Students' Perception of the *Free4talk* Website as A Self-learning Media to Improve Speaking Skills of the First Year English Education Students at the University of Mataram

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Abstract

This research explores the perceptions of first-year students in the English Education Program at the University of Mataram regarding the use of Free4Talk as a self-directed learning platform to improve their English-speaking skills. In response to the growing need for flexible and accessible language learning tools, Free4Talk offers a real-time communication environment that allows users to engage in spontaneous conversations with global speakers. The study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data from student questionnaires and qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews to obtain a comprehensive understanding of student experiences and attitudes. The results reveal that most students perceive Free4Talk positively, especially in terms of enhancing their speaking fluency, vocabulary, pronunciation, and confidence. The platform's ease of access, time flexibility, and informal setting were seen as major advantages that support learner autonomy. Students reported feeling more motivated and less pressured compared to traditional classroom settings, which enabled them to experiment with language more freely. However, the platform was found to lack structured content, goal-setting features, and pedagogical support, which are crucial for sustained progress and skill development. Despite its benefits, several challenges were identified, including technical difficulties such as unstable internet connections and poor audio quality, psychological barriers like fear of making mistakes and anxiety when interacting with strangers, as well as limited availability of serious and constructive conversation partners. The absence of feedback and measurable progress tracking also hindered students' ability to monitor improvement. These findings suggest that while Free4Talk serves as a useful supplementary tool for speaking practice, it is not sufficient as a stand-alone learning medium. Therefore, its integration into formal instruction, guided by educators, could significantly enhance its effectiveness in fostering English-speaking proficiency among EFL learners.

Keywords
Free4Talk, student perception, self-learning, speaking skills, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), first-year students

INTRODUCTION

Speaking skills in English are a fundamental and essential aspect for students in the English Education Program. These skills involve the ability to express ideas, interact effectively, and use language appropriately according to context. Speaking skills also support mastery of other aspects, such as fluency, accuracy, vocabulary, and pronunciation (Brown, 2007). For students, especially those in their first year, speaking skills are essential as they open up opportunities for success in both academic and professional fields.

Despite its importance, many students face challenges in developing their speaking skills. Among these challenges are low confidence, limited vocabulary, difficulties with pronunciation, and a lack of fluency. According to Rahman & Azhimia (2022), speaking anxiety is a predominant issue among EFL students in Indonesia, caused by fear of making mistakes, cultural norms discouraging public speaking, and limited exposure to English communication outside of class.

At the University of Mataram, similar challenges are evident among students of the English Education Study Program. Based on the observation conducted, many students revealed that they rarely practice speaking English outside of class, and most experience anxiety or fear when speaking, particularly in formal situations or in public. This anxiety is often related to the fear of making mistakes and a lack of self-confidence. The issue is further exacerbated by limited opportunities to practice speaking in real-life contexts, as

classroom activities tend to focus more on grammar and theory than on interactive speaking practice.

A study conducted by Lamila (2020) at Muhammadiyah University Surakarta in 2018 also provides a similar picture. This study identified several types of speaking anxiety experienced by first semester students, such as social anxiety and cognitive anxiety, which often arise due to fear of making mistakes and feelings of embarrassment when speaking in public. Furthermore, the study found that speaking anxiety in first year students is influenced by uncertainty and a lack of experience in actively speaking English, which aligns with the findings about the limited opportunities for practicing speaking outside of class. This anxiety hampers their ability to communicate effectively in real-life situations and limits their speaking experience outside the academic environment.

A key issue in traditional language education is the limited opportunities for students to practice speaking in real-world contexts. In class activities often focus on grammar drills, vocabulary exercises, and written tasks, leaving little room for spontaneous oral communication. To address this gap**,** self-directed learning (SDL) offers a promising solution. SDL allows learners to take control of their learning process, setting goals, finding resources, and evaluating their progress (Zubaidi & Amanah, 2024). It is particularly relevant for language learners who need flexibility and independence in acquiring speaking skills. SDL empowers students to engage in practice outside of formal classroom settings and is often

supported by digital tools and platforms like Free4Talk, which provide opportunities for real-time, interactive communication.

A previous study by Junaidi et al. (2020) also indicates that in Indonesia's EFL context, including at the University of Mataram, classroom-based learning often fails to provide sufficient opportunities for students to develop speaking skills. This underscores the need for alternative media that can support students in self-learning and effectively practicing their speaking skills.

With technological advancements, various online platforms have emerged as innovative solutions to address limitations in traditional language learning. One promising platform is Free4Talk, which offers real-time voice and video communication features. Free4Talk allows users to interact with speakers from diverse backgrounds in a relaxed atmosphere without formal pressures. Studies have shown that this platform helps students build confidence, expand their vocabulary, and improve their fluency through self-directed practice (Wahyuningsih & Maisyanah, 2021).

