



Students' Perception of Using Speak PAI in Learning Speaking At Sma Negeri 1 Panyabungan Selatan

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Abstract

The study employed a qualitative research design with interviews as the primary instrument of data collection. The participants of this research were eleventh-grade students who had experience in using the application. The focus of the study was on three main aspects: the ways in which students use the SpeakPal application in their learning process, their perceptions of the advantages and usefulness of this tool to increase speaking ability, and the challenges they encounter during its implementation. The findings revealed that most students expressed positive perceptions toward the application. They viewed Speak Pal as a practical, enjoyable, and helpful tool that provides opportunities to practice speaking at any time and in any place, beyond classroom limitations. The features offered, such as daily speaking exercises, pronunciation practice, and interactive conversations, were considered effective in building students' confidence, enriching vocabulary, and supporting independent learning. In addition, SpeakPal was reported to reduce feelings of shyness and nervousness, thus increasing students' fluency when speaking English. Nevertheless, some obstacles were identified, including unstable internet connectivity, restricted access to premium features, and occasional difficulty in understanding automated feedback provided by the application. In conclusion, the study emphasizes that SpeakPal significantly contributes to students' speaking development. The findings further suggest that integrating applications like Speak Pal into English learning can enhance motivation, foster learner autonomy, and improve students' overall speaking proficiency.

Kata Kunci: *Students' Perception, Speak Pal, Speaking Ability.*

INTRODUCTION

The ability to communicate in English, especially the ability to speak, is becoming increasingly important in the era of globalization. This is not only relevant in an academic context, but also in the world of work and social interactions. In line with the demands of the times, English language learning in schools, including SMA Negeri 1 Panyabungan Selatan, continues to develop. One effort that can be made is by utilizing technology, such as language learning applications. Even though there have been various efforts to increase students' speaking skills, there are still many challenges faced. Some of these are lack of opportunities to practice speaking with native speakers, lack of self-confidence, and limited time in face-to-face learning. Apart from that, conventional learning methods are often less effective in motivating students to actively participate in speaking activities.

Good speaking skills not only allow individuals to communicate effectively, but also increase their confidence, open up employment opportunities, and expand their social networks. In the context of learning English, speaking is one of the most difficult skills to master, yet it is also one of the most important. In recent years, technology has developed very rapidly.

The emergence of various language learning applications, Speak Pal application is a solution and offers innovative ways to overcome challenges in language learning. This application allows students to practice talking with native speakers anytime and anywhere, and provide instant feedback. Theory Experience Core emphasizes the importance of direct experience in the learning process. Technology-supported learning aligns with constructivist theory (Akhmad & Munawir, 2022), which views learning as a Process where students construct knowledge through active interaction with personal, natural, and social realities. Theory This explains that students can think to solve problems, looking for ideas and making decisions (Darsih et al., 2021). In Teacher learning must be able to create a comfortable learning atmosphere and directing students to understand the material and guiding students directly to resolve existing problems with find a solution to the problem. This theory is encouraging students to think in solving problems by looking for ideas and make a decision.

According to the Harmer (2001) in the context of language learning, direct experience can be obtained through interactions with native speakers, language use in real situations, and reflection of the experience. The Speak Pal application has great potential to integrate the theory of experience cores in language learning. Through its features, such as conversations with native language tutors, speaking exercises, and personal feedback, students can get direct experience in using English. In addition, this application also allows students to interact with other users of various countries, so they can learn about different cultures and expand their horizons.

In daily life and academic pursuits, English served as a widely used international language for communication. In Indonesia, English will be taught as a foreign language in schools from senior high school through university. It is undeniable that until recently the first widely used international language will be English. English is widely taught in many countries around the world. According to Richards & Rodger, 1986, many people in various countries use English as a means of communication in various important international meetings. Mastery of English is very important because almost all global information sources in various aspects of life use this language. (Crystal, 2003) states that English is a global language. This statement represents the meaning that English is used by various nations to communicate with nations around the world.

