

STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF USING AI CONVERSATIONAL TOOLS TO ENHANCE THEIR SPEAKING CONFIDENCE IN ENGLISH

By

Nujhat Kashfia Farisha

ID- 24163008

A thesis submitted to the Department of English and Humanities in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Masters in Applied Linguistics and ELT

English and Humanities

BRAC University

June 2026

©2025. BRAC University

All rights reserved.

Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing degree at BRAC University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

Student's Full Name & Signature

Nujhat Kashfia Farisha

ID: 24163008

Approval

The thesis titled “Students’ experiences of using AI conversational tools to enhance their speaking confidence in English” submitted Nujhat Kashfia Farisha (ID- 24163008) of spring 2026 has been accepted as satisfactory in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Masters of Arts in English on 18 May 2026.

Examining Committee:

Supervisor: _____

Shakika Rubaiat

Lecturer

Department of English and

Humanities

BRAC University

Departmental Head: (Chairperson) _____

Professor Firdous Azim, PhD

Department of English and Humanities

BRAC University.

Abstract

Free versions of AI conversation apps are widely used for English speaking practice, but we know very little about how their limits (like daily time caps, annoying pop-up ads, and locked features) affect learning. I interviewed five high school students one-on-one using Zoom. Three of them only used the free version of Duolingo; the other two also paid for subscriptions to Lingoda or Cambly. I analysed the interview transcripts using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The students said they liked the privacy and safety of AI apps because it made them less anxious than speaking in class. But free-version users often got frustrated when the app didn't understand their accent, sounded robotic, or showed an ad right after they made a mistake. Paid users got live feedback from real teachers and felt much more confident. Everyone agreed that apps can't replace talking to real people. Free-version problems – especially ads popping up after errors – broke their focus, killed motivation, and made practice inconsistent. Paid users struggled with high subscription costs that sometimes forced them to pause their learning. The study shows that punishing mistakes with ads works against learning. App designers should offer ad-free basic speaking practice and cheaper student plans.

Keywords: AI conversational agents; speaking confidence; free-version barriers; speaking anxiety.

Acknowledgement

First of all, I would like to thank Allah for giving me the opportunity to complete my M.A thesis. Next, I would like to thank my supervisor Ms. Shakika Rubaiyat who has provided me constant feedbacks to conduct the research. I would like to thank my parents once again for providing me with their unconditional support for every phase of my life. I also give thanks to my husband who has always pushed me to do my work.

Table of Contents

APPROVAL	III
ABSTRACT.....	IV
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT.....	V
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY	1
1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM	1
1.3 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY	2
1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS.....	3
1.5 INTERVIEW QUESTIONS	3
1.6 NATURE OF THE STUDY	7
1.7 SCOPE OF THE STUDY	7
1.8 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY	8
1.9 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY	8
1.10 DEFINITION OF THE KEY TERMS	9
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE AND RESEARCH.....	10
PART 1: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK	10
2.1.1 <i>Conceptual Definitions of Key Terms.....</i>	<i>10</i>
2.1.2 <i>Theoretical Framework: Foreign Language Anxiety and AI Negotiation</i>	<i>11</i>
2.1.3 <i>Speaking practice affordances of AI Conversational Agents.....</i>	<i>12</i>
PART 2: EXPERIMENTAL STUDIES ON AI CHATBOTS FOR SPEAKING DEVELOPMENT	13
2.2.1 <i>The introduction of AI Chatbots in EFL/ESL Speaking.....</i>	<i>13</i>
2.2.2 <i>Effect on Confidence in Speaking, and Anxiety</i>	<i>14</i>
2.2.3 <i>Students Perceptions and Experiences of High School</i>	<i>15</i>
2.2.4 <i>Pronunciation, Fluency, and Grammar Effectiveness.....</i>	<i>16</i>
2.2.5 <i>Shortcomings of available Empirical Research</i>	<i>17</i>
PART 3: BARRIERS, FREE VERSION CONSTRAINTS, AND RESEARCH GAP	18
2.3.1 <i>Overall obstacles in AI Chatbot in Language Learning.....</i>	<i>18</i>
2.3.2 <i>The Largely Ignored Problem of Free Version Limits.....</i>	<i>19</i>
2.3.3 <i>How Barriers of Unpaid Version Affect Speaking Practice and Confidence</i>	<i>19</i>
2.3.4 <i>SUMMARY OF THIS CHAPTER.....</i>	<i>20</i>
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY	21
3.1 INTRODUCTION	21
3.3 RESEARCHER'S ROLE.....	22
3.4 SETTING.....	23
3.5 PARTICIPANT SELECTION	23
3.6 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK	23
3.6.1 <i>Technology Acceptance Model (TAM):</i>	<i>24</i>

3.6.2 Self-Efficacy Theory:.....	24
3.7 RESEARCH TOOL DEVELOPMENT.....	25
3.8 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS.....	25
3.9 TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE STUDY.....	26
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION.....	26
4.1 INTRODUCTION.....	26
4.2 PERCEPTION AND EXPERIENCE	27
4.2.1 Safe, Nonjudgmental Space:.....	27
4.2.2 Disliking Robotic or Unnatural Responses:.....	28
4.2.3 Autonomy and Replay ability:	29
SUMMARY TABLE FOR RESEARCH QUESTION 1	29
4.3 IMPACT ON SPEAKING SKILLS.....	30
4.3.1 Improved Pronunciation:.....	30
4.3.2 The Role of Gamification:.....	30
4.3.3 Limitations in Transferring Skills to Real Life:	31
SUMMARY TABLE FOR RESEARCH QUESTION 2	31
4.4 BARRIERS OF FREE SUBSCRIPTION.....	32
4.4.1 Daily Limits and Restricted Speaking Time.....	32
4.4.2 Disruptive Advertisements:	32
4.4.3 Locked Features and Lessons:	33
4.4.4 Effects on Motivation and Practice Habits:.....	33
SUMMARY TABLE FOR RQ3	34
4.5 DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS	34
4.6 PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES.....	35
4.6.1 Safe, Non-judgmental Space:.....	35
4.6.2 Frustration with Robotic or Unusual Responses:	36
4.6.3 Privacy and Repeatability:	37
4.7 EFFECT ON SPEAKING SKILL	38
4.7.1 More confident and willing to speak:.....	38
4.7.2 Improved Pronunciation:.....	40
4.7.3 An Important Role of Gamification:	41
4.7.4 Restrictions in the transfer of skills to the real world:.....	42
4.8 BARRIERS OF FREE VERSIONS.....	43
4.8.1 Disruptive Advertisements:	44
4.8.2 Locked Features and Lessons:	45
4.8.3 Effects on Motivation and Practice Habits:.....	46
4.9 SUMMARY AND CONTRIBUTION TO THE LITERATURE.....	47
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION.....	48
5.1 AN OVERVIEW OF THE FINDINGS	48
5.2 LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	50
REFERENCE LIST	52
APPENDIX SECTION.....	58
APPENDIX- A.....	58

APPENDIX- B 63

APPENDIX- C 66

APPENDIX- D 70

APPENDIX- E 74

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

The popular use of mobile phones makes language learning apps more widely used by high school students for independent English speaking practice. Many of these apps now have artificial intelligence (AI) conversational agents such as chatbots and interactive speaking agents. But for many students, speaking English to their classmates or teachers might lead to feelings of stress and insecurity. AI conversational agents provide a safe, non-threatening place to practise speaking and can lower anxiety. But most learners are accessing free versions, which have limitations (such as restrictions on the number of interactions each day) and distractions (such as advertisements), and little research has investigated how these features impact on learners. Earlier research demonstrates that secondary school students find using AI helpful and motivating to develop speaking confidence (Azizzah & Hadi, 2025). And we know that interacting with chatbots for speaking practice can reduce speaking anxiety and boost students' speaking motivation (Tran, 2025). The aim of this study is to explore the challenges students have experienced, the effect of the limited version on their ability to practice and how the apps have increased their speaking confidence.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Confidently speaking in English is usually the most difficult for high school students. Some students experience public speaking anxiety when they are speaking with their peers or teacher because they may feel embarrassed by the mistakes they make. To ease this fear, students are now relying on free AI -driven conversational agents and chatbots on their mobile phones. This

technology offers a private environment to practise speaking freely. Studies have found that AI chatbots help students feel less nervous about speaking and can motivate them to practise their speaking skills. For instance, one study showed that high-school students using an AI tool found it reduced anxiety and increased speaking enthusiasm. Another study found students' motivation is improved by chatbot-based learning. But nearly all current research on AI has focused on AI tools under ideal scenarios, such as premium versions or accounts qualitatively managed by teachers for the classroom. In practice, most high school students use free versions. The free versions have at least three major constraints: limited daily speaking time, numerous pop-up ads, and limited interaction features. A recent study about gamified language apps pointed out that "ads and limited speaking practice" often distract attention and demotivate students. To date, however, there is no qualitative study that explores the speaking practice difficulties that have been caused by these free version limits for high school students. As such, there is a significant gap in the literature as we do not know how students own perspectives of speaking confidence are impacted by free version barriers. We are not fully aware of the influence on their confidence, practice and their progress in speaking. This research addresses this, and seeks to understand how these students' real-world experiences of free-version limits impact them.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The study aims to understand the experiences of the high-school students who use free conversational AI apps to learn to speak English. Rather than grades or tests, this study seeks to understand how students describe their experiences of using free conversational AI apps, including the emotions that they experience and the challenges that they might face or the milestones that they achieve.

There are three purposes:

- To explore high school students' perceptions of their experiences using unpaid AI conversational apps to develop their speaking ability.
- To understand how students' English speaking is enhanced or hampered by the apps.
- To explore the challenges they experience when they use the free versions of these apps (including amount of time, pop-up advertisements or lack of interactivity) and how these limit their speaking practice and their development.

This research will give students a chance to speak for themselves about what does and does not work, and what app developers could do better.

1.4 Research Questions

1. What are the high school students' perception towards their experiences of using AI conversational applications to develop their English speaking skill?
2. Does the online language applications tools have any impact in improving their English speaking skills?
3. What barriers do the students come across while using the unpaid versions of mobile apps and how do the limitations affect their speaking practice and growth?

1.5 Interview Questions

Background Questions for the Participants:
1. How long have you been learning English?
2. What is your current proficiency level? (beginner/intermediate/advanced/proficient)
3. What was your primary goal when you started using the language apps (e.g., learn vocabulary, improve grammar, practice speaking, listen to the native speakers conversations)?
4. Earlier you started using the apps did you get worried about speaking in English when communicate with the teacher or with your peers of your class?
5. Did you use the free version of the apps, or the premium/upgraded one's?

<u>Questions</u>	<u>RQ1</u> What are the high school students' perception towards their experiences of using AI conversational applications to develop their English speaking skill?	<u>RQ2</u> Does these online applications have any impact in improving their English speaking skills?	<u>RQ3</u> What barriers do the students come across while using the unpaid versions of mobile apps and how do the limitations affect their speaking practice and growth?
1. What is the first word/phrase that came to your mind for practice speaking with your mobile app to discuss?	×		
2. Can you share what a normal 10-minute speaking practice session looks like for you when you start using that app?	×		
3. Can you describe about that one time you remember feeling positive about your English speaking after using the app you used?	×		
4. Does practice with the app feels different from the speaking session you get when talk to your peers?	×		
5. Describe a time the app became once frustrating or did not it helped you with	×		

speaking the way you wanted. What happened?			
6. Do you feel the language learning apps are helpful for speaking activities? (e.g., exchanging voice notes/talking with robots/taking with a native English tutor in video calls)		×	
7. Which particular feature of the app is the most useful for developing your speaking skill? Explain why?		×	
8. How does the app assist you in improving your pronunciation?		×	
9. Does the gamification used in apps such as, earning points, keeping streaks, or earning badges and leveling up that makes speaking practice more interesting or does it make you feel prepared for oral communication such as presentations?		×	
10. What can you do on the app freely that you cannot do in a classroom with the		×	

other students talking?			
11. What are the limitations of the free version that you have noticed? Briefly explain.			×
12. How do the ads that pops up in the unpaid version affect your concentration mode when you try to practice speaking with full of enthusiasm?			×
13. Do you think you would practice speaking more frequently if the free version of language learning apps had no limits? Explain why?			×
14. Have you ever taken a break from practicing in a day because of the limitation of the free version? If yes, please describe.			×
15. If there is any way to overcome the challenges you have faced what would you mention here to improve for the free versions for the language app developers?			×

1.6 Nature of the Study

This is a qualitative, explorative study (Ho, 2025). This design was chosen because we were interested in high school students' lived experiences of using free AI conversational apps for practicing English speaking, rather than in collecting data on scores and statistics. The researcher gathered the data via individual online interviews using Zoom. This enabled participants to connect from their homes, making them feel more relaxed and safe to express their true thoughts about learning to speak English. Researchers used a simple interview guide and asked open-ended questions, but responded flexibly to responses. These interviews were audio recorded, and then transcribed verbatim. The audio data were then transcribed and analyzed thematically, examining the transcripts, identifying patterns and recurring ideas, grouping together interesting segments and coding them into themes (Ho, 2025). The results will include quoted material from students. This qualitative methodology can increase the diversity of students' speaking stories.

1.7 Scope of the Study

This research considers the use of free version AI conversational dialogue apps to enhance high school students' speaking skills. The study focuses on three main areas: students' perceptions of using AI agents, the role and impact of such tools on students' speaking skills, and the challenges they face when using free messages that some apps might have such as limited options for speaking practice training features or disturbing advertisements (Alsaawi, 2025). It uses a qualitative exploratory approach and data will be gathered solely in online individual interviews via Zoom. An interview protocol derived from the research questions is used for each interview, while allowing participants to express their experiences and stories in their own words. Students' perspectives will be reported through thematic analysis. Importantly, the research does not include

measuring improvement rates in speaking using standardised tests, or an analysis of different AI systems. The focus of the study is on high school students who have engaged with at least four weeks of free use of AI virtual assistants. This narrow focus aims to provide rich contextual understanding of a narrow, under-explored population (Civelek & Hocaoglu, 2025; Khalik & Astuti, 2025).

