

LEVERAGING FREE4TALK.COM IN PROVIDING SPEAKING PRACTICE FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS THROUGH SELF-DETERMINED LEARNING

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Abstract

In today's digital landscape, technology has become more accessible, providing significant support to users, particularly English learners. This study is motivated by the issue of low English-speaking proficiency among students, attributed to limited exposure due to restricted learning duration and insufficient practice opportunities. Additionally, the need for self-directed and flexible learning methods has become increasingly crucial, particularly in this digital era. This research aims to explore the use of Free4talk.com platform as a device to enhance students' English proficiency through a self-determined learning. This research employs qualitative research through case study approach. This study will be carried out with collecting data, reducing data, displaying data and drawing the conclusion. The participants include the students from English Education study program under the Faculty of Education at Nahdlatul Ulama University Yogyakarta. Besides, some English teachers who use this platform to maintain and practice their English skills are also included to be the participants. Data collection will be gathered through interviews. The findings will illuminate the utilization of Free4talk.com by some students and teachers in improving and practicing their English language via interactive communications and flexible learning. Moreover, the platform fosters cross-cultural exchanges among the users from diverse countries.

Keywords: Free4talk.com, speaking, English learners, self-determined learning

1. Introduction

In the era of globalization and technological advancement, mastering English speaking skills is increasingly essential for both academic and professional success (Lestari & Pd, 2022). English has become the global lingua franca, and proficiency in speaking is one of the most challenging areas for language learners (Gelen & Tozluoglu, 2021). However, many students struggle with their speaking proficiency due to limited exposure and insufficient opportunities for practice, particularly in non-native English-speaking countries like Indonesian people. They only depend on the chances given by the English teacher in the classroom. Even if they are given a chance, many of the students have no confident at all or often get stuck specially when they are put in front of the class. This situation frequently becomes a big concern for many English learners particularly in the formal school (Kurniasih & Lisan, 2023). Consequently, learners frequently miss the necessary practice to develop fluency and confidence for real-world communication (Hanifah & Lisan, 2024).

In traditional language learning environments, speaking practice is often constrained by time limitations and the formal setting of the classroom. Students typically receive limited hours of speaking practice, which may not be sufficient for achieving fluency. This challenge is exacerbated by the fact that many learners rely solely on structured classroom settings, where speaking opportunities may be scarce. In fact, sometimes the real situations



in the class doesn't support them to have more chance to speak in a long duration and various topics. It cannot be denied since the formal school have a syllabus and target topics to be accomplished since it causes the restricted time for speaking. Consequently, learners often lack the practice necessary to develop the fluency and confidence required for effective communication in real-world contexts (Hanifah & Lisan, 2024). In the field of English language learning, one of the main shortcomings at various class levels is the lack of practice that allows the knowledge and science related to English that has been obtained during learning (Niswa et al., 2024). At the student level, the input of English material and knowledge that has been obtained at the previous level such as elementary school, junior high school or high school should be considered sufficient to teach English through speaking or other skills. Unfortunately, this has not been realized properly and optimally. Many students, especially at Nahdlatul Ulama University in Yogyakarta, still have limited English proficiency. One of the reasons is that students do not use or instil it when they are outside the classroom. They only consider it as input and do not use it as output and finally in terms of practice, it is still very disproportionate (Maji et al., 2022). In addition to limited linguistic factors, some of the reasons why students have problems in speaking skills are due to several factors including fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence and also feeling less comfortable when speaking English. This also results in a very low portion of practice.

The digital revolution has introduced new opportunities for learners to engage in autonomous language learning. Online platforms provide interactive and flexible environments where learners can practice speaking with peers from around the world (Global, 2023). One such platform is Free4Talk.com, a free online platform that connects users globally for real-time voice conversations. Users can engage in conversations with individuals from various countries, allowing for authentic, spontaneous speaking practice.