At University of Mataram, particularly in the English Education program, many first-year students struggle with speaking confidence due to limited exposure to real conversational practice outside the classroom. Traditional learning environments often focus on structured dialogues, written exercises, and grammar accuracy, leaving students with few opportunities to engage in spontaneous communication (Tawali, 2024). As a result, students may feel anxious when speaking English, lack fluency, and hesitate to express themselves in real world situations.

As part of Generation Z, these students are digital natives who are accustomed to using online platforms for communication, learning, and social interactions. The integration of technology in education aligns with their preferences, making digital solutions like Free4Talk a relevant and accessible tool for improving their speaking skills. Free4Talk provides a flexible, pressure free space where students can practice English independently, interact with various speakers, and build confidence through real-time conversations.

This study aims to explore first year students' perceptions of using Free4Talk as a self-learning tool to improve their English-speaking skills, as well as the challenges they encounter during its use. In terms of perceptions, the study focuses on how students view the usefulness of the platform, its ease of use, their comfort level when speaking with strangers or native speakers, and the platform's impact on their confidence and fluency. At the same time, this research also seeks to identify the specific challenges students face when using Free4Talk, such as technical issues, language anxiety, lack of speaking partners, time management difficulties, or feelings of intimidation when speaking with more fluent users. Understanding both their perceptions and the obstacles they encounter is essential to evaluate the platform's overall effectiveness and practicality. These insights may help improve the learning experience and guide the integration of tools like Free4Talk into language learning programs more effectively.

The urgency of this study lies in its ability to identify the benefits and challenges students experience when using this platform as a self-learning tool. By understanding students' perceptions, this research is expected to provide useful insights for developing more effective English language learning programs that align with students' needs. Additionally, the findings from this study are expected to serve as a foundation for recommending the integration of Free4Talk into the curriculum as a support for English language learning.

While previous research has explored various online platforms for language learning, limited studies have examined the effectiveness of Free4Talk specifically within Indonesia's EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating how Free4Talk may address specific challenges faced by Indonesian students in developing English speaking skills, particularly in overcoming cultural and educational barriers unique to this environment.

This research also holds significance in the context of language education in the digital era. With technological advancements, the digitalization of language education provides students with broader and more flexible access to practice speaking skills. The findings of this research are expected not only to benefit students in improving their speaking skills but also to assist educators and policymakers in developing innovative and responsive teaching strategies that meet the demands of the times (Anandari, 2015).

Through this research, it is hoped that a clearer picture will emerge of how student perceptions of Free4Talk can contribute to supporting English language learning that is more comprehensive and in line with students' needs.

RESEARCH METHODS
Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, which integrated both quantitative and qualitative approaches to gain a comprehensive understanding of students' perceptions and challenges in using the Free4Talk platform as a self-learning tool for improving their English-speaking skills. According to Creswell & Clark (2018), mixed-methods research involves collecting and analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data to explore a research problem more thoroughly. In this study, quantitative data were obtained through a questionnaire that measured students' perceptions after using Free4Talk. Qualitative data were collected through a group interview that explored the specific challenges students faced while using the platform. The use of a mixed-methods approach allows for triangulation (Patton, 2015), which strengthened the credibility of the findings by validating quantitative results with qualitative insights.

Time and Setting of the Research

The research was carried out over four weeks, from 16 April to 19 May 2025, during the 2024/2025 academic year. The study was conducted at the English Education Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, University of Mataram, located in West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia.

Object and Participants of the Study

The object of this study was the use of the Free4Talk website as an online platform to support autonomous learning in developing English-speaking skills. The participants were first-year students of the English Education Program at the University of Mataram, academic year 2024/2025. A total of 20 students completed the questionnaire, while six students who actively used the platform were selected to participate in a group interview. The selection of participants for the interview was based on their willingness and active

engagement with the platform during the implementation period.

Data Collection Techniques

This research employed four primary data collection techniques: observation, questionnaire, interview, and documentation. These methods were chosen to ensure a rich and comprehensive understanding of the use of the Free4Talk platform as a self-learning tool for improving students' speaking skills.

Observation in qualitative research used to capture real-time behavior and context related to the research object. According to Suwendra (2018), observation is the process of collecting data by using the five senses or technological tools to directly witness events or situations. In this study, non-participant observation was conducted during the first and second weeks of the research, focusing on how students were introduced to and practiced using the Free4Talk platform. The researcher did not interfere in the classroom process but used an observation checklist and took supporting documentation such as photographs. These sessions aimed to observe student engagement, responsiveness, and the overall implementation of Free4Talk in a learning setting. Observations were conducted three times during the period from 19 April to 3 May 2025.

