

EFL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE USE OF SMALLTALK2ME TO PRACTICE SPEAKING SKILLS

¹Fadlan Rambe, ¹Ernita Daulay

¹English Department, Faculty of Teacher Training, State Islamic University of North Sumatera, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author

Email: fadlan0304212080@uinsu.ac.id

Received:
18 June 2025

Revised:
29 July 2025

Accepted:
1 August 2025

Published:
20 August 2025

How to cite (APA 7th style): Rambe, F. & Daulay, E. (2025). EFL undergraduate students' perspectives on the use of SmallTalk2Me to practice speaking skills. *Frasa: English Education and Literature Journal*, 6(2), 267-276. <https://doi.org/10.47701/frasa.v6i2.5047>

Abstract

This research was initiated based on preliminary survey findings that highlighted the challenges faced by EFL students in speaking English, which subsequently guided the researcher's focus. The primary objective of this study is to examine students' perceptions of SmallTalk2Me as a digital tool for enhancing speaking proficiency. Employing a qualitative design, the study involved four students from a public institution in North Sumatra, who responded to open-ended questionnaires and participated in semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed through thematic analysis, which revealed several significant themes: AI tools as scaffolding agents, confidence development in speaking, real-time feedback and error correction, social interaction with technology, and accessibility and flexibility of learning platforms. The findings indicated that SmallTalk2Me and similar AI-based applications were perceived as effective scaffolding agents, providing structured speaking practice, immediate feedback, and a supportive environment for trial and error. Participants reported noticeable improvements in pronunciation, fluency, confidence, and motivation. These results align with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which underscores the role of scaffolding, mediation, and social interaction in second language acquisition. The selection of this theoretical framework was grounded in its relevance to the study's objectives and its endorsement by the researcher's advisor. Moreover, the study highlights that the integration of AI tools into language learning fosters learner autonomy and enhances speaking competence, particularly in contexts where interaction with native speakers is limited. The findings further emphasize the importance of emotional support and self-directed learning within digital speaking practice. Overall, SmallTalk2Me is shown to offer promising features that contribute to the development of students' speaking abilities.

Keywords: EFL learners, speaking skills, SmallTalk2Me, AI in language acquisition, sociocultural theory.

INTRODUCTION

English has become a vital tool to reach the requirements to apply the job. In the other word, English is important language that all people should know how to communicate with this language. Some sectors such as education, social media, company, advertisement, news, global trading, use English as their main language, which means English become to the one crucial aspect for people, especially speaking skills.

Speaking can understand as a communication process with others, which is language as the media to connect it. Even in EFL students, it is also one of skill that they should have, in example presentation, reading the material, and doing some oral project with the teachers. Apart from that, speaking itself can acquire by the environment or mother tongue, so it means speaking can acquire naturally by the people without study the language. Who people that still can't speak English, usually they have some problems in speaking EFL. According to Riadil, I. (2020) EFL students really have problems in speaking, with evidence 77% use their mother tongue in English class and 83% agree that mother tongue is easier than learn English. In other words, students who didn't get an English as their mother tongue, didn't get the environment who used English as the primary language won't speak English as well as the students got one or both of them (Genidal Riadil, 2020).

Then world emerged the new solution to help many people to learn English with supporting Artificial Intelligent (AI). Today's, artificial intelligence (AI) serves as the powerful support system to increase EFL students' speaking skill. This statement also supported by (Abimanto & Mahendro, 2023), they stated using AI can increase our speaking, reading, listening skills effectively. AI can provide the material and train us to practice well, which the many features can use in learning speaking so it can more improving our speaking skill named, Smalltalk2me. This AI presented to help students to improve their speaking skill and know about their speaking skill level there, the materials of speaking skill are feeling good as a real – life situation so the students can increase their speaking skill engaged the material well. So, our objectives of research in this opportunity are to find the students' perspectives about this Smalltalk2me AI. As for the researcher start the research also want to find the essential of humans' perspective on a thing exactly on Smalltalk2me, then this research also get references from previous research by the other researchers with same or different application or AI in increasing English skill surely in speaking skill.