The impact of globalization and digital era is a significant increase in cross-cultural understanding and intercultural communication (Eppendi et al., 2024). The users also began to understand each other's culture including through online and digital media. They don't need to be present in a particular place at certain time thanks to the advance of the technology. It is mentioned earlier that English has become the most widely used online language, with around 1 billion users in online chats and other social media (Ilyosovna, 2020). This is because if someone is able to understand and use English, they have the opportunity to access online resources, follow world news, and even participate in various forums (Awaliyah et al., 2022). Moreover, the ability to recognize and understand intercultural differences within the scope of cross-cultural understanding in various countries is increasingly important as it is also a requirement of being a global citizen. The concept of a global citizen has emerged alongside the rapid pace of globalization. Global citizenship arises from diversity with the aim of expanding inclusivity on a global level, ultimately creating a global society that fosters world peace (Apandi et al., 2022). It leads to quite essential situation where global citizens need to be aware of inclusive perspective and understanding as an interrelated nation. Pertaining to this issue, English absolutely plays a vital role to achieve and create such a global citizen.

In addition to learners getting a communication learning community from various countries including countries around the world (Kukulka-Hulme, 2017). They also automatically learn cultures between countries because of the intensity and flexibility of the Free4talk.com platform. In seeing the relationship between language and culture, language in its function aims to express, display, and symbolize cultural reality, so that intercultural competence is created for learners (McLoughlin & Lee, 2010). This



competence is a competence that is possessed by someone to interact with people from other cultures by adhering to the ability to appreciate their own culture and empathy for foreign cultures so that it ultimately creates the ability to behave appropriately in understanding a culture or different cultures (Bahasa & Padang, 2023).

The concept of *heutagogy*, or self-determined learning, has gained prominence in recent years as learners are increasingly taking control of their own educational journeys (Protection & Protection, 2022). In heutagogy approach, learners determine their learning needs, set goals, and manage their progress independently (Irving, 2016). This model aligns well with the use of digital platforms like Free4Talk.com, where learners are responsible for initiating and managing their learning experiences. In contrast to pedagogy and andragogy, heutagogy emphasizes the learner's autonomy and capacity to self-direct their learning in response to personal goals and interests (Sharma, 2014). With the flexible, informal structure of Free4Talk.com, learners can autonomously select conversation partners, topics, and schedules, thus tailoring their learning experiences to their individual needs (Canning, 2010).

Heutagogy is a learning that is in accordance with the current digital revolution because it combines various approaches that make students feel free to learn (Handayani et al., 2022). This means providing opportunities for learners to practice independent learning in order to develop self-confidence and responsibility and improve language skills gradually according to their respective abilities (Corthout et al, 1994). The Heutagogy approach specifically emphasizes that it is very important that a student who is no longer in a special program, they still need a place to maintain and improve their learning skills continuously (Cole, 2022). Therefore, the Heutagogy approach in self-determined learning is expected to be able to stimulate and motivate interest in learning, activate independent learning, and in this case improve students' English skills comprehensively and continuously so that learners can achieve their respective targets in learning English.

This research aims to explore how Free4Talk.com can be used as a tool to enhance English learners' speaking proficiency through self-determined learning. The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent does Free4Talk.com foster self-determined learning?
2. What are the perceived benefits and challenges of using Free4Talk.com for speaking practice?

Given the increasing importance of self-determined learning in the digital age, this study contributes to the existing body of research on technology-enhanced language learning. It provides insights into how English learners leverage digital platforms to enhance their speaking skills outside of traditional classroom settings. Additionally, this study explores the role of cross-cultural exchanges facilitated by Free4Talk.com, highlighting the potential for fostering intercultural competence alongside language proficiency.

