

EFL Learners' Perceptions of Using ELSA Speak for Speaking and Pronunciation Improvement

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ABSTRACT

English speaking and pronunciation remain challenging for EFL learners, especially in non-English departments. Although mobile-assisted language learning has been widely studied, limited research explores students' perceptions of AI-based pronunciation applications such as ELSA Speak. Therefore, this study investigates students' perceptions of using ELSA Speak to improve speaking and pronunciation skills. This qualitative descriptive study involved 20 students from the English Club at Hafsaty University, with five students selected for interviews. Data were collected through interviews, observation, and documentation. The findings show that ELSA Speak provides real-time feedback, increases students' confidence, and supports independent learning. However, students also faced challenges, including internet dependency and limited free features. Overall, ELSA Speak is considered an effective tool for improving speaking and pronunciation skills among EFL learners.

Keywords: *EFL Learners, ELSA Speak, Pronunciation, Speaking Skill, AI Learning*

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INTRODUCTION

Speaking is considered one of the most important skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning because it enables learners to communicate ideas, thoughts, and information effectively in real-life situations. In the era of globalization, English speaking ability has become increasingly important in education, technology, and professional contexts, where communication skills are highly valued (Qudratillah et al., 2025). For EFL learners, speaking competence is often regarded as an indicator of successful language learning, as it reflects learners' ability to use language in authentic communication (Islam, 2022).

However, mastering speaking is not an easy task for many EFL learners. One of the major challenges lies in pronunciation, which directly affects intelligibility in communication. Incorrect pronunciation may lead to misunderstandings, even when learners possess adequate vocabulary and grammar knowledge (Boutheyna & Oumayma, 2024). In addition, pronunciation difficulties are often influenced by first language interference, where learners transfer phonological patterns from their native language into English (Andriani et al., 2026).

In the Indonesian context, English teaching is still largely dominated by conventional approaches that emphasize grammar and reading rather than communicative competence. As a result, students tend to develop passive knowledge without sufficient speaking ability. Previous studies also found that students experience various problems in developing speaking skills, including limited vocabulary, lack of confidence, and fear of making mistakes (Parawangsa et al., 2024). Limited opportunities for speaking practice, large classroom sizes, and lack of individual feedback further contribute to students' low speaking performance (Hwang et al., 2025).

Another important factor affecting speaking ability is psychological barriers, such as anxiety and lack of confidence. Many students feel afraid of making mistakes when speaking

English, which reduces their willingness to participate in communication. Technology-assisted learning can help reduce students' glossophobia and increase their confidence in speaking practice (Zainuddin et al., 2025). Emotional factors have been shown to significantly influence oral communication, where high anxiety can negatively impact speaking performance (Wu & Rose, 2025).

To address these challenges, the integration of technology in language learning has become increasingly important. Advances in artificial intelligence (AI) have enabled the development of innovative learning tools that provide real-time feedback and personalized learning experiences (Merino-Campos, 2025). AI-based applications allow learners to practice speaking independently, which is difficult to achieve in traditional classroom settings.

One of the applications designed for this purpose is ELSA Speak, an AI-powered platform that focuses on improving pronunciation through speech recognition technology. The application provides instant feedback, allowing learners to identify and correct their errors (Ivan & Hakim, 2024). This aligns with the concept of Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL), which emphasizes flexibility, accessibility, and learner autonomy (Tang & Kukulska-Hulme, 2025).

Although previous studies have explored the use of mobile applications in language learning, most studies mainly focus on general language learning applications or measure learning outcomes quantitatively. In addition, only a limited number of studies investigate students' perceptions and experiences in using AI-based pronunciation tools such as ELSA Speak, particularly among students from non-English departments who often have limited exposure to English speaking practice. Therefore, this study aims to explore EFL learners' perceptions of using ELSA Speak to improve speaking and pronunciation skills.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore students' perceptions and experiences in using the ELSA Speak application. This approach was selected because it allows the researcher to gain in-depth insights into learners' perspectives and experiences in a natural learning context

Respondents

The participants of this study were 20 students from the English Club at Hafsa Waty University. The participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their experience using the ELSA Speak application. All participants were from non-English departments, particularly health-related programs, which typically have limited exposure to English speaking practice. Among the participants, five students were selected for in-depth semi-structured interviews to obtain detailed information regarding their perceptions and experiences in using ELSA Speak.

Instruments

The primary instrument in this study was the researcher herself, as commonly applied in qualitative research. To support data collection, several instruments were used, including a semi-structured interview guide, an observation checklist, and documentation. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions focusing on students' learning experiences, perceptions of ELSA Speak, speaking confidence, and challenges encountered during the learning process. Meanwhile, the observation checklist was used to examine students' engagement, participation, and interaction with the application during speaking activities. Documentation, such as screenshots, field notes, and learning records, was also collected to strengthen the credibility of the data.

