

# Photovoice: Analyzing Students' Perceptions and Experiences in Learning English Pronunciation Using the ELSA Speak Application

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## Abstract

This research explores the perceptions of students at MAS Simbang Kulon Buaran Pekalongan regarding their experiences using the ELSA Speak application, an AI-based tool designed to enhance English pronunciation learning. Employing a qualitative photovoice approach, this study involved three students from class 12, who documented their experiences through photographs and participated in semi-structured interviews. The collected data were analyzed using thematic and visual analysis to identify key themes related to usability, engagement, and pronunciation improvement. Findings indicate that ELSA Speak is user-friendly, engaging, and effective in helping students develop pronunciation skills, particularly in intonation, stress, and segmental sounds. Students also reported increased confidence in speaking English due to the application's real-time feedback and interactive features. These results align with previous research, highlighting the potential of AI-driven applications in facilitating language learning. The study suggests that integrating technology like ELSA Speak can make pronunciation practice more accessible and effective for students.

**Keywords:** *Perceptions, Students, Experiences, ELSA Speak, English Pronunciation, Photovoice*

## Introduction

Learning English is an essential part of education in preparing students for global challenges in the modern era. Among the various skills needed to learn English, speaking is one of the most valued, particularly in international communication. According to CFL (2013), English is an international language used worldwide. Therefore, students are expected to master English and speak it fluently so that they can keep up with current developments and compete globally. Lutfa et al. (2024) state that speaking is a productive oral skill essential in everyday communication and enables students to interact with others.

The rapid advancement of technology has created new opportunities for students to improve their skills in learning English. Maritsa et al. (2021) state that technology is a tool that helps people around the world perform daily activities, including those in education and the workplace. Spector (2012) adds that technology is the application of knowledge for practical purposes.

In today's digital era, the development of new technology has provided more innovative ways to learn English. One of the most popular tools for improving English pronunciation is the ELSA Speak application. This application is specifically designed to help students develop their speaking fluency through voice recognition technology and artificial

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intelligence (AI). Samad and Aminullah (2019) highlight that ELSA Speak is highly suitable for students' needs in the teaching and learning process. With advanced technology, the application offers real-time feedback, which makes learning more effective and interesting for students.

The ELSA Speak application provides students with opportunities to develop their pronunciation skills. Pronunciation refers to the correct articulation of sounds, including intonation, stress, and accent, which are important for the accuracy and clarity of spoken language (Yaniafari and Olivia, 2022). Good pronunciation is crucial in English communication, yet it is a skill that requires effort and practice to master. Isakova (2022) argues that learning English pronunciation is particularly challenging for non-native speakers, such as Indonesians, due to differences in sound patterns between English and Indonesian. For instance, in English, incorrect intonation can change the meaning or grammatical class of a word, whereas in Indonesian, intonation changes usually affect meaning but not the word class (Laila and Liliana, 2022).

ELSA Speak serves as a solution for students to improve their English pronunciation through targeted practice and personalized feedback. Muamar et al. (2022) describe ELSA Speak as a modern learning tool that not only teaches grammar and vocabulary but also focuses on helping users improve their pronunciation. With voice recognition technology, the app detects pronunciation errors with an accuracy rate of over 95% (Luu et al., 2021). This high level of precision makes it easier for students to track their progress and correct mistakes. ELSA Speak offers a 7-day free trial with two free lessons each day, covering 25 different topics. According to Tran (2019), the app includes over 1,300 lessons and 70 topics, enabling users to practice pronunciation at different levels—from individual words to full phrases—based on their needs.

In short, ELSA Speak provides a promising way for students to develop their English pronunciation skills using technology. With continuous practice, students can overcome challenges in pronunciation and become more confident speakers of English.

## **Previous Study**

There have been several studies that focus on the use of digital applications to enhance English pronunciation skills. These studies highlight the growing role of technology in improving language learning outcomes, particularly in pronunciation practice. One such study is the research conducted by Adityarini et al. (2021), titled "Enhancing Students' Pronunciation using Android Pronunciation Application." This research shares similarities with the current study, as both focus on the use of digital applications to help students improve their English pronunciation.