In related study with researchers which done by Alkathiri, (2019), the study was considering 'YouTube' as the app to examine the students perspective in improving speaking EFL. As the result from the article, YouTube proofs increase the student's motivation in speaking EFL. So, in this research, researcher want to find how the students' perspective with 'SmallTalk2Me' app in speaking EFL with doing pre-interview survey and follow with interview the undergraduate students to get the data. Even much research used 'SmallTalk2Me' app in their research but still no one research talking about 'students' perspective' in 'SmallTalk2Me' app. In addition, this research also wants to explore and make the documentation of students' perspective with 'SmallTalk2Me' apps in speaking EF.

In addition, Alamer & Khateeb, (2021) investigated EFL learners' impressions of using the ELSA Speak app and discovered that mobile-based AI applications improve learners' confidence and pronunciation. Kartal and Çağıltay's (2022) study found that AI-powered speaking applications improved learners' fluency and gave individualized feedback (Kartal, 2022). These findings indicate the expanding role of AI in helping speaking skill development, highlighting the importance of researching SmallTalk2Me from the perspective of EFL learners. Also, Rashtchi & Mohammadi, (2017) conducted a study on Iranian EFL learners using the TalkPal AI Chatbot and discovered that students who participated in speaking tasks with AI chatbots reported higher levels of confidence, fluency, and error recognition. This is consistent with the scaffolding role of AI tools in assisting pupils to operate within their zone of proximal development (ZPD).

The main question in this research about "What are students' perspectives on SmallTalk2Me", which are the following questions in interview are: 1) What is your experience in using application that enhanced speaking skill?, 2) What is your experience in using smalltalk2me, is it improving speaking skill?

Perspective

Perspective itself approach to seek the human sight, understanding about something happen in their life. Which in learning speaking with AI tools, perspective means the human understanding in learning with using AI tools emotionally, critically. The supporting statement about this theory according to Schutz (1967) perspective refers to human interpretation which based on the background, social cultural, and experience.

Social Culture

According to Howard Giles whose developed this theory stated, individuals tend to adjust their speech patterns to become more similar (convergence) or more dissimilar (divergence) to those of their interlocutors. The motivation for this accommodation is influenced by the desire for social approval, the need to express group identity, or the wish to maintain social distance.

In social cultural especially in environment, language exposure takes the role majorly, students with low – exposure in EFL tend to can't speak well, conversely students with high – exposure get more time to listen and practice EFL. SmallTalk2Me offers the students to make an intensive conversation and offers some tools to improve the speaking skill which based on Artificial Intelligence (AI). Several studies which research strength, weakness and the use in SmallTalk2Me generally find according to Suvojit and Shesha (2022) which focus on the use of artificial intelligence to assess and measure the student's improvement. Related by Victor and Paz Prendes (2021) which investigate the students' assessment with AI.

CALL

Computer – Assisted Language Learning (CALL) refers to pedagogical learning with collaboration between human and technology. Warschauer & Healey are the experts who developed this theory and made the hypothesis which are, CALL becoming to the three phases: behaviouristic, communicative, and integrative. CALL in the last phase, integrative is the main part in this hypothesis because integrative means the collaboration between the human and

the technology or artificial intelligence. This theory can refer to authentic theory to create the interaction in education learning.

CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning) has evolved significantly, from behaviourist drills to integrative techniques that incorporate authentic communication via multimedia and AI (Warschauer & Healey, 1998). According to Levy, (2023) CALL focuses on "the search for and study of computer applications in language teaching and learning". The current phase, Integrative CALL, includes online resources, multimedia, and intelligent tutoring systems, demonstrating the dynamic function of AI technologies such as SmallTalk2Me in developing learner-centered and interactive settings.