Procedures

The study was conducted for approximately three months, from January to March 2026. The data collection process was carried out in three stages. First, the researcher conducted observations during students' speaking practice using ELSA Speak in the English

Club. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain detailed information about students' perceptions and experiences. Finally, documentation was collected to validate the findings and provide supporting evidence.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman, which consists of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. In the data condensation stage, the researcher selected, categorized, and simplified relevant data obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation (Martalenny & Azizah, 2025). The categorized data were then organized and presented systematically during the data display stage to identify recurring themes and patterns. Finally, conclusions were drawn and verified through data triangulation to ensure validity and consistency.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Students' Experiences in Using ELSA Speak

The findings indicate that students had generally positive experiences when using ELSA Speak as a learning tool. The application enabled them to practice pronunciation independently and repeatedly without feeling pressured by the classroom environment. One participant stated:

"I can practice speaking many times without feeling embarrassed when I make mistakes." (Participant 1)

This independent practice allowed students to focus on their individual weaknesses and gradually improve their pronunciation accuracy. In addition, students highlighted the importance of the real-time feedback provided by the application. Unlike traditional classrooms, where feedback is often limited due to time constraints, ELSA Speak allows learners to receive immediate corrections. This finding supports the concept of Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL), which emphasizes flexibility and learner autonomy (Tang & Kukulska-Hulme, 2025). However, some students experienced initial difficulties in understanding how to interpret the feedback provided by the application.

Students' Perceptions of the Usefulness of ELSA Speak

The study reveals that students perceive ELSA Speak as a useful and practical tool for improving pronunciation skills. One participant explained:

"The application helps me know which words I pronounce incorrectly." (Participant 2)

The application's ability to detect pronunciation errors and provide corrective feedback helps learners become more aware of their mistakes, particularly in vowel and consonant sounds that differ from their first language. This finding is consistent with the theory of corrective feedback. According to (Ellis, 2013), feedback enables learners to notice errors and adjust their language production. Furthermore, students appreciated the structured features of the application, such as categorized lessons and progress tracking, which increased their motivation and engagement in learning (Hellín et al., 2023).

Impact on Students' Speaking Confidence

Another important finding of this study relates to students' speaking confidence. Most participants reported that they felt more confident when speaking English after regularly using the application. One student mentioned:

"After using ELSA Speak, I feel more confident because my pronunciation is better." (Participant 3)

This increased confidence is attributed to the opportunity to practice privately without fear of making mistakes or being judged by others. This finding aligns with previous research indicating that reduced anxiety can increase learners' willingness to communicate (Salbaş & Ekmekçi, 2025). In addition, improved pronunciation contributes to better intelligibility, which is the primary goal of pronunciation learning. (Jenkins, 2000) emphasizes that intelligibility is

more important than achieving native-like pronunciation. In this study, students reported that their speech became clearer and easier to understand, which further enhanced their confidence in communication.

Challenges in Using ELSA Speak

Despite the positive perceptions, several challenges were identified in using ELSA Speak. One of the main challenges is dependency on a stable internet connection. A participant stated:

"Sometimes the application cannot run properly when the internet connection is unstable" (Participant 4)

Another limitation is related to the restricted features in the free version of the application. Some students reported that limited access to advanced features reduced the effectiveness of their learning experience. Additionally, a few participants mentioned that the feedback provided by the application was not always accurate, indicating that AI-based systems are not entirely free from errors. These findings suggest that while ELSA Speak is a valuable learning tool, it should be used as a complement to traditional instruction rather than a complete replacement.

CONCLUSIONS

This study contributes to the growing discussion of AI-assisted language learning by exploring EFL learners' perceptions of using ELSA Speak, particularly among students from non-English departments. The findings indicate that ELSA Speak can support students' pronunciation development, increase speaking confidence, and encourage independent learning through real-time feedback and flexible practice opportunities. The findings also provide practical implications for both teachers and students. For teachers, AI-based applications such as ELSA Speak may serve as supplementary learning tools to support speaking instruction and provide additional pronunciation practice outside the classroom. For students, the application offers a more flexible and less intimidating environment that encourages continuous speaking practice and learner autonomy. However, this study has several limitations. The research involved a limited number of participants and was conducted within a single educational setting, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the study mainly focused on students' perceptions rather than measuring actual improvement in speaking performance. Therefore, future studies are recommended to involve larger participants from various educational contexts and combine qualitative and quantitative approaches to obtain more comprehensive findings regarding the effectiveness of AI-based pronunciation applications in language learning.

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