applications into their English language instruction. In one such school in Mojokerto, East Java, teachers have implemented the ELSA Speak app to support independent speaking practice. Preliminary interviews with local teachers revealed that they chose the app for its immediate corrective feedback on

pronunciation, its user-friendly interface, and its capacity to enhance students' speaking confidence. The AI features allow learners to monitor their own progress and practice at their convenience, aligning with the needs of students preparing for the professional workplace (Nguyen & Pham, 2023). To support this integration, the school provides Wi-Fi access, ensuring that students can engage in regular speaking practice both inside and outside the classroom.

Despite the growing adoption of AI applications like ELSA Speak, few studies have explored the actual experiences and perceptions of students using such tools in rural vocational contexts. Most existing research focuses on general effectiveness or teacher perspectives, without capturing students' voices in real-world settings (Zhao & Xia, 2023; Widodo et al., 2022). Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by investigating two key questions: (1) What are students' experiences in using ELSA Speak to develop English speaking skills independently? and (2) How do students perceive the benefits and challenges of using ELSA Speak as a speaking practice tool?

By exploring students' reflections on their progress, confidence, and ease of use, this research seeks to evaluate how ELSA Speak contributes to improving pronunciation, fluency, and learner autonomy. Furthermore, the findings may provide insights for educators regarding students' learning preferences and inform the integration of similar digital tools into classroom practice. Ultimately, the study highlights both the strengths and limitations of ELSA Speak as a supplementary resource for enhancing English speaking skills, particularly within the context of rural vocational education in Indonesia.

METHOD

This research aimed to explore students' experiences using ELSA Speak to develop their English-speaking skills independently and investigate students' perceptions concerning the benefits and obstacles of using ELSA Speak to develop their English-speaking skills independently. The type of research that researcher used is descriptive qualitative. According to Nawawi (2005), descriptive research is research conducted by describing the state of the research object at the present time based on the facts that appear or as they are. According to Moleong (2010), qualitative research is research conducted to understand the phenomenon of what is experienced by the research subject and presented in descriptive form in the form of words and phrases.

As for the approach, this research used a phenomenology approach. Phenomenology is a qualitative research design focused on exploring and understanding individuals' lived experiences of a specific phenomenon, emphasizing their subjective perceptions and meanings. Researchers employ methods such as in-depth interviews, written narratives, or observations to gather rich, descriptive data, which is then analyzed to identify essential themes and the underlying structure of the experience. The goal of this approach is to articulate the universal essence of the phenomenon while respecting unique variations in individual experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The phenomenon is that the students are encouraged to utilize the ELSA Speak application by the teacher during their free time outside of class or at home to enhance their independent English language learning.

In this research, 25 10th grade students of vocational high school at Mojokerto, East Java gathered to become informants regarding the use of ELSA SPEAK as an AI-based English learning application for independent learning. The reason of chose this school is because many students use Elsa Speak. The criteria determined by the researcher in selecting research informants are as follows: (1) Currently studying English. (2) Have used the ELSA Speak App while studying at school. (3) Able to operate the ELSA Speak App application well.

This research was conducted at one of vocational high schools located in Mojokerto, East Java. The school has a variety of specialty programs, including Computer and Information

Engineering, Hospitality and Tourism Services, Culinary, and Fine Arts, with a total of more than 400 students enrolled. A conducive learning environment and support for technology-based learning innovations make the vocational school is a relevant place to research students' perceptions about the use of ELSA SPEAK in independent English learning.

Data collection for this research involved questionnaires, and interviews. Questionnaires collect structured responses to complement and validate the findings. Interviews gather in-depth insights into students' perceptions and experiences with ELSA SPEAK. Documentation used to support data and as research evidences. These methods aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the students' perspectives.

This study adopted Cresswell (1998) data analysis methods. First, to explore students' perspectives on the ELSA Speak App, data were collected through structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Next, the interview recordings were converted into exact written transcripts or transcribed as what had spoken by the students, and then translated into English. Then, data were organized systematically by tabulating the questionnaire responses in spreadsheet. Interview transcripts were categorized into preliminary themes. Fourth, a thematic coding approach was applied in this analysis. For instance, segments discussing ELSA's system crash or problem in internet connection were labeled as "Benefit and Obstacles". Finally, findings were interpreted through the lens of existing literature on language-learning technology.

