

# EFL students' perception toward Free4talk in enhancing speaking ability

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## Article Info

### Article history:

Received 02 08, 2025

Revised 04 18, 2025

Accepted 04 23, 2025

### Keywords:

EFL students

Free4talk

English speaking skills

Informal language practice

Language learning

## ABSTRACT

This research aims to explore how English Education study program students improve their English speaking skills through the Free4talk platform. Many students experience difficulties in oral communication due to anxiety and lack of confidence. Free4talk, as an audio-based online conversation platform. Offers a language practice space that is informal, real-time, and supports interaction between fellow learners and native/non-native speakers. A phenomenological approach was used in this study as it aims to understand students' direct experience of using Free4talk. Data was collected through semi-structured interview with five seventh-semester students over a one-month period. Each interview session lasted 30 to 40 minutes. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques, and data collection was stopped when no new themes emerged (data saturation). The results showed that students had positive perception of using Free4talk, with improvements in confidence, speaking fluency, and pronunciation. The informal atmosphere of the platform helps to reduce speaking anxiety, while exposure to different types of speakers promote adaptability in communication. However, there were challenges such as technical limitations and lack of structure in the learning experience. The findings highlight the potential of Free4talk in supporting EFL students' speaking skill development and the importance of structure mentoring for the benefits to be maximized.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Speaking skills are very important in education, especially in foreign language learning, especially English. Effective speaking skills allow people to communicate and convey ideas in various context (Lekhtyanskaya, 2021). The second language acquisition theory proposed by Gass (2018) states that interaction and input delivery are crucial for effective language learning. Mastery of speaking ability is an indicator of success in learning English as a foreign language (EFL). It is also a although speaking is a highly valued skill, many EFL students face various challenges in improving it. Lack of supportive environment for speaking practice, limited interaction with native speakers, and anxiety about making mistakes that reduce confidence are some of the most common obstacle (Omar, 2024; Azbayeva, 2021; Mridha, 2020). Traditional learning methods in the classroom usually emphasize grammar and reading comprehension. As a result, students feel unprepared to use English in live conversation.

*Journal homepage:* <https://journal2.um.ac.id/index.php/jpp/index>

Perception plays a crucial role in the effectiveness of language learning, especially when educational technology is used as a tool. According to Zack (2019), perception is the way a person uses sensory information to make sense of their environment. In the context of language learning, students' perception of digital platforms can affect their engagement, learning outcomes, and their readiness to use technology. Theoretically, Vygotsky (1978) emphasized that social interaction plays a crucial role in the learning process, where technology can serve as a tool that facilitates communication and collaboration. In line with this, the connectivism theory developed by Siemens (2005) highlights how digital networks allow students to participate in online communities to enrich their learning experience. In addition, Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) theory, developed since the 1960s, suggests that technology can enhance interactivity and personalization in language learning, making it more adaptive to individual needs (Ima, 2024; Wang, 2021).

The way languages are learned has been transformed by advances in digital technologies, which allows students to participate in interactive environments that improve their motivation and their learning outcomes (Zhang, 2020; Wei, 2022). Digital tools enable learning experiences and more effective communication through dynamic and personalized activities (Suryaman et al, 2021; Santosa, 2017). With this situation in mind, a number of digital platforms have been created to support language teaching, one of which is Free4talk. Free4talk is one of the digital platforms designed to help EFL students improve their speaking skills. The platform was launched in 2020 and experienced a surge in popularity in February 2023 with 1.3 million visitors (Gelen & Tozluoglu, 2021). Free4talk allows students to communicate internationally, providing opportunities to practice speaking with native speakers and other learners from different backgrounds. By providing a live communication-based environment, Free4talk conforms to the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) which emphasize the importance of real interaction in language learning (Richards, 2006).

Free4talk has several key features that help improve your speaking. Unlike similar platforms such as Tandem and HelloTalk that generally require a premium subscription or focus more on text-based one-on-one spontaneous group-based voice conversations without an account matching system, thus creating a more inclusive and flexible learning environment for speaking practice (Al Khateeb, 2021; Li & Wang, 2020). First and foremost, the platform offers voice-based chat rooms that allow users to speak without visual pressure, which reduces speaking anxiety (Salhy & Darir, 2024). Secondly, the participant matching system allows students to speak with different language proficiency levels, which results in an inclusive learning experience. Thirdly, the time flexibility allows students to join the practice session anytime they want. These features are very beneficial, but there are still some issues such as content moderation and support for native speakers. Research shows that the main challenges in using Free4talk are anxiety and lack of confidence. Many students felt nervous when they had to speak with native speakers or more advanced participants, which impacted their fluency and clarity of expression. In addition, exposure to various accents and dialects often leads to confusion and frustration. Without strong motivation, students tend to be reluctant to take risks in speaking, thus limiting the development of their abilities (Rahayu, 2020; Rahmaniah, 2019).