The questionnaire was used to gather quantitative data related to students' perceptions after using the Free4Talk website. As noted by Sugiyono (2010), a questionnaire is a data collection technique conducted by giving a set of written questions to respondents for them to answer. In this study, the questionnaire consisted of Likert-scale statements that explored several dimensions: the usefulness and ease of the Free4Talk platform, students' motivation and interest in speaking, self-reported improvement, and how frequently they used the platform for speaking practice. The questionnaire was distributed during Week 3, from 4 to 9 May 2025, after students had been exposed to Free4Talk for two weeks. A total of 20 first-year students of the English Education Program at Mataram University participated in the questionnaire. The results provided measurable indicators of students' experiences and attitudes, which were later compared and validated through interview and documentation data.

The questionnaire consisted of 19 items designed to explore students' perceptions and experiences in using Free4Talk as a self-learning tool for improving English speaking skills. These items are divided into two main categories: positive perceptions (items 1–12) and challenges faced (items 13–19). The first part focuses on how students perceive the benefits of Free4Talk. It includes aspects such as accessibility (item 1), comfort and increased self-confidence when speaking English (items 2 and 7), the variety and relevance of discussion topics, and the ability to choose speaking partners based on their level (items 3 and 4). It also evaluates the overall learning experience and flexibility of the platform (items 5 and 6), as well as improvements in specific speaking skills such as pronunciation, fluency, and vocabulary acquisition (items 8–11). Lastly, it addresses how Free4Talk may encourage learners to take more responsibility for their own learning (item 12).

The second part of the questionnaire aims to identify technical, psychological, and structural barriers students might face. These include difficulty finding active speaking partners (item 13), unstable internet connections (item 14), and

speaking with users who do not use proper English (item 15). Other issues include the lack of guidance on how to use Free4Talk effectively (item 16), the unstructured nature of the interactions compared to classroom settings (item 17), feelings of anxiety when talking to strangers (item 18), and the fear of making mistakes when speaking English (item 19). Overall, this questionnaire helps the researcher gain a comprehensive understanding of both the advantages and limitations of using Free4Talk as a language learning platform, which supports the investigation into its effectiveness and areas for improvement.

Interviews were conducted to explore in greater depth the challenges students faced while using the Free4Talk platform. According to Anggito & Setiawan (2018), interviews are used to obtain in-depth data by allowing respondents to express their personal experiences, thoughts, and opinions related to the research topic. The type of interview used in this study was semi-structured, which, as described by Sugiyono (2010), allows the researcher to follow a prepared list of questions while remaining flexible to explore new insights that arise during the conversation.

In this research, the interview was held in Week 4, specifically on 10 May 2025, and involved a group of six first-year students who had actively used Free4Talk. The interview was conducted in a group setting, allowing the participants to discuss and reflect on shared challenges such as technical difficulties, anxiety in speaking with strangers, trouble finding serious speaking partners, and other barriers they encountered. The interview lasted approximately 45 minutes, and with the participants' permission, it was recorded for accuracy and later transcribed for analysis.

Documentation was used as a supporting technique to enrich and validate the data collected from the other methods. According to Suwendra (2018), documentation involves collecting data from written or visual sources that are relevant to the research. In this study, documentation included screenshots of Free4Talk sessions, guidance materials, photos from observation sessions, and researcher field notes. These documents served to provide contextual evidence of student engagement, the implementation process, and the environment in which the Free4Talk platform was used.

Data Analysis Techniques
Quantitative Data Analysis

Survey responses are analyzed using **descriptive statistics** (e.g., percentages, means, and standard deviations) to identify general trends in students' perceptions of Free4Talk.

Table 1. Likert Scale Categories and Mean Score Ranges

Scale	Level of Agreement	Mean Score Range
1	Strongly Disagree	1.00-1.79
2	Disagree	1.80-2.59
3	Neutral	2.60-3.39
4	Agree	3.40-4.19
5	Strongly Agree	4.20-5.00

The questionnaire analyzed by formula:

Mean = N $(f1\times1) + (f2\times2) + (f3\times3) + (f4\times4) + (f5\times5)$

Where:
- $f1f1$ = number of respondents who chose **Strongly Disagree (score 1)**
- $f2f2$ = number of respondents who chose **Disagree (score 2)**

- f3f3 = number of respondents who chose **Neutral (score 3)**
- f4f4 = number of respondents who chose **Agree (score 4)**
- f5f5 = number of respondents who chose **Strongly Agree (score 5)**
- NN = total number of respondents (i.e., N=f1+f2+f3+f4+f5N=f1+f2+f3+f4+f5)