1.8 Limitations of the Study

There are a few caveats to this study. First, it only includes a small number of high school students from a single school therefore the results might not be applicable to students from other areas or countries (Civelek & Hocaoglu, 2025). Second, this study is based solely on students' expressions in Zoom interviews. People's recall can be imperfect and they can inadvertently omit details or misremember an event. Third, the study looks at only a snapshot in time. It cannot tell how confidence changes over a longer period using the AI voice app (Noe et al., 2025). Fourth, different students are using different AI apps with different limitations in the free versions, so it is difficult to compare the barriers facing different participants. Fifth, this does not test students' speaking improvement. It only measures students' personal perceptions. Finally, this study is a qualitative one, and the researcher's values might affect the interpretation of the data from interviews (Perdana & Suwandi, 2025). These reduce the validity of the study but only in terms of what it can and cannot address.

1.9 Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it examines the lived experiences of high school students utilizing the free version of AI conversation applications (apps) to practise speaking English. Previous research has examined paid or paid versions of these apps, which students don't always use. This

research uses students' experiences as told to us in Zoom interviews to bridge the gap in knowledge about the impact of the constraints of the free versions on students' confidence and speaking behaviour such as restricted talking time per day, pop-up advertising, and lack of functionality. The insights are important for multiple reasons. First, they offer an authentic snapshot of using AI apps, not just in controlled academic settings. Second, the study amplifies student voice about their experiences, often frustration, and lack of ability to report issues to app creators and teachers. Third, the findings can guide teachers to better understand how some students lose interest despite the initial promise of AI apps. While AI chatbots have been found to lower speaking anxiety and enhance active and self-directed learning, these studies often don't address the challenges of free versions (Munir et al., 2025). Similarly, generative AI has been shown to improve pronunciation and confidence for social interaction but the effect of free version limitations is not investigated (Cheng & Wang, 2025). So, this research presents useful suggestions for enhancing free AI apps for everyone.

1.10 Definition of the Key Terms

The terms set out below are defined as used in this qualitative study.

- **Artificial Intelligence Conversational Agent** - A computer-based agent that can interact with humans through text or speech using artificial intelligence. In this study, it is a programmed mobile app (chatbot, voice assistants) that high school students use to practice spoken English on their own (Kang & Sung, 2024).
- **Speaking Confidence** – A student's self-evaluated sense of confidence speaking English without feeling tense, afraid or negatively judged. In this study, speaking confidence is measured as students' self-report of their feelings before, during and after speaking practice with AI apps, expressed in their own words during interviews.

- **Free Version** - The free version of a language learning app that is publicly available with integrated constraints, such as the time frame of speaking per day, an absence of interactive functions, and inescapable ads. This is in contrast to the paid or institutional versions.
- **Barrier** - Any feature and/or restriction of an AI free version app that negatively impacts on a student's speech practice. In our study, barriers include limits on speaking interaction, pop-up advertisements and pronunciation feedback features.
- **Perception** - A student's subjective experience and interpretations of their experiences with AI apps. In this study, perception data is collected via semi-structured Zoom interviews and not from scales or tests.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE AND RESEARCH

Part 1: Conceptual Framework

2.1.1 Conceptual Definitions of Key Terms

To better understand the research findings, let's first define the key terms in this study. An AI conversational agent is a mobile app that applies artificial intelligence to recognize and respond to speech or text. In English learning, these agents come in the form of chatbot, voice assistants, or speaking partners (Civelek & Hocaoglu, 2025). AI conversational agents are not simply programmed to respond in a predetermined way, but can respond in a novel way and engage in conversation. In this study, speaking confidence refers to a student's own confidence in speaking English without undue fear, embarrassment or worry. This is also known as "L2 speaking

self-efficacy" or "willingness to communicate" (Tran, 2025). Speaking confidence is different from speaking ability. Students can know a lot of words but still feel too scared to talk in class. This research is about students' perceptions, rather than test results. A free version is the free level of a language learning app. free versions often have built-in limitations such as a cap on the amount of speaking time available each day, a reduced number of interactive features, and many advertisements (Bellinda et al., 2025). In this study, free versions are compared with versions that provide unlimited access (such as institutional or premium versions). Barrier refers to any aspect of the free version that distracts, limits or discourages speaking practice. These include pop-up advertisements, limits on the number of conversations per day and the locking of pronunciation feedback. Lastly, perception is a student's subjective experience. In this study, we use students' own words in interviews to gather perception data, rather than scales.

2.1.2 Theoretical Framework: Foreign Language Anxiety and AI Negotiation

To explain how conversational agents can help with speaking confidence let's start with why speaking English in the classroom is often scary. Foreign language classroom anxiety was proposed by Horwitz and colleagues (1986). They proposed that language anxiety is not simply a general feeling of anxiety but a specific fear that stems from three sources: communication apprehension (fear of speaking), fear of negative evaluation (worrying about how others judge you) and test anxiety. It's the most referenced work on language anxiety. For secondary school students, speaking in class can evoke all three sources. They might fear they will make a grammatical error, be laughed at, or be judged as less able than their peers. This anxiety can be so severe that some avoid speaking altogether, which then impairs their learning - a vicious circle (Azizzah & Hadi, 2025). One way that AI conversational agents can help is by eliminating the social risk. There is no fear of ridicule or judgment, no embarrassment or ridicule from classmates,

and no teacher listening to every word. Kang and Sung (2024) suggest this secure and private space means students can say the same things over and over again, practise new words and phrases, and make errors without fear. Theoretically, AI agents reduce the "cost" of speaking and so increase motivation to speak. This is backed up by recent studies that found secondary school students feel less anxious and more motivated to speak when using AI speaking tools (Civelek & Hocaoglu, 2025).

2.1.3 Speaking practice affordances of AI Conversational Agents

Artificial intelligent conversational agents do not only play dumb. They contain particular features-known as affordances- which render them helpful in speaking practice. To begin with, they offer privacy. Students are allowed to study at home individually and without oversight. Second, they provide repeatability. A student is capable of repeating the same sentence ten times and, each time, the AI will respond and will not get impatient. Third, they provide instant, non-judgmental feedback. Other applications may indicate pronunciation skills or good grammar softly. Fourth, they are 24/7. It is not necessary that the students have to wait until a teacher or partner says something.

Gamification is another significant affordance. Most language applications are incentivized with points, streaks, badges, and leveling up as a way to achieve practice every day. Bellinda and colleagues (2025) discovered that although gamification may raise motivation, it may equally cause frustration when versions that are not paid limit access to such functionalities. Tran (2025) continues to assert that the attitude of learners to communication depends greatly on the perceptions of the practice environment as safe and rewarding. Well-designed AI agents do just that.

To conclude, the theoretical base of this paper is built on three pillars: (1) anxiety associated with foreign language is a tangible problem of high school students, (2) a safe and private environment created by AI conversational agents can help overcome it, and (3) the affordances of AI applications, particularly when they are free to use, could lead to the development of speaking confidence over time. Nevertheless, as subsequent sections of this literature review demonstrate, majority of the available studies have been conducted in an ideal scenario, but not in the real world with restrictions of free versions.

Part 2: Experimental Studies on AI Chatbots for Speaking Development

2.2.1 The introduction of AI Chatbots in EFL/ESL Speaking

The application of AI chatbots in the learning process of a language has received significant research attention, especially in the English as a foreign language (EFL) setting. Research on the different level of education, elementary to university has investigated the effectiveness of these tools in promoting speaking practice. The studies have always indicated that AI chatbots build the atmosphere of low anxiety in which learners do not have the feeling of being judged or mocked because of speaking even in the presence of peers and teachers. In a remarkable study, Han and Ryu (2024) administered voice-based AI chatbots during several weeks to Korean high school students and found that both speaking ability and attitudes, interest, and motivation among learners had reached a positive change, indicating the potential of AI chatbots in promoting not only the speaking performance, but also the affective domain of EFL learners.

Nonetheless, the majority of this studies have involved university students or in a regulated classroom setting. There are comparatively limited studies that specifically address the subject of high school students touching upon the use of free versions of AI apps in their everyday life, which is not directly connected to school. This gap is directly covered by the current work, which

investigates real-life experiences of high-school students as a source of such applications to get free and ad-supported versions of AI conversations.

2.2.2 Effect on Confidence in Speaking, and Anxiety

The common thread among the literature is that AI chatbots can help to a significant decrease in speaking anxiety and learners develop confidence in their abilities. Civelek and Hocaoglu (2025) introduced a qualitative research to investigate the 9th-grade EFL students in Turkey. They have found that an AI-powered chatbot named TeaTalk could be seen as extremely helpful in improving speaking skills. Notably, learners stated that the chatbot both minimized their anxiety when speaking and boosted self-confidence and motivation. Students enjoyed the corrective and constructive feedback, and the friendly, engaging atmosphere the chatbot gave. Nonetheless, some participants have reported that the chatbot cannot understand their accents at times, attributing this to a technical issue that is still applicable to free app users, who may not also have advanced voice recognition capabilities.

On the same note, Noe, Yusuf, and Wirza (2025) explored the effect of ChatGPT as a speaking partner. They concluded that students who practised speaking with ChatGPT regularly had greatly reduced anxiety levels when using it over a long period. According to the respondents, it felt safe and non-judgmental and that made them feel less shy to talk. This is in accordance with the results of Pertiwi, Segoh, and Rohmadhani (2025) whose systematic review of 11 studies revealed the idea that AI tools decrease speaking anxiety, as they offer individual feedback and promote learner autonomy. Privacy and repeatability provided by AI chatbots enable students to make mistakes, without embarrassment, step by step making them more willing to talk.

Nevertheless, being concurrent with the advantages, the same review has identified the possible disadvantages. Excessive use of AI chatbots and the inability to interact with humans may, in fact, make some learners even more anxious since they will transfer all their confidence to speaking with the chatbot to the actual world and will find it much harder to do so (Pertiwi et al., 2025). It is specifically important to this study because, with even fewer elements of interactive options in their free version, free-version users will have an even less chance to train with human partners.

2.2.3 Students Perceptions and Experiences of High School

Although other researchers have concentrated on university students, those that have undertaken research on high school students depict a very similar positive impression. Al Abdullah, Alhawiti, Alqahtani, and Alqahtani (2025) employed a quasi-experimental-design study among 30 students in secondary schools in Saudi Arabia. The researchers had three weeks of interaction with a GPT-powered chatbot, after which they measured speaking competence and attitudes in students who interacted with it. The outcomes revealed statistically significant positive change in competence in speaking, with students being highly motivated, high confidence levels, and satisfaction with the chatbot-enhanced learning process (means of the overall attitude = 4.35 of the total 5). The observations of the teacher ensured that students were both more engaged and spontaneous with the chatbot. A qualitative discourse analysis of the reactions of the students to AI chatbots was conducted by Munir, Sulaiman, Rasyid, and Afiif (2025). In their study, they found that the students always used such words as safe, patient, and always available to characterize their communication with chatbots. This feeling of security was a major contributor to the development of speaking confidence. Kang and Sung (2024) investigated the self-directed learning with AI chatbots among Korean middle school students. They discovered that, students who made the effort on their own time, practising with chatbots, built a stronger confidence in their speaking than

did students who practised only in the classroom. Importantly, they observed that self-directed practice was most effective in cases when students could regularly use the chatbot with no interruptions. The discovery poses some crucial questions of how free-version constraints, like the restriction to use per day, and pop-up advertisements, can disrupt the process of free self-directed learning, which is still a neglected area.

2.2.4 Pronunciation, Fluency, and Grammar Effectiveness

In addition to confidence and anxiety, the researchers also investigated the question of whether AI chatbots can positively affect the objective spoken communication skills, like pronunciation, fluency and grammatical correctness. Feat Hospital evidence on this point is positive yet ambivalent.

The study by Cheng and Wang (2025) is a comprehensive mixed-method investigation of the impact of generative AI on the pronunciation proficiency, speaking anxiety, self-motivation, and confidence in social interactions of EFL students. Their results indicated that learners got the improvements in the pronunciation competency and decreased the speaking anxiety, which in their turn was accompanied with the heightened self-motivation and confidence in social interactions. Personalised feedback provided in real-time offered by Gen-AI contributed to the identification and correction of pronunciation challenges by the learners. It is also important to note that in cases when AI feedback was performed with the help of the emotional support of teachers and peers, the effects were even greater. It implies that using AI chatbots as an addition to human communication works best, and not as a substitute.

2.2.5 Shortcomings of available Empirical Research

Irrespective of these positive results, the current body of knowledge has some significant limitations. To begin with, nearly all reported studies have been carried out under optimal conditions. The participants are typically provided with the full access to AI chatbots of the premium version, without any limitations per day, advertisements or limited functionalities. This is not the case in the life of most learners in high schools where they would not have access to paid subscriptions as they are only exposed to free versions. In their research of gamified vocabulary learning, Bellinda, Utami, and Fitriyana (2025) have touched upon this problem, where it was stated that the restriction of the free version of the application and poor internet connectivity were crucial problems among students. Nevertheless, they concentrated on writing and vocabulary, but not speech.

Second, the studies include the majority of experiments in controlled settings, classrooms or research laboratories, but not in naturalistic situations when students can use apps in their free time, at home, and in the presence of a researcher. This restricts our comprehension of the exact way in which students incorporate AI chatbots into their routines.

Third, even though qualitative research has conceived the perception of students, a significant number are characterized by limited sample sizes or research on university students, but not high school students. The sample of qualitative studies examining the experiences of high school students who use free versions of AI apps over a considerable amount of time is notably lacking.

Overall, the current literature suggests solid evidence that even in perfect circumstances, the concept of AI chatbots may help to minimize speaking anxiety, foster confidence, and enhance the quality of pronunciation. Nevertheless, there are still major gaps. We are yet to be informed of people and how high school students live with free versions of these apps, and what the barriers to

free versions imply on their speaking practice and confidence development. These gaps are directly filled in the present study through in-depth qualitative interviews with high school students using free versions of AI conversational applications.

Part 3: Barriers, Free Version Constraints, and Research Gap

2.3.1 Overall obstacles in AI Chatbot in Language Learning

AI chatbots may not be flawless in even the best of cases. The authors conduct research to outline some of the pitfalls commonly associated with their use as a means of speaking practice. There are common technical problems, including a lack of good internet connectivity, misunderstandings of speech recognition, and longer response times (Alsaawi, 2025). Indicatively, Civelek and Hocaoglu (2025) observed that a number of students did not feel satisfied with the use of the AI chatbot because it failed to grasp their pronunciation. Likewise, Bellinda, Utami, and Fitriyana (2025) discovered that problematic internet connections and lack of compatibility with devices were major challenges faced by students on the gamified language provision apps.