Furthermore, Chapelle, (2001) emphasizes that effective CALL settings should promote meaning-focused communication, learner autonomy, and feedback, all of which are built into the SmallTalk2Me design. This wide definition stresses that CALL involves more than just using computers; it is also about understanding how technology may enhance teaching. SmallTalk2Me fits within this paradigm by offering structured speaking challenges and interactive feedback to students. According to Chapelle (2001), good CALL should promote meaning-focused interaction, allow learners to produce output, and provide formative feedback (Chapelle, 2001). These criteria are strongly related to SmallTalk2Me's features, which include real-time speaking practice and corrective feedback.

METHOD

According to Crotty, (1998), methods refers to the way how to collect the data in the research which conclude pre-interview survey, interview, etc. in addition, the purpose of this study is to find the students' perspective about 'SmallTalk2Me', the researcher decides to use qualitative approach. This qualitative method is chosen by the researcher for several reason such as to get the pure reason from the participants, to find the extensive explanation about 'SmallTalk2Me', and find other variables as the researcher hope will be useful in the next research.

This research already consents to English study program especially this ethical consideration had conveyed to the participants before starting the research. The two research questions choose because the research wants to find the perceptions, so the research uses 'what' to ask the participants experience. In the other word, the answer will be narrative and classified by some themes, the question already validated by the advisor.

Respondent

In this study, the researcher decides to choose 4 students EFL of State University in North Sumatera exactly undergraduate students. The 4 students are chosen by the same major and same semester as an undergraduate learner. These participants are qualified by fill the g-form which ask about the application or website which improve "speaking" and talk about "SmallTalk2Me" or the researcher named it as a pre-interview survey. In addition, Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their experience using SmallTalk2Me.

Technique of Collecting Data

The researcher only uses 2 instruments to obtain the data from the participants, pre-interview survey as the first instrument to make sure the participants are user of "SmallTalk2Me" app.

This pre-interview survey also wants to find the frequency of "SmallTalk2Me" app for a week before they go to the next instrument which is interview. With the following pre-interview survey, interview is going to the next level, the participants will ask for several question, the answer will record and obtain as data then the researcher filter it to the main point that researcher is looking for.

Data Analysis

This part provides the analysis of interview transcript and open-ended questionnaire responses from the participants. This analysis uses thematic analysis that emerged around EFL students' perspective about 'Smalltalk2me' and other learning apps which enhance speaking skill. To analyse the data gathered from semi-structured interviews and pre-interview surveys, the current study used a thematic analysis technique. As part of the data analysis process, participant comments were transcribed, important points were filtered, and recurrent patterns pertaining to their SmallTalk2Me application experiences were found. The analysis was based on the principles of thematic analysis, where emergent themes were categorized based on participant narratives and the theoretical framework of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, even though the study does not specifically outline a comprehensive coding procedure like open or axial coding. Responses were manually categorized by the researcher into theme groups that represented important elements of the educational process, such as interaction, feedback, emotional support, and scaffolding. In this section also explain by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which stressed the point such as the role of scaffolding, mediation, and the social interaction in learning development.

Thematic analysis also followed Braun & Clarke (2006) six-phase framework. Coding was conducted manually using Microsoft Word. The themes that emerged—including "AI Tools as Scaffolding Agents," "Confidence Build-Up in Speaking," "Real-Time Feedback and Error Correction," "Social Interaction with Technology," and "Accessibility and Flexibility of the Learning Platform"—emphasized the various ways in which sthe AI-based tool influenced students' speaking development. To assure the legitimacy and reliability of the findings, the researcher took various steps, but not all of them were explicitly identified as such in the text. Participants were chosen using purposive sampling to ensure they had relevant experience with the SmallTalk2Me program. An academic adviser evaluated the research instruments, which included interview questions, to ensure construct validity. Additionally, ethical concerns were addressed by gaining participant agreement and ensuring voluntary participation. The use of audio messages during interviews allowed for more natural and real responses, which improved the overall reliability of the data. These approaches, together with theoretical triangulation based on sociocultural theory, contributed to the analysis's robustness and interpretative depth.