English as a global language, plays a crucial role in expanding horizons, fostering international communication, and opening opportunities in various fields. By learning English, a person will open their horizons and knowledge internationally. As a global language, English holds a very large function and role. One of the visible implications is that more and more people are trying to learn to master English well. In the field of education for example. To face global competition, English is introduced to students early, it is not only taught in senior high school, but also from the kindergarten level.

The use of English is also starting to be widely used in non-educational fields such as economics and business. The United States is known for its products: McDonald's, Coca cola, Nike, Ford, etc. In addition, several countries such as China, South Korea, Japan. Germany, and the Netherlands use English as a second language so that they are able to establish trade cooperation with countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. So that various kinds of trade documents also use English. This shows that English is not only useful in the field of education, but in other fields. English will be mandatory and examined as part of the National Examination. There will so many elements in English such as speaking.

In today's digital era, the ability to speak English has become a crucial skill for high school students, especially in facing global competition. However, the reality on the ground shows that many students still feel nervous, lack confidence, and have limited vocabulary when asked to speak in English. This may be due to the lack of opportunities to practice speaking directly, both inside and outside the classroom.

For example, speaking happens when you greet a friend by saying, "Hi, how are you?", when you order food by saying, "I'd like a burger, please," or when you answer a teacher's question with, "I think the answer is..." etc. Speaking activities typically involve at least two people, a speaker and a listener. It usually happens spontaneously and includes features like pronunciation, word stress, and intonation. The main goals of learning speaking are to build confidence when speaking English, to communicate with others – especially with native or international speakers – and to understand conversations in movies, songs, or while traveling abroad.

As globalization progresses, the role of communication becomes increasingly important. In an era where advances in science and technology are increasingly rapid, international communication opportunities are increasingly widespread. The implementation of a free market requires the Indonesian state to be competitive in various fields. Indonesia can no longer just rely on natural resources and physical abilities to achieve national prosperity, but must rely more on professional human resources. One of the important requirements to achieve this is good communication skills. The most important means of communication throughout the world is language. Language is a system of symbols in the form of sounds that are arbitrary and are used by humans to speak, collaborate, communicate and identify (Derakhshan et al., 2016). Without language, humans cannot communicate and express their thoughts and feelings.

Comprehensive language skills, including speaking, listening, reading and writing skills, are an important part of learning. Learning a language is becoming increasingly important to be able to communicate well. Communication means using language to understand and express information, thoughts and emotions, as well as to develop science, technology and culture. The ability to communicate in a complete sense at the next level is discourse ability. Meanwhile, teaching speaking will be not easy, because the teacher had to choose an appropriate ways in order to make the learning process fun and effectively. So, the students enjoyed and relaxed learning speaking and they could master it.

There will many factors that made students difficult in mastering speaking. Brown (2007) in language learning, challenges refer to the difficulties or obstacles that students face in understanding, using, or developing language skills due to internal and external factors. These challenges may include;

- a. Internal factors lack of self-confidence, limited vocabulary, and communication anxiety,
- b. External factors limited access to technology, learning environment, and support from teachers or peers.

Taylor (2017) motivation and interest, a lack of intrinsic motivation or interest in the language can diminish students' willingness to engage in speaking practice and anxiety and fear of judgment. Students often experience anxiety about speaking, fearing negative evaluation from peers or instructors (Makhlouf, 2020). These are factors that hamper students master in English speaking.

Preliminary observations at SMA Negeri 1 Panyabungan Selatan, particularly in Class XI, revealed three major challenges; 1) Low student motivation, with many students perceiving English as a difficult subject. 2) Students' knowledge of technology-based learning media is still limited.

3) A lack of modern, interactive learning tools to support speaking practice.

Based on field observations and preliminary interviews with several students, it was found that the majority of students face various difficulties in learning

speaking. This is in line with Brown's (2007) theory, which states that language learning challenges are influenced by both internal and external factors.