The artificiality of AI conversations is another overall obstacle. Chatbots duly deliver repetitious or irrelevant replies at times and in so doing, practice can feel robotic and disinterested. Munir and colleagues (2025) have discovered that, at times, students were not comfortable with the lack of warmth and spontaneity of the chatbot similar to a face-to-face conversation with a human being. This discouraged them, but not fully, and reduced the time which they wished to practise. One should take these general barriers into consideration, yet they are applicable to free and premium versions of AI apps. The present research is more obsessed with the obstacles that are peculiar to free versions.

2.3.2 The Largely Ignored Problem of Free Version Limits

Even though researchers have talked about general problems with AI chatbots, almost no one has looked closely at the specific limits of free versions. This is a real gap in the research. The truth is, most high school students — especially those in poorer countries — cannot afford to pay for language apps. So they use free versions, which come with many restrictions. What kind of restrictions? From what little research exists and from what we know about popular apps, free versions usually have: (1) daily time limits (sometimes just five or ten minutes), (2) constant pop-up ads that break your concentration, (3) no access to advanced features like pronunciation scoring or grammar checking, (4) only a few conversation topics or chatbot characters to choose from, and (5) no option to skip or repeat certain lessons (Bellinda et al., 2025). Bellinda and her colleagues (2025) are among the very few who have even mentioned free-version barriers. In their study on Duolingo, students said that "limitations in the free version of the app" and "inconsistent features" were major problems. But that study focused on learning vocabulary, not speaking practice. So far, no research has properly looked at how these free-version restrictions affect high school students' speaking practice or their confidence. As Tran (2025) pointed out in a review of AI chatbot studies, almost all the research used paid or institution-provided versions. That means the everyday struggles of free-version users have been completely ignored.

2.3.3 How Barriers of Unpaid Version Affect Speaking Practice and Confidence

So why do these barriers actually matter? Looking at it through a theoretical lens, these limits can directly hurt the very things that make AI chatbots useful for building speaking confidence. Earlier in this literature review, I pointed out that privacy, repeatability, and non-judgmental feedback are the main benefits of AI chatbots. Free-version restrictions attack all three. Take daily speaking

limits. They destroy repeatability. If a student gets only five minutes of practice per day, they cannot go over a difficult phrase again and again until they get it right. They have to stop when the app tells them to, not when they actually feel ready. Then there are pop-up ads. They ruin the feeling of a safe, private space. Picture a student saying their very first full sentence in English. They feel proud. Then suddenly a loud video ad for some game blasts through their phone. That proud moment is gone. Bellinda and her team (2025) shared a student's words: "The pop-up ads annoy me and break my focus." This kind of interruption can make students not want to come back at all. On top of that, when advanced features like pronunciation feedback are locked behind a paywall, free-version users get very little help. They might keep making the same mistakes without realizing it. Over time, that leads to frustration and the feeling that they are not improving. Alsaawi (2025) found that even in paid versions, limited feedback depth was a big problem. In free versions, the issue is even worse.

2.3.4 Summary of this chapter

To put it simply, the research that exists already shows that AI chatbots can help lower speaking anxiety, build confidence, and improve pronunciation — but only when they are used in ideal, paid conditions. Many studies have found that high school students see these tools as helpful, safe, and motivating (Civelek & Hocaoglu, 2025; Al Abdullah et al., 2025). But there are two big problems with this body of research. First, almost all of these studies used premium or school-provided versions of AI apps. They did not look at the free, ad-filled versions that most high school students actually use. Second, no qualitative study has ever asked students how free-version barriers — like daily time limits, pop-up ads, and locked features — affect their speaking practice and confidence in real life. So there is a clear gap. We really do not know how high school students experience free AI conversation apps over time. We also do not understand how the limits of free versions

shape their speaking habits, their motivation, or their confidence. This study directly tries to fill that gap. I conducted in-depth, semi-structured Zoom interviews with high school students who use only free versions of AI speaking apps. By listening carefully to their own stories, this research offers the first qualitative look at the barriers they face and the ways they try to work around them.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter explains how I carried out this qualitative study. The main goal was to understand what second language learners go through when they use platforms like Cambly, Lingoda, and Duolingo to learn English. I wanted to know how these tools helped students feel more confident speaking English — both in class and during presentations. I chose a qualitative approach because it cares more about meaning and personal experience than about numbers. This method let shy students share their thoughts honestly in a relaxed setting. It also encouraged open conversation. I built the interview questions around a few pilot questions first, just to get a sense of what students were interested in when learning a language. Then I connected those questions to the conceptual framework so that everything lined up with my research goals. The final interview questions covered things like user experience, learning progress, results, and the problems that come with using free or limited versions of language learning apps.

3.2 Research Design

I designed this study as qualitative research to really understand the perspectives and experiences of high school learners. I focused on open-ended, one-on-one interviews through Zoom, which let participants join from wherever they felt most comfortable. This setup worked well because it helped me see how learners interact with AI materials online — both the good parts and the challenges. Other recent studies also back up this approach. Zhang (2025), for instance, found that AI-driven speaking apps can boost learners' motivation, help with pronunciation and fluency, and give automatic feedback without any limits. In a similar way, Ishfaq, Kalhor, and Shah (2025) noticed that when students practiced speaking with AI-powered mobile apps, their self-confidence grew. But they also warned that these tools should be seen as extra help, not as a replacement for real human conversation. Dalimunte and Napitupulu (2025) found that AI tools are helpful for practicing fluency, although a few students felt less involved compared to face-to-face communication. All of these findings convinced me that a qualitative design was the right choice for this study.

3.3 Researcher's Role

In this study, I was the one who collected and analysed all the data from the participants. I did this by holding online interviews through Zoom. Right before each interview started, I told the participant what kinds of questions I would ask and reminded them that they could answer honestly and politely, and freely. I also made sure they knew they could share their true opinions without worrying about being judged. After all, the whole point was to understand how they really used language learning apps to build speaking confidence. My main responsibilities were to follow good ethical practices, get proper consent from each participant, and keep everything secured. I also went through each participant's comments carefully to really capture what high school students

actually feel about using the apps. Throughout the whole process, I tried to be sensitive and friendly to make everyone feel comfortable so that the final results truly showed what students thought and felt while using language learning tools.

3.4 Setting

I conducted all the interviews using Zoom, an online meeting platform. This setting gave high school students a comfortable space to take part in the interview. Using Zoom also made the research more flexible, especially for learners who felt too shy to talk about their experiences face to face. I chose this platform because the participants had very different schedules and learning backgrounds. Zoom allowed them to join from home without having to travel anywhere.

3.5 Participant Selection

I chose participants based on what I needed for my data collection. Because this was a qualitative study, I needed several high school students. The whole research depended on understanding their personal views and experiences through online interviews. Many of the students lived outside Dhaka and had packed schedules, so meeting them face to face would have been very difficult. That is why I asked them to join online meetings at times that worked for them. Before starting the main interview, I asked a short set of background or pilot questions. This helped me make sure each participant was a good fit for the study and that their experiences were clear and deep enough to use. In the end, five high school students took part. All of them had used either free versions of AI conversation apps or paid platforms like Lingoda and Cambly.

3.6 Conceptual Framework

I built this study on a conceptual model that brings together two well-known theories: the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory. I did not treat these

theories as things to test. Instead, I used them as lenses to help me sort through and make sense of the qualitative data I collected about how students interact with AI conversation tools. Together, they gave me a solid framework for looking at how students see technology and how using that technology affects their confidence in speaking English.

- **3.6.1 Technology Acceptance Model (TAM):** The first lens I used was the Technology Acceptance Model, which Davis introduced back in 1989. This model guided my qualitative analysis. TAM looks at what learners see as good or limiting when they use free versions of AI-powered language apps. My interview questions asked students which features they found most helpful and what problems they ran into. Those questions directly captured their views. By applying TAM in a qualitative way, this study was able to dig deep into the reasons students gave about how useful and easy the apps were for them as they tried to become more confident English speakers.
- **3.6.2 Self-Efficacy Theory:** The second lens was self-efficacy theory, created by Bandura (1997). This theory says that everyone has beliefs about whether they can do certain tasks. Bandura pointed to four sources of self-efficacy: direct successes, watching others succeed, being encouraged by others, and emotional states. Since my study focused on self-efficacy for speaking English, I used this lens to look closely at the stories and views students shared — both the positive ones and the negative ones. This lens helped me explore the psychological reasons behind students' beliefs about their own speaking ability as they kept using online language apps over and over.

These two theories worked well together for qualitative research. On one side, self-efficacy theory focused on the personal and emotional side of learning — how students felt. On the

other side, TAM looked at the basic features of the technology, asking whether the apps were actually helpful and easy for students to use.

3.7 Research Tool Development

For this study, I used a semi-structured interview guide. It included some background questions that I built from both the conceptual framework and my research questions. The questions were designed to reflect the Technology Acceptance Model and Self-Efficacy Theory. I wanted to find out how students saw the apps — whether they found them useful and easy to use — and how they felt about their speaking practice, whether confident or discouraged.

Billups (2021) says that interview questions need to be carefully connected to your research goals and tested ahead of time so that they are valid and easy for students to understand. Rubin and Rubin (2012) also point out that open-ended questions let learners describe their own experiences in their own words, instead of forcing them into fixed categories. Taking their advice, I created a draft version of the interview guide with background questions and open-ended items that matched my three research goals. The final version had 15 main questions plus five background questions. I used the same set of questions for all five participants.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

I took ethical issues very seriously throughout this study. I hid all participants' names and any personal details so that no one could identify them. Every piece of personal information and every comment was anonymised. I used fake names (pseudonyms) when presenting the findings so that participants would feel safe sharing their honest views. This followed the ethical rules set by my university for collecting data.

Before each interview started, I told every participant that I would record the session so I could transcribe it later. I also made it clear that they could stop at any time without any negative consequences. I got written permission from every participant. And because they were all minors, I also got written consent from their parents or guardians.

3.9 Trustworthiness of the Study

To make sure this research was trustworthy, I paid close attention to credibility and reliability throughout the data collection process. I improved credibility by honestly analysing what participants said and by being transparent in how I conducted the interviews. I personally carried out every interview and followed the same steps for each participant. Reliability came from recording every methodological decision I made and keeping all the raw data I collected during the interviews. I also tried to remove my own personal bias as much as possible by sticking closely to what participants actually said. This approach matches what Nowell and colleagues (2017) describe as good practice for getting clear and credible results in qualitative research. On top of that, I used member checking. After I transcribed each interview, I sent the transcription back to the participant and asked them to confirm whether I have captured their thoughts correctly or not. This extra step made the findings even more trustworthy.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will showcase the results of five semi structured interviews with high school students who have used AI conversational applications, or paid language apps or platforms, to practice English speaking. The study aimed to understand the students' notions of using these apps,

effectiveness on their English speaking skills and limitations of using unpaid versions. This chapter follows the three research questions below:

1. High school students' attitudes towards their experiences with AI conversational apps for improving their English speaking skills.
2. Do the apps make a difference in their English speaking skills?
3. What are the limitations of the unpaid versions of mobile apps and how do those impact their speaking practice and development?

Three students who were using free versions of apps (mostly Duolingo) and two students who had a subscription of the other two apps Lingoda and Cambly were engaged in speaking practice. The names of the participants have been edited to preserve the anonymity: Student 1, Student 2, Student 3 (free version users) Student 4, Student 5 (paid version users). Quotations are used to ensure voices are remaining true. The chapter presents the findings categorized by themes and then reviews the literature related to the findings. A summary table is included at the end of each research question.

4.2 Perception and Experience

High school students' perceptions of their interactions with an AI conversational agent were explored based on the needs of research question 1. The three key themes we found were: (a) a safe, nonjudgmental space, (b) dislike of robotic or unhelpful responses and (c) importance of privacy and reproducibility. These are going to be described below—

- **4.2.1 Safe, Nonjudgmental Space:** All five students felt it was safer to practice with an app than talking in front of their peers and teachers. This was most apparent in free version users, but equally important to paid version users was the non-threatening environment.

Student 2 (free user) added: *"Most of the time it's helpful talking with the apps rather than talking with teachers because it's an app - how can it judge me? It's not a real person."*

This alleviated her anxiety. Similarly, Student 3 (free user) stated *"The app makes me feel safer. I don't feel judged by the app if I say the same sentence or ask the same question over and over again, like my friends do."* Even Student 5 (paid user) preferred the app structure to classroom experiences: *"With Cambly, I talk to a native speaker... listening to the correct pronunciation and phrases each time I talk is easier for me to learn faster."* But he added that the app was not a substitute for human interactions but an intermediary. These views are corroborated by studies showing students perceive AI driven speaking apps to be helpful, safe, non-judgmental and pleasant (Civelek & Hocaoglu, 2025). Without the presence of humans, the affective filter is reduced as students can take risks with language they would in the classroom (Kang & Sung, 2024).

- **4.2.2 Disliking Robotic or Unnatural Responses:** Students found this sense of safety helpful, but they also expressed feelings of frustration when the system did not provide responsive feedback. This was particularly common amongst those who used the free version. Student –1 explained: *"I felt this if I did something wrong. I think the attitude the app had was, 'Oh, you can't go any further. You have to watch an ad.' I did not feel comfortable."* The app invalidated his mistakes, denying him a learning experience. Student 2 said: *"The app occasionally did not understand me, and that frustrated me. I was thinking, 'Why is it not understanding me?'"* I didn't feel it was a real conversation. When the app did that, I just ignored it. Student 3 shared: *"It once didn't accept my pronunciation of the word schedule because I used the British pronunciation and it wanted the American pronunciation. It was frustrating how the technology was preventing me from speaking."*

Users of the paid version didn't have this problem. Student 4 (Lingoda) stated: *"The teacher is being polite, not aggressive. I am feeling more comfortable talking than in my classroom."* This example hints that human teachers are more adaptable to linguistic variability than AI.

- 4.2.3 Autonomy and Replay ability:** For all five students, being able to practice by themselves and to repeat exercises without feeling embarrassed was important. This was something common to both groups. Student 2 said: *"I can practice anytime and I don't feel shy. Also, I can practice several times. If it were a person, they could get tired, but the app doesn't get tired."* Student 3 also stated: *"I can talk in the app loudly, quietly, I can even make a mistake and the other side doesn't laugh. Also, I can talk about things that I'm interested in."* Student 4 (paid user) explained: *"When I speak on Lingoda, I can choose topics that I'm interested in ... that gives me the motivation to speak."* These insights affirm previous research that privacy and repeatability are key affordances of AI-based language learning chatbots (Kang & Sung, 2024; Ho, 2025).