2. Methods

This research employs a qualitative method with using case study approach, focusing on exploring the experiences of English learners using Free4Talk.com. A case study design was chosen because it allows for an in-depth investigation of participants' interactions with the platform in a naturalistic setting, providing detailed insights into the



phenomenon being studied (Sugiyono, 2016). This is suitable for the researcher to find out a deep information related to the benefits and also challenge pertaining to the research. The participants in this study were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on individuals who actively use Free4Talk.com for English-speaking practice. The participants included ten undergraduate students from the English Education program at Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Yogyakarta from various batches starting from 2021, 2022 and 2023. Furthermore, the researcher involved two English teachers who use the platform to practice and maintain their English-speaking skills.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and observations. The interviews were conducted with each participant to gather insights into their experiences using Free4Talk.com. The questions focused on how participants used the platform for speaking practice, their motivations for self-determined learning, the benefits during the use of the platform and the challenges they faced. The observations were also made by joining selected Free4Talk.com session from the students to observe and analyze the conversation and the interactive dynamics communication between the users of this platform. To analyze the data, this research used Miles and Hubberman's data analysis (Syam et al., 2023). The analysis consists of three streams of activities that occur simultaneously, namely: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. In collecting the data, the researchers were selecting, focusing, and simplifying the raw data collected from interviews and observations. The next step was data reduction and data display to select the data needed and organizing the data into themes and patterns that emerged during the analysis. The last was drawing a conclusion where the researcher synthesized the findings to answer the research questions and formed conclusions based on the results.

3. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the research and followed by the discussion. As outlined in the data collection methods, the researchers gathered data through interviews and observations. After observing and interviewing both students and English teacher using the Free4talk.com platform, the researchers identified several findings, which will be elaborated in the following explanation. The researcher interviewed the students and also the English teachers during the use of this platform as well as asking their experiences and feedbacks. In certain moments, the researcher also joined in their chatroom to know how their conversations were conducted during the use of this platform. Based on the data collected from 4 two students of batch 2021, 4 students of batch 2022 and 3 students of batch 2023, they affirmed that there are some positives sides they obtained during using this application for several months. The following are brief explanations based on the interviews.

The students' batch 2021 said that this application assisted them to improve their English since some of them have also been a tutor in a course who also need to use English during teaching. They used this application to practice their English especially in speaking so that it could promote their fluency and pronunciation. They learned a lot from listening to many friends' dialect and speaking during their conversations. Besides, they also got some benefits since during the usage, they got a lot of friends from other countries, for example for Vietnam, Philippines, and India. Furthermore, they said that it's simple and free which made them like this apps compared to other apps.



Pertaining to the students from batch 2022, most of them felt glad that they know this apps. Some of them are still in low proficiency of English. So, they use this for certain times in a week and continuously for one or two months. The result was that they can have more confident since they get used to speak with people especially from various countries during utilizing this apps. One of them said that this was the first time she enjoyed speaking using English with people from other countries. She didn't feel shy or anxious since she didn't need to reveal her face to other people or having face to face conversation through video. She said that it happened because almost every day she used this apps to practice.

Furthermore, the students' batch 2023 emphasized that they also got more confident to speak in English after using this apps for several weeks. They got some friends from middle east countries like Pakistan, Iran and Yaman. They felt more enthusiastic using this platform to get more friends from abroad to know more about other countries' cultures and information. One of them said that they were more confident owing to the relaxed environment using this apps. This apps offered so many chatrooms where can be adjusted and selected based on the needs. For instance, they would get same level of English proficiency and it caused them to be more relaxed where they also learned English together. In other case, some of higher level are quite helpful and enjoying the conversation since they not only teach, but also learn many information and culture about each country.