Although various studies have highlighted the benefits of Free4talk, most of them have focused on quantitative measurements such as improved speaking fluency without delving into students' subjective experiences. Salhy & Darir (2024) found that Free4talk improved fluency and confidence, but did not examine the real challenges experienced by students. Another study by Saputri & Fuady (2023) highlighted the motives for using the platform, while the research by Gelen & Tozluoglu (2021) emphasized without exploring barriers in interaction. Therefore, there is still a gap in deeply understanding EFL students' subjective perception toward Free4talk as a gap by exploring EFL students' perception regarding the use of Free4talk in improving their speaking skills. Specifically, this study was designed to answer the following question: What are the perceptions of EFL students towards using Free4talk in improving their speaking ability? Therefore, understanding students' perceptions of Free4talk is essential, as insights from their experiences can serve as a foundation for developing more relevant and effective speaking practice strategies. The findings of this study not only highlight the benefits and challenges of the platform but also provide guidance for educators in integrating Free4talk into language learning curricula. Moreover, the results offer valuable input for platform developers to enhance the platform's features to better address the needs and learning obstacles faced by EFL students. The results of this study are expected to provide deeper insight into the benefits and challenges of using Free4talk, as well as provide recommendations for platform developers to improve features according to the needs of English language learners.

## 2. METHOD

### 2.1. Research Design

This study used a qualitative approach with a phenomenological method, as the main focus was to explore the direct experiences and subjective perceptions of EFL students in using Free4talk. The phenomenological approach is considered the most appropriate compared to other qualitative methods such as grounded theory, which tends to be used to build theories from data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). While grounded theory aims to generate new concepts or theories, phenomenology aims to capture "live experience" or experiences directly experienced by

participants (Creswell, 1998) thus, this approach is in line with the research objective which is to deeply understand how students experience and interpret the use of Free4talk in improving their speaking skills.

## 2.2. Research Participants and technique sampling

The participants in this study were 7th semester students from the English Education study program at a university in Medan who had used Free4talk as a medium for speaking practice. The selection of participants was done through purposive sampling technique, where only students who had experience using Free4talk were selected to be interviewed. The number of participants was set at 5 people based on the principle of data saturation, which is when additional interviews no longer produce significant new information, so the data is considered sufficient to understand the phenomenon studied. Although all participants were female and from the same institution, this limitation was recognized as a potential gender and location bias that could affect the generalizability of the results.

**Table. 1 Demographic Information of Participant**

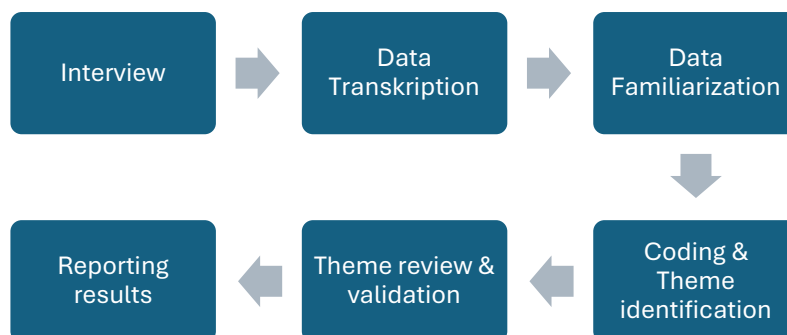
No.	Gender	Experience	Frequency of the use	Background to English language learning
1.	Female	1 Year	Once a Week	Ever attend a language course
2.	Female	1 Year	Once a Week	Self-taught
3.	Female	1 Year	Once a Week	Ever attend a language course
4.	Female	6 Month	Once a Week	Self-taught
5.	Female	1 Year	Once a Week	Learn only through Free4talk

## 2.3. Interview Protocol

This interview were semi-structured, allowing for a more in-depth exploration of students' perception, beliefs and experiences of using Free4talk. The language used in the interviews was tailored to the preferences of the participants, both in English and Bahasa Indonesia. The interview question were design based on a literature review on technology-based learning, Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) theory, as well as previous research on Free4talk as a medium for learning to speak in English. Prior to the main interview, a pilot test was conducted on two students with similar characteristics to ensure the questions were clear and relevant. Each interview sessions lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. All interview were recorded using a digital voice recorder and an automatic transcription application was done manually and confirmed by the research before being analyzed.