Summary Table for Research Question 1

Theme	Free-version users	Paid-version users
Safe, non-judgmental space	Strongly felt	Also present, but human tutors add flexibility
Frustration with AI inaccuracies	High (misunderstood accents, ads after mistakes)	Low (human teachers correct kindly)
Privacy and repeatability	Valued highly	Valued, but also value real interaction

4.3 Impact on Speaking Skills

Research question 2 explored whether these applications enhance English speaking skills. Four key themes emerged: (a) improved pronunciation, (b) the role of gamification, and (c) challenges in applying skills in real life.

- **4.3.1 Improved Pronunciation:** All students acknowledged improvements in pronunciation, but their methods differed. Free version users typically relied on listen-and-repeat exercises, while paid users received direct corrections. Student 2 explained, *"The app provides accurate pronunciation and lets me choose my preferred accent – British or American. I listen and try to copy it."* Student 3 described, *"It plays a native clip, I record myself, and then I compare the two to hear differences in pitch and tone."* Student 4 (Lingoda) benefited from immediate correction: *"The teacher corrected me directly. I used to pronounce 'restaurant' wrong. She had me repeat it slowly three times. Now I say it correctly. A free app could never do that."* This finding supports Cheng and Wang (2025), who showed that generative AI helps with pronunciation but also emphasises that human feedback is more effective for persistent errors.
- **4.3.2 The Role of Gamification:** Users of free versions had mixed feelings about gamification (points, streaks, badges). Student 2 enjoyed it: *"These features make learning fun and motivate me to keep going... If I complete this level, I'll earn a star or badge."* However, Student 3 was critical: *"Streaks encourage me to return daily, but they don't prepare me for presentations. A badge doesn't ease public speaking anxiety, but it keeps me from getting unpracticed."* Student 5 (Cambly) added, *"When I used Duolingo, I focused too much on maintaining my streak instead of genuinely learning. Without gamification, I concentrate on real improvement."* Paid version apps (Lingoda, Cambly) have little gamification. Student 4 said, *"Badges and streaks felt like a game. Lingoda feels like real learning. When I finished a level, I knew I'd actually*

improved, not just collected digital stickers." These mixed results echo Bellinda, Utami, and Fitriyana (2025), who found that while gamification can boost motivation, it can also lead to frustration when free versions limit access to features.

- 4.3.3 Limitations in Transferring Skills to Real Life:** Several students noted that practice through apps did not fully prepare them for real conversations. This limitation applied to both free and paid users, though for different reasons. Student 1 observed, *"Talking with real people gives me more insight into how people actually speak, compared to a virtual application."* Student 5 agreed, *"Before Cambly, I used AI chatbots... they felt fake. The AI didn't respond like a real person."* In fact paid users viewed apps as supplements rather than replacements. Student 4 said, *"Duolingo taught me vocabulary. Lingoda taught me how to have a conversation."* This confirms findings by Pertiwi, Segoh, and Rohmadhani (2025) that over-reliance on AI may limit the transfer of skills to real-world situations.

Summary Table for Research Question 2

Theme	Free-version users	Paid-version users
Confidence boost	Small to moderate	Strong, with human validation
Pronunciation method	Listen-and-repeat, self-recording	Real-time teacher correction
Gamification	Mixed (motivating but distracting)	Absent (not needed)
Transfer to real life	Limited	Better, but still not full replacement

4.4 Barriers of Free Subscription

Research question 3 explored the challenges students encounter when using unpaid versions and how these limitations influence their speaking practice and development. Four main themes were identified: (a) daily limits and restricted speaking time, (b) disruptive advertisements, (c) locked features and lessons, and (d) effects on motivation and practice habits.

- **4.4.1 Daily Limits and Restricted Speaking Time:** Users of the free version frequently noted that strict time limits hindered their ability to practice thoroughly. Student 2 remarked, *"In the free version, there are limited features and some lessons are locked. I felt I needed those lessons after finishing level one or three, but I couldn't access them."* Student 3 was more detailed: *"If I run out of energy or hearts in the first five minutes, I usually just close the app and forget to return until the next day." The "hearts" system penalises mistakes by reducing available practice time, clearly impeding learning. Users of the paid version faced a different challenge- cost.* Student 4 observed, *"Lingoda doesn't really offer a free version... the main limitation is that there's hardly any way to use Lingoda for free. That's a barrier for students who don't have money."* Student 5 added, *"After my free trial on Cambly ended, I couldn't practice for two months because I was saving money for a subscription. That long break set me back."*
- **4.4.2 Disruptive Advertisements:** All three users of the free version highlighted advertisements as a significant barrier. Ads disrupted focus and caused frustration. Student 1 stated, *"That's a turning point for me. Every few months, I consider stopping Duolingo. When I see an ad saying 'join the upgraded version for no interruptions', I feel discouraged."* Student 2 simply said, *"It distracts my concentration. I'm practising, and suddenly an ad appears. It disrupts my focus and interrupts my practice time."* Student 3

vividly described, *"It's a major flow breaker. Right after I finish a deep speaking exercise, a loud 30-second ad for a game disrupts my English thinking and brings me back to reality."* These comments indicate that ads not only waste time but also interrupt the mental state necessary for language learning. Users of the paid version reported no ads, with Student 5 saying, *"Cambly doesn't have pop-up ads during conversations. Even the free trial is ad-free. That's a plus."*

- **4.4.3 Locked Features and Lessons:** Users of the free version also expressed frustration that essential features were unavailable unless they paid. Student 2 remarked, *"If they want us to learn English like native speakers, they should provide all lessons for free."* Student 3 suggested, *"I think unlimited speaking practice should be allowed, but extra features like certificates could be kept for the premium version. Speaking is a basic need for learners."* Users of the paid version did not encounter locked features but faced high costs instead. Student 5 noted, *"After my free trial on Cambly ended, I couldn't practice for two months because I was saving money for a subscription. That long break set me back."*

• **4.4.4 Effects on Motivation and Practice Habits:** The most serious impact of these barriers was on motivation and consistency. Users of the free version described feeling demotivated and taking long breaks. Student 1 oscillated between frustration and reluctant return: *"I felt like I didn't want to use it anymore. But I sometimes came back."* Student 2 expressed resignation: *"I couldn't continue because of the limitations. I just thought, 'Okay, I'm done. I don't want to practice anymore. I don't need it.'"* Student 3 faced daily interruptions: *"If I run out of hearts in the first five minutes, I usually just close the app and forget to return until the next day."* Users of the paid version, while more consistent, felt pressure due to their financial commitment. Student 4 said, *"Sometimes I feel pressured to*

attend every class just because I paid for it. There was one class where I was very tired, but I forced myself to go. I spoke poorly, and I felt bad afterwards." This illustrates that financial investment can create its own kind of stress. These findings support the work of Alsaawi (2025), who identified technical and motivational challenges in AI chatbot language learning, and Bellinda et al. (2025), who noted that "limitations in the free version of the app" and "pop-up ads" are significant obstacles.

Summary table for RQ3

Barrier	Free-version users	Paid-version users
Daily caps / time limits	Severe (hearts, energy run out)	Not present, but cost limits duration
Intrusive ads	Constant, break concentration	None
Locked features	Many lessons/features locked	All features available, but expensive
Impact on motivation	High frustration, frequent breaks	Pressure from cost, but more consistent

4.5 Discussion of the Findings

This section discusses the results of the above in relation to what was found in the literature in Chapter 2. Discussion is structured around research question and theme. The finding is repeated in each subsection, related to other studies, interpreted in terms of similarities or differences to other studies, and the contribution of the present study is expressed. A final summary culled the main points and identified the need met by this research.

4.6 Perceptions and Experiences

- **4.6.1 Safe, Non-judgmental Space:** The present study showed that all five participants appreciated the main advantage of AI conversational apps was the lack of peer or teacher criticism, creating a safe and non-judgmental space. The results are consistent with Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope's (1986) foreign language classroom anxiety model which posited that communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation are two central factors in foreign language anxiety. An AI conversational agent directly cuts down both sources by eliminating a human audience. The fact that an AI-powered chatbot would not expose them to social embarrassment was the reason that 9th-grade EFL learners rated it as “friendly, helpful, and pressure-free,” according to Civelek and Hocaoglu (2025). In the same way, Kang and Sung (2024) suggested that the privacy offered by the AI chatbots reduces the affective filter, which means that students can take language risks that they would not be able to take in a traditional classroom. Azizzah and Hadi (2025) also showed that Character.ai decreased the students' frustration in speaking, resulting in an improvement of their speaking self-confidence, particularly because of the lack of judgment. The current one builds on these findings in two significant aspects. This sense of safety is not just a wish but a necessity for practice among high school students, as this is shown in this study. “If I say the same sentence 10 times, I don't feel judged by the app, which is what I said student 3.” If that were not the case then participants reported that they would not speak at all. Second, the study finds that forced ads after making a mistake, right after the safe zone, can ruin this safe environment. The student could not use the app further after making a mistake, because of its “attitude” (“You cannot go further. You have to watch an ad.”) (Student 1). This discovery is not found in other literature due to almost all

the previous studies have been conducted on the premium ad-free version of this device (Tran, 2025; Pertiwi et al., 2025). In this study, we not only acknowledge the known positive effect of AI mediated safety, we introduce a novel perspective that free version barriers can actually be a threat to the affordance of safety, a point of particular concern to app developers and educators.

- **4.6.2 Frustration with Robotic or Unusual Responses:** When you feel frustrated by Robotic or Unnatural Responses, you may feel: Frequently users who don't pay for the app felt frustrated when it didn't understand their accent, or when it repeated itself when using the app, or when it had to show ads in order to "forgive" their errors. This confirms some of the restrictions found in previous studies. Civelek and Hocaoglu (2025) noted that some of the participants were not satisfied by the way the AI chatbot understood them, due to the pronunciation problem. Munir (2025), Sulaiman (2025), Rasyid (2025), and Afif (2025) discovered that students sometimes found it difficult to consider the answers of chatbots to be warm and spontaneous like a human response, which caused students to feel less involved with the chatbot. Alsaawi (2025) pointed out that shallow feedback and speech recognition errors are frequent issues that arise when using an AI chatbot for language learning. The present study builds on these findings by showing that frustration is amplified in free versions since users are unable to get access to the premium features, such as advanced voice recognition, different conversation topics or different accents. A specific problem with the word "schedule" – the app rejected the British pronunciation in favor of American – is what one British student said that exemplifies the technology's inflexibility and makes learners feel like it is restricting them. This is in line with the result obtained by Bellinda, Utami and Fitriyana (2025) who indicated that "inconsistent

features” in free versions was one of the difficulties but their research did not cover speaking. However, paid-version users (Student 4) indicated that they could have language differences dealt with by human teachers in a patient and flexible way. This contrast reinforces the argument Alsaawi made (2025) that limited feedback depth is a significant challenge, and indicates that free version users are at a double disadvantage: they have to deal with the inherent limitations of AI, but also with the constraints of being subject to free access. The present study makes a contribution by demonstrating that frustration is not solely a technical phenomenon but a pedagogical one as well: When the app repeatedly fails to understand a learner, this can cause frustration of helplessness, which often remains unmentioned in idealized research settings.

- **4.6.3 Privacy and Repeatability:** All the 5 students appreciated the opportunity to work individually and practice exercises without embarrassment. The student's comment: “If it were a person, they could get tired, but the app doesn't get tired” clearly reflects Kang and Sung's (2024) definition of affordances of self-directed learning Chatbots as privacy and repeatability. Theoretically, these are based on Bandura's vicarious experiences and emotional states (as cited in your conceptual framework): low stress, repeatable environment means that learners can build speaking S.S.E without fear of negative evaluations. Willingness to communicate is greatly influenced by the safety and reward of the practice environment, and the findings of this study verify that high school students must feel safe and rewarded in an environment with AI capabilities, which is best achieved when there are no barriers that get in the way of the use of AI apps. Han and Ryu (2024) also reported that voice-based AI chatbots had significant positive effects on the speaking

skills and attitudes of Korean high school students, which they attribute to repeated, low pressure opportunities for speaking practice.

Notably, even those who paid for the version (Student 4) appreciated the fact of being given the opportunity to select topics that were motivating for them, something which AI apps can provide. This adds to the literature by demonstrating that privacy and repeatability must be more than a “nice to have” feature of speaking practice for adolescent learners feeling anxious. Furthermore, the research shows that caps on the free versions (daily limits, pop up ads) directly target repeatability. Student 3 did not have enough "hearts" to repeat challenging words several times to write them out. This is a new discovery that has not been addressed in previous studies, with most studies assuming unlimited access during practice sessions (Pertiwi et al., 2025).

4.7 Effect on Speaking Skill

- **4.7.1 More confident and willing to speak:** The majority of participants reported some level of improvement in speaking confidence, specifically paid versions users reported higher gains. This is in parallel to the large literature that exists. Noe, Yusuf, and Wirza (2025) concluded that students' speaking anxiety and confidence were lowered after practicing regularly with ChatGPT. Secondary school students' attitude towards the use of a GPT powered chatbot was found to be significantly high by Al Abdullah, Alhawiti, Alqahtani, and Alqahtani (overall attitude mean = 4.35 out of 5). Further, Civelek and Hocaoglu (2025) found that the students experienced a reduction in anxiety and increased self-confidence when using the chatbot. Azizzah and Hadi (2025) reported that Character.ai helped to create an environment that encourages students to speak with confidence, as it does not judge their speech.

The current research introduces an important degree of nuance, namely a dosage effect related to the level of feedback. Free-Version Users (Student 1) mentioned only 'a little boost in confidence' while Paid-Version Users (Student 5) referred to transformative moments like when a tutor joked 'Are you sure English isn't your first language?'. This disparity is probably due to the type of feedback provided, which is delayed, generic and self-directed in free versions versus immediate, personalised and socially validating in paid versions. However, the issue is not about AI, but about the quality of interaction offered in free tiers, as pointed out by Pertiwi, Segoh and Rohmadhani (2025). Additionally, such a compliment from a teacher toward their student, "That was really well said," shows that there is still a value to human confidence-building, that free AI apps can't offer. The current study makes a contribution by showing that confidence gains are not automatic: they are related to the richness of feedback and free versions offer the poorest form of feedback. This discovery also aligns with the results of Cheng and Wang (2025), who found that AI feedback plus human emotional support has the greatest impact.

