

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

Speaking proficiency is an important aspect of a learner's progress toward mastering English. Speaking proficiency pertains to a learner's ability to orally convey thoughts, feelings, and information clearly, directly, and effectively through oral communication (Alamer & Al Khateeb, 2021). Dewaele and Li (2020) note that speaking is a productive skill that calls on the learner to use all of the language aspects - grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation - they have learned to communicate. The act of speaking is also social since speaking requires a learner to engage in a variety of social situations and contexts of communication (Zhang & Wang, 2020). Nguyen and Habók (2021) emphasized that speaking is a fundamental aspect of communicative competence. Nevertheless, achieving successful second language acquisition requires more than speaking ability alone, as learners' motivation, confidence, and access to sufficient opportunities for language practice play significant roles in developing communicative proficiency. To clarify, the students speaking proficiency in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) can be even more intimidating when speaking English is not a language routinely used for communication in each of the many countries this applies to.

Speaking performance refers to an individual's ability to communicate effectively in order to express ideas, intentions, opinions, and expectations Ghareeb (2020). As one of the most essential language skills, speaking plays a crucial role in daily communication and requires continuous practice in the appropriate use of language, pronunciation, and intonation Schmitt (2008). Over the past four decades, research on speaking in second language learning has expanded significantly, reflecting its growing importance in language education Derakhshan et al. (2016). Furthermore, globalization and the increasing role of English as an international language have heightened the demand for learners with strong speaking abilities across various professional and academic contexts. Previous studies have also demonstrated that several components of speaking

proficiency can be effectively developed through instruction in second and foreign language classrooms Derakhshan et al. (2016).

Nowadays, the idea of speaking performance or talk as performance exists for students as a fairly familiar concept. This is supported by the statement of Riadil (2020) that almost all teachers or lecturers require students to display their work results both individually and in groups in English learning activities to support the development of their speaking performance. One of the functions of speaking skills is speaking performance. According to Irawan et al. (2022), speaking performances are observable or measurable actions that are done to effectively convey a message to an audience, using a variety of criteria with the hope that the audience understands what is said. In addition, learners often experience limited practice opportunities, low motivation, insufficient vocabulary mastery, and a lack of self-confidence in speaking performance, which frequently leads to speaking anxiety. This anxiety manifests as fear of making mistakes, negative evaluation, and hesitation to speak, resulting in students feeling insecure when communicating with native English speakers Oradee (2012). .

However, many language learners face speaking anxiety, which impacts their performance in oral skills. Amira et al. (2021) define foreign language-speaking anxiety as very common, and this anxiety can contribute to a decrease in students' self-esteem when using English. Additionally, when they are in class, they may tend to be more anxious because they fear offending someone, may have limited vocabulary, may feel inadequate due to external pressures, and may feel self-conscious. Rao (2019) states that being skill proficient in speaking, has become important and necessary in everyday life and in a working context. However, traditional modalities support students in learning and not enough in practicing speaking. It is difficult to develop their speaking skills when they spend limited classroom time speaking, or if the students don't get individualized feedback on their speaking skills, or if it continues to be through lectured instruction.

Anxiety is a key component of foreign language learning because it affects how learners think and act in relation to language tasks. According to Ali and Anwar (2021), anxiety negatively impacts learners' overall experiences in foreign

language settings. Similarly, Azzahra and Fatimah (2023) define anxiety as a psychological state involving worry, nervousness, and fear, which influences learners' emotional reactions. Expanding on Azzahra and Fatimah's (2023) definition of language anxiety, Rashid (2021) indicates that anxiety is a multi-dimensional, more complex process that includes factors such as self-efficacy, fear, and worries of perceived evaluation from others. Specifically, Azzahra and Fatimah (2023) explain that language anxiety, especially in the English learning context, acts as a barrier to which learners are unable to adapt to the target language. While many learners tend to experience anxiety related to language learning, interaction with others leads learners to become frustrated and feel low in esteem, despite the frustrations described by Ali and Anwar (2021).

At the same time, technological advancements in information technology have also had an impact language and this has been seen with various digital tools to facilitate learning. One notable development has been the incorporation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) that can provide instructional resources that are interactive and adaptive to the student experience. In this instance, AI is a flexible tool that assists the learner in developing their speaking abilities of English in a format that is both tailored and responsive to their needs and to their instructional progression. AI, in this context, has modified the educational experience in that it allowed for flexibility in learning like never before, allowing the learner(s) the ability to learn, practice, and develop their speaking acumen anytime, anywhere, without the need for a traditional physical classroom. Chen et al. (2020) noted that AI application can overcome physical geographical barriers allowing learners the ability to practice their speaking aims with both a native student and peer users through multiple digital platforms (Hamuddin et al. 2018).