## 2.4. Analysis Data

Data analysis in this study used a thematic approach based on Braund & Clarke (2006) model, which consist of six main stage: (1) Transcribing the interview verbatim, (2) rereading the data to find initial patterns, (3) giving initial codes to the data, (4) identifying and grouping themes, (5) interview the themes that have been found, and (6) presenting the result of the analysis in the form of thematic description. The coding process was done manually and assisted by qualitative analysis software such as NVivo to increase accuracy. The reliability of the coding was tested through intercoder reliability, where two researcher separately coded the data and then compared the result to ensure consistency. If there were differences, the coding was discussed until agreement was reached, increasing the reliability of the analysis. Data saturation was determined when the last interview no longer yielded new information, indicating that key patterns and themes had emerged repeatedly. To increase the validity of the data, this study applied member checking techniques, where participants were given the opportunity to review their interview to ensure that the interpretations made remained accurate. With this method, the research aims to gain a deeper understanding of EFL students' perception of Free4talk and its effectiveness as a language learning tool.



**Figure 1. Steps of Data Analysis**

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. Result

Open-ended interviews offered initial insights into EFL students' experiences with Free4talk for enhancing their speaking abilities. Analyzing the data revealed two key components of students' perceptions: benefit including increased confidence, fluency, and pronunciation, and challenges including technical limitations and misuse of the platform. The results are detailed as follows:

##### 1. Confidence Boost

As shown through interviews conducted with five participants, Free4talk has been proven to increase students' confidence in speaking. They claimed that the platform increased their confidence because of its calm and pressure-free atmosphere. All participants agreed that using Free4talk improved their speaking skills. One participant emphasized:

*"Since Free4talk is informal, I feel less pressured, which makes me more confident in speaking."*

The opportunity to speak with a variety of speakers also helps them increase their confidence, reduce their fear of speaking, build courage in communicating, and get used to different communication styles and accents.

##### 2. Speaking Fluency

Improved speaking fluency as a key benefit of using Free4talk was revealed as one of the themes that emerged from the data. The platform gives EFL students the opportunity to practice speaking in a more relaxed and interactive environment, helping them to reduce thinking pauses and increase spontaneity in communication. Before using Free4talk, students often had difficulty constructing sentences spontaneously due to limited vocabulary and fear of making mistakes. However, after practicing regularly, they began to feel more fluent and confident in speaking. One participant stated that Free4talk speaking practice has helped her to respond to conversations more quickly and naturally.

*"Before, I often felt hesitant and considered words too much before speaking. However, after practicing regularly with people from different countries, I am now able to speak more fluently."*

Other participants also highlighted that exposure to different accents and speaking styles through this platform had a significant impact on their fluency.

*"I am now more used to hearing different ways of speaking from different people. This makes me no longer awkward when I have to respond spontaneously in conversation."*

Based on these findings, Free4talk proved to provide an effective practice space for students to develop their speaking fluency. By consistently interacting with a variety of speakers, students not only become more fluent in conveying ideas but also better prepared to participate in real conversations.

##### 3. Pronunciation Improvement

In addition to improving speaking fluency, Free4talk also contributes to helping EFL students improve their pronunciation. Through direct interaction with native and non-native speakers, students get the opportunity to hear different ways of pronouncing words and receive feedback that helps them understand more accurate pronunciation. With consistent practice, students notice an improvement in the clarity and understandability of their pronunciation in English. One of the participants expressed how Free4talk helped him in improving his pronunciation:

*"Through Free4talk, I understand better how to pronounce words correctly. By listening directly to how others speak, I can imitate and learn better pronunciation."*

These findings suggest that Free4talk provides opportunities for students to improve their pronunciation through the process of listening and imitating the interlocutor's way of speaking. With the direct interaction and feedback from other users, students can better understand the correct phonetic aspects, so that their pronunciation becomes clearer and more accurate in English communication.