This study investigates how EFL students experience and perceive the use of ELSA Speak, an AI-driven language learning application, as a tool to enhance their English-speaking proficiency through independent learning. The research particularly focuses on both the perceived benefits and the challenges students encounter when using the application autonomously outside classroom settings.

A descriptive qualitative research design was employed in this study. Descriptive qualitative research allows researchers to portray the current conditions of a phenomenon based on naturally occurring data without manipulating the study environment (Nawawi, 2005). As emphasized by Moleong (2010), qualitative research is intended to provide a deep understanding of the experiences of participants by presenting data in a narrative form, such as words, expressions, and descriptions rather than numeric data.

To gain a deeper understanding of students' lived experiences, a phenomenological approach was adopted. Phenomenology focuses on capturing and interpreting individuals' firsthand experiences and the meanings they assign to a particular phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach was appropriate since the study sought to explore how students personally engaged with ELSA Speak as a learning tool during their free time beyond the classroom setting.

The participants in this study consisted of 25 tenth-grade students from a vocational high school in Mojokerto, East Java, which offers programs such as Computer Engineering, Hospitality and Tourism, Culinary Arts, and Visual Arts. This school was purposively selected due to its conducive digital learning environment and the widespread use of ELSA Speak among its students. The inclusion criteria for selecting participants were: (1) currently enrolled in English courses, (2) prior experience using ELSA Speak during their studies, and (3) ability to navigate the application independently.

To gather data, the study utilized questionnaires, and interviews. The questionnaires were designed to obtain structured and generalizable data regarding students' perceptions. Semi-structured interviews allowed the researchers to delve more deeply into participants' experiences, offering flexibility while maintaining focus on the research objectives.

The data analysis process followed Creswell's (1998) qualitative procedures. Initially, students' responses from questionnaires and interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and translated into English. Questionnaire data were organized and tabulated for clarity.

Interview data were coded thematically to identify recurring patterns and themes. For instance, comments on technical glitches or limited access to stable internet were grouped under the theme "Benefits and Obstacles." This thematic coding facilitated the identification of essential experiences and perceptions, which were then interpreted in relation to the broader literature on mobile-assisted language learning..

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and interprets the findings of the study regarding EFL students' experiences and perceptions of using the ELSA Speak application as a support tool for enhancing their English-speaking proficiency through independent learning. The data, gathered through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, reveal both the advantages and challenges encountered by students while engaging with the app outside the formal classroom setting.

A. Students' Experiences in using ELSA Speak to Develop English Speaking Skills Independently

Based on the first research question regarding students' experiences in using ELSA Speak, the researcher collected data through online questionnaires and direct interviews conducted during students' break time. The findings indicated that students generally had positive experiences while using the application. Many of them reported that ELSA Speak had become part of their daily routines and was perceived as more flexible and effective in improving speaking skills compared to traditional classroom methods. Additionally, one of the prominent aspects highlighted by students was the opportunity for self-paced learning and content customization, which allowed them to focus on specific speaking challenges at their own convenience and learning pace.

Motivation and Confidence

Students consistently described ELSA Speak as a motivating tool that helped them feel more confident in practicing English. The app's non-judgmental environment and instant feedback were key factors in reducing anxiety and encouraging regular practice.

> *"It makes me more confident because no one judges me even if I make mistakes."* – Informant 22 *"The feedback provided significantly boosts my confidence. When I know my mistakes or areas to improve, I can immediately correct them."* – Informant 20

These reflections suggest that ELSA Speak fosters a psychologically safe space for learners, especially those hesitant to speak in traditional classroom settings. The immediate correction feature reinforces a sense of competence, aligning with Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy, where perceived mastery enhances motivation. By eliminating fear of criticism, students are more willing to engage in consistent speaking practice.