In the current digital era, a wide range of technological tools are available to support the development of speaking fluency, including applications such as Loora AI, Duolingo, and Rosetta Stone. Among these innovations, the English Language Speech Assistant (ELSA) has emerged as a prominent platform designed to facilitate and improve learners' spoken English proficiency. Based on App Store research, this app has been on the market since 2015 and is being used by more than 11,000 users around the world. ELSA Speak is ranked 18th in the

Global Education App category and provides language learning support for nine languages, including Hindi, English, Indonesian, Japanese, Thai, Korean, Portuguese, Spanish, and Vietnamese, Syabina & Rahman (2024). ELSA Speak offers a variety of practice activities specifically developed to improve learners' pronunciation at the word, phrase, and sentence levels. In addition, the application incorporates advanced features that help users refine their pronunciation and develop a more accurate American English accent. During the learning process, students listen to model pronunciations provided by the application and subsequently record their own speech using the microphone feature, allowing them to compare and improve their verbal production through immediate feedback.

According to Nguyen (2021), research in the field of second language acquisition has demonstrated that ELSA Speak, as an AI-powered speaking application, supports the development of various essential aspects of oral communication. These include pronunciation accuracy, stress placement, connected speech, syllable emphasis, word stress, and conversational competence, while providing learners with a low-anxiety environment that encourages speaking practice. In a traditional classroom setting performance, for example, could create anxiety and stress in students, leaving them seized in the moment, unlike ELSA that provides the ability to perform practice in their personal homes and receive immediate feedback on pronunciation, intonation, and fluency in their speaking ability. To further enhance the experience ELSA is relatively complete with a situational learning component, gamification elements, and a multicultural aspect to address students' varying backgrounds. Also, teachers have reported to use ELSA as a device to alert them to students who had issues with their pronunciation which can be followed-up to provide better and almost one-on-one instruction.

The effectiveness of AI-assisted learning was further supported by Qassrawi et al. (2024), who found significant improvements in learners' speaking fluency when AI-generated voice was integrated into language instruction. The research studies report findings of this phenomenon. The use of AI that provides knowledge about pronunciation errors through human-like characteristics

provides specific feedback, and reduces bias that may affect human evaluators, thus improving accuracy, fluency, and ease of learning to speak English. The use of an AI may also assist with any social discomfort regarding rehearsing English after finding errors in pronunciation. Not all research has shown positive results with AI-assisted language learning. For example, Yelta Pebriani et al (2024) conducted a study on speaking performance and found no significant differences in learners' speaking performance between AI speaking and non-AI speaking systems. They also refer to additional variables, including availability of technology, instructional strategies, applications of learning strategies, and motivation in the learners' process of acquiring a second language.

According to Warman et al. (2023), AI technologies have shown considerable potential in supporting introverted learners, who often feel more comfortable practicing speaking with AI than participating in direct interpersonal communication. By offering a less formal and more learner-centered environment, AI enables students to engage in speaking practice without the fear of negative evaluation. In addition, Qiao and Zhao (2023) noted that AI can strengthen self-regulated learning by giving learners greater control over the pace and direction of their language-learning process, allowing instruction to be tailored to individual skill levels.

Previous studies on ELSA Speak have mostly focused on improving technical aspects, particularly pronunciation accuracy, through features such as speech recognition, phoneme analysis, and automated feedback (Sukmawati & Pratama, 2021; Aswaty & Indari, 2022; Karim et al., 2023). Most studies utilized classroom-based action research, with many of the studies being conducted in university or adult learner contexts. Thus, the main contributions of these studies were to highlight improvements in the accuracy of sound production and articulation. However, very few studies have discussed how ELSA Speak supports students' overall speaking skills, including fluency, confidence, and speaking performance, particularly among EFL students at the vocational high school level.

Speaking is widely recognized as one of the most demanding skills for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Many students struggle with various linguistic aspects, including inaccurate pronunciation, insufficient

vocabulary, limited fluency, and grammatical errors, all of which can impede effective oral communication. Beyond these language-related difficulties, learners often face psychological challenges such as fear of making mistakes, lack of self-confidence, performance anxiety, and concerns about negative judgments from teachers or peers. These factors frequently contribute to elevated levels of speaking anxiety and discourage active participation in speaking activities. In response to these challenges, recent advancements in Artificial Intelligence (AI)-driven language learning technologies, particularly applications such as ELSA Speak, have emerged as promising tools to support learners in improving their speaking abilities while reducing anxiety-related barriers.

Through its speech recognition technology, pronunciation analysis, immediate feedback, native-speaker models, and opportunities for repeated practice, ELSA Speak helps learners improve their pronunciation accuracy, fluency, and overall speaking performance. Furthermore, the application allows students to practice independently in a low-pressure environment, reducing the fear of being judged by others and helping to alleviate speaking anxiety. However, there is still limited research examining how the use of ELSA Speak influences vocational high school students' self-perceptions of speaking ability and their levels of speaking anxiety.