Besides, the researcher also asked two English teacher who also used this apps for some period of time. During the interview, they shared the same problem that they often don't use or practice their English except only when they use them in the classroom to teach English to their students. It also only can be realized when the classroom is conducive and the students can follow their speaking related to the materials. However, when it comes to a more difficult discussion or explanation, the teacher forcedly used Indonesian Language during the classroom. Besides, the English teacher often get stuck in speaking English with certain topics like science and politics or other fields they never discussed or mastered before. Thanks to this apps that they not only maintain their English-speaking skills since they have a partner to do anytime and anywhere, but they also can be more fluent to discuss with any kind of fields and also sharpen their critical thinking during the discussion with some friends from different countries. In addition, one of the teachers said that this would be a very good technique for the learners who want to practice English through autonomous learning or applying self-determined learning. She added that the flexible learning offered by Free4talk.com could help the English learners find easy to access and utilize this apps. The easy accessibility also allowed them to control and manage their own personalized learning. The other teacher said that cultural exchange promoted by this apps would definitely help many English learners not only improving their English skills but also widen their knowledge of other cultures and information from different countries which this will lead to become a good global citizen. Both of the English teacher agreed that this apps also would help the students in personalizing their learning of English. This apps are free and simple which cause the students can utilize it any where and any time they need. The convenience of easy access, along with the flexibility of time and location, enables users to tailor their learning experience. They have the freedom to adapt their learning style to meet their personal goals while using this platform.

However, some of students and also the English teacher said that there are some issues which become challenges in using this apps. Different dialect from each country often make beginner would find difficulties to grasp the message or the conversation. One English



teacher said that since this apps is formed like a chatroom group, so this cause lack of structured learning. There is no step-by-step learning especially in terms of grammar or vocabularies. The users need to be more independent in terms of their own goals of learning. Furthermore, the other drawback is the potential of spam or inappropriate behaviours from the users, for instance, rude words or get kicked out from the room many times. There is also a bit struggle to find appropriate room for the users since many of the chatroom are sometimes only providing a limited capacity of the users.

Based on the data, it can be revealed several key findings related to the use of Free4Talk.com by English learners. Those are:

1. **Improved Speaking Skills:** Participants involved during the interviews reported significant improvements in their speaking fluency, pronunciation, and confidence. Many of the students highlighted the value of engaging in spontaneous conversations with native and non-native speakers from around the world, which provided them with diverse linguistic input. This apps help them a lot to improve the speaking skills for students, while the English teacher also could enhance especially maintain the exposure of their English since they become the sources of English for their students in the classroom.
2. **Cross-Cultural Competence:** One of the unexpected findings was the role of Free4Talk.com in fostering intercultural communication. Participants noted that engaging with speakers from various countries expanded their cultural awareness, which enhanced both their linguistic and cultural competence. Based on the data collected, the participants got many friends especially around south-east Asian countries and also middle-east countries who also use this apps for learning English. This widen their opportunity to be a good global citizen started by this digital platform as the trigger.
3. **Autonomous Learning:** Most participants indicated that Free4Talk.com allowed them to practice speaking in an autonomous and flexible manner. They appreciated the platform's lack of formal constraints, which allowed them to control when and how they practiced. The easy accessibility and also flexible time and place allowed the users to manage their own type of learning. They can personalize their learning style to achieve the goals they want during using this platform.

These findings suggest that Free4Talk.com is a valuable tool for promoting self-determined learning and enhancing English-speaking proficiency as well as promoting cultural exchanges as being a global citizen. The platform's flexibility aligns with the principles of heutagogy, allowing learners to take control of their learning processes and to personalize their own learning pace. However, the challenges faced by some learners highlight the need for additional strategies to cope with in order to support and maintain the learner's motivation and consistency in using this apps through self-directed learning environments.

4. Conclusions

This study explored how English learners use Free4Talk.com to improve their speaking skills through self-determined learning. The findings indicate that the platform provides significant benefits in terms of speaking practice, cross-cultural exchanges and



autonomous learning. The English learners may require additional support to maintain regular engagement and maximize the platform's potential. However, as said in the findings, some of drawbacks like different dialects, lack of structured learning, and potential spam or inappropriate behaviours of users also become the challenge during the use of this apps. Future research could investigate the integration of more structured guidance within informal learning platforms to enhance learners' outcomes. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on digital language learning and self-determined learning, offering practical insights for educators and learners seeking flexible, autonomous approaches to language acquisition.

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