Qualitative Data Analysis

The interview data in this study is analyzed using thematic analysis, a widely used method in qualitative research for identifying patterns and themes within textual data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis follows these key steps:

1. Transcription –All recorded interviews are transcribed word for word, ensuring that participants' responses are accurately documented.
2. Coding – The transcripts are systematically examined to identify recurring words, phrases, and patterns, which are then assigned codes for easier classification.
3. Categorization – The codes are grouped into broader categories and themes that reflect common student experiences, challenges, and perspectives on Free4Talk.
4. Interpretation – The emerging themes are analyzed to draw meaningful insights about students' perceptions, highlighting both the benefits and limitations of using Free4Talk for speaking practice.

This structured approach to thematic analysis allows for a clear and systematic interpretation of the qualitative data while maintaining the authenticity of participants' responses.

Triangulation

To enhance the validity and reliability of the findings, this study employs triangulation, a method used in research to compare and crosscheck different data sources (Denzin, 2012). In this study, survey results (quantitative data) are compared with interview findings (qualitative data) to gain a more complete and well-rounded understanding of students' perceptions of Free4Talk. The survey results provide a broad statistical overview of students' experiences. The interview data offers detailed personal insights, helping to explain why students may hold certain perceptions or face particular challenges. By integrating both types of data, triangulation ensures that the study findings are not solely reliant on one data source, reducing potential bias and increasing the overall credibility of the research.

Ethical Considerations

This research follows ethical guidelines to ensure that all participants' rights, privacy, and wellbeing are protected, as recommended in educational and social science research ethics frameworks (Cohen et al., 2018). The following principles are applied:

- Informed Consent – Each participant received a clear explanation of the study's objectives, procedures, and their rights. Participation was voluntary, and written consent is obtained before data collection begins.

- Confidentiality – Participants' personal details and responses are kept anonymous and securely stored to protect their privacy. Identifiers such as names are removed from transcripts and reports.

By adhering to these ethical principles, this study ensures that research integrity is maintained and that participants feel safe and respected throughout the process.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This research was conducted by using mixed-method research. The research presented the result of the data based on the formula that had been told before. The result of the data presented clearly with the procedure of conducted data in first year students at the University of Mataram. The researcher took 20 students to be sampling for this research. The researcher explained the result to find out the students' perceptions to improve speaking skills with Free4talk.

The researcher took 20 participants as sample for questionnaire and 6 students for interview. So, the research supported by the existence of the questionnaire were Adopted by (Bicen & Kocakoyun, 2018) given by online that designed by Google Form. For the Quantitative method namely using questionnaire, there are 19 questions. The numbers 1-5 are items for perceptions, the number 6-12 are items for benefit, the number 13-19 are items for challenges. Then for the Qualitative method, namely by interview using 10 questions which contain section on perception, benefits and challenges they face when using Free4Talk.

The table below presents the interpretation categories of the average scores based on the Likert scale. Each number on the scale (1–5) corresponds to a specific level of agreement and is associated with a particular range of mean scores. This interpretation is used to determine respondents' levels dof agreement with each statement in the questionnaire.

Table 2. Likert Scale Categories and Mean Score Ranges

Scale	Level of Agreement	Mean Score Range
1	Strongly Disagree	1.00-1.79
2	Disagree	1.80-2.59
3	Neutral	2.60-3.39
4	Agree	3.40-4.19
5	Strongly Agree	4.20-5.00

Accessibility & Usability

This category focuses on how students perceive the ease of accessing and using the Free4Talk platform. It includes items that evaluate how simple the platform is to open and operate, the attractiveness of conversation topics, and the extent to which students can control their user experience. These aspects are grouped together because they all deal with technical convenience and content navigation. The items reflect the practical functionality of the platform and its usability from the learner's perspective.

Table 3. Presents the results of the students' responses

No.	Statement	Mean	Interpretation
1	Free4Talk is easy to access	3.65	Agree
3	The topics are interesting	3.35	Neutral
4	I can choose partners by level	3.86	Neutral

Psychological Response

This category addresses the emotional and psychological reactions students experience when using

Free4Talk. It includes both positive responses, such as feeling comfortable, confident, and motivated, as well as negative feelings like anxiety and fear of making mistakes. The grouping is based on the affective domain of language learning, where emotions can significantly influence learner participation, engagement, and willingness to communicate. These perceptions are essential to understand how comfortable students feel in a real-time, social learning environment.

