



Students' Language Anxiety Levels and Factors in Using ELSA Speak for Grade Eight at SMP Santo Thomas 3 Medan

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the levels of students' language anxiety and its contributing factors in using ELSA Speak, an AI-powered mobile application for English speaking practice. Conducted among 26 eighth-grade students at SMP Santo Thomas 3 Medan, the research applied a qualitative method utilizing the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) questionnaire and in-depth interviews. The findings revealed that most students experienced mild to relaxed levels of anxiety when using ELSA Speak. Only one student reported an anxious level, while none fell into the very anxious category. Three primary factors contributing to students' language anxiety were identified: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Notably, test anxiety appeared across all anxiety levels, indicating its strong

influence in technology-assisted language learning. The study concludes that while ELSA Speak reduces extreme anxiety, the embedded scoring and feedback system remains a source of pressure for learners. Recommendations are made for educators to create supportive learning environments and for application developers to consider the psychological impacts of evaluative features in educational technologies.

ARTICLE INFO

Article History

Received 5 June 2025

Revised 21 June 2025

Accepted 22 June 2025

Keywords

Language Anxiety, ELSA Speak, Speaking Anxiety

Saragih, F., Lubis, S. (2025). Students' Language Anxiety Levels and Factors in Using ELSA Speak for Grade Eight at SMP Santo Thomas 3 Medan. *TRANSFORM: Journal of English Language Teaching and Learning*. Vol 14(2). 116-124. <https://doi.org/10.24114/tj.v14i2.67378>

INTRODUCTION

The integration of digital technology into educational practices has profoundly transformed the landscape of language learning. One notable advancement is the emergence of AI-powered language learning applications such as ELSA Speak, designed to improve students' speaking skills through personalized feedback and speech

recognition technology. Akriono and Isnaini (2024), noted that students perceive ELSASpeak as a valuable and accessible tool, particularly effective in enhancing English pronunciation.

Aligned with the objectives of Indonesia's **Kurikulum Merdeka**, which mandates junior high school students to be capable of expressing ideas in spoken English, such technologies are expected to facilitate this goal. However, the success of these tools is often undermined by psychological barriers, particularly language anxiety. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) identified three major factors contributing to language anxiety: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation.

While previous studies have extensively discussed language anxiety in conventional classroom settings (Wulandari et al., 2024; Imelda & Fajardini, 2018), limited research focuses on anxiety experienced in digital or application-based learning contexts. This study addresses this gap by analyzing students' language anxiety levels and its contributing factors when using ELSA Speak at SMP Santo Thomas 3 Medan.

The purpose of the Introduction is to stimulate the reader's interest and to provide pertinent background information necessary to understand the rest of the paper. You must summarize the problem to be addressed, give background on the subject, discuss previous research on the topic, and explain *exactly* what the paper will address, why, and how. A good thing to avoid is making your introduction into a mini review. There is a huge amount of literature out there, but as a scientist you should be able to pick out the things that are most relevant to your work and explain why. This shows an editor/reviewer/reader that you really understand your area of research and that you can get straight to the most important issues.

METHOD

Research Design

A qualitative descriptive method was applied to explore the levels and factors of students' language anxiety while learning English through ELSA Speak. This approach was selected to allow in-depth understanding of students' experiences and emotions associated with language learning in a technology-mediated environment.

Participants

The participants comprised 26 eight-grade students from SMP Santo Thomas 3 Medan. These students were chosen because they regularly used ELSA Speak in their English learning activities and were familiar with its features and scoring mechanisms.

Data Collection

Data were collected using two instruments:

- 1) An adapted version of the **Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)**, which consists of 33 items rated on a five-point Likert scale, tailored to the context of using ELSA Speak.
- 2) **Semi-structured interviews** to capture qualitative insights into the students' experiences, fears, and reactions during the use of ELSA Speak.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Miles and Huberman's (1984) framework:

- 1) **Data Reduction:** Organizing, summarizing, and focusing the raw data into significant findings.
- 2) **Data Display:** Presenting data in descriptive tables and thematic narratives.
- 3) **Conclusion Drawing/Verification:** Interpreting and validating findings by identifying patterns and relationships.

The anxiety levels were categorized into five levels based on Mayangta's (2013) adaptation of Oetting's scale, such as: Very Anxious, Anxious, Mildly Anxious, Relaxed, and Very Relaxed.

RESULTS

The results of this study, obtained from the analysis of the FLCAS questionnaire and in-depth interview, revealed varied levels of anxiety among students when using ELSA Speak. The data indicated that while no student experienced a very high level of anxiety, a considerable number showed mild anxiety, while others reported