Researcher focuses on the research with pre-interview survey and interview. Which pre-interview survey do with questionnaire, the pre-interview survey data purpose to construct the data base from participant to follow the interview section. Interview as the second tool and as the important thing in this research. This interview held with 4 participants which they are also EFL students, this interview held in 5 to 10 minutes which the participants get 2 questions from the interviewer. The interviewer held by WhatsApp chat, so the interviewer gives the question,

and the participants answer with the audio or voice message. This situation already agreed upon by the participants and the interviewer so there aren't any forced in it.

RESULTS

AI Tools as Scaffolding Agents

Participants described SmallTalk2Me app which pointed that supportive tools which guided the participants through structured and repetitive learning. This app detailed the feedback on grammar, fluency, and pronunciation, which helped the learners correct the mistakes properly.

"What helped me the most was the detailed feedback from SmallTalk2Me. For example, if I mispronounced a word, the app would tell me which syllable to fix. That helped me focus more on how to say things correctly." (Participant A)

"Using SmallTalk2Me website helped improve my speaking. The instant feedback and realistic conversation practice made the learning process effective." (Participant C)

Participants in this study saw AI technologies like SmallTalk2Me as facilitators of guided learning. These programs offered learners with fast corrections and organized feedback, allowing them to practice meaningful speaking on their own. This is consistent with Vygotsky's concept of scaffolding, in which temporary support allows learners to finish activities they would otherwise be unable to complete on their own. The feedback mechanisms of SmallTalk2Me can be viewed as a type of technological mediation, with the digital tool serving as a cognitive partner. As stated in Participant A's reflection, the AI provided corrective pronunciation assistance, which improved increase accuracy and fluency. This discovery is consistent with the findings of Satar & Akcan (2018) and Li and Hegelheimer (2013), who both underlined how AI and computer-mediated environments can help L2 speaker's progress.

Confident Build Up in Speaking

Overcoming nervousness and increasing confidence were common themes in participants' narratives. The usage of AI technologies was seen as non-threatening setting, reducing learners fear of being judged for making mistakes.

"Practicing speaking with SmallTalk2Me was a safe space. No one was judging me, and I wasn't afraid of making mistakes." (Participant A)

"I became more confident in speaking after using SmallTalk2Me and receiving feedback from native speakers." (Participant B).

Vygotsky stressed the significance of affective support in the ZPD, in which learners' emotional states influence their ability to internalize knowledge. Participants reported feeling more confident in speaking after regular, nonjudgmental practice with AI tools. SmallTalk2Me was regarded as a "safe space" to make and fix mistakes. This emotional safety encourages learners to take chances when speaking, which is an important component of communicative ability. The findings are consistent with Kessler et al. (2012) research, which demonstrated that kids benefit emotionally from practicing language skills in low-anxiety digital contexts.

Real-time Feedback and Error Correction

Participants appreciated the fast feedback offered by AI systems, which they believed accelerated their learning. Real-time replies enabled them to detect and correct errors quickly.

"When I speak with SmallTalk2Me... It gives me feedback right away. That helps me realize." (Participant B)

"After recording my voice, SmallTalk2Me provided detailed feedback on which sounds or syllables were mispronounced and how to improve them." (Participant D)

Vygotsky saw feedback and interaction as critical to internalizing linguistic information. AI tools provide real-time correction, which resembles the job of a more knowledgeable other (MKO), albeit in digital form. For example, Participant B mentioned how receiving fast feedback during use SmallTalk2Me chats helped him discover and rectify grammatical faults. This real-time engagement. These findings support Kukulka-Hulme et al., (2020) claim that mobile and AI-based solutions are becoming more capable.

