HARNESSING AI-POWERED PRONUNCIATION TOOLS: EVALUATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE ELSA SPEAK APP IN ENHANCING SPEAKING SKILLS AMONG EFL/ESL LEARNERS

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Abstract

This article examines the effectiveness of the ELSA Speak application, an AIpowered tool, in enhancing English-speaking skills among EFL/ESL learners. It reviews research findings and user perspectives on how ELSA supports improvements in pronunciation, fluency, and overall speaking confidence. The app's adaptive and interactive design provides personalized learning experiences that complement traditional classroom instruction. Findings from various studies show positive learner attitudes, highlighting increased motivation, accuracy in speech production, and self-directed practice. Overall, the review emphasizes the potential of ELSA Speak as a supplementary resource for developing speaking proficiency in language education.

Keywords: Speaking skill; Pronunciation; Fluency; ELSA Speak; AI; Automatic speech recognition (ASR).

Introduction

Speaking skill is a critical component of second/foreign language learning; it enables learners to communicate effectively, to be intelligible, and to develop confidence in real-world interactions. However, many learners struggle especially with pronunciation, fluency, intonation, and confidence. Traditional classroom instruction often does not provide enough individualized feedback or sufficient opportunities for frequent speaking practice outside class time. These persistent challenges have prompted growing interest in innovative tools, particularly AI-driven systems, that can supplement traditional instruction by providing individualized, real-time support, and among these emerging solutions, ELSA stands out for its ability to deliver precise, immediate feedback to learners. Tamaki explains further, "We are developing our own voice recognition AI. Using this cutting-edge technology, we measure the pronunciation of non-native speakers and score them on the naturalness of their pronunciation. ELSA allows users to take English conversation lessons as if they were sitting next to a native English speaking teacher. Thanks to the immediate feedback provided by AI, users can

improve their English pronunciation, and also greatly improve their listening comprehension."In recent years, technology—especially mobile applications powered by Artificial Intelligence (AI) and automatic speech recognition (ASR)— has become increasingly popular as a supplement to traditional language teaching. These tools provide features such as instant feedback, repeated practice, flexibility of time/place, adaptive exercises, and self-paced learning. Among such tools, the *ELSA Speak* app has gained attention for its focus on pronunciation and speaking practice via AI and ASR.

Origin of The App

ELSA (English Language Speech Assistant) is a startup founded in 2015 by Stanford alum Ms. Vu Van, and Dr. Xavier Anguera, a veteran in speech recognition and AI. ELSA's app, which is called ELSA Speak, listens to the way language learners pronounce words, sentences or conversations to pinpoint exact errors and provide real-time, accurate feedback on their pronunciation mistakes with specific suggestions on how to improve. The company built its own proprietary speech technology using deep learning and A.I. to detect people's pronunciation mistakes with 95%+ accuracy. Based in San Francisco, ELSA has raised $12 million in capital and is backed by leading VCs in Silicon Valley, Southeast Asia and Japan. ELSA Speak is available on iOS and Android with more than 40 million downloads in over 100 countries. The company has offices in Portugal, Vietnam, India, Indonesia and Japan. While she had a strong command of English vocabulary, her Vietnamese accent often led to misunderstandings in class, making her feel dismissed. Realizing that many of her international peers faced similar challenges, Vu saw a need for a solution. In her search for a co-founder, she partnered with Dr. Xavier Anguera, a renowned speech analyst. Together, they officially launched ELSA Speak in 2015. Today, ELSA Speak is recognized as one of the top AI startups, listed alongside Microsoft Cortana and Google Allo by Forbes. It has millions of users worldwide, helping learners improve their spoken English.

What skills does ELSA Speak improve?

ELSA Speak uses games and activities to enhance spoken English and pronunciation. It personalizes learning paths, tracks progress, and allows users to create custom study sets.

What age group is it appropriate for?

The app is suitable for users aged 13 and older. However, users over 18 may benefit the most as they can independently access and utilize its features.

How will students benefit?

ELSA app engages students with interactive games to improve their speaking skills. It provides feedback on pronunciation by letting users compare their speech to ideal pronunciations, making it an effective learning tool.

Is ELSA Speak free?

This app offers limited access to free users. A premium account is required to unlock the full range of features and maximize the app's benefits.

How it works?

Speak: Practice speaking words, sentences, or entire conversations into the app.

