



Students' Perceptions of Their Speaking Practice with Foreign Interlocutors via Online Platforms

Suci Tresna Dewi Handayani

Universitas Teknologi Bandung, Indonesia

Jalan Soekarno Hatta No. 378, Bandung

Email : suci@utb-univ.ac.id

Abstract. As online platforms become more widely accessible, English learners have greater opportunities to practice speaking with foreign interlocutors, though many remain hesitant due to a lack of confidence in their speaking abilities. This study examines the perceptions of 107 first-semester English learners at a private university who were assigned to use SCMC platforms like Free4Talk, InterPals, and HelloTalk to engage in English conversations with foreign interlocutors. The aim was to understand how these platforms supported speaking practice and identify any challenges faced. Data were collected through a questionnaire that included Likert-scale items and open-ended questions. The results revealed that 78% of students had positive perceptions, indicating that the platforms facilitated their English-speaking practice through real-time communication. However, they also reported technical issues, such as poor internet connectivity, and challenges with engagement, including difficulty finding consistent conversation partners. The study recommends further research into long-term language learner experiences and an exploration of platform features that could enhance English-speaking practice.

Keywords: English, Language Learning, SCMC.

Abstrak. Seiring dengan semakin luasnya aksesibilitas platform online, para pelajar bahasa Inggris kini memiliki lebih banyak kesempatan untuk berlatih berbicara dengan penutur asing, meskipun banyak yang masih merasa ragu karena kurangnya kepercayaan diri dalam kemampuan berbicara mereka. Penelitian ini mengkaji persepsi 107 mahasiswa semester pertama di sebuah universitas swasta yang ditugaskan untuk menggunakan platform SCMC seperti Free4Talk, InterPals, dan HelloTalk untuk berinteraksi dalam bahasa Inggris dengan penutur asing. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk memahami bagaimana platform-platform tersebut mendukung latihan berbicara dan mengidentifikasi tantangan yang dihadapi. Data dikumpulkan melalui kuesioner yang mencakup item skala Likert dan pertanyaan terbuka. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa 78% mahasiswa memiliki persepsi positif, yang menunjukkan bahwa platform tersebut membantu mereka berlatih berbicara bahasa Inggris melalui komunikasi secara langsung. Namun, mereka juga melaporkan masalah teknis, seperti koneksi internet yang buruk, dan tantangan dalam berinteraksi, termasuk kesulitan menemukan lawan bicara yang tetap. Penelitian ini merekomendasikan penelitian lebih lanjut tentang pengalaman pembelajar bahasa jangka panjang dan eksplorasi fitur platform yang dapat meningkatkan latihan berbicara bahasa Inggris.

Kata Kunci: Bahasa Inggris, Pembelajaran Bahasa, SCMC.

1. INTRODUCTION

Availability of online platforms for language learning has provided English learners more opportunities to practice speaking with foreign interlocutors. However, many of them remain hesitant to engage in the interaction, especially when it comes to their speaking ability.

In this study, first-semester English learners at a private university were instructed to use online platforms to communicate in English with foreign interlocutors through some platforms such as: Free4Talk, InterPals, HelloTalk, and other platforms they liked. The reason of this instruction was because of their lack of confidence in speaking English, they felt their English-speaking skill was not good enough to hold a conversation.

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This study explores their perceptions of how these platforms facilitated their speaking practice. Exploring it is essential for understanding its impact on their speaking skills. The advantages of technology use in learning language have been recognized by many educators. They use technological tools, Synchronous Computer-Mediated Communication (SCMC) with real-time text chats, video, and audio conversations into their instruction. Studies have shown that CMC is an effective way to practice a foreign language (Alghammas, 2020; Belda-Medina, 2021; Gelen & Tozluoglu, 2021; Salhy & Darir, 2024). In particular, interacting with foreign interlocutors through SCMC is considered a valuable method for enhancing speaking performance.

This study aims to describe the perceptions of 107 students who were assigned to talk to foreigners in English using free online platforms. Afterwards, they completed a questionnaire to share their thoughts on how the experience supported their speaking practice. The results were expected to support the idea that SCMC can be a helpful tool in facilitating the students' English-speaking practice.