Flexibility and Convenience

Speak offered, allowing them to practice anytime and anywhere without the constraints of classroom schedules. This adaptability was especially valuable for learners with busy routines or those who preferred private practice.

> *"ELSA is more flexible because I can use it anywhere and anytime." – Informant 7 "I prefer the app for its simplicity." – Informant 25 "ELSA Speak provides immediate feedback and helps correct pronunciation quickly, so learning is more effective and*

independent. Whereas the traditional classroom method is better for practicing direct interaction and discussion." – Informant 8

These insights highlight ELSA's role as a technical practice tool, complementing classroom-based social interaction. The contrast between ELSA's individualized feedback and the general corrections in class supports Garrison & Kanuka's (2004) blended learning model, where AI tools handle repetitive skill-building while classrooms focus on communicative competence.

Self-Paced Learning and Integration into Daily Routine

Students valued the app's ability to adjust to their individual learning pace and integrate seamlessly into their daily lives. The level-based challenges and topic selection allowed them to personalize their practice according to their goals and comfort.

"Since it matches my level, I'm more motivated to learn English." – Informant 4 *"I frequently use the pronunciation check and daily training features to identify and correct errors through repetition."* – Informant 15 *"I'm motivated because I see daily progress."* – Informant 24

ELSA's customizable pathways and daily reminders helped students form consistent learning habits. The ability to choose topics like "Shopping Essentials" or "Office Small Talks" made practice relevant and engaging. This aligns with Holec's (1981) concept of learner autonomy, where control over pace and content fosters intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement.

B. Students' Perceptions of the Benefits and Challenges of using ELSA Speak as a Speaking Practice tool

Perceived Benefits

Students' Motivation

Students widely perceived ELSA Speak as a motivating tool that encouraged consistent speaking practice. The app's gamified features, such as badges, streaks, and level progression, were particularly effective in sustaining interest and making learning enjoyable.

"I often use the game features because they make learning fun." – Informant 11 *"Since it matches my level, I'm more motivated to learn English."* – Informant 4 *"I'm motivated because I see daily progress."* – Informant 24

These responses reflect how ELSA's design supports intrinsic motivation through personalized challenges and visible progress. According to Ryan & Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory, enjoyment and perceived competence are key drivers of motivation. ELSA's adaptive difficulty levels and daily reminders align with this framework, helping students stay engaged in their learning routines. The ability to practice "anywhere, anytime" also supports autonomy, a core element of independent learning (Holec, 1981).

Boosting Self-Confidence

Many students reported increased confidence in speaking English after using ELSA Speak. The app's private, non-judgmental environment allowed them to practice freely without fear of criticism, which was especially helpful for shy learners.

"It makes me more confident because no one judges me even if I make mistakes." – Informant 22 *"The feedback provided significantly boosts my confidence. When I know my mistakes or areas to improve, I can immediately correct them."* – Informant 20 *"I prefer using the app because I'm afraid to ask questions in front of others in class."* – Informant 5 *"It feels like having a private tutor I can talk to anytime without leaving home."* – Informant 20

These perceptions align with Horwitz et al.'s (1986) findings that low social risk environments increase learner participation. ELSA's instant feedback reinforces self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), helping students feel competent and in control of their progress. The app's conversational simulations also mimic real-life interactions, allowing students to build confidence in a safe and familiar context.

Improving Pronunciation Accuracy

Students consistently praised ELSA Speak's effectiveness in improving their pronunciation. The app's real-time correction and syllable-level feedback helped learners identify and fix errors immediately, leading to noticeable progress.

"ELSA directly highlights mispronounced syllables, allowing me to correct and retry until I get it right." – Informant 12 *"In ELSA Speak, you can directly correct pronunciation, intonation, and word stress, and even point out which parts are wrong."* – Informant 4 *"The speech analysis feature lets me repeat until correct, like having a personal coach."* – Informant 16 *"I frequently use the pronunciation check and daily training features to identify and correct errors through repetition."* – Informant 15

These features support step-by-step improvement and reinforce correct pronunciation habits. The ability to compare one's speech to native models and receive targeted feedback aligns with Fitria's (2023) emphasis on personalized learning in AI tools.