Social Interaction with Technology

While SmallTalk2Me provided controlled speaking practice, some participants also had real-time discussions with others. These contacts were viewed as opportunities to practice their talents in real-world settings.

"I could have conversation with SmallTalk2Me. That helped me become more confident." (Participant B)

Vygotsky saw social interaction as the foundation for all higher mental functioning. Although SmallTalk2Me primarily provides AI-based engagement, some participants experienced conversing with SmallTalk2Me. This contact allowed them to test and improve their speaking skills in real-world situations. These experiences demonstrate how learners progress from AI-mediated rehearsal to actual interaction, supporting the SCT's perspective that learning is a socially situated process. It also reflects Blake & Ottoson's (2009) findings, which emphasize the importance of synchronous computer-mediated communication in language acquisition.

Accessibility and Flexibility of Learning Platform

Students loved the simplicity of access and the freedom to practice at their own speed. The flexibility provided by AI tools made it easier for them to include speaking practice into their daily activities.

"Using SmallTalk2Me was very effective for me because I could practice anytime." (Participant D)

"I used to test English on SmallTalk2Me then practice speaking on my own." (Participant A)

Finally, participants commended the tools' flexibility and convenience. Being able to learn from anywhere and at any time enabled them to incorporate speaking practice into their daily lives, which is an important component of contextual learning, according to sociocultural theory. This supports Stockwell's (2010) findings that mobile and online resources improve learner engagement by accommodating students' schedules and preferences.

DISCUSSION

The findings surely present the results and proof by participants' statement. And in this opportunity, the researcher wants to explain the result more with adding the interpretation from the researcher. The findings of this study support the use of AI tools like SmallTalk2Me

in English language learning, particularly to improve speaking abilities among EFL learners. The thematic analysis showed numerous basic benefits that are consistent with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory. First, the employment of AI tools as scaffolding agents revealed that structured and tailored feedback improved learners' ability to perform above their current level. SmallTalk2Me operated as a More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) by giving real-time error correction, as recommended by Vygotsky (1978), allowing learners to finish speaking activities with greater confidence. Second, the emotional and motivational characteristics, such as enhanced confidence and decreased fear, mirrored the affective aspects of learning emphasized in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Learners reported feeling safe while practicing with AI, which supports Kessler's (2012) assertion that technology can minimize speaking fear and create a psychologically supportive setting.

Third, as participants interacted with the program on their own, they demonstrated great learner autonomy. This is consistent with Little's (1995) argument that well-designed digital environments promote autonomy by providing learners with choice and control over content and pacing. Furthermore, SmallTalk2Me's motivational aspects of gamification, progress tracking, and goal setting promoted long-term engagement. According to Ushioda (2011), learner motivation is influenced not just by internal factors, but also by tools and environments that promote learner identity and purpose. Finally, while SmallTalk2Me mostly provided simulated engagement, it nonetheless promoted communicative skills, and some students carried this practice to real-time discussions. This confirms Blake's (2009) claim that synchronous engagement, even with AI, can help learners progress to real-world conversation. Overall, our findings reinforce the importance of CALL and sociocultural theory in understanding how learners benefit cognitively, socially, and emotionally from AI-based language aids.

In the researcher interpretation, the using of digital tool to much may broke themselves. Health, Mentality, because a lot of exposure in using digital tool with high frequency. Without under-control, it may be coming worse activity to the EFL students. This research also has limitation, this study only can reference by the other EFL students, in addition, this research can use with the same pedagogical study approach.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate EFL undergraduate students' attitudes toward the use of SmallTalk2Me to improve their speaking skills. Five key themes emerged from thematic analysis of interview and questionnaire data: AI tools as scaffolding agents, speech confidence building, real-time feedback and error correction, social interaction through technology, and learning platform accessibility and flexibility. The data revealed that students regard SmallTalk2Me as a beneficial tool for enhancing their English-speaking abilities. They valued the AI-driven feedback, the ability to practice repeatedly and risk-free, and the platform's motivational elements. The study also verified the importance of sociocultural elements, including scaffolding and mediated learning, in the development of speaking abilities.