Get feedback: The app uses AI to analyze your speech and provide instant, detailed feedback.

Learn: It then personalizes your learning path and provides exercises to help you improve on your specific weak points

In the following review, we can see what Emma Miller thinks, who is an **English as a Second Language (ESL)/Accent Coach & Writer**, about this app: "Initial Assessment: After signing up, users are guided through an assessment process where they record themselves reading 16 sentences aloud. This evaluation provides a fluency level (e.g., Intermediate or Advanced), an overall score, detailed pronunciation scores for each letter, and even a predicted IELTS score." [1]

AI-Based Feedback: ELSA's real-time speech recognition technology offers detailed feedback on pronunciation and fluency. The feedback highlights pronunciation errors with color-coded indicators and scores, enabling users to identify and correct mistakes. Practice is unlimited, allowing users to keep trying until they pronounce words correctly.

Features of the Elsa Speak method

ELSA Speak's conversational English and pronunciation exercises are divided into two categories: standard and advanced. Standard exercises focus on correcting pronunciation errors in individual words, while advanced exercises break words down by syllable to identify and fix mistakes in detail.

Each activity evaluates the pronunciation of a single sound within a word, rather than the entire word. The app highlights the sound and provides its International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) transcription for clarity.

Additionally, ELSA offers listening comprehension exercises that use audio clips and multiple-choice questions. For instance, you may be shown a word along with two audio recordings. Your task is to read the word, listen carefully to both clips, and choose the one that matches the correct pronunciation.

Practices of this type are used to show when the phonetics of a syllable should be emphasized; it also offers vocabulary according to the user's goal in learning English: it can be conversational or business-related.

Finally, Elsa has many exercises, around 1600, to develop good pronunciation. In the Premium version, all exercises are unlocked; in the free version, only five are available.

YouTube Video Collection: ELSA also includes a collection of free YouTube videos accessible to both premium and non-premium users. While these videos provide additional learning content, they are not exclusive to the app, and similar resources can be found directly on YouTube.

User reviews

It is also important to take into account the opinions of users of this application so that we know firsthand how people are interacting with it. Let's see what people think about ELSA. "It's excellent, I just wish the definitions and examples were in Spanish as well as English (which they already are) so I could understand them better. Overall, it's a very good app from what I've seen so far."

For other users, the app works well, as it helps improve pronunciation and understanding of the language, but the price is excessive. "It's a very good app, especially for listening and pronunciation. It also gives you an approximate analysis of your progress based on your pronunciation and tells you your mistakes, which you can then use to train yourself."

Many studies report that students perceive ELSA Speak as useful, convenient, and engaging. For example, *Students' Perception Towards the Use of ELSA Speak App for Speaking Practice* (Jakarta) finds generally positive attitudes.

In *Students' Perceptions on the Use of ELSA Speak Application to Improve English Speaking Skills* (Yuliawati & Suryadi) students reported that ELSA helps with pronunciation, gives clear feedback, helps them notice errors. Also noted: the motivational benefit—having immediate, individualized feedback, tracking progress, more freedom to practice outside of class.

Unlike general English learning platforms such as Rosetta Stone, Duolingo, or FluentU, ELSA Speak specializes exclusively in improving pronunciation, making it a standout option for learners seeking to refine their spoken English. The app has earned high ratings from users, with scores of 4.7 on Google Play, 4.8 on the App Store, and 4 out of 5 on Facebook, reflecting its effectiveness and popularity among language learners.

Conclusion

The evidence to date suggests that the ELSA Speak app is an effective and promising tool for improving speaking skills—particularly pronunciation, some fluency, and confidence—in EFL/ESL learners. Its AI/ASR capabilities offer individualized feedback and flexible, learner-driven practice. Students generally hold positive attitudes toward it, appreciating immediate feedback, motivational features, and the ability to practice outside class. However, ELSA Speak is not a complete replacement for classroom interaction and should be integrated in a blended approach that includes spontaneous speaking, communicative tasks, peer interaction, and teacher feedback. Limitations such as rigid feedback, motivational dropouts, technological access, and perhaps lack of real conversation exposure remain. For educators, the practical recommendation is to adopt ELSA Speak as a supplement, train students how to use it well, ensure regular usage, and combine app practice with communicative classroom tasks. For researchers, future work should pursue longer-term, comparative, and contextually diverse studies.

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