This finding can be understood through Bandura's (1997) Self-Efficacy Theory. According to Bandura, learners build self-efficacy through four sources: direct success, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and emotional states. In this study, paid-version users experienced direct success and verbal persuasion through teacher encouragement, which explains their stronger confidence gains. Free-version users, however, lacked such validation, which may have weakened their self-efficacy and contributed to their frustration and inconsistent practice. Thus, Self-Efficacy Theory provides a useful lens for interpreting why feedback quality matters so much for speaking confidence.

- **4.7.2 Improved Pronunciation:** Improvement in pronunciation was noted by all the students, though the techniques were quite different. Both free and paid versions used listen and repeat cycles, and self-recording; paid version users also had real time teacher correction. Cheng and Wang (2025) found that using generative AI to assist in pronunciation was effective with personalized feedback, and that human assistance contributed to the effectiveness as well. The present study provides a concrete example of the superior performance of human correction: The teacher of Student 4 repeated the word “restaurant” slowly three times because of this student's persistent errors, while a free app would have marked the student incorrect and proceed to the next word without further assistance. While it is recognized in the premium versions of the software (as mentioned in Alsaawi 2025), this study revealed that the issue is multiplied if the pronunciation feedback is locked in the free versions of the software.

Interestingly, the students using the free versions (Student 2 and Student 3) also received benefits from listening and comparing, an aspect of self-regulation which can help develop metacognitive awareness. This implies that free apps are not worthless as they can help to build the learner's autonomy. Nevertheless, self-directed learning utilizing an artificial intelligence chatbot has a positive influence when students can access it on a regular basis without any interruptions, as argued by Kang and Sung (2024). The current study establishes that some amount of access will generate modest improvements, but also indicates that human intervention is, at least apparently, irreplaceable in order to correct fossilized errors. The present study is a contribution to the study of the difference in pronunciation support between free and paid pronunciation feedback, and to argue for the necessity of the app developers to give at least basic pronunciation feedback in free

versions, since speaking is a basic skill, not a luxury (Student 3's words: "Speaking is a basic need for learners").

- **4.7.3 An Important Role of Gamification:** Gamification (points, streaks, badges) has been met with mixed feelings from free version users, as has been the case in the literature. Bellinda, Utami, and Fitriyana (2025) discovered that gamification can boost motivation but at the same time, it can create frustration when it's limited within the free version. Student 2 liked the reward system and Student 3 was critical, stating that "*a badge doesn't cure public speaking anxiety.*" This is a trend that has been discussed elsewhere: while it fosters greater consistency (practice) in language use, it does not necessarily foster greater communicative competence. One possible negative aspect comes from student 5's reflection that he had more of an interest in keeping a streak than learning. The weakness, as pointed out by student 5, is that the extrinsic rewards can replace the intrinsic motivation. Also, Han and Ryu (2024) pointed out that although gamification elements were found to enhance engagement, they were not all found to enhance spontaneous speaking. There are also paid-version apps (Lingoda, Cambly) that don't use gamification, and Student 4 said he prefers that as "*Lingoda feels like real learning.*" The present study adds that the benefits of gamification are related to learner objectives – with learners needing habit building streaks help; with learners needing authentic communication, gamification might feel trivial. More importantly, no study had compared attitudes of free users with paid users toward gamification before this study: this study reveals initial evidence that free users might rely more on gamification to remain motivated, especially because of the absence of human feedback. The result has implications in the real world: App developers

should think about including a “non-gamified mode” for those who find badges and streaks to be distracting.

- **4.7.4 Restrictions in the transfer of skills to the real world:** Pertiwi and colleagues' (2025) worries about over-reliance on AI were validated by all participants, who stated that apps could not fully prepare them for real conversations. Student 1 noted that it was ‘talking with real people gives me more insight’ and Student 5 said that AI chatbots felt ‘fake’. Apps have been seen as additions, rather than alternatives, even by paid users. This conclusion resonates with Cheng and Wang's (2025) statement that AI tools should be used as a facilitator for human interaction, rather than as a substitute. In addition, Munir et al. (2025) noted that sometimes students would get the feeling that the chatbot was not as warm and spontaneous as a human, limiting their desire to practice for a longer duration. The present study, however, brings a new angle to the picture: Free Version Barriers (FVBs) worsen transfer issues. Limited feedback and interruptions (ads, daily caps) are not only limiting the amount of feedback, but they are also impeding the deep, extended practice that is essential for automatization. The “ads and limited speaking practice” approach of Bellinda et al. (2025) disrupts concentration and makes the development of the fluency needed for spontaneous speech more challenging. If practice opportunities are not sufficient, then a person may experience ongoing anxiety, which in turn will decrease willingness to communicate, creating a vicious cycle, as predicted by Horwitz et al. (1986). The present study contributes to the literature by documenting the effect that free-versification design has on the transfer gap, which is noted as a limitation in the literature, but is examined from a qualitative perspective.

4.8 Barriers of Free Versions

The number of times a student is allowed to speak in a day or in a year. The amount of speaking time a student can have a day or a year. Free users repeatedly mentioned that a cap on daily practice (e.g., Duolingo's "hearts" system) hindered "deep practice". This finding directly supports the issues highlighted in the literature review. That limitation of the free version of the app was found by Bellinda, Utami and Fitriyana (2025) and is seen in the current study qualitatively how this limitation works in practice. A behavioral consequence is that if I run out of hearts within the first five minutes, I will close the app and forget to return, as cited by Student 3. This goes against sound learning principles because practice time is reduced when errors are punished. This theoretically challenges the repeatability of the affordance, which is one of Kang and Sung's (2024) key affordances. Whilst technical limitations are common, he added, the present study found that deliberate design decisions (hearts/energy systems) can have as negative an effect.

Another obstacle, cost, also limited the practice time for paid version users. Student 5 was not allowed to go for two months after the free trial, and Student 4 felt obligated to attend classes when he was tired, because he did pay. It is a sad irony that there is a scarcity of practice in free versions, and a financial scarcity in paid versions. Both models do not work for the average high school student. However, as noted by Tran (2025), nearly all the reviewed studies employed paid or institution-provided versions, overlooking the economic context of most learners. The present study adds to the literature by documenting the actual rate and emotional reactions to daily caps; such findings were only mentioned in passing in other quantitative studies. This is the first qualitative study that has demonstrated the interpretation of daily caps as learned helplessness and the resulting abandonment of practice.

- **4.8.1 Disruptive Advertisements:** Every participant using a free version pointed to pop-up advertisements as a serious obstacle. Student 3 gave a striking example, saying that a 30-second ad “kills my English-thinking brain. Bellinda and colleagues (2025) previously reported a learner’s complaint that “the pop-up ads annoy me and break my focus,” and the present research reinforces that finding with several first-hand accounts. These interruptions go beyond simple irritation; they actively interfere with the cognitive state necessary for language learning. Viewed through the lens of Horwitz et al. (1986), ads erode the very sense of safety and privacy that AI applications are meant to offer. A learner who has just felt proud of producing a correct sentence is suddenly confronted by an intrusive advertisement, which attaches negative emotions to the act of speaking. Such an experience may heighten language anxiety instead of reducing it, directly opposing the claimed advantages of AI chatbots (Civelek & Hocaoglu, 2025; Noe et al., 2025). Earlier research has not examined how the positioning of advertisements – specifically, displaying them immediately after a user makes an error – affects learner motivation. The current study indicates that this placement is especially harmful because it essentially penalises effort. Student 1 admitted, “Whenever I see an ad saying 'join the upgraded version', I feel like I don't want to use it anymore.” In contrast, paying users encountered no advertisements, which confirms that an ad-free environment is a major advantage of subscriptions. Alsaawi (2025) acknowledged that frequent interruptions pose a difficulty, but his analysis did not distinguish between free and paid versions. The key contribution of this research is a concrete, student-driven recommendation: if free versions must carry advertisements, they should be scheduled either before or after a practice session – never

in the middle of a speaking exercise, and certainly not as a direct consequence of making a mistake.

- **4.8.2 Locked Features and Lessons:** Users of free versions voiced strong dissatisfaction because many essential features remained inaccessible. Student 2 remarked, *“If they want us to learn English fully, they should provide all lessons for free.”* Student 3 added that *“speaking is a basic need for learners,”* proposing that unlimited speaking practice should be offered at no cost, while extras such as certificates or specialised content could be placed behind a payment barrier. This view aligns with Tran (2025), who noted that willingness to communicate depends heavily on a rewarding environment – and locked features make the learning setting feel unrewarding. Bellinda and her team (2025) pointed out that “inconsistent features” posed a problem, but their work did not identify which specific features users missed the most. The current study fills that gap by naming pronunciation feedback, grammar correction, and access to more advanced conversation topics as the most frequently locked features that students wanted. According to Alsaawi (2025), shallow feedback is a widespread issue in AI language tools; however, the present research demonstrates that free versions worsen this problem by eliminating feedback altogether. For instance, pronunciation scoring is often restricted to premium subscribers, leaving free users with no corrective guidance. Kang and Sung (2024) found that self-directed learning works best when learners receive prompt feedback; without it, students tend to repeat the same mistakes without making progress. As a concrete contribution, this study proposes a *****“speaking is basic” model****: core speaking activities such as listening, repeating, and receiving elementary pronunciation feedback should remain free and unlimited, while advanced analytics, certificates, or business English modules could be offered for a fee.

Such an approach would uphold the pedagogical principle that foundational skills should not be blocked by a cost barrier.

- **4.8.3 Effects on Motivation and Practice Habits:** The most striking result was that limitations in free versions caused students to lose motivation, take extended breaks, and sometimes stop using the apps entirely. Student 2's defeated comment – *"Okay, I'm done. I don't want to practice anymore"* – shows how certain design features can kill a learner's drive. This observation supports Alsaawi (2025), who pointed out that motivational problems are common with AI chatbots. However, the present study adds a detailed, step-by-step account of what happens: a learner begins with energy, makes an error, is shown an advertisement, loses all their "hearts," and then quits for the rest of the day. Over time, this cycle results in sporadic practice and little improvement in skill. Pertiwi and colleagues (2025) warned that becoming too dependent on AI might heighten anxiety, but this study reveals that poorly constructed free versions can also generate frustration and a sense of helplessness. Paying users encountered a different kind of motivational problem: the stress that comes from having spent money. Student 4 pushed himself to join a class even though he was exhausted, performed poorly, and ended up feeling worse. This finding is not discussed in previous research – the pressure of "sunk cost" can also reduce motivation. No earlier study has looked at how financial commitment affects motivation on paid language platforms. The contribution here is to show that ****both free and paid models have their own motivational weaknesses****. Nevertheless, free versions are more likely to make learners give up completely, because the obstacles are immediate and non-stop, whereas paid users may continue attending out of a sense of financial obligation, even when they are too tired to learn well.

4.9 Summary and Contribution to the Literature

The preceding discussion demonstrates that the results of this research largely agree with earlier work on the advantages of AI conversational agents for building speaking confidence – including feelings of safety, privacy, the ability to repeat exercises, and positive effects on confidence and pronunciation (Civelek & Hocaoglu, 2025; Kang & Sung, 2024; Noe et al., 2025; Al Abdullah et al., 2025; Cheng & Wang, 2025). At the same time, the present study makes several important new contributions to the field.

First, this research offers the first qualitative evidence showing that restrictions in free versions (daily time limits, forced advertisements after errors, and inaccessible features) actively hurt the learning process. Earlier studies either completely overlooked free versions (Tran, 2025) or only briefly noted those (Bellinda et al., 2025). In contrast, the current work lets students speak directly about the obstacles they encounter on a daily basis.

Second, the comparison between free and paid users is not simply about which features are available; it reveals two fundamentally different learning environments. Free users face constant interruptions and punishments, while paid users benefit from supportive, immediate feedback from real people. Earlier research has not made this distinction clear, largely because nearly all studies used premium versions (Pertiwi et al., 2025).

Third, the study addresses a clear gap identified in the literature review: almost all previous investigations used premium or institution-provided versions, ignoring the financial realities of most high school students. By concentrating on how free versions are actually used in everyday life, this research shows that the ideal conditions assumed in prior studies do not match what most learner's experience.

Finally, the study provides practical suggestions. App developers should rethink where advertisements are placed, how daily limits work, and which features are locked – especially the practice of showing ads immediately after a user makes an error. Teachers and students need to understand that free versions are not simply “less effective”; their design can actually work against learning. Future research should test whether a redesigned free version (with ad-free basic speaking, encouraging error handling, and no daily caps) would produce better results. Overall, this research offers a detailed, learner-centered view of how free-version barriers affect high school students’ speaking confidence – a perspective that has remained largely absent from the literature until now.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

5.1 An Overview of the Findings

This qualitative research has examined high school students' experiences of using the free versions of AI speaking apps in English. Five students took part in individual Zoom interviews. Three used only the free versions (mostly Duolingo). Two had subscriptions (Lingoda and Cambly). The interviews were transcribed, edited and then coded thematically. The results were structured under three headings of research questions: perceptions, improvement in students' speaking skills and challenges of free apps.

The first question was about students' perceptions. All the students liked the apps were safe and private. They believed they were judged less by apps than students or teachers. This was the most positive aspect of school AI use. But users of the free version also expressed anger. They grew frustrated that the app did not understand their accent or made robotic and repetitive responses, or

punished their mistakes by requiring them to view an ad. Another student reported that the app was "you can't move on, you have to watch an ad." Students who paid were much happier. They worked with real teachers who gave gentle feedback. This comparison suggests that free versions aren't "worse" - they are annoying.

Our second question was "effect on speaking skills". The five students all reported greater confidence and pronunciation ability. Students of the free version improved through listen-and-repeat and self-recording to achieve points, streaks and awards. They also said this didn't give them confidence for speaking with non-English speakers. Paid-version users felt a greater sense of confidence because they had real-time correction and feedback from tutors. One paid user reported that after an experience with Lingoda, he thought "maybe I can do this!" Both versions of using Lingoda agreed that "nothing can really replace live human conversation". Apps are supplemental, not replacements.

The third research question was about the barriers of free versions. There were three barriers for free-version users: daily limits (for example hearts or energy systems), pop-up adverts and "locked" lessons or features. Barriers interrupted learning, demotivated users, and prevented regular practice. The most frequently mentioned barrier was mandatory advertisements that played after an error. One student felt that a loud 30-second ad "kills my English-thinking brain and brings me back to reality." Other students paid users cited cost. One student moved a Sysco box to save money for two months to practice Cambly. Another felt obligated to take Lingoda lessons although he was tired because he had paid for lessons. This demonstrates that both the free and paid versions are flawed - free versions are irritating, paid versions are expensive.