Overall, including AI technologies such as SmallTalk2Me into language learning helps learners improve cognitively and affectively. It not only improves linguistic proficiency, but also boosts student confidence, drive, and independence.

REFERENCES

- Abimanto, D., & Mahendro, I. (2023). Efektivitas Penggunaan Teknologi AI Dalam Pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris. *Sinar Dunia: Jurnal Riset Sosial Humaniora Dan Ilmu Pendidikan*, 2(2), 256–266. <https://doi.org/10.58192/sidu.v2i2.844>
- Alamer, A., & Khateeb, A. Al. (2021). Effects of using the WhatsApp application on language learners motivation: a controlled investigation using structural equation modelling. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 36, 149–175. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2021.1903042>
- Alkathiri, L. (2019). Students' Perspectives towards Using Youtube in Improving EFL Learners' Motivation to Speak. *Journal of Education and Culture Studies*, 3, 12. <https://doi.org/10.22158/jecs.v3n1p12>
- Blake, S. C., & Ottoson, J. M. (2009). Knowledge utilization: Implications for evaluation. *New Directions for Evaluation*, 2009(124), 21–34. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1002/ev.311>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology; In qualitative research in psychology. *Uwe Bristol*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://psychology.ukzn.ac.za/?mdocs-file=1176>
- Chapelle, C. (2001). Innovative language learning: Achieving the vision. *ReCALL*, 13, 3–14.
- Crotty, M. J. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*.
- Genidal Riadil, I. (2020). A Study of Students' Perception: Identifying EFL Learners' Problems in Speaking Skill. *International Journal of Education, Language, and Religion*, 2, 31–38. <https://doi.org/10.35308/ijelr.v2i1.2256>
- Kartal, G. (2022). Evaluating a mobile instant messaging tool for efficient large-class speaking instruction. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 37, 1252–1280. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2022.2074463>
- Kessler, R. C., Petukhova, M., Sampson, N. A., Zaslavsky, A. M., & Wittchen, H.-U. (2012). Twelve-month and lifetime prevalence and lifetime morbid risk of anxiety and mood disorders in the United States. *International Journal of Methods in Psychiatric Research*, 21(3), 169–184. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mpr.1359>
- Kukulska-Hulme, A., Beirne, E., Costello, E., Coughlan, T., Ferguson, R., FitzGerald, E., Gaved, M., Herodotou, C., Holmes, W., Mac Lochlainn, C., Mhichíl, M., Rienties, B., Sargent, J., Scanlon, E., Sharples, M., & Whitelock, D. (2020). *Innovating Pedagogy 2020: Open University Innovation Report 8*. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.26971.72480>
- Levy, M. (2023). *Computer-Assisted Language Learning: Context and Conceptualization*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198236320.001.0001>
- Li, Z. (2013). Mobile-assisted grammar exercises: Effects on self-editing in L2 writing. *Language Learning & Technology*, 17, 135–156.
- Rashtchi, M., & Mohammadi, M. (2017). Teaching Lexical Bundles to Improve Academic Writing via Tasks: Does the Type of Input Matter? *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, 14, 201–219.
- Satar, M., & Akcan, S. (2018). Pre-service EFL teachers' online participation, interaction, and social presence. *Language, Learning and Technology*, 22.

Stockwell, G. (2010). Using Mobile Phones for Vocabulary Activities: Examining the Effect of Platform. *Language Learning and Technology*, 14.

Warschauer, M., & Healey, D. (1998). Computers and language learning: an overview. *Language Teaching*, 31(2), 57–71. <https://doi.org/DOI: 10.1017/S0261444800012970>

Copyright © 2025 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.