Internally, students admitted to lacking self-confidence when speaking English in front of others. This stems from their fear of making grammatical or pronunciation mistakes, which often leads to embarrassment or fear of being mocked by their peers. In addition, limited vocabulary is a major obstacle that prevents them from expressing their ideas clearly and fluently. Some students also reported feeling anxious when required to speak spontaneously in English, as they are not yet accustomed to thinking and responding in the language.

Externally, the lack of learning facilities, such as insufficient access to supportive technology, limited speaking media, and inadequate time allocated for speaking practice in class, has become a significant barrier. English teachers also struggle to create an interactive learning environment, as students tend to be passive when it comes to speaking in English. Furthermore, the school environment does not encourage the use of English in daily communication, which hinders students' speaking development.

In response to these challenges, one of the English teachers at the school took the initiative to adopt a more modern and student-friendly approach by utilizing a language learning application called Speak Pal. This app allows students to practice speaking English independently through virtual conversations. Speak Pal offers various features such as role plays, chats with AI, and instant feedback on pronunciation errors, which enable students to learn in a more enjoyable and personalized way.

The initial results from using Speak Pal have shown a positive response from the students. Several students reported that they felt more confident speaking English because they could practice without the fear of being judged by classmates or teachers. Moreover, the app helped them improve their vocabulary and gradually correct their pronunciation. The use of this technology also encouraged students to be more active in learning outside of the classroom and to take greater responsibility for developing their speaking skills. Therefore, technology-based learning strategies, such as the use of Speak Pal, have the potential to be an effective solution in improving students' speaking abilities at SMA Negeri 1 Panyabungan Selatan. At the same time, they address the challenges identified earlier as described by Brown (2007).

The researcher is highly interested in exploring students' perceptions of the use of Speak Pal as a technology-based speaking learning media used by the English teacher. English language learning should be improved with some fun practices and could increase students' learning motivation and the teacher had to choose an appropriate technique in teaching Speaking, because teaching speaking is not so easy. Teaching speaking to students must first train the students' self-confidence, also instill motivation in the students and convince them to penetrate all the impossibilities that have been embedded in.

To address these challenges, this study investigates the use of the Speak Pal application as a tool to actively involve students in speaking practice and enhance their motivation and confidence. This application involves students actively by providing a feature that can be used so that communication practice can run pleasantly according to students' interests and level. Using this application as a modern learning media will encourage students to think critically to find and practice speaking and gain direct experience. Speak Pal is a free app that helps people learn and speak English by providing a platform for finding language partners and practicing conversation. Speak is the first and only app that lets you get real conversational practice without needing a live tutor on the other end.

METHODOLOGY

This research used a qualitative approach which aimed to explore students' perceptions of using the Speak Pal application to increase their speaking skills. A qualitative approach was chosen because the nature of this research emphasized a deeper understanding of individual experiences and perceptions rather than measuring or quantifying data in numerical form. This study was conducted at SMA Negeri 1 Panyabungan Selatan in Mandailing Natal. The school was selected because its students used the Speak Pal application during English language learning. The research took place from January to July 2025, spanning approximately six months, which provided sufficient time to observe students' interactions with the application in the classroom context.

The subjects of this study were the eleventh-grade students of SMA Negeri 1 Panyabungan Selatan, totaling 25 students, consisting of both male and female students. The selection of research subjects was based on eleventh-grade students who had used the Speak Pal application for learning English.

These stages helped the researcher to organize complex data and provided a solid foundation for developing the research findings. Therefore, the results of the analysis were expected to describe students' perceptions comprehensively toward the use of the Speak Pal application in improving their speaking skills.

1. Data Reduction
2. Data Display
3. Conclusion Drawing and Verification

RESULT/FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that students primarily use the Speak Pal app as a real-time communication tool to engage with speakers from various countries, practicing pronunciation, vocabulary, and fluency in authentic contexts. In many cases, the app serves as a substitute for face-to-face speaking opportunities, especially in areas where interaction with native or proficient English speakers is rare. This reflects the principle of ubiquitous learning (Cakmak, 2019), which highlights the ability of mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) platforms to transcend time and location constraints, enabling continuous learning across formal and informal settings.