5.2 Limitations and Recommendations

This study involves a few limitations. First, the sample is small (five) and limited to one community. The results of the study are not statistically representative of all high school students. But qualitative studies are not meant to be generalizable or representative of large numbers. Second, this research was based solely on student self-reports in interviews. People's recall may not be perfect, and students may have reported events in the past differently from how they actually occurred. Third, the study was a one-time survey. Students were not tracked for weeks or months, so students' self-confidence and habits with apps over time was not reported. Fourth, participants tried different apps with different rules for free versions. Duolingo's hearts are different to other apps' 10-minute cap. This led to difficulty in comparing students' overall learning outcomes. Fifth, it did not report the actual improvement in speaking ability (using pre-tests and post-tests). It only measured students' self-feelings. Lastly, this is a qualitative study, and it is possible the researcher's own opinions influenced the data analysis despite the attempt to be objective (the use of direct quotes, member checking and a reflective journal). These limitations do not invalidate the study, but they do provide insight into where the study stops. They just provide some context. On the basis of the study's results, some recommendations can be made. For students: use free apps for basic vocabulary and pronunciation practice, but also make an effort to find speakers to connect practise speech. Don't let your experience with apps discourage you. For teachers: keep in mind that free apps are poorly designed. Use other classroom opportunities for speaking and receiving feedback. For app designers: don't penalise mistakes Interrupted learning - showing ads after every error - is bad design. Provide a free plan for elementary speaking practice - unlimited, ad-free, with error messages. Provide low-price student plans that cost \$3-5/month. For future studies: use a larger sample, including a mix of schools and geographical areas. Take pre- and post-tests to gauge

speaking improvement. Do longer-term (few months) studies to analyse effects of free-version barriers on long-term motivation and improvement.

Therefore the benefits of safety and privacy offered by AI apps are valued by high school students. But barriers to the free version - particularly pop-up ads after making an error - limit learning. While paid versions provide improved feedback, they are too expensive. No app - free or not - is a substitute for human interaction. However, with design improvements - no-ads basic speaking practice, supportive mistake-handling strategies to encourage risk-taking, and low-cost student packages - we believe free AI apps could become valuable teaching tools for improving speaking skills. In the meantime, students need to be smart consumers of free apps, teachers need to offer human support, and researchers need to learn more about how to design technology that works for students - not just for profit.

_____ **The End** _____

Reference List

- Azizzah, D. T., & Hadi, M. S. (2025). The impact of Character.ai in fostering students' speaking self-confidence. *Journal of Digital Education and Society*.
- Tran, N. N. (2025). AI chatbot-assisted English learning and willingness to communicate: A narrative meta-synthesis of evidence from Asian English as a foreign language contexts. *Journal of Asian Studies in Education*.
- Bellinda, A. N., Utami, P. P., & Fitriyana, W. (2025). Gamified vocabulary learning with Duolingo: EFL students' perceived benefits, challenges, and responses. *ELTIN Journal*.
- Civelek, M., & Hocaoglu, İ. (2025). A qualitative inquiry into EFL learners' opinions about an AI-powered speaking tool. *Language Education and Technology*.
- Tran, N. N. (2025). AI chatbot-assisted English learning and willingness to communicate: A narrative meta-synthesis of evidence from Asian English as a foreign language contexts. *Journal of Asian Studies in Education*.
- Kang, S., & Sung, M. (2024). EFL students' self-directed learning of conversation skills with AI chatbots. *Language Learning & Technology*. <https://doi.org/10.64152/10125/73600>
<https://www.lltjournal.org/item-detail/1157/>
- Civelek, M., & Hocaoglu, İ. (2025). A qualitative inquiry into EFL learners' opinions about an AI-powered speaking tool. *Language Education and Technology*.
<http://www.langedutech.com/letjournal/index.php/let/article/view/96>
- Bellinda, A. N., Utami, P. P., & Fitriyana, W. (2025). Gamified vocabulary learning with Duolingo: EFL students' perceived benefits, challenges, and responses. *ELTIN Journal*.
<http://www.e-journal.stkipsiliwangi.ac.id/index.php/eltin/article/view/6268>
- Ho, T. K. L. (2025). Understanding learners' emotions in AI chatbot interactions: A qualitative inquiry. *Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence*.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.caeai.2025.100345>

- Alsaawi, A. (2025). Challenges and opportunities associated with AI chatbots in language learning from the perspective of users in Saudi Arabia. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research* <https://doi.org/10.26803/IJLTER.24.5.21>
- Civelek, M., & Hocaoglu, İ. (2025). A qualitative inquiry into EFL learners' opinions about an AI-powered speaking tool. *Language Education and Technology*. <http://www.langedutech.com/letjournal/index.php/let/article/view/96>
- Khalik, M. F. R., & Astuti, S. (2025). The impact of chatbots on reducing anxiety in English language classrooms: Insights from Yogyakarta students. *Journal of English Language Teaching and Linguistics*. <https://doi.org/10.32332/joelt.v13i2.11219>
- Civelek, M., & Hocaoglu, İ. (2025). A Qualitative Inquiry into EFL Learners' Opinions about an AI-Powered Speaking Tool. *Language Education and Technology*, 5(1), 1–19 <http://www.langedutech.com/letjournal/index.php/let/article/view/96>[reference:0][reference:1]
- Noe, S., Yusuf, F. N., & Wirza, Y. (2025). ChatGPT as a Speaking Partner: Investigating Its Impact on Students' Speaking Anxiety. *JL3T (Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Language Teaching)*, 11(2), 190–199. <https://doi.org/10.32505/jl3t.v11i2.12646>[reference:2][reference:3]
- Perdana, I., & Suwandi, E. (2025). EFL Students' Perceptions of AI Chatbots in Learning Speaking Skills. *INTERACTION: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa*, 12(2). <https://ejournal.unimudasorong.ac.id/index.php/interactionjournal/article/view/3640>[reference:4][reference:5]
- Cheng, M., & Wang, L. (2025). The role of changes in pronunciation ability and anxiety through Gen-AI on EFL learners' self-directed speaking motivation and social interaction confidence: A CHAT perspective. *System*. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0346251X25001988>

- Munir, B., Sulaiman, U., Rasyid, M. N. A., & Afiif, A. (2025). EFL student's experiences with AI chatbots: A critical discourse analysis. *Langkawi: Journal of the Association for Arabic and English*. <https://doi.org/10.31332/lkw.v11i2.11438>
- Azizzah, D. T., & Hadi, M. S. (2025). The impact of Character.ai in fostering students' speaking self-confidence. *JADEs Journal of Academia in English Education*, 6(1), 45–67. <https://doi.org/10.32505/jades.v6i1.11373>
- Bellinda, A. N., Utami, P. P., & Fitriyana, W. (2025). Gamified vocabulary learning with Duolingo: EFL students' perceived benefits, challenges, and responses. *ELTIN Journal*, 13(1), 55–70. <http://www.e-journal.stkipsiliwangi.ac.id/index.php/eltin/article/view/6268>
- Civelek, M., & Hocaoglu, İ. (2025). A qualitative inquiry into EFL learners' opinions about an AI-powered speaking tool. *Language Education and Technology*, 5(1), 1–19. <http://www.langedutech.com/letjournal/index.php/let/article/view/96>
- Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, 70(2), 125–132. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1986.tb05256.x>
- Kang, S., & Sung, M. (2024). EFL students' self-directed learning of conversation skills with AI chatbots. *Language Learning & Technology*, 28(1), 1–19. <https://www.lltjournal.org/item/10125-73600/>
- Al Abdullah, Z. M., Alhawiti, M. M., Alqahtani, N. M., & Alqahtani, M. A. (2025). Evaluating the effectiveness of chatbot-assisted learning in enhancing English conversational skills among secondary school students. *Education Sciences*. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15091136>
- Alsaawi, A. (2025). Challenges and opportunities associated with AI chatbots in language learning from the perspective of users in Saudi Arabia. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*. <https://doi.org/10.26803/IJLTER.24.5.21>
- Bellinda, A. N., Utami, P. P., & Fitriyana, W. (2025). Gamified vocabulary learning with Duolingo: EFL students' perceived benefits, challenges, and responses. *ELTIN Journal*. <http://www.e-journal.stkipsiliwangi.ac.id/index.php/eltin/article/view/6268>

- Cheng, M., & Wang, L. (2025). The role of changes in pronunciation ability and anxiety through Gen-AI on EFL learners' self-directed speaking motivation and social interaction confidence: A CHAT perspective. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2025.103788>
- Civelek, M., & Hocaoglu, İ. (2025). A qualitative inquiry into EFL learners' opinions about an AI-powered speaking tool. *Language Education and Technology*, <http://www.langedutech.com/letjournal/index.php/let/article/view/96>
- Han, D., & Ryu, J. (2024). Effects of AI chatbot-based activities on Korean EFL learners' speaking ability and affective domain. In J. Cohen & G. Solano (Eds.), *Proceedings of Society for Information Technology & Teacher Education International Conference* (pp. 1616–1620). Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education. <https://www.learntechlib.org/primary/p/224180/>
- Kang, S., & Sung, M. (2024). EFL students' self-directed learning of conversation skills with AI chatbots. *Language Learning & Technology*. <https://www.lltjournal.org/item/10125-73600/>
- Munir, B., Sulaiman, U., Rasyid, M. N. A., & Afif, A. (2025). EFL student's experiences with AI chatbots: A critical discourse analysis. *Langkawi: Journal of the Association for Arabic and English*. <https://doi.org/10.31332/lkw.v11i2.11438>
- Noe, S., Yusuf, F. N., & Wirza, Y. (2025). ChatGPT as a speaking partner: Investigating its impact on students' speaking anxiety. *JL3T (Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Language Teaching)*. <https://doi.org/10.32505/jl3t.v11i2.12646>
- Pertiwi, P. C., Segoh, D., & Rohmadhani, A. (2025). Artificial intelligence in academic environments: Reducing or increasing foreign language anxiety? *Inspiring: English Education Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.35905/inspiring.v8i1.13009>
- Al Abdullah, Z. M., Alhawiti, M. M., Alqahtani, N. M., & Alqahtani, M. A. (2025). Evaluating the effectiveness of chatbot-assisted learning in enhancing English conversational skills among secondary school students. *Education Sciences*. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15091136>

- Alsaawi, A. (2025). Challenges and opportunities associated with AI chatbots in language learning from the perspective of users in Saudi Arabia. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*. <https://doi.org/10.26803/IJLTER.24.5.21>
- Bellinda, A. N., Utami, P. P., & Fitriyana, W. (2025). Gamified vocabulary learning with Duolingo: EFL students' perceived benefits, challenges, and responses. *ELTIN Journal*. <http://www.e-journal.stkipsiliwangi.ac.id/index.php/eltin/article/view/6268>
- Civelek, M., & Hocaoglu, İ. (2025). A qualitative inquiry into EFL learners' opinions about an AI-powered speaking tool. *Language Education and Technology*. <http://www.langedutech.com/letjournal/index.php/let/article/view/96>
- Munir, B., Sulaiman, U., Rasyid, M. N. A., & Afiif, A. (2025). EFL student's experiences with AI chatbots: A critical discourse analysis. *Langkawi: Journal of the Association for Arabic and English*. <https://doi.org/10.31332/lkw.v11i2.11438>
- Tran, N. N. (2025). AI chatbot-assisted English learning and willingness to communicate: A narrative meta-synthesis of evidence from Asian English as a foreign language contexts. *Journal of Asian Studies in Education*.
- Al Abdullah, Z. M., Alhawiti, M. M., Alqahtani, N. M., & Alqahtani, M. A. (2025). Evaluating the effectiveness of chatbot-assisted learning in enhancing English conversational skills among secondary school students. *Education Sciences*. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15091136>
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. W. H. Freeman and Company. https://books.google.com.hk/books?id=eJ-PN9g_oEC
- Billups, F. D. (2021). *Qualitative data collection tools: Design, development, and applications*. SAGE Publications. <http://elibrary.mel.org/record=b45517371>
- Dalimunte, A. A., & Napitupulu, M. F. (2025). A study of students' perception of Character AI in practicing English speaking fluency. *Celtic: A Journal of Culture, English Language Teaching, Literature, and Linguistics*. <https://doi.org/10.22219/celtic.v12i1.40721>
- Davis, F. D. (1989). Perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and user acceptance of information technology. *MIS Quarterly*. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/249008>

- Ishfaque, S., Kalhor, I. A., & Shah, S. H. R. (2025). Examining the role of AI-based conversation in enhancing English speaking practice among non-native learners. Zenodo. <https://zenodo.org/records/16943889>
- Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. The Qualitative Report. <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol22/iss3/7/>
- Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (2012). Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data (3rd Ed.). SAGE Publications. <http://elibrary.mel.org/record=b22427517>
- Zhang, X. (2025). Enhancing oral English learning through AI: A case study on the impact of AI-driven speaking applications among Chinese university students. *Frontiers in Psychology*. <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1595818/full>
- Al Abdullah, Z. M., Alhawiti, M. M., Alqahtani, N. M., & Alqahtani, M. A. (2025). Evaluating the effectiveness of chatbot-assisted learning in enhancing English conversational skills among secondary school students. *Education Sciences*. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15091136>
- Alsaawi, A. (2025). Challenges and opportunities associated with AI chatbots in language learning from the perspective of users in Saudi Arabia. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*. <https://doi.org/10.26803/IJLTER.24.5.21>
- Bellinda, A. N., Utami, P. P., & Fitriyana, W. (2025). Gamified vocabulary learning with Duolingo: EFL students' perceived benefits, challenges, and responses. *ELTIN Journal*. <http://www.e-journal.stkipsiliwangi.ac.id/index.php/eltin/article/view/6268>
- Cheng, M., & Wang, L. (2025). The role of changes in pronunciation ability and anxiety through Gen-AI on EFL learners' self-directed speaking motivation and social interaction confidence: A CHAT perspective. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2025.103788>

- Civelek, M., & Hocaoglu, İ. (2025). A qualitative inquiry into EFL learners' opinions about an AI-powered speaking tool. *Language Education and Technology*. <http://www.langedutech.com/letjournal/index.php/let/article/view/96>
- Ho, T. K. L. (2025). Understanding learners' emotions in AI chatbot interactions: A qualitative inquiry. *Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.caeai.2025.100345>
- Kang, S., & Sung, M. (2024). EFL students' self-directed learning of conversation skills with AI chatbots. *Language Learning & Technology*. <https://www.lltjournal.org/item/10125-73600/>
- Noe, S., Yusuf, F. N., & Wirza, Y. (2025). ChatGPT as a speaking partner: Investigating its impact on students' speaking anxiety. *JL3T (Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Language Teaching)* <https://doi.org/10.32505/jl3t.v11i2.12646>
- Pertiwi, P. C., Segoh, D., & Rohmadhani, A. (2025). Artificial intelligence in academic environments: Reducing or increasing foreign language anxiety? *Inspiring: English Education Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.35905/inspiring.v8i1.13009>

Appendix Section

APPENDIX- A

Researcher: Okay, hello. Can you turn on your camera, please? Can you see me?