Understanding students' perceptions is crucial, not only for assessing the effectiveness of SCMC but also for improving the design and implementation of these digital tools in language learning contexts. If students feel more confident and capable using online platforms for speaking practice, they are likely to engage with them more consistently, leading to better language acquisition over time. Furthermore, by identifying any barriers or challenges students face when using these platforms, educators can provide more targeted support to help overcome these obstacles.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

SCMC in Enhancing Language Learning

Synchronous Computer-Mediated Communication (SCMC) is potential to improve language learning. It serves as a way for practicing a foreign language (Rubin, 2016). It also improves language learning by facilitating multimodal interactions. Belda-Medina (2021) highlighted how combining text, audio, and video in SCMC platforms creates rich, real-time communication, enhancing learners' language skills. Alghammas (2020) found that web-based synchronous speaking platforms improve speaking skills and boost learner confidence. Similarly, Al Ghazali (2020) reported that social networking sites are valuable for reinforcing linguistic performance.

There are many SCMC platforms that we can use. Salhy and Darir (2024) noted that platforms like Free4Talk may be effective in improving fluency. It is in line with

Takase (2024) who noted that synchronous communication often results in simpler language, as learners focus on fluency over complexity. Gelen and Tozluoglu (2021) emphasized Free4Talk's accessibility and security, motivating learners across various proficiency levels. Kobayashi (2024) recommended integrating platforms like Zoom and Padlet to support speaking practice, as they allow for real-time communication and collaboration.

HelloTalk is another popular tool for practicing speaking, as it connects learners with native speakers, promoting autonomous learning (Sadeghi & Chalak, 2023a, 2023b). It also potentially reducing anxiety (Wadie, 2022). Meanwhile, in another study, it was found that language learners felt they learned more and experienced less anxiety during in-person interactions than in online settings (Martinsen & Thompson, 2024). It is proven that SCMC does not always have an effect on practicing English speaking. The following section will discuss the challenges of using SCMC in speaking practice.

Challenges of Using SCMC

While SCMC offers advantages, it also presents challenges. Firstly, is in terms of an engagement, as Bagheri and Mohamadi Zenouzagh (2021) found the limited engagement such as: silence, pauses and hesitations, focus on syntax, and L1 use. The second one is technical issues, such as poor internet connections, can disrupt communication, as highlighted by Gulzar, Ali, and Bagram (2022); Martin (2021); Wadie (2022), who noted that connection problems hinder communication flow. Additionally, Hidayat, Djatmika, and Ngadiso (2022) emphasized that the quality of interactions and learner motivation are critical to the success of SCMC platforms. Without adequate support and engagement, the effectiveness of these platforms may diminish.

In summary, SCMC platforms provide valuable opportunities for enhancing speaking skills and communicative competence. However, challenges such as technical issues and learner motivation must be addressed to maximize their effectiveness. With proper planning and infrastructure, SCMC can be a powerful tool for language learning in the digital age.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

The respondents were 107 first-semester English learners who were instructed to use online platforms to communicate in English with foreign interlocutors through platforms such as Free4Talk, InterPals, HelloTalk, and other platforms they preferred.

They filled out the questionnaire, which contained questions about their impressions or perceptions of their brief experience when they were assigned to use one of the online platforms offered. This study was conducted using a Likert-scale added by 2 open-ended questions of the students' views about the advantage and disadvantage of the platforms they used. They used the platform to have conversations in English with foreign interlocutors from other countries. The duration of the online conversations was not specified, as it was intended for the interaction to occur naturally, and the respondents were expected to express their perceptions honestly.

Afterward, the results of the questionnaire, were analyzed by calculating the mean of the categories of statements that were positively toned, as follows:

1. The platform features make it easy for you to get in contact with foreign interlocutors to talk in English.
2. The foreigners you met were willing to practice speaking English with you.
3. This platform facilitates your efforts to improve your English-speaking performance.

The responses to these statements used a Likert scale: Strongly disagree (1), Disagree (2), Neutral (3), Agree (4), Strongly agree (5). The results of the mean calculation were displayed in the form of tables and charts, which were then interpreted into finding.