In addition, speaking anxiety, which may represent one of the biggest hindrances in foreign language learning, has been rarely examined specifically in the context of AI-enhanced learning. Previous studies (Shofi & Ainiyah, 2024; Syabinaji et al, 2019), have mostly focused on improving general speaking performance, but have not specifically examined the role of AI in alleviating students' speaking anxiety. Therefore, this study fills that gap by examining the effectiveness of ELSA Speak not only in technical aspects such as pronunciation but also in psychological aspects such as speaking anxiety and self-confidence in the context of speaking instruction at SMK PGRI 2 Denpasar. This study seeks to determine whether the use of ELSA Speak significantly alleviates students' speaking anxiety and increases students' willingness to use English. As well as considering additional critically important factors such as technological constraints, student interest, and the availability of the app in actual classroom

situations. Therefore, the researcher intends to conduct a study entitled “The Effect of the ELSA Speak Application on Students’ English Speaking Anxiety and Speaking Performance at SMK PGRI 2 Denpasar” to investigate the potential of AI-based language learning technology in addressing students’ speaking difficulties and supporting their oral English development.

1.2 Problems Identification

Based on the background of the study, the key points can be summarized as follows.

- 1.2.1 Speaking is one of the most challenging language skills for EFL learners to master and perform effectively, often resulting in speaking anxiety and limited oral performance.
- 1.2.2 Many students experience speaking anxiety when communicating in English, which can negatively affect their self-confidence and level of comfort during oral interactions, ultimately hindering their speaking performance.
- 1.2.3 There are now AI-enhanced technology options such as ELSA Speak that provide immediate feedback on students’ pronunciation and speaking performance, helping them improve their fluency, speaking confidence, and reduce speaking anxiety.
- 1.2.4 There is a lack of studies that analysed ELSA Speak while also examining its effects on learners’ speaking anxiety and speaking performance.

1.3 Research Limitation

The scope of this study is restricted to examining the impact of the ELSA Speak application on two aspects of English speaking development, namely students’ speaking anxiety and speaking performance, among eleventh-grade students at SMK PGRI 2 Denpasar.

1.4 Research Questions

Based on the research background and problem identification presented in the previous sections, this study formulated four research questions to guide the investigation.

- 1.4.1 Is there a significant simultaneous effect of using the ELSA Speak application on students' speaking anxiety and speaking performance among eleventh-grade students at SMK PGRI 2 Denpasar?
- 1.4.2 Is there a significant effect of the ELSA Speak application on eleventh-grade students' speaking anxiety at SMK PGRI 2 Denpasar?
- 1.4.3 Is there a significant effect of the ELSA Speak application on eleventh-grade students' speaking performance at SMK PGRI 2 Denpasar?
- 1.4.4 How do the students perceive the use of the ELSA Speak application in learning English speaking?

1.5 Research Objectives

This research is conducted to:

- 1.5.1 Investigate whether the use of the ELSA Speak application has a simultaneous significant effect on students' speaking anxiety and speaking performance.
- 1.5.2 Examine whether the use of the ELSA Speak application significantly affects students' speaking anxiety.
- 1.5.3 Find out whether the use of the ELSA Speak application is a significant effect on students' speaking performance
- 1.5.4 Explore how students perceive the implementation of the ELSA Speak application in supporting their English speaking learning.

1.6 Research Significance

1.6.1 Theoretical Significance

The present study contributes to the theoretical understanding of speaking anxiety and speaking performance within English as Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, particularly regarding the role of artificial intelligence-based learning applications in supporting language development. The findings provide insights into how AI-assisted tools, such as ELSA Speak, may help overcome affective barriers in language learning by creating supportive opportunities for speaking practice and improving learners' oral communication abilities. Furthermore, this study is expected to enrich the existing literature on technology-assisted language learning, particularly in

relation to the development of pronunciation accuracy, speaking fluency, and learners' confidence in using English.

1.6.2 Practical Significance

1.6.2.1 Teachers

This study provides practical implications for English teachers by highlighting the potential of AI-based applications, such as ELSA Speak, as alternative learning resources to support speaking practice. Based on the findings, ELSA Speak can serve as a practical tool for creating a more comfortable, less stressful, and non-threatening speaking environment where students can practice English at their own pace. Furthermore, the application offers flexible and personalized learning opportunities that allow students to receive immediate feedback, monitor their progress, and develop greater confidence in their speaking abilities.

1.6.2.2 For Students

Using ELSA Speak allows learners to practice English orally in a low-stakes setting, get immediate feedback, and diminish their future speaking anxiety. ELSA encourages learners to continue learning independently, perhaps improving their speaking English skills and increasing their confidence to interact in English in authentic contexts.

1.6.2.3 For Other Researchers

This study provides valuable resources for future researchers who are interested in exploring the integration of artificial intelligence in supporting and enhancing language learning processes. Specifically, the findings may serve as a reference for investigating the psychological dimensions of foreign language learning, such as speaking anxiety, as well as examining the affordances offered by digital technologies in supporting learners' oral communication development. Furthermore, this study may contribute to future research exploring how AI-based applications can be effectively implemented to address both linguistic and affective challenges in EFL learning contexts.