

**EXPLORING 7TH-GRADE JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS'
PERCEPTIONS OF USING THE ELSA SPEAK APP IN MALL-BASED
PRONUNCIATION LEARNING**

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ABSTRACT

In the learning process at the junior high school level, English pronunciation remains an under-appreciated component, particularly in Indonesia. However, good pronunciation is crucial for effective communication. This study aims to investigate how seventh-grade students with low pronunciation skills perceive the use of the ELSA Speak app in MALL. This research employed a qualitative approach, specifically designed as a case study. Data were collected from five seventh-grade students at a junior high school in Karawang through participant observation, direct use of the ELSA Speak app, and semi-structured interviews. The results indicate that the use of ELSA Speak provides significant benefits in helping pronunciation skills, building student confidence, and increasing motivation for independent learning. However, several technical challenges and limitations in vocabulary comprehension were also identified. These findings demonstrate the great potential of ELSA Speak as an innovative and effective pronunciation learning medium at the junior high school level.

Keywords: pronunciation, MALL, ELSA speak, student perceptions, learning technology

ABSTRAK

Dalam proses pembelajaran di tingkat sekolah menengah pertama, pengucapan bahasa Inggris masih menjadi komponen yang kurang dihargai, terutama di Indonesia. Namun, pengucapan yang baik sangat penting untuk komunikasi yang efektif. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menyelidiki bagaimana siswa kelas tujuh dengan keterampilan pengucapan rendah memandang penggunaan aplikasi ELSA Speak di MALL. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, yang dirancang khusus sebagai studi kasus. Data dikumpulkan dari lima siswa kelas tujuh di sebuah sekolah menengah pertama di Karawang melalui observasi partisipan, penggunaan langsung aplikasi ELSA Speak, dan wawancara semi-terstruktur. Hasilnya menunjukkan bahwa penggunaan ELSA Speak memberikan manfaat yang

signifikan dalam membantu keterampilan pengucapan, membangun kepercayaan diri siswa, dan meningkatkan motivasi untuk belajar mandiri. Namun, beberapa tantangan teknis dan keterbatasan dalam pemahaman kosakata juga diidentifikasi. Temuan ini menunjukkan potensi besar ELSA Speak sebagai media pembelajaran pengucapan yang inovatif dan efektif di tingkat sekolah menengah pertama.

Kata Kunci: pengucapan, MALL, ELSA speak, persepsi siswa, teknologi pembelajaran

A. Introduction

Pronunciation is a key component in mastering English as a foreign language (EFL). Correct pronunciation not only helps convey messages clearly but also boosts confidence in speaking (A. P. Gilakjani, 2016). However, in the context of junior high school learning, this skill is often not a top priority. Most curricula and learning activities focus more on grammar and vocabulary, while pronunciation is considered a minor aspect that doesn't require special attention (A. Gilakjani et al., 2011).

Many English words are spelled the same but pronounced differently. If you can't pronounce a word correctly, it can lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations. By studying pronunciation, you can pronounce words accurately and avoid such misunderstandings. Pronunciation can be a determining factor in the impression your conversation partner

makes when using English. So, it's not just the ability to use vocabulary and grammar correctly that will receive attention; pronunciation is also crucial. Another crucial function of learning pronunciation is to be able to pronounce words with a native speaker's accent. If our pronunciation is like that of a native speaker, our confidence will grow rapidly.

The development of digital technology brings new opportunities to improve the quality of English language learning, one of which is through the Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) approach. MALL is a subset of Mobile Learning (m-learning) and Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL). MALL has evolved to support students' language learning with the increasing use of mobile technology such as cell phones and laptops. Enhancing language learning through MALL provides a change not available in

traditional classrooms. MALL offers access to learning anywhere, anytime, and wherever the user is. This allows users to hone their language skills right before or after conversations in the language they are learning.

With MALL, students can access language learning materials and communicate with teachers and peers anytime and anywhere. Mobile learning (MALL) allows students to access learning materials through mobile devices, enabling learning anytime and anywhere (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008). One popular application in this context is ELSA Speak, an artificial intelligence-based application that provides automatic feedback on pronunciation.

Most studies on ELSA Speak have been conducted at the university level using a quantitative approach (Kholis, 2021). There is little research exploring the perceptions of junior high school students, particularly seventh-grade students, regarding the use of this application, particularly those with low pronunciation skills. Therefore, this study is important to understand in-depth how seventh-grade junior high school students interpret the use of ELSA Speak in the

context of MALL-based pronunciation learning.