Table 4. Presents the results of the students' responses

No.	Statement	Mean	Interpretation
2	I feel comfortable speaking	3.35	Agree
5	Learning with Free4Talk is fun	3.55	Agree
7	I feel more confident speaking	3.55	Agree
18	I feel nervous with strangers	3.25	Neutral
19	I'm afraid of making mistakes	3.05	Neutral

Language Development

This category captures students' self-assessed improvement in specific aspects of English-speaking skills. It includes elements such as fluency, pronunciation, smoothness of speech, and vocabulary acquisition. All items under this category directly relate to the linguistic outcomes students aim to achieve through practice. They are grouped together because they reflect measurable progress in speaking competence, which is the main objective of using Free4Talk as a language-learning tool.

Table 5. Presents the results of the students' responses

No.	Statement	Mean	Interpretation
8	I improve my pronunciation	3.45	Agree
9	I become more fluent	3.45	Agree
10	I speak more smoothly	3.60	Agree
11	I learn new vocabulary	3.80	Agree

Learning Autonomy

This category reflects the extent to which students feel that Free4Talk encourages self-directed learning. It includes items that assess whether learners feel they can manage their own learning pace and whether they take personal responsibility for their progress. These statements are categorized here because they align with the principles of learner independence, emphasizing initiative and control in the learning process outside the classroom.

Table 6. Presents the results of the students' responses

No.	Statement	Mean	Interpretation
6	I can learn at my own pace	3.65	Agree
12	I feel more responsible	3.40	Agree

Interaction Challenges

This category consists of items that reveal difficulties students face in interacting with others on the platform. It includes barriers such as the availability of active speaking partners and the varying levels of English proficiency among users. These are grouped together because they reflect external limitations that affect the quality of peer communication. These challenges do not stem from the platform's design but rather from the unpredictable nature of real-time user interactions.

Table 7. Presents the results of the students' responses

No.	Statement	Mean	Interpretation
13	It is hard to find active partners	3.45	Agree
15	Not all users speak English well	3.55	Agree

Technical & Structural Barriers

This category includes issues related to infrastructure and the absence of formal learning support. It covers technical difficulties such as poor internet connections, as well as pedagogical concerns like the lack of guided instruction or clear structure compared to traditional classrooms. These are grouped together because they present obstacles that hinder the effectiveness of the platform, particularly for learners who benefit from more structured or teacher-led environments.

Table 8. Presents the results of the students' responses

No.	Statement	Mean	Interpretation
14	Internet connection is a barrier	3.65	Agree
16	Lack of guidance is a challenge	3.15	Neutral
17	Less structured than classrooms	3.35	Agree

The statements in the instrument can be grouped into six main categories. First, the Accessibility & Usability category includes three items (numbers 1, 3, and 4) related to the ease of access and available features on the Free4Talk platform. Second, the Psychological Response category consists of five items (numbers 2, 5, 7, 18, and 19), reflecting students' emotional responses such as comfort, confidence, nervousness, and fear of speaking with strangers or making mistakes.

Third, the Language Development category includes four items (numbers 8, 9, 10, and 11) that show students' perceptions of their progress in speaking skills, including improvements in pronunciation, fluency, smoothness, and vocabulary acquisition. Fourth, the Learning Autonomy category consists of two items (numbers 6 and 12), which describe the students' independence and sense of responsibility in the self-learning process.

Fifth, the Interaction Challenges category includes two items (numbers 13 and 15) that represent students' difficulties in finding active and suitable speaking partners on the platform. Lastly, the Technical & Structural Barriers category contains three items (numbers 14, 16, and 17), highlighting technical issues such as poor internet connection and the lack of clear guidance and structured learning paths in Free4Talk. This categorization helps simplify the analysis and better align the findings with the research focus on students' perceptions, benefits, and challenges in using Free4Talk as a self-learning tool for speaking skills.

Result of the Questionnaire

Based on the result of the questionnaire to subjects, the researcher found data that was relevant to research problems. The questionnaire aimed to investigate students' perceptions after using Free4Talk as a self-learning tool to improve their English-speaking skills. A total of 19 items were presented using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), covering various aspects such as accessibility, learning outcomes, user experience, and encountered challenges.

Based on the results, 13 out of 19 statements (approximately 68%) received a mean score in the **"Agree"** category. According to Arikunto (2010), a

perception can be considered valid and generally positive if more than 60% of respondents provide positive responses (i.e., "Agree" or "Strongly Agree"). Therefore, this study meets the criteria for a **legit**imate positive perception, as the percentage of positive responses exceeds the 60% threshold. These findings confirm that most students had a favorable view of Free4Talk as a tool for improving speaking skills.

The highest-rated item was "I can choose partners by level" (Mean = 3.86)**,** showing that students appreciated the platform's flexibility in selecting speaking partners according to their proficiency. This feature contributes to more personalized and effective learning. Other high-rated statements included "I learn new vocabulary" (M = 3.80), "Free4Talk is easy to access" (M = 3.65)**,** and "I can learn at my own pace" (M = 3.65)**.** These indicate that students value the platform's convenience and ability to support independent learning.