Adityarini et al. demonstrated that using pronunciation applications can significantly improve students' pronunciation skills. In their study, they employed the English Pronunciation Phonetics app and a listening practice feature to assist students in practicing and refining their pronunciation. The findings confirmed that the use of these digital tools was effective in enhancing students' pronunciation accuracy and confidence.

However, there are notable differences between the two studies. While Adityarini et al. used the English Pronunciation Phonetics app as the primary learning tool, the current study focuses on the ELSA Speak application. Unlike English Pronunciation Phonetics, ELSA Speak utilizes advanced artificial intelligence and voice recognition technology to provide immediate feedback on students' pronunciation. It also offers personalized learning paths based on users' needs, making it more interactive and adaptive.

Additionally, the studies differ in terms of their participants. Adityarini et al. conducted their research with 100 students from Muhammadiyah University of Surakarta, targeting university-level learners. In contrast, this study involved three participants from class 12 at MAS Simbang Kulon Pekalongan. This smaller, more focused sample allows for a

deeper exploration of individual experiences and perceptions regarding the use of the ELSA Speak application.

These differences highlight the unique contributions of each study. While Adityarini et al. provide broader insights into how pronunciation apps can benefit university students, the current study aims to explore the specific experiences of high school students using ELSA Speak. By understanding their perceptions and challenges, this research adds a new perspective to the growing body of literature on technology-enhanced language learning

## **Method**

This research employed a qualitative approach using the Photovoice method, as introduced by Wang and Burris (1997). Photovoice is a visual research method where participants use photographs to express and articulate their experiences, providing deeper insights into their perceptions and feelings. In this study, Photovoice was combined with semi-structured interviews to explore students' experiences in using the ELSA Speak application—an application designed to help learners improve their English pronunciation.

### *Participants*

The participants in this research were three students from class 12 at MAS Simbang Kulon Buaran Pekalongan who had experience using the *ELSA Speak* application. They were selected using a purposive sampling method to ensure that all participants had relevant experiences with the application. The small sample size allowed for a more detailed and focused exploration of their individual perspectives.

### *Data Collection*

The data collection process consisted of two main stages:

#### **1. Photovoice Activity**

Participants were asked to take and submit one photograph for each category provided by the researcher. These categories were designed to encourage participants to reflect on their experiences with *ELSA Speak* and capture their feelings or perceptions visually. Each photograph was expected to represent how they felt or what they experienced while using the application.

#### **2. Semi-structured Interviews**

After the Photovoice activity, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant to gain a deeper understanding of their photographs. The interviews provided participants an opportunity to explain the meaning behind their images, describe their experiences in detail, and share their opinions about the *ELSA Speak* application. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

## **Data Analysis**

The data analysis involved two key components:

#### **1. Visual Analysis**

The photographs submitted by participants were analyzed to identify common themes and patterns related to their experiences with *ELSA Speak*. The visual data were examined for elements that reflected emotions, challenges, and benefits associated with using the application.

## 2. Thematic Analysis:

The interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and insights. This process involved coding the data, grouping similar codes into broader categories, and interpreting the findings in relation to students' experiences and perceptions. The combination of visual and textual data helped to create a more comprehensive understanding of how students engaged with *ELSA Speak*.

By using *Photovoice* and thematic analysis, this study provides a holistic view of students' experiences, capturing both the visual and narrative aspects of their interaction with the *ELSA Speak* application. This approach not only highlights the potential of digital technology in language learning but also sheds light on students' feelings and challenges in improving their pronunciation through innovative tools.

## Result and Discussion

### 1. Findings

The findings indicate that students benefited from using *ELSA Speak* in learning pronunciation. They found the application engaging and effective in improving their pronunciation skills. Additionally, students reported increased confidence when speaking English due to the app's real-time feedback and interactive features.