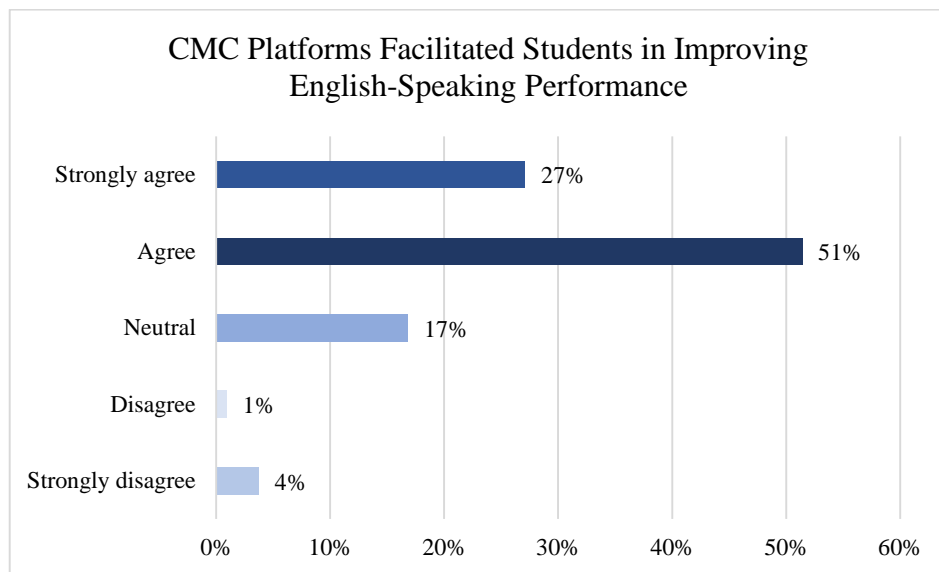
4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore first-semester English learners at a private university perception of how using digital communication platforms, such as Free4Talk, InterPals, and HelloTalk, contributed to their English-speaking practice. These platforms allow students to interact with peers and native speakers through various online communication tools, such as voice chats, video calls, and text messaging. The analysis results are condensed into one statement that summarizes the key points, which is “CMC Platforms Facilitated Students in Improving English-Speaking Performance” with the following calculations:

The average of 107 responses is 11.52 out of 12. The average range is 76.76, with the following calculation results.

Table 1. Students' perceptions frequency

No	Range	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	20 - 36	Strongly disagree	4	4%
2	36,1 - 52,1	Disagree	1	1%
3	52,2 - 68,2	Neutral	18	17%
4	68,3 - 84,3	Agree	55	51%
5	84,4 - 100	Strongly agree	29	27%
Total			107	100%

**Figure 1. Chart of students' perceptions percentage**

The questionnaire results indicated a generally positive perception of the effectiveness of these platforms. Specifically, 27% of respondents strongly agreed that the platforms helped them improve their English-speaking practice, while 51% agreed. A smaller portion, 17%, remained neutral, 1% disagreed, and 4% strongly disagreed with the statement.

In the present study, the majority of students (78%) expressed a positive perception of online platforms such as Free4Talk, HelloTalk, and InterPals, agreeing that these platforms facilitated the improvement of their English-speaking skills. They indicated that the features of these platforms, particularly those enabling real-time communication with foreign interlocutors.

This, in turn, expanded the range of topics they could discuss in English, providing opportunities for varied practice. These findings align with existing literature on the effectiveness of synchronous communication platforms for language learning. For instance, Al Ghazali (2020) reported that learners view social networking sites as valuable

tools for reinforcing linguistic performance, especially when they facilitate interaction with native speakers or other learners. Similarly, Alghammas (2020) found that students perceive web-based synchronous speaking platforms as effective tools for improving speaking skills and confidence. Kobayashi (2024) recommended integrating platforms like Zoom and Padlet support speaking performance. Gelen and Tozluoglu (2021) found specifically about the platform of Free4Talk, where it provides a free and secure space that enhances language practice, and motivates learners at different levels of proficiency.