In terms of language development, students also agreed that the platform helped them become more confident in speaking (M = 3.55)**,** improved their fluency (M = 3.45)**,** enhanced their pronunciation (M = 3.45)**,** and allowed them to speak more smoothly (M = 3.60)**.** These results suggest that regular use of Free4Talk contributed positively to students' speaking performance and self-efficacy.

Despite the overall positive response, several statements received neutral ratings, highlighting challenges that some students faced. For instance, the statements **"**Lack of guidance is a challenge" (M = 3.15)**,** "I feel nervous with strangers" (M = 3.25)**,** and "I'm afraid of making mistakes" (M = 3.05) reflect areas where students experienced uncertainty or discomfort. These concerns imply that while students generally value Free4Talk, there are psychological and structural barriers that need to be addressed.

Arikunto's perspective reinforces the interpretation of these findings: although the majority of responses indicate a positive perception, the presence of several neutral responses signals that the learning experience was not without difficulty. Thus, additional support mechanisms—such as structured guidance, confidence-building strategies, and teacher facilitation—may be necessary to help students maximize the platform's potential and overcome the limitations of self-guided learning.

In conclusion, the questionnaire results demonstrate that students' perceptions of Free4Talk are largely positive, particularly in terms of its accessibility, flexibility, and impact on speaking skills. However, to further enhance its effectiveness, it is essential to address the emotional and technical challenges that some students still face.

Results of Interviews

To answer the second research question regarding the challenges students, face when using Free4Talk as a self-learning media to improve speaking skills, the researcher conducted semi structured interviews with six first year English Education students at Mataram University. Thematic analysis of the collected data revealed six major themes that describe the obstacles encountered by students during their use of Free4Talk. While all participants acknowledged that Free4Talk contributed positively to their speaking abilities especially in improving fluency, vocabulary, and building confidence they also highlighted several significant limitations. These limitations were mostly related to technical barriers, lack of structured content, psychological factors, and

the absence of pedagogical support typically expected from effective self-learning media.

1. Technical Issues (Internet Connectivity and Audio Quality)

One of the main challenges reported by all participants involved technical limitations, particularly unstable internet connections and poor audio quality. These issues frequently disrupted the natural flow of conversations, resulting in interrupted practice and limited speaking time. One student mentioned difficulties understanding conversations during weak connections and admitted to leaving sessions early. Others described recurring issues such as delayed audio, disconnections, and sound distortion, which negatively affected their ability to concentrate and communicate effectively.

"When my internet is slow, I cannot hear clearly, and the voice cuts off. I sometimes get frustrated and just leave the room." Participant 3. Participant 1 also added "When my signal is weak, I can't hear clearly. Sometimes I just leave the room." Such problems were especially frustrating for learners who relied on mobile data or unstable networks, making sustained participation difficult. These findings highlight that although Free4Talk offers open access, its effectiveness heavily depends on consistent internet connectivity. Without reliable infrastructure, learners may face frequent setbacks, lowering their motivation and confidence to engage in meaningful communication practice.

2. Lack of Structure and Pedagogical Guidance

Another key issue raised by all six participants was the absence of a structured learning framework within Free4Talk. Unlike classroom-based learning, the platform does not provide learners with clear goals, levels, or guided tasks. Students expressed uncertainty about their progress due to the lack of instructional direction. Many felt that without set objectives or feedback from a teacher, they were unsure if they were making improvements.

"I think it would be better if there's a level or topic guide. Now, I just talk randomly and I don't know if I improve or not." Participant 2. Additionally, several participants pointed out that conversations on the platform often lacked educational relevance, with random or unhelpful topics being common. *"There should be speaking levels or practice modules. I feel lost sometimes."* Participant 5. They emphasized the need for conversation modules or speaking levels to help guide practice sessions. This absence of structure made some students feel lost and unmotivated.

3. Psychological Barriers: Fear, Anxiety, and Low Confidence

Emotional and psychological obstacles also emerged as significant challenges. Participants frequently described feeling nervous, embarrassed, or hesitant when speaking, particularly in front of unfamiliar individuals or native speakers. These emotional responses often led students to avoid speaking altogether or remain silent in group sessions. *"I always worry they will laugh if I speak wrong."* Participant 6. The fear of making mistakes or being judged was a common concern. Some students reported that they would overthink before speaking, which slowed down spontaneous communication and affected fluency. *"I feel nervous when I*

talk to strangers, especially native speakers. I'm afraid they will judge my English." (Participant 5)

4. Difficulty in Finding Serious and Suitable Speaking Partners

Another consistent challenge identified was the difficulty in finding speaking partners who were serious about language learning. Participants noted that many users on the platform lacked focus or used Free4Talk for non-academic purposes. As a result, students often found themselves in conversations that were unproductive or off-topic.