However, despite these advantages, some students encountered challenges in pronunciation learning. Certain English phonemes that do not exist in their native language proved difficult to master. For instance, Participant Y mentioned difficulty in differentiating between the /θ/ and /ð/ sounds, which affected their pronunciation accuracy. This challenge aligns with findings by Isakova (2022), who noted that non-native speakers often struggle with unfamiliar phonetic distinctions. These difficulties suggest that while AI-based pronunciation tools are beneficial, additional instructional support or phonetic training may be necessary to enhance learning outcomes. Based on the data collected, this study revealed three main findings regarding students' experiences in using the *ELSA Speak* application:

#### a. Ease of Use and Enjoyable Learning Experience.

English students preferred using the *ELSA Speak* application because it is easy to use, engaging, and features an interface that is fun and visually appealing (Picture 1). The application's colorful design and interactive animations keep students motivated and prevent boredom during learning sessions.

One of the participants, Ghina, expressed her positive experience with *ELSA Speak*. She highlighted how the application's design made her feel comfortable and excited while learning:



Figure 1

This image was provided by Ghina, one of the participants who shared her experience using the *ELSA Speak* application. Ghina expressed her happiness while using the application, emphasizing its user-friendly features and visually engaging design, which kept her motivated and prevented boredom during learning sessions. The picture she submitted reflects her cheerful and colorful feelings, symbolizing the enjoyable learning experience created by *ELSA Speak*. This reinforces how technology can make language learning more fun and engaging for students.

Ghina described her experience as follows:

*"In my opinion, the ELSA Speak application is very easy to use. Its colorful display is not boring, and the animations make me comfortable learning for quite a long time. So, I think this picture perfectly represents how I feel about it."*



Figure 2

The picture submitted by Rama, another participant, conveys an analogy between consistent use of the *ELSA Speak* application and following a doctor's prescription to recover from an illness. Just as regular medication can lead to recovery, Rama believed that consistent use of the application brought significant improvements in his English.

*"After using the ELSA Speak application, I experienced significant changes. There were many words I initially struggled to pronounce, but now I can pronounce them well. The application also shows how closely my pronunciation resembles that of a native speaker. After using it for quite some time, I feel more confident and have a better understanding of English accents and the correct intonation for each word."*



The image provided by Anggi, another participant, depicts a large amount of money, symbolizing the abundance of features available in the *ELSA Speak* application. Anggi explained that this image reflects her perception of the application's value. She highlighted that *ELSA Speak* offers numerous features that help improve essential aspects of English pronunciation, including segmental sounds, syllables, stress, rhythm, and intonation. These features made a significant difference in her learning experience, making it easier and more enjoyable to improve her pronunciation skills.

*"When I first used the ELSA Speak application, I was really surprised. It wasn't just the attractive design, but also the many helpful features it offered. These features truly supported my learning journey. I am so happy—it's truly amazing!"*

The ELSA Speak (English Language Speech Assistant) application is an online tool specifically designed to help learners improve their English pronunciation and speaking skills. It provides personalized feedback and customized learning materials that allow users to develop their pronunciation effectively. Based on this research, three student respondents

shared why they chose to use the ELSA Speak application. They all agreed that the application offers highly engaging and interactive content with an attractive user interface. This visual appeal, combined with its high-quality materials, makes it easier for students to stay motivated and practice consistently. Another reason for choosing ELSA Speak is its adaptive learning approach. Participants highlighted that the application allows users to select materials that match their level of proficiency, ensuring that learning is neither too easy nor too challenging. This feature, as supported by Anes et al. (2023), creates a personalized learning experience that encourages continuous progress while reducing frustration.

The diversity of features offered by ELSA Speak is another reason students prefer it. Beyond simple pronunciation drills, the application provides exercises on stress, rhythm, and intonation—essential elements of natural and fluent English speech. These features make the learning experience more varied and enjoyable compared to traditional pronunciation exercises. Participants found this variety crucial in keeping their learning process fresh and exciting.