Although Free4talk helps improve English speaking skills, some challenges are still faced by users. Based on the interview result, these obstacles can be categorized as follows:

##### 1. Technical Limitations

Users often experience technical issues, such as unstable internet connections, unsupported devices, and audio glitches. Poor sound quality and non-optimal microphone detection cause disrupted conversations. In addition, bugs in the app were also reported to hinder smooth interactions. These challenges indicate that the stability and management of conversation sessions on Free4talk still need to be improved for a more effective learning experience.

##### 2. Misuse of the Platform

Some users utilize Free4talk not for the purpose of language learning, but simply to chat aimlessly or even use it as a dating app. This makes the learning environment less conducive and distracts users who want to practice speaking seriously. Therefore, it is important for users to be more selective in choosing their interlocutors in order to stay focused on language learning goals.

### 3.2. Discussion

The result show that Free4talk helps EFL students improve fluency and pronunciation in English. However, obstacles such as technical issues and misuse of the platform hinder its effectiveness. Connection problems, unsupported devices, and usage that is not always focused on learning are the main challenges in utilizing Free4talk as a speaking tool.

#### 1. Confidence Boost

Research shows that Free4talk gets positive responses from students in increasing their confidence when speaking in English. This is in line with Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, which suggest that students who feel capable are more confident in their abilities to perform tasks, such as speaking in English (Bandura, 1997). The platform contributes to reducing speaking anxiety and enabling more relaxed interaction, as discussed by Vygotsky's social constructivism, which emphasizes that learning occurs through social interactions, and creating a relaxed learning environment can foster better language acquisition (Vygotsky, 1978). In addition, Free4talk is also considered easy to use by students, thus supporting a more comfortable and effective learning experience (Gelen & Tozluoglu, 2021; Wahida, 2024). Not only does it boost confidence, Free4talk also plays a role in motivating students to learn English (Saputri & Fuady, 2023). Its interactive characteristics and ease of access make students more encouraged to practice speaking without the fear of making mistakes. This can be explained by the concept of intrinsic motivation motivated to practice by the concept of intrinsic motivation in language learning, where students feel motivated to practice without fear of failure low-pressure environment (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This pressure-free learning environment fosters students' curiosity, which in turn increases their active participation in learning (Mohd et al., 2020). Furthermore, the concept of effective learning depends not only the material delivered by the teacher, but also on students' active involvement in understanding and developing their skills. Ahmad (2022) emphasized that the learning process should not only be teacher-centered. This view is in line with the findings of Andrew et al. (2020), who stated that a shift from teacher-centered learning towards student-centered learning can improve educational effectiveness. In this context, Free4talk can be a tool that allows students to be more independent in honing their speaking skills. In addition, Free4talk provides opportunities for students to practice direct communication with peers and native speakers, which significantly helps them build confidence in speaking (Wahida, 2024). By incorporating these activities, Free4talk offers a form of formative assessment that provides immediate feedback, allowing students to reflect on their speaking performance and make improvements (Brown, 2004). Free4talk main advantage is its ability to create an authentic learning environment, where students can engage in natural conversations without the formal pressure of the classroom. This aligns with the concept of authentic learning environments, where learners engage in real-world tasks and communication, leading to deeper language acquisition (Gee, 2003). As such, the platform serve not only as a speaking practice tools but also for self-reflection and more effective formative evaluation.

#### 2. Speaking Fluency

Speaking fluency is a fundamental component of communicative competence in language learning, encompassing not only speed but also coherence, natural rhythm, and reduced hesitation (Nation, 2009). In the context of Free4talk, students highlighted how the platform helped them to speak more smoothly in real conversations. According to Salhy (2024), Free4talk is one of the communication-based learning platforms that is effective in improving speaking fluency. This aligns with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), which emphasizes the importance of social interaction in developing higher-level thinking skills, including spontaneous language use. Speaking fluency in English is not only determined by the ability to speak spontaneously and without excessive pauses (Gelen & Tozluoglu, 2023). In this context, Free4talk provides an opportunity for students to practice speaking in authentic communication situations, which allows them to develop quick-thinking skills in constructing sentence as well as reducing the use of unnecessary pauses (fillers), such as "um" or "uh". In addition, research by Apandi (2022) shows that repeated and consistent interaction through digital platforms can improve students' speaking speed without sacrificing accuracy. This factor contributes to improved speaking fluency as it allows students to get used to speaking in English with more natural rhythm. Moreover, from a pedagogical perspective, regular exposure to interactive speaking practice as offered by Free4talk facilitates automaticity in language production—a critical aspect of fluency (Schmitt, 2000). The platform flexibility allows students to practice anytime and anywhere, which supports autonomous learning (Little, 2007) and encourages learners to take control over their own fluency development. In practical terms, this means that teachers could integrate Free4talk into their instructional design as a supplementary fluency-enhancing activity. Task-based learning framework, such as those proposed by Ellis (2003), could be adapted to suit the Free4talk environment to promote goal-oriented conversation.