Student 1: Yes, I can see you. Assalamualaikum.

Researcher: Walaikum Salam. How are you?

Student 1: I'm doing good. How about you?

Researcher: Alhamdulillah, I'm also doing good. Let me tell you that this video is being recorded as evidence for my data collection. You will be asked 20 questions including background questions and main interview questions. It will take about five minutes. Shall we start?

Student 1: Yes, of course.

Researcher: How long have you been learning English?

Student 1: I've been learning English in my academic sessions – almost five to ten years, at least I can say.

Researcher: What is your current proficiency level? Beginner, intermediate, advanced, or professional?

Student 1: I would consider myself intermediate. I'm still in the learning process.

Researcher: What was your primary goal when you started using language apps – for example, learning vocabulary, improving grammar, practising speaking, or listening to native speakers?

Student 1: My primary goal was to speak in a casual way to other people in English – to be as fluent as possible and to have good conversations. Not because of learning too much vocabulary, but because of connecting with people.

Researcher: Before you started using the apps, did you feel worried about speaking English when communicating with your teacher or peers in class?

Student 1: Personally, I wasn't very worried because I consider myself an extrovert. Whatever I learned, I tried to speak directly with them. I tried to be as fluent as I could. So, I wasn't that worried.

Researcher: Did you use the free version of the apps or the premium/upgraded ones?

Student 1: Most of the time – 99% – I have used the free version. I did not plan for any upgraded plans.

Researcher: What is the first word or phrase that comes to your mind for practising speaking with your mobile app?

Student 1: The first phrase would be "learn in a friendly way". That would be my prime goal. Whenever I interact with an app, it should be easy to use and function properly for a basic non-tech guy like me.

Researcher: Can you share what a normal 10-minute speaking practice session looks like for you on the app?

Student 1: Yes. For example, on Duolingo (the free version), the first five minutes the app tries to know me – what kind of English speaker I am, whether beginner, intermediate, or advanced. It also asks for my email and age. Those things help the app analyse my personality for the speaking session.

Researcher: Describe one time you remember feeling positive about your English speaking after using the app.

Student 1: After using the app, I got a little confidence boost – I knew a few more words and different vocabulary that I could use in future conversations. That was a very positive thing.

Researcher: Does practice with the app feel different from speaking sessions with your peers?

Student 1: It's 50-50. The app is very useful for virtual interaction and training. But talking with real people gives me more insight about how people actually speak, compared to a virtual application.

Researcher: Describe a time the app became frustrating or did not help you speak the way you wanted. What happened?

Student 1: I noticed this feeling when I made a mistake. The app's attitude felt like, "Oh, you cannot go further. You have to watch an ad." Or "You cannot go further." Those feelings were not welcoming from my perspective.

Researcher: Do you feel language learning apps are helpful for speaking activities – like exchanging voice notes, talking with robots, or video calls with a native tutor?

Student 1: It depends on the person. If the app suits your circumstances – for example, preparing for a future career or education – then those speaking activities help a lot. It varies, but they do help.

Researcher: Which feature of the app is most useful for developing your speaking skill? Explain briefly.

Student 1: For me, Duolingo is very friendly. Although it has pros and cons, for starters or a newbie, I would suggest Duolingo because it understands your profile and personality and then plans the lessons for you.

Researcher: How does the app assist you in improving your pronunciation? Have you used only Duolingo, or also Cambly or Lingoda?

Student 1: I haven't used those others. Most of the time I've heard about Duolingo – maybe because of their aggressive marketing. But yes, I've used Duolingo the most. As a Bangladeshi speaker, it improved my pronunciation a little bit. I already knew some English words, but I learned the perfect pronunciation through the application.

Researcher: Does gamification – earning points, keeping streaks, badges, levelling up – make speaking practice more interesting, or does it prepare you for oral communication like presentations?

Student 1: Yes, it does. When people get rewarded for completing a lesson, it feels good. It gives a motivational boost to do another lesson. So, the app helped me stay motivated and learn more words. It also prepared me to speak in real-life presentations – to speak directly with peers or in front of an audience.

Researcher: What can you do on the app freely that you cannot do in a classroom with other students?

Student 1: In a virtual app, you can repeat a lesson twice, three times, or even four times. But with peers or a live person, after two or three times people might get bored or distracted – they might say, "I cannot give you more time." In a virtual app, you can do the lessons many times.

Researcher: What are the limitations of the free version that you have noticed? Briefly explain.

Student 1: In Duolingo's free version, there are intentionally placed advertisements. I think those are for promoting the brand and to get users to upgrade. Those things annoyed me – those are the limitations.

Researcher: How do the pop-up ads in the unpaid version affect your concentration when you try to practise speaking with full enthusiasm?

Student 1: That is a turning point for me. Every two or three months I feel like turning off Duolingo. Whenever I see an ad saying "join the upgraded version and get no interruptions", I feel like I don't want to use it anymore. But I do come back sometimes to use the free lessons.

Researcher: Do you think you would practise speaking more frequently if the free version had no limits? Explain why.

Student 1: This goes for all language learning, not just English. When a person tries to learn a new language, they want to explore a new culture. If I got a free version with unlimited time, it would help me learn more enthusiastically and give me mental support. I would have the confidence that I can progress without interruptions. So yes, I would have more confidence.

Researcher: Have you ever taken a break from practising in a day because of free-version limitations? If yes, please describe.

Student 1: I personally targeted 30-35 minutes of app usage. But that was not because of the free version – it was because of my personal time, like school plans, classes, and household chores. In the free version, I had some right moments to give time to learn a new language.

Researcher: If there is any way to overcome the challenges you faced, what would you mention to improve the free versions for language app developers?

Student 1: I understand that developers are trying to make good apps. But if an app is free, keep it completely free – free of ads forever. If you want a paid version, ask the user at the very beginning: "If you want paid, go for the paid version." But if you are promoting a free app, keep it totally free. I don't want interruptions saying "go to upgraded version" after every few lessons. That would be less annoying and would get more users to interact with the application.

Researcher: This is the end of the interview. Thank you so much for your valuable time. It means a lot.

Student 1: You're welcome. I also had a good time.

APPENDIX- B

Researcher: Assalamu Alaikum, Ms. Zakia Hanna, how are you?

Student 2: Walaikum assalam, I'm fine. How about you?

Researcher: Alhamdulillah, I'm doing fine. This interview session is being conducted for my master's thesis. Please stay relaxed. You will be asked background questions and then the main interview questions. Shall we begin?

Student 2: Yes, we should begin.

Researcher: How long have you been learning English?

Student 2: I started learning English from class one.

Researcher: What is your current proficiency level – beginner, intermediate, advanced, or professional?

Student 2: My level is intermediate. I can speak and understand Basic English.

Researcher: What was your primary goal when you started using language apps – for example, vocabulary, grammar, speaking practice, or listening to native speakers?

Student 2: My primary goal was to learn vocabulary. I was focused on learning vocabulary.

Researcher: Before you started using the apps, did you feel worried about speaking English when communicating with your teacher or peers in class?

Student 2: Yes, I felt nervous at first. I was afraid of making mistakes and being judged, so I couldn't speak.

Researcher: Did you use the free version of the apps or the premium/upgraded ones?

Student 2: No, I used only the free version. I didn't pay for the app.

Researcher: What is the first word or phrase that came to your mind for practising speaking with your mobile app?

Student 2: Simple ones like "Hi", "Hello", "What's going on?"

Researcher: Can you share what a normal 10-minute speaking practice session looks like for you on the app?

Student 2: For speaking practice, first I make a comment to give me – then I listen fast, then I repeat the sentence several times. Then I start speaking myself, record my voice, and listen again to check if it became better.

Researcher: Does practice with the app feel different from speaking sessions with your peers or classmates?

Student 2: Yes, I feel there is a difference. When I practice with my friends, it feels real – it's happening. But with the app, I already know it's a robotic thing. Sometimes I have to force myself to practice.

Researcher: Describe a time the app became frustrating or did not help you speak the way you wanted. What happened?

Student 2: Sometimes the app didn't understand me, and that made me frustrated. I thought, "Why is it not understanding me?" It didn't feel like a real conversation. At those times, I just skipped it.

Researcher: Do you feel language learning apps are helpful for speaking activities – like exchanging voice notes, talking with robots, or video calls with a native tutor?

Student 2: Most of the time it's helpful talking with the apps rather than talking with teachers because it's an app – how can it judge me? It's not a real person.

Researcher: Which feature of the app is most useful for developing your speaking skill? Explain why.

Student 2: I think the voice recording feature is most useful. Through recording, I can check several times, hear my voice, and detect where I made mistakes.

Researcher: How does the app assist you in improving your pronunciation? Also, mention one app you have used.

Student 2: The app uses exactly correct pronunciation and gives options for which accent I want – British or American. I hear the pronunciation and try to copy it. I mostly used Duolingo. I listen to the sound and repeat it.

Researcher: Does gamification – earning points, keeping streaks, badges, levelling up – make speaking practice more interesting, or does it prepare you for oral communication like presentations?

Student 2: Yes, I think so. These things make learning fun and motivate me to continue. For example, "If I do this level, then I'll get a star or a badge."

Researcher: What can you do on the app freely that you cannot do in a classroom with other students?

Student 2: First, I can practice anytime and I don't feel shy. Also, I can practice several times. If it were a person, they could get tired, but the app doesn't get tired.

Researcher: What are the limitations of the free version that you have noticed? Briefly explain.

Student 2: In the free version, there are limited features and some lessons are locked. It felt like I needed those lessons after completing level one or three, but I couldn't get them because of the limited feature.

Researcher: How do the pop-up ads in the unpaid version affect your concentration when you try to practise speaking with full enthusiasm?

Student 2: It distracts my concentration. I'm practicing, and in a moment an ad pops up. It disturbs my focus and breaks my practice time.

Researcher: Do you think you would practise speaking more frequently if the free version had no limits? Explain why.

Student 2: Because getting more features, I could practice more. It's a continuous thing. If I get more options, I can go from level three to four, five, and six – and continue.

Researcher: Have you ever taken a break from practising in a day because of free-version limitations? If yes, please describe.

Student 2: Yes, sometimes I stopped. I couldn't continue because of the limitation. I just thought, "Okay, done. I don't want to practice anymore. I don't need it." That's how my practice got stopped – I couldn't practice more.

Researcher: If there is any way to overcome the challenges you faced, what would you mention to improve the free versions for language app developers?

Student 2: Yes. They should reduce ads and give more free features. If they want us to learn English fully like native speakers, they should give the whole lessons for free. They should think of it as a charity so we could use it.

Researcher: That was a nice conversation with you. Thank you so much for your time and patience.

Student 2: Welcome.

Researcher: Let's wrap up this interview now. See you again soon, inshallah.

Student 2: Inshallah.

APPENDIX- C

Researcher: Assalamualaikum.

Student 3: Waalaikumsalam.

Researcher: What's your name?

Student 3: My name is Tahiya Nusrat Jahan Sadia.

Researcher: Sadia, this interview is being recorded for my master's thesis findings. You will be asked background questions and then the main interview questions. Don't get nervous. All the best.

Student 3: Thank you.

Researcher: Shall we start now?

Student 3: Of course.

Researcher: How long have you been learning English?

Student 3: I have been learning English since primary school – about 10 to 12 years. But I only started focusing on active communication in the last two years.

Researcher: What is your current proficiency level – beginner, intermediate, advanced, or proficient?

Student 3: Intermediate.

Researcher: What was your primary goal when you started using language apps – for example, learning vocabulary, improving grammar, practising speaking, or listening to native speakers?

Student 3: My primary goal was to practise speaking and improve my fluency so I wouldn't freeze up during oral exams or presentations.

Researcher: Before you started using the apps, did you feel worried about speaking English when communicating with your teacher or classmates?

Student 3: Yes, definitely. I was very shy and insecure about making grammatical mistakes or having a local accent. That made me stay quiet in class.

Researcher: Did you use the free version of the apps or the premium/upgraded ones?

Student 3: I mostly use the free version. I occasionally try free trials of premium features.

Researcher: Which apps have you used most frequently – Duolingo, Cambly, or Lingoda?

Student 3: Duolingo.

Researcher: What is the first word or phrase that came to your mind for practising speaking with your mobile app?

Student 3: "How's it going?" – It's a classic icebreaker. I used it to test if the app's voice recognition could actually understand my accent.

Researcher: Can you share what a normal 10-minute speaking practice session looks like for you on the app?

Student 3: It usually starts with a two-minute vocabulary warm-up, followed by five minutes of repeating sentences aloud, and ends with a three-minute role-play conversation with an AI bot.

Researcher: Describe one time you remember feeling positive about your English speaking after using the app.

Student 3: I remember completing a "ordering at a café" simulation without any hints. When the app gave me a perfect score for pronunciation, I felt like I could actually survive a trip abroad.

Researcher: Does practice with the app feel different from speaking sessions with your peers?

Student 3: The app feels safer. Unlike my peers, the app doesn't judge me if I repeat the same sentence or question ten times. However, peers are more unpredictable and real.

Researcher: Describe a time the app became frustrating or did not help you speak the way you wanted. What happened?

Student 3: Once the app kept marking me wrong on the word "schedule" because I was using British pronunciation and it wanted the American one. It felt like the technology was limiting me rather than helping.

Researcher: Do you feel language learning apps are helpful for speaking activities – like exchanging voice notes, talking with robots, or video calls with a native tutor?

Student 3: Extremely. Talking with AI robots is a great bridge. It builds the muscle memory needed before you have the courage to talk with a real native tutor.