Then, another platform like HelloTalk considered as an effective tool for practicing speaking (Rosilah & Ulfa, 2024). In the other study, Sadeghi and Chalak (2023a) indicated that HelloTalk positively influenced learners' independence, it can enhance autonomous language learning. It also can facilitate English teaching (Sadeghi & Chalak, 2023b), and improve self-confidence (Damayanti, Hifdil, & Hamdani, 2024; Canals, 2020). It might be possible because of the ease of using these communication platforms to find foreign conversation partners. In this study, the students primarily mentioned the global reach and diverse users as the advantage of using SCMC, as York, Shibata, Tokutake, and Nakayama (2021) who also found that SCMC was making fun atmosphere make new friends from other countries. The platform allows them to connect with people from various countries, making it easy for them to find their own interlocutors that they would not find as in face-to-face class.

However, Bagheri and Mohamadi Zenouzagh (2021), who found that face-to-face and CMC conversation modes exhibit different levels of limited and elaborated engagement, although the difference is not far. Takase (2024) emphasized the difference between synchronous and asynchronous CMC communication, in synchronous zoom communication, the learners simplified their communication and decreased sentence complexity compared to the asynchronous one. From that study result, we can say that in the SCMC mode students can improve their vocabulary production.

Despite the overall positive feedback, the findings suggest that simply providing access to these platforms is not sufficient to guarantee improvements in speaking skills. For instance, pedagogical challenges, Gulzar, Ali, and Bagram (2022) discussed challenges faced by students using synchronous communication technologies in business English contexts, SCMC is good to promote speaking practice yet it needs good supported technical terms such as good internet connection and well-planned lesson. Martin (2021) and Wadie (2022) also mentioned that poor connection hindered the flow of communication. In this study, while 78% of respondents reported positive views, 17%

expressed neutral opinions, and 5% (1% disagreed, 4% strongly disagreed) were dissatisfied with the platforms' effectiveness mainly due to lack of technical issues such as poor audio and video quality, especially with unstable networks. Some also said about user less engagement because it was difficult to find consistent partners and lack of feedback or correction.

In addition, the findings underscore the need for further exploration of the specific factors influencing the success of these platforms. Martin (2021) and Hidayat, Djatmika, and Ngadiso (2022) emphasize that the quality of interactions and student motivation play significant roles in shaping learners' perceptions of online language-learning platforms. Similarly, Sadeghi and Chalak (2023b) highlighted the role of learner autonomy in improving the effectiveness of platforms like HelloTalk.

The findings of this study also contribute to the ongoing discussion about platform evaluation in language learning. Belda-Medina (2021) explored how multimodal interaction in synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC) enhances communicative competence, aligning with the view that platforms like Free4Talk and HelloTalk provide opportunities for meaningful conversation. Salhy and Darir (2024) similarly noted that platforms like Free4Talk may be effective in improving fluency. Further investigation into how students interact with these platforms could help identify specific features that promote engagement and fluency development.

The present study confirms that synchronous online platforms like Free4Talk, HelloTalk, and InterPals facilitate students in English-speaking practice. While the majority of students found these platforms helpful, particularly due to the real-time interactions they enabled with native speakers and other learners, the mixed and negative perceptions expressed by a smaller subset of students suggest that factors such as student motivation, interaction quality, and platform design significantly influence their effectiveness. Thus, it is crucial for educators to not only incorporate these platforms into their teaching practices but also to tailor their usage to the diverse needs and learning preferences of students.

5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

In conclusion, the results of this study suggest that platforms such as Free4Talk, InterPals, and HelloTalk are generally perceived as effective in facilitating English-speaking practice. However, a small percentage of students reported neutral or negative experiences, regarding technical issues. These findings suggest to the selection of

alternative options for improving English-speaking. English online conversation with foreign interlocutors via free online platform can be a good option for language learners to practice their English-speaking.

This study is limited to perceptions based on students' brief experiences with SCMC while interacting with foreign interlocutors. Future studies could focus on long-term experiences to provide deeper insights, which would strengthen and enhance the relevance of students' perceptions. These studies could also further explore aspects such as conversation frequency, interaction quality, and platform design.

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