Students' self-directed use of the app also resonates with Khusnia (2017) learner autonomy theory, which stresses the importance of learners taking control of their own learning processes. By selecting conversation partners, choosing when to practice, and determining the focus of their interactions, students exercise agency over their learning a hallmark of autonomous language development.

From a second language acquisition (SLA) perspective, the app's conversational structure is consistent with Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985) and Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1996). Krashen posits that acquisition is most effective when learners receive comprehensible input slightly above their current ability level ($i+1$) (Handayani, 2022). The Speak Pal app facilitates this through exposure to slightly challenging speech, while Long emphasizes that negotiation of meaning asking for clarification, rephrasing, and confirming understanding further promotes learning (Makhlouf, 2020). In practice, students' accounts show that many engaged in these strategies, particularly when faced with unfamiliar vocabulary or accents.

Additionally, the intercultural nature of interactions supports Byram's (1997) intercultural communicative competence framework, which expands the concept of language proficiency beyond grammar and vocabulary to include cultural awareness, adaptability, and pragmatic understanding. Speaking with individuals from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds gives students valuable practice in adjusting language use, interpreting cultural cues, and responding appropriately, thereby preparing them for global communication contexts.

The use of the Speak Pal application has been generally perceived positively by learners, as reflected in both interview responses and observational findings. Learners reported that the application provided an enjoyable and engaging experience, often describing it as feeling like conversing with a real partner. This sense of realism encouraged active practice and reduced shyness, creating a supportive environment to build confidence in speaking English. In particular, learners highlighted that Speak Pal enriched vocabulary and facilitated direct practice of pronunciation, making language learning more meaningful compared to merely studying theory. The ability to prepare and practice through the application

also supported greater participation in classroom discussions, indicating a transfer of skills from the digital platform to formal learning settings.

Observations confirmed these perceptions, showing that most learners demonstrated enthusiasm, active engagement, and noticeable improvement in fluency and pronunciation. The ease of accessing and navigating the app reflected their readiness to engage with digital tools, while the flexibility to practice anytime outside of class fostered consistent learning habits. Learners were observed to sustain focus, explore topics creatively, and exhibit increased confidence when responding to the application, further reinforcing the positive impact on their linguistic and communicative development.

These positive outcomes can be interpreted through Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, particularly the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, which emphasizes the benefits of scaffolding provided by more capable peers or proficient speakers. The app functions as a scaffolded environment where learners receive guidance, corrections, and modeling that helps them progress to higher competence levels. In addition, the communicative focus of Speak Pal aligns with the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (Richards & Rodgers, 2001), where authentic interaction is prioritized over rote memorization, and mirrors task-based language teaching, in which learning occurs through meaningful, real-world communicative tasks (Khusnia, 2017). Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis in (Rahmawati, 2017) further explains observed improvements: repeated, low-pressure interactions helped lower learners' anxiety, enabling them to absorb and produce language more effectively. This process created a positive feedback loop in which practice, confidence, and skill development mutually reinforced each other.

However, the findings also indicate challenges that temper the overall positive impact. Some learners continued to experience hesitation when speaking in front of peers, suggesting that self-confidence remains a key factor influencing oral performance. Additionally, a small group displayed low motivation, difficulty maintaining attention, and reluctance to complete tasks. These observations indicate that while Speak Pal provides an engaging and low-anxiety environment conducive to learning, its effectiveness is mediated by individual learner factors such as confidence, interest, persistence, and willingness to participate. Consequently, although technology can offer favorable conditions for language learning, pedagogical support remains crucial to address psychological barriers and sustain learner motivation.

Overall, Speak Pal contributes significantly to the development of linguistic competence and communicative ability by offering authentic practice, scaffolded support, and opportunities for autonomous learning, while also highlighting the importance of individualized guidance and encouragement in maximizing learning outcomes.