#### 3. Pronunciation Improvement

Research shows that students consider pronunciation as a crucial aspect of speaking, but they do not want explicit and boring teaching methods (Inceceay & Dolar, 2011). In line with these findings, free4talk enables natural pronunciation improvement through live interaction. This aligns with the Communicative Language

Teaching (CLT) approach, which emphasize real-time, interactive communication as a medium for language acquisition (Richards, 2006). Students get real-time feedback from their interlocutors, so they can correct mistakes without formal pressure. Such as immediate feedback is essential for phonological awareness, which according to Derwing & Munro (2005), plays a vital role in developing clearer pronunciation among adult EFL learners. In addition, the various features available, such as multiple language support, Private rooms, and custom rooms, provide flexibility for students to practice according to their needs. These features not only support the development of speaking skills, but also improve pronunciation accuracy through exposure to various communication style and accents.

The result show that while Free4talk contributes to improving English speaking skills, there are several obstacles that hinder its effectiveness as an optimal learning environment. The main challenges include technical issues and misuse of the platform. Technical issues, such as unstable internet connection, poor voice quality and inaccurate microphone detection, are significant barriers to online communication (Mu & Wang, 2020). These disruptions can reduce user engagement in meaningful conversations (Cheer et al., 2018) and decrease learning effectiveness (Budinsky et al., 2023). To address this, system optimization, improved microphone sensitivity, as well as the provision of troubleshooting guides need to be done by platform developers. In addition, misuse of the platform by users who use it for non-learning purposes, such as chatting or dating, may hinder the establishment of a conducive learning environment. Previous studies confirm that a structured and goal-oriented learning environment is essential in online language learning (Budinsky et al., 2023). Therefore, better regulation and stricter monitoring features can help ensure that Free4talk remains a platform that supports the optimal development of English speaking skills.

Despite the challenges, Free4talk still offers a great opportunity for language learners to practice speaking with speakers from different backgrounds. With easy access and a large community, the platform provides a valuable opportunity for users to increase their confidence and fluency in English. With some improvements in technical aspects and community management, Free4talk can further serve as an innovative and useful technology in supporting language learning effectively.

#### 4. LIMITATION

This study has several limitations that need to be considered. First, the limited number of participants and homogeneous background, especially in terms of gender and study location, may effect the diversity of perspective obtained. The majority of the participants came from one institution and do not represent the entire population of EFL students in Indonesia, so the findings cannot be widely generalized. Secondly, the qualitative approach used did not allow the research to objectively measure speaking improvement through pre and post tests. The lack of longitudinal data also limits the understanding of the long-term impact of using Free4talk on students' speaking abilities. For the future research, it is recommended that research use a mixed-method approach, for example by cabining in-depth interviews and speaking tests before and after using the platform. Longitudinal research with a longer period of time can also provide a more comprehensive picture of the development of EFL students' skills. In addition, involving participants from different institutions and more diverse background will enrich the findings and increase the external validity of the research.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the use of Free4talk as an online learning platform contributes positively to the improvement of EFL students speaking skills. The main findings show that Free4talk is able to increase students' confidence, speaking fluency, and active engagement in English language practice. The pressure-free learning environment and the opportunity to interact directly with native speakers and fellow learners create directly with native speakers and fellow learners create an authentic atmosphere that supports the development of speaking skills.

Pedagogically, Free4talk can complement formal classroom learning by proving additional space for students to practice independently and continuously. This supports the principle of learner autonomy, which is highly relevant in modern language learning contexts. Within in framework of Vygotsky's theory of social interaction, Free4talk serves as a scaffolding that allows students to build their speaking skills through collaborative interaction and authentic dialog. These interactions were also shown to reduce speaking anxiety, as described in Krashen;s affective filter hypothesis.

However, the limitations of study- such as the absence of longitudinal data and limited representation of participants-need to be addressed. To extend the contribution of this research, future studies could adopt a mixed methods approach that combines qualitative and quantitative data.

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