"Some people just come to joke or talk nonsense. I want a serious conversation, but it's hard to find someone who really wants to learn" Participant 4. Several participants also encountered rooms where the other users lacked sufficient English proficiency, making meaningful dialogue difficult. "I want to talk about useful topics, but most people are not focused." Participant 3. The lack of a matching system based on proficiency levels or learning goals made it hard to find appropriate partners. Students suggested that features such as filters based on topics or levels would significantly improve the platform's usefulness for learning purposes.

5. Limited Feedback and Learning Progress Monitoring

The absence of feedback mechanisms within Free4Talk was another major concern expressed by all participants. Students indicated that there was no way to receive correction or evaluation of their speaking performance. Without feedback, they were unsure whether their grammar, pronunciation, or sentence structure was accurate. *"Nobody corrects my grammar or pronunciation. I feel like I just speak without knowing if it's right."* Participant 6.

"I don't know if my grammar or pronunciation is right. No one corrects me." Participant 2. This lack of feedback created uncertainty and feelings of stagnation. Some students described their learning experience as "blind practice," noting that they could not assess whether they were improving or simply repeating mistakes. The absence of a tracking feature also made it difficult for students to monitor their development or reflect on their learning journey.

6. Free4Talk's Role: Beneficial for Practice, Not Sufficient for Self-Learning

Despite the limitations discussed, all participants acknowledged that Free4Talk had value as a tool for practicing English speaking. However, they collectively agreed that the platform alone was insufficient for fully independent learning. Students described Free4Talk as useful for gaining speaking experience, but emphasized the need for additional structure and guidance to support long-term language development.

"It's useful to talk, but I still need more support like feedback or structure. It can't replace a real class." Participant 1. "With more features and guidance, Free4Talk could really help us learn by ourselves." Participant 6 Participants suggested that features such as structured topic discussions, grammar feedback, speaking level classifications, and progress tracking would enhance the platform's educational potential. These findings indicate that Free4Talk can be an effective supplementary tool, but it would benefit from pedagogical enhancements or integration into formal instruction to fully support autonomous learning goals.

Based on the interviews, we can conclude that, while Free4Talk is a useful additional tool for practicing English speaking, it falls short of meeting the criteria for an effective self-learning media. The primary challenges identified are unstable internet connections and poor audio quality, a lack of structured learning and instructional guidance, psychological barriers such as fear and anxiety, difficulty finding serious conversation partners, and a lack of feedback and progress monitoring.

In its current form, Free4Talk allows for spontaneous and informal speaking practice, but it does not yet provide the comprehensive features required for autonomous learning. For Free4Talk to evolve into a truly effective self-learning platform, it must incorporate improvements such as structured learning modules, level-based speaking rooms, built-in feedback systems, and anxiety-reducing environments for beginner learners. Only then can it fully support the development of speaking skills in a self-directed and pedagogically sound manner.

Discussion

Based on the data collected from both the questionnaire and the interviews, it can be concluded that most first year students of the English Education Study Program at Mataram University have a positive perception of using Free4Talk to improve their English-speaking skills. The students reported significant improvements in various areas, such as confidence, fluency, vocabulary acquisition, and pronunciation. Through real-time interaction with other learners and speakers from diverse backgrounds, students became more accustomed to speaking spontaneously and engaging in authentic conversations, which enhanced their overall communication skills. These findings align with Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory, which emphasizes the role of social interaction, observation, and experiential learning in developing new skills. In the context of Free4Talk, students benefit from the opportunity to engage in peer learning and gain language input in a natural setting.

Furthermore, the findings support Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis, which suggests that language acquisition occurs when learners are exposed to comprehensible input slightly above their current level (i+1). Free4Talk provides a platform where students are exposed to various forms of natural speech, thus allowing them to internalize vocabulary and language patterns in meaningful contexts. This is also in line with previous research, such as Ariatna et al. (2025) who found that online speaking platforms enhance learners' fluency, confidence, and communicative competence.

However, not all students considered Free4Talk to be fully effective as a self-learning tool. Several participants noted that the platform lacks a structured learning framework. They found it difficult to track their progress, set specific learning goals, or receive directed feedback, which hindered their ability to learn independently. This limitation reflects Holec's (1981) theory of learner autonomy, which argues that successful self-directed learning requires clear objectives, self-monitoring, and reflective tools to support learners in managing their own progress. In its current state, Free4Talk tends to function more as a conversational practice space rather than a comprehensive self-learning medium.