Perceived Challenges

Speech Recognition Inaccuracies

Despite its strengths, students expressed frustration with ELSA Speak's speech recognition system. Several users reported that the app occasionally misjudged correct pronunciation, leading to confusion and reduced trust in the feedback.

"Sometimes I feel my pronunciation matches the example, but the app still marks it wrong. I don't know if I'm actually wrong or if the app's voice detection is unclear." – Informant 6

This uncertainty undermines learners' confidence and disrupts their belief in the app's reliability. According to Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy, perceived competence is crucial for sustained motivation. When feedback is inconsistent or unclear, students may question their progress and disengage. These findings highlight the need for improved accuracy and transparency in AI-driven pronunciation assessment.

Reliance on Internet Connectivity

Another common challenge was the app's dependence on stable internet access. Students in remote areas found it difficult to use ELSA Speak consistently due to poor signal quality, which interrupted practice sessions and limited accessibility.

"Since I live in a remote area, poor signal often disrupts the app's functionality." – Informant 2

This issue reflects broader infrastructure constraints that affect digital learning equity. As noted in the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989), perceived ease of use and usefulness directly influence adoption. When technical barriers such as connectivity interfere with learning, students may perceive the app as less effective, regardless of its pedagogical value. Offline functionality or low-data modes could help mitigate this limitation.

Subscription-Related Limitations

While students appreciated ELSA Speak's features, many were discouraged by the cost of accessing premium content after the free trial period. This financial barrier limited their ability to fully benefit from the app's advanced tools.

"After the trial ended, I was shocked by the subscription cost. That discouraged me, but I continued to learn with the features available." – Informant 19

Economic access plays a critical role in perceived utility. When learners cannot afford full access, their experience becomes restricted, and long-term engagement may decline. This concern echoes findings from the Technology Acceptance Model, where external factors like price and technical stability influence user perception and continued use. Addressing affordability, through institutional support or tiered pricing, could enhance inclusivity and sustained learning.

CONCLUSION

This research investigated students' experiences and perceptions of using the ELSA Speak application to autonomously develop their English-speaking skills. The study specifically explored how students utilized the app for independent practice, examining both their experiential journey and their views on the advantages and challenges encountered. Data was gathered through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, with findings structured around the core research questions concerning student experiences and their perceived benefits and obstacles while using ELSA Speak for self-directed learning.

Students reported largely positive experiences when using ELSA Speak independently. A key finding was the significant enhancement in motivation and confidence, attributed to the app's safe, non-judgmental environment and its provision of real-time, explicit feedback on pronunciation and vocabulary, allowing immediate correction and reducing fear of criticism. Furthermore, students highly valued the flexibility and convenience ELSA offered compared to traditional classrooms, enabling practice anytime and anywhere, which was particularly beneficial for shy learners hesitant to speak in class settings. The app's perceived effectiveness, especially in improving foundational pronunciation and fluency through features like syllable-level correction, was widely acknowledged. Students also appreciated the self-paced, customized learning facilitated by adjustable difficulty levels and its seamless integration into daily routines through relevant topics and reminders, making consistent practice achievable and habit-forming.

Regarding perceived benefits and obstacles, students identified several significant advantages of ELSA Speak. The most praised benefits included the detailed, instant pronunciation analysis and feedback, which allowed learners to pinpoint and correct errors immediately; the practicality of role-play and conversational features that simulated real interaction and boosted conversational confidence; engaging gamification elements that sustained interest; and useful tools like the voice-activated dictionary for contextual vocabulary learning. However, several obstacles were also noted. Technical challenges, particularly

inconsistent speech recognition leading to ambiguous or inaccurate feedback, undermined trust and learning effectiveness for some users. The cost of subscription after the free trial period was a significant barrier for others, limiting access to advanced features. Additionally, dependency on a stable internet connection posed a challenge for users in areas with poor connectivity, disrupting practice sessions and highlighting the need for improved offline functionality. These limitations suggest that while ELSA is a valuable supplementary tool for technical speaking practice, it may not fully address all language learning needs or be equally accessible to all users.

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