In terms of the changes observed after using the ELSA Speak application, the three participants reported significant improvements in their speaking skills. Before using the application, they struggled with accurate pronunciation and often felt insecure about speaking English. However, with regular use of the application, they noticed considerable progress. The immediate feedback provided by ELSA Speak allowed them to identify and correct mistakes in real time, helping them focus on specific areas of improvement. One participant noted that ELSA Speak made her more aware of how native speakers pronounce certain words and phrases, enabling her to adopt a more natural accent and intonation. This improvement in pronunciation skills boosted the respondents' confidence. They expressed that speaking English, which used to feel intimidating, became more comfortable and enjoyable. The increase in self-assurance made them more willing to engage in conversations using English. Research by Yuliawati and Suryadi (2023) also found that ELSA Speak not only improves pronunciation but also increases users' overall confidence and motivation to practice speaking more frequently.

Along with confidence, the participants noticed improvements in their vocabulary. The ELSA Speak application offers numerous opportunities to practice new words and phrases in context, which helps users expand their vocabulary while improving pronunciation. This combination of vocabulary building and pronunciation practice makes ELSA Speak a valuable tool for comprehensive language learning.

The participants also observed significant progress in specific aspects of pronunciation. These include segmental sounds, syllables, stress, rhythm, and intonation—key elements that are essential for clear and natural-sounding speech. Segmental sounds refer to the individual vowel and consonant sounds that form the foundation of pronunciation. Mastering these sounds is critical for clear communication. Syllables, which are groups of sounds consisting of vowels and consonants, help learners break down words into manageable units for easier pronunciation. The participants explained that understanding the structure of syllables helped them pronounce longer and more complex words more confidently. Stress, the emphasis placed on specific syllables or words, is vital for conveying the correct meaning in speech. Misplaced stress can cause confusion, making it important for learners to practice stress patterns carefully.

Rhythm, the natural pace and flow of speech, plays an essential role in making spoken language sound smooth and natural. The ELSA Speak application helped the participants develop a better sense of rhythm by offering exercises focused on sentence cadence and natural patterns of spoken English. Intonation, the rise and fall of pitch in speech, was another area that showed improvement. Intonation is crucial for expressing emotions, attitudes, and intentions, making it a key aspect of effective communication. The



participants stated that practicing with ELSA Speak allowed them to use appropriate intonation in different contexts, making their speech more engaging and expressive.

The visual feedback feature in ELSA Speak was particularly helpful in enhancing these pronunciation aspects. The application shows users the correct mouth positions for producing certain sounds, which helped the participants visualize and imitate accurate pronunciation. Additionally, the phonetic spelling provided on the screen served as a useful reference for understanding how words are pronounced. This aligns with the findings of Kholis (2021), who highlighted that the interactive programs in ELSA Speak cater to different levels of language proficiency while focusing on essential pronunciation aspects such as segmental sounds, stress, and rhythm. For the participants, these features made the application an effective and enjoyable tool for improving their speaking skills and building greater confidence in using English.

## Conclusion

The findings suggest that using the ELSA Speak application positively impacts students' English pronunciation learning at MAS Simbang Kulon Buaran Pekalongan. The participants reported significant improvements in their speaking skills, particularly in key aspects such as segmental sounds, syllables, stress, rhythm, and intonation. The ELSA Speak application not only enhanced their pronunciation accuracy but also increased their confidence in speaking English. This confidence was supported by the interactive features of the application, such as real-time feedback and visual mouth position guides, which helped participants better understand and practice pronunciation. The findings suggest that using the ELSA Speak application positively impacts students' English pronunciation learning at MAS Simbang Kulon Buaran Pekalongan.

Another point is that the personalized and adaptive nature of the application provided targeted practice based on each learner's proficiency level, making it a valuable resource for continuous language learning. The findings align with previous research, further confirming the effectiveness of ELSA Speak in promoting better pronunciation and helping learners develop natural speech patterns. Given these positive outcomes, it can be concluded that ELSA Speak is a useful tool for supporting English pronunciation learning. It is highly recommended as a supplementary resource for students seeking to improve their speaking skills in a more engaging and interactive way.

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