Despite the overall positive perceptions of the Speak Pal application, learners encountered several challenges that influenced their engagement and effectiveness

in developing speaking skills. Technical barriers were among the most frequently reported issues, including unstable internet connections, choppy audio, app crashes, login failures, and occasional performance problems due to low device storage (Cakmak, 2019). These technical difficulties disrupted the flow of conversation, limited the smooth execution of practice sessions, and sometimes reduced learner engagement. The findings align with prior observations that technology-enhanced language learning heavily relies on technical stability and accessibility, and when these fail, opportunities for consistent practice decline.

Linguistic difficulties also posed significant obstacles. Learners sometimes struggled with fast speech, heavy accents, or vocabulary beyond their current proficiency, which occasionally hindered comprehension and slowed interaction. While theories such as Krashen's Input Hypothesis highlight the benefits of slightly challenging ($i+1$) input, excessively advanced language input can overwhelm learners' working memory, reducing effectiveness. Structured strategies, such as simplified speech, repetition, or slower pacing, could help mitigate these difficulties, but such features may need to be integrated more systematically into the app's design and partner-matching mechanisms.

Affective and motivational constraints were equally notable. Some learners reported nervousness, shyness, and fear of negative evaluation, particularly when interacting with peers or more advanced speakers. This anxiety sometimes led to mispronunciations, hesitancy, or reduced participation. The findings echo Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Theory, which emphasizes communication apprehension and performance anxiety as persistent barriers in speaking activities. While repeated exposure to low-pressure practice helped some learners overcome these affective challenges, others may benefit from gradual onboarding with peers of similar proficiency to build confidence before engaging with advanced speakers.

Finally, feature limitations were identified as a constraint on engagement and learning. Students noted that fixed conversation time limits, lack of adjustable speech speed, and limited customization in partner selection reduced the app's flexibility. Effective language learning platforms must balance accessibility, usability, and adaptability to meet individual learner needs, offering an appropriate level of challenge and support.

Observational findings reinforced these insights, showing that while the app generally fostered enthusiasm, active participation, and noticeable progress in speaking skills, individual differences affected outcomes. Most learners accessed the app independently, maintained focus, and demonstrated improvements in fluency, pronunciation, and confidence (Thornbury, 2005). However, some exhibited hesitation when speaking in front of peers, lower motivation, and inconsistent engagement, highlighting the impact of personal factors such as confidence, interest, and persistence on the app's effectiveness.

Taken together, these results suggest that while Speak Pal provides a flexible and supportive platform for enhancing linguistic competence and communicative

ability, its success depends on both technical performance and individual learner characteristics Chapelle's (2001). Addressing these challenges requires complementary pedagogical strategies, including scaffolding, gradual exposure, task variety, and adaptive features, to optimize learning outcomes and maintain sustained engagement.

CONCLUSION

The Speak Pal app functions as an effective platform for authentic, real-time communication with speakers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, enabling learners to practice pronunciation, vocabulary, and fluency. Its flexibility allows students to learn anytime and anywhere while exercising control over their learning schedules, conversation partners, and discussion topics. The app provides meaningful language input slightly above learners' current levels, with opportunities to negotiate meaning during interactions. Additionally, the intercultural nature of communication within the app supports the development of cultural awareness and the ability to adapt language use to different contexts.

Students view Speak Pal as highly beneficial in enhancing their speaking skills, particularly in building confidence, increasing fluency, and fostering a greater willingness to communicate. Interaction with more proficient speakers offers natural scaffolding that supports progress in language competence. The app's focus on authentic conversation aligns with approaches that prioritize meaningful communication over rote learning. Regular use also helps reduce speaking anxiety over time, allowing students to engage more actively and effectively in English conversations.

Despite its benefits, several challenges hinder the app's overall effectiveness. Technical barriers, such as unstable internet connections and occasional app crashes, disrupt communication and reduce practice opportunities. Linguistic difficulties, including fast speech, strong accents, and advanced vocabulary, sometimes overwhelm learners and limit comprehension. Affective challenges such as shyness and fear of negative evaluation remain obstacles for some users, particularly in interactions with highly proficient speakers. Additionally, feature limitations, such as fixed conversation times and lack of customizable options, reduce the app's adaptability to individual learner needs.

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