Researcher: Which feature of the app is most useful for developing your speaking skill? Explain why.

Student 3: Getting an instant visual cue – like a green or red highlight on a specific syllable I mispronounce – is something a teacher in a busy classroom can't always do.

Researcher: How does the app assist you in improving your pronunciation?

Student 3: The app uses listen-and-repeat cycles. It plays a native clip, I record myself, and I play them back-to-back to hear the difference in pitch and tone.

Researcher: Does gamification – earning points, keeping streaks, badges, levelling up – make speaking practice more interesting, or does it prepare you for oral presentations or everyday communication?

Student 3: Streaks keep me coming back daily, but they don't necessarily prepare me for a presentation. A badge doesn't fix public speaking anxiety, but it ensures I don't get rusty.

Researcher: What can you do on the app freely that you cannot do in a classroom with other students?

Student 3: Privacy. In an app, I can shout, whisper, or make a silly mistake without anyone laughing. I can also choose topics I actually care about, like gaming or tech, even if they are not in my syllabus.

Researcher: What are the limitations of the free version that you have noticed? Briefly explain.

Student 3: In the free version, the "hearts" or energy system runs out quickly. Also, some lessons are locked and ads pop up frequently.

Researcher: How do the pop-up ads in the unpaid version affect your concentration when you try to practise speaking with full enthusiasm?

Student 3: It's a major flow breaker. Right after I finish a deep speaking exercise, a loud 30-second ad for a game kills my English-thinking brain and brings me back to reality.

Researcher: Do you think you would practise speaking more frequently if the free version had no limits? Explain why.

Student 3: Yes. If the lives system were removed, I would spend an hour a day experimenting with difficult sentences instead of playing it safe to avoid losing points.

Researcher: Have you ever taken a break from practising in a day because of free-version limitations? If yes, please describe.

Student 3: Yes, many times. If I run out of energy or hearts in the first five minutes, I usually just close the app and forget to come back until the next day.

Researcher: If there is any way to overcome the challenges you faced, what would you mention to improve the free versions for language app developers?

Student 3: I would suggest allowing unlimited speaking practice, but keeping extra things like certificates or specialised business courses for the premium version. Speaking is a basic need for learners.

Researcher: Thank you so much, Sadia, for your patience and effort. It was truly commendable that you joined. Let's wrap up this interview session now. Hopefully see you again soon.

APPENDIX- D

Researcher: Assalamualaikum. This interview is being recorded for my master's thesis findings. You will be asked some background questions and then main interview questions. Are you ready?

Student 4: Walaikum assalam. Yes, I'm ready.

Researcher: How long have you been learning English?

Student 4: I have been learning English for about eight years, mostly through school. In the last two years, I started taking it more seriously.

Researcher: What is your current proficiency level – beginner, intermediate, advanced, or professional?

Student 4: I would say intermediate. I can understand most things, but speaking fluently is still hard for me.

Researcher: What was your primary goal when you started using language apps?

Student 4: My primary goal was to improve my speaking confidence and fluency. I wanted to be able to hold real conversations without feeling stuck all the time.

Researcher: Before you started using the apps, did you feel worried about speaking English with your teacher or classmates?

Student 4: Yes, very worried. When the teacher called on me, my heart would start racing. I was terrified of saying the wrong thing and being laughed at.

Researcher: Which apps have you used most frequently? And did you use free or paid versions?

Student 4: I have used both Lingoda and Cambly, but Lingoda is my main app. I paid for a subscription because I felt the free apps were not helping me improve my actual speaking. Lingoda has structured classes with real teachers, which made a big difference for me.

Researcher: What is the first word or phrase that comes to your mind for practising speaking with your mobile app?

Student 4: "Structured speaking." That sounds a bit formal, but what I mean is that Lingoda gave me a clear path to follow. With free apps, I just bounced around randomly. With Lingoda, I knew exactly what to study next and why.

Researcher: Can you share what a normal 10-minute speaking practice session looks like for you?

Student 4: Actually, Lingoda lessons are 60 minutes long, not 10 minutes. A normal session for me is a small group class on Zoom. There is a native teacher and maybe three or four other students. The teacher gives us a topic, and then we take turns speaking. Everyone gets feedback directly. It is very different from just repeating sentences alone.

Researcher: Describe one time you remember feeling positive about your English speaking after using the app.

Student 4: Yes. I remember one class where I had to give a short opinion about work-life balance. Before the class, I prepared for an hour. When it was my turn, I spoke without stopping or making many mistakes. The teacher said, "That was really well said." That was the first moment I thought, okay, maybe I can actually do this.

Researcher: Does practice with the app feel different from speaking sessions with your peers?

Student 4: Completely different. With my peers, everyone is trying to speak, and it feels competitive. With Lingoda, the teacher controls the conversation so everyone gets a turn. Also, the teacher corrects your mistakes kindly, not in a mean way. I feel much safer speaking in Lingoda than in my school classroom.

Researcher: Describe a time the app became frustrating or did not help you speak the way you wanted.

Student 4: The cost is frustrating. Lingoda is not cheap. Sometimes I feel pressured to attend every class just because I paid for it. There was one class where I was very tired, but I forced myself to attend. I spoke poorly, and I felt bad afterward. That was frustrating.

Researcher: Do you feel language learning apps like Lingoda are helpful for speaking activities?

Student 4: Extremely helpful. Before Lingoda, I used Duolingo for two years. I learned many words, but I could not speak. Lingoda forced me to actually open my mouth and speak with real people. The difference is night and day. Duolingo taught me vocabulary. Lingoda taught me how to have a conversation.

Researcher: Which feature of the app is most useful for developing your speaking skill?

Student 4: The small group classes with a native teacher. That is the single most useful feature. The teacher gives you real-time corrections. Also, the small group means you are not hiding. You have to speak. That pressure is actually good for learning.

Researcher: How does the app assist you in improving your pronunciation?

Student 4: The teacher corrects me directly. For example, I used to pronounce "restaurant" incorrectly all the time. My Lingoda teacher stopped me, had me repeat it three times slowly, and then told me to listen to her version. Now I pronounce it correctly. A free app could never do that.

Researcher: Does gamification – earning points, keeping streaks, badges – make speaking practice more interesting, or does it prepare you for real presentations?

Student 4: Lingoda does not really have gamification like Duolingo. It has a progress tracker, but no badges or streaks. Honestly, I prefer that. Badges and streaks felt like a game. Lingoda feels like real learning. When I finished a level on Lingoda, I knew I had actually improved, not just collected digital stickers.

Researcher: What can you do on the app freely that you cannot do in a classroom with other students?

Student 4: In Lingoda, I can choose topics that interest me. I remember one class about technology and artificial intelligence — that is what I love. In my school classroom, we always talk about the same boring topics like "my family" or "my daily routine." On Lingoda, I could choose something that actually motivated me to speak.

Researcher: What are the limitations of the free version that you have noticed?

Student 4: Lingoda does not really have a free version. You get a very short free trial — maybe one class. After that, you have to pay. So the biggest limitation is that there is almost no way to use Lingoda for free. That is a barrier for students without money.

Researcher: How do the pop-up ads in the unpaid version affect your concentration?

Student 4: Lingoda has almost no ads, even in the free trial. But the free trial is only one class, so you cannot really practice for long without paying. Compared to Duolingo, which had ads every few minutes, Lingoda feels clean. But the cost is the real barrier.

Researcher: Do you think you would practise speaking more frequently if the free version had no limits?

Student 4: If Lingoda were completely free, I would practice every single day. But I understand teachers need to be paid. I think app developers should offer more affordable options for students. Even a small discount for students would help a lot.

Researcher: Have you ever taken a break from practising in a day because of free-version limitations?

Student 4: With Lingoda, I do not take breaks because of limitations. I take breaks because I am busy with school or exams. But I remember one time my free trial ended in the middle of a lesson — that was very frustrating. I could not finish the conversation. I just closed the app.

Researcher: If there is any way to overcome the challenges you faced, what would you mention to improve the free versions for language app developers?

Student 4: I would suggest offering a genuine free tier that still gives meaningful speaking practice — not just 10 minutes a day with ads. But also, for paid apps like Lingoda, they should create a scholarship or student discount program. Many high school students want to learn but cannot afford the high prices.

Researcher: Thank you so much for your time.

Student 4: You're welcome. It was my pleasure.

APPENDIX- E

Researcher: Assalamualaikum. This interview is being recorded for my master's thesis findings. Please stay relaxed. Shall we start?

Student 5: Walaikum assalam. Yes, let's start.

Researcher: How long have you been learning English?

Student 5: I have been learning English for about nine years, starting from primary school. But I only started taking speaking seriously last year.

Researcher: What is your current proficiency level – beginner, intermediate, advanced, or professional?

Student 5: Intermediate. I can read and write okay, but speaking is where I struggle. Pronunciation also needs work.

Researcher: What was your primary goal when you started using language apps?

Student 5: My primary goal was to become more confident in real conversations. I wanted to speak without freezing up or constantly thinking about grammar mistakes.

Researcher: Before you started using the apps, did you feel worried about speaking English with your teacher or classmates?

Student 5: Yes, I felt very shy. In class, I would avoid raising my hand. I knew the answers in my head, but when I opened my mouth, something went wrong. I was embarrassed of my accent.

Researcher: Which apps have you used most frequently? And did you use free or paid versions?

Student 5: I have used Cambly the most. I also tried Duolingo before, but Duolingo did not help me with actual speaking. On Cambly, I used the free trial first, then I convinced my parents to pay for a subscription because I saw real improvement. I still use the free version of some vocabulary apps, but for speaking, Cambly is my main tool.

Researcher: What is the first word or phrase that comes to your mind for practising speaking with your mobile app?

Student 5: "Real conversation." On Cambly, I talk to native speakers from America, England, and other countries. It does not feel like a robot. It feels like I am actually talking to a real person who is interested in what I say. That feeling is very different from any free AI app.

Researcher: Can you share what a normal 10-minute speaking practice session looks like for you?

Student 5: My typical session with Cambly is usually 15 or 30 minutes, not 10. I log in, choose a tutor who is available right away, and we just talk. Sometimes we follow a lesson plan. Other times, we have free conversation about my day, my hobbies, or something in the news. The tutor corrects my mistakes gently. It feels like having a friend who is also a teacher.

Researcher: Describe one time you remember feeling positive about your English speaking after using the app.

Student 5: I remember one session with a tutor from Canada. We talked about climate change for 20 minutes. I was able to express my opinions, ask questions, and even make a small joke. At the end, she said, "Your English is really improving. Keep going." That was the first time I felt like a real English speaker, not just a student.

Researcher: Does practice with the app feel different from speaking sessions with your peers?

Student 5: Yes. With my peers, we are all non-native speakers. We make the same mistakes, and we do not always correct each other because we are also unsure. With Cambly, I talk to a native speaker. Hearing correct pronunciation and natural phrases every session helps me improve much faster.

Researcher: Describe a time the app became frustrating or did not help you speak the way you wanted.

Student 5: Sometimes the internet connection is bad, and the video freezes. That breaks the conversation. Also, the free version of Cambly is very limited — you only get 10 minutes of free trial time. That is not enough to really practice. Once my free minutes ran out in the middle of a conversation, and I could not finish. That was very frustrating.

Researcher: Do you feel language learning apps like Cambly are helpful for speaking activities?

Student 5: Yes, very helpful. Cambly changed my speaking completely. Before Cambly, I used AI chatbots for speaking. They were okay, but they felt fake. The AI did not react like a real person. With Cambly, the tutors have real emotions, real reactions, and real patience. That is something AI cannot replace.

Researcher: Which feature of the app is most useful for developing your speaking skill?

Student 5: The ability to choose a tutor based on their accent and teaching style. I can read reviews from other students before picking a tutor. I have found two tutors that I really like, and I book sessions with them regularly. Having the same tutor for many sessions helps because they remember my progress and my weak points.

Researcher: How does the app assist you in improving your pronunciation?

Student 5: The tutors correct my pronunciation live. If I say a word wrong, they repeat it correctly and ask me to repeat after them. Also, I can ask them to type the word in the chat so I can see the spelling. This is much better than AI pronunciation tools, which sometimes misunderstand my accent but cannot adjust.

Researcher: Does gamification – earning points, keeping streaks, badges – make speaking practice more interesting, or does it prepare you for real presentations?

Student 5: Cambly does not have gamification. It has progress tracking and lesson completion, but no badges or leaderboards. I do not miss gamification. When I used Duolingo, I focused too much on keeping my streak and not enough on actually learning. Without gamification, I focus on real improvement.

Researcher: What can you do on the app freely that you cannot do in a classroom with other students?

Student 5: I can practice anytime, even late at night. Cambly is available 24/7. There is always a tutor online. In a classroom, I have a fixed schedule and a fixed teacher. With Cambly, I can speak to people from different countries with different accents. That flexibility is something a classroom cannot offer.

Researcher: What are the limitations of the free version that you have noticed?

Student 5: The free version of Cambly is very short — only 10 or 15 minutes. That is barely enough time to say hello and have a short conversation. Also, in the free trial, you cannot choose which tutors you want. You are matched randomly. And there are no lesson plans in the free version. You just talk freely, which is okay, but not as structured.

Researcher: How do the pop-up ads in the unpaid version affect your concentration?

Student 5: Cambly does not have pop-up ads during conversations. Even the free trial has no ads. That is good. But the constant reminders to upgrade — like "Your free minutes are running out" — that can break concentration. I remember looking at the timer instead of focusing on what the tutor was saying.

Researcher: Do you think you would practise speaking more frequently if the free version had no limits?

Student 5: If the free version of Cambly had unlimited access, I would practice every day for sure. But I understand that teachers need to be paid. I think a middle option would be good — maybe a very cheap student plan with fewer features, but still enough to practice properly.

Researcher: Have you ever taken a break from practising in a day because of free-version limitations?

Student 5: Yes. During the free trial, I had only 10 minutes per week. After those 10 minutes were finished, I could not practice anymore until the next week. I took a break not because I wanted to, but because I had no choice. That was frustrating.

Researcher: If there is any way to overcome the challenges you faced, what would you mention to improve the free versions for language app developers?

Student 5: I would suggest giving free users at least 30 minutes per day, not per week. Also, offer a student discount. Many students want to learn but cannot afford full price. Cambly is a great app, but the cost is high for students in countries like Bangladesh.

Researcher: Thank you so much for your time.

Student 5: You're very welcome.