Moreover, the findings of this study reveal that while Free4Talk offers a valuable space for improving students' speaking fluency and confidence, but it's not sufficient for self-learning media. Many students expressed that although the platform encourages spontaneous conversation, it lacks

instructional guidance, structured progression, and feedback mechanisms that are crucial for independent learning. This highlights the need for integrating technological innovation in language learning platforms not only as a medium for interaction, but also as a tool that supports reflective and goal-oriented learning processes.

A relevant study by Farmasari et al. (2023) from the University of Mataram supports this point, stating that English preservice teachers show agentic projections toward innovation in online learning, recognizing the importance of incorporating ICT to overcome learning challenges and improve outcomes. This emphasizes that platforms like Free4Talk have significant potential provided they are enhanced with pedagogical structures that promote learner autonomy and self-regulation.

In addition to the lack of structure, students also encountered several technical, psychological, and pedagogical challenges when using Free4Talk. These challenges can be categorized into six key issues. First, the lack of structured learning on the platform made it difficult for some students particularly beginners to navigate their learning process. Unlike classroom settings where activities are guided and sequenced, Free4Talk offers spontaneous conversations without clear learning objectives or feedback mechanisms. As a result, students may struggle to measure their progress or identify specific areas for improvement. Second, unstable internet connectivity emerged as a significant technical barrier. Since Free4Talk operates in real time, interruptions caused by weak signals or disconnections can disrupt communication and discourage students from continuing their practice. This is particularly relevant in areas with limited internet infrastructure. Third, students reported difficulty in finding serious or active speaking partners. While the platform allows users to join open conversation rooms, not all participants are equally committed to language learning. Some may be passive, off topic, or lack the necessary proficiency in English, which reduces the quality of interaction and learning.

Fourth, the anxiety of speaking with strangers was a recurring psychological barrier. Some students expressed discomfort or nervousness when engaging in conversations with unfamiliar users, especially those from different cultural backgrounds. This hesitation can limit the frequency and depth of their speaking practice. Fifth, related to the previous point, several students admitted experiencing fear of making mistakes during conversations. This fear is commonly associated with language learning anxiety and can lead to reduced participation or overreliance on passive listening. According to Dörnyei's (2005) theory of motivation, such emotional barriers can inhibit language development unless learners feel supported in a low anxiety environment. Sixth, the absence of guidance or scaffolding during the learning process limited the effectiveness of Free4Talk for some students. Without prompts, structured topics, or progress tracking, less confident learners may feel directionless and find it difficult to maintain consistent practice or focus on specific language goals.

Overall, Free4Talk is seen as a useful tool for practicing speaking skills, especially in increasing fluency and confidence. However, to be fully effective as a self-learning medium, the platform still requires further development—such as the addition of level-based discussion rooms, built-in progress tracking, and structured feedback features. In its current form, Free4Talk serves better as a complementary tool rather than a standalone self-learning system. Therefore, for optimal results, its use should be integrated with other learning strategies that offer more structure and support.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that first year English Education students at Mataram University generally perceive Free4Talk positively as a self-learning tool to improve English-speaking skills, particularly in fluency, confidence, vocabulary, and pronunciation. This finding answers Research Question 1, which focuses on students' perceptions of using Free4Talk as a self-learning tool to improve their speaking skills.

Furthermore, students face several challenges when using the platform effectively: (1) technical problems such as unstable internet connectivity and poor audio quality; (2) lack of structure and pedagogical guidance, making it difficult for learners to set goals or follow a clear learning path; (3) psychological barriers, including fear of speaking, anxiety, and low self-confidence; (4) difficulty in finding serious and suitable speaking partners, which affects the quality of interaction; (5) limited feedback and the absence of tools for monitoring learning progress; and (6) while Free4Talk is beneficial for casual speaking practice, it is not sufficient as a standalone self-learning platform. This finding answers Research Question 2, which explores the challenges students face in using Free4Talk.

Students are encouraged to keep using Free4Talk to build fluency and confidence. To get better results, they should also use structured strategies like keeping a speaking journal, recording their speaking, and asking for feedback from teachers or peers. Teachers can help students use Free4Talk more effectively by setting clear speaking goals, giving reflective tasks, or linking Free4Talk activities to class assignments. They should also support students emotionally to reduce anxiety and boost participation. Free4Talk developers should improve the platform by adding level-based rooms, speaking prompts, and feedback tools. Features like goal-based partner matching and progress tracking would also help users learn more effectively and stay motivated. Future research could study how Free4Talk affects speaking skills over time or compare its impact across different student levels. It could also explore how combining it with other tools supports language learning.

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