B. Research Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach with a case study design, allowing researchers to explore students' experiences and perceptions in depth (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2018). The study was conducted at a junior high school in West Java that had never implemented the ELSA Speak application in its teaching and learning activities. Five seventh-grade students were selected purposively, with the criteria being low pronunciation skills based on teacher observations.

Data were collected through observation and interviews. Observations were conducted while students were using ELSA Speak to record their engagement, reactions, and challenges. Implementation lasted for one day to provide students with hands-on experience using ELSA Speak's features. Interviews were conducted after implementation to further explore students' perceptions of the application. Data were analyzed using the thematic analysis method by Braun & Clarke, (2006), which included data familiarization, initial

coding, theme development, and interpretation.

C. Results and Discussion

1. Benefits of ELSA Speak in helping Pronunciation Skills

Five students reported that using ELSA Speak helped them correct their pronunciation skills. The voice note and auto-correction features provided immediate feedback, which was very useful in recognizing pronunciation errors and correcting them. This aligns with the findings of Fraser (2000), who stated that immediate feedback is essential in pronunciation learning to avoid repeating errors.

ELSA Speak provides authentic input, consistent with Second Language Acquisition theory, which states that language learners progress more easily if they hear or read language that is slightly more difficult than their current level but still understandable (Krashen, 1985). This is called the “i+1” concept, where i is the student’s current level of ability, and +1 is a slight new challenge that can push them to learn further.

For example, if a student can already understand the sentence: “I like apples,” and then they are presented with the sentence: “I really like eating

red apples,” that is i+1. The sentence is slightly more complex, but still understandable. By consistently receiving this kind of feedback, their language skills will naturally improve. Therefore, in the context of ELSA Speak, the app provides clear, native pronunciation examples from native speakers that are close to the student’s level, yet still challenging, allowing students to progress more quickly.

2. Ease of Access and Active Student Participation

ELSA Speak is considered easy to use by students. The intuitive interface and engaging features make it convenient and less overwhelming for students, as it can be used anywhere and anytime. This encourages active participation during the independent learning process. In line with Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, (2008) the success of MALL depends on the app’s ease of access, portability, and flexibility. Observations show that students enthusiastically complete all practice sessions, and some even discuss them with their peers when they encounter difficulties. This supports constructivist theory, which emphasizes that learning is more effective when students are actively

involved and construct their own knowledge (Piaget, 1952; Vygotsky et al., 1978). Increased Confidence in Speaking

One significant impact of using ELSA Speak is increased student confidence in speaking English. Because the practice process is conducted individually without social pressure, students feel free to try and repeat pronunciation without fear of judgment. This aligns with the findings of Derwing & Munro, (2015), who stated that self-confidence is a crucial factor in successful pronunciation learning. This personalized and non-pressurizing learning also aligns with the reflection-based learning approach in constructivist theory.

4. Technical Challenges and Understanding Vocabulary in the App
Although this app offers many benefits, students still face several challenges. One obstacle that arises is technical glitches with the voice note feature, which does not respond well (bugs in the app). Furthermore, some students struggle to understand the meaning of vocabulary in the app due to their limited English language skills. According to Ibrahim, (2021), these types of obstacles are common in MALL and need to be addressed with

linguistic support, such as a mini-dictionary or translation feature. These challenges indicate that the app needs to be more flexible to the proficiency level of beginner students.

5. Students' Motivation and Desire to Continue Using the App

Interestingly, despite only using the app for one day, all students expressed a desire to continue using ELSA Speak beyond research activities. They found the app enjoyable and easy to use. However, some students also expressed limitations in accessing premium features, which are only available to paid users. This reflects the potential for a digital divide if access to learning resources is unequal, especially for students. Darsih et al., (2021) also noted that the limited availability of free features is a barrier to utilizing the ELSA Speak app in formal educational settings.

D. Conclusion

This study shows that the ELSA Speak app has a positive impact on improving the pronunciation skills of seventh-grade junior high school students with pronunciation limitations. Through interactive features and real-time feedback,

students can practice independently and gain a better understanding of their errors. The ELSA Speak app can be used anytime and anywhere, making it comfortable for students.

Beyond technical aspects, the app also builds students' confidence and motivation to continue learning. Although some technical challenges and feature limitations were encountered, the benefits experienced by students indicate that ELSA Speak has the potential to be a relevant and effective learning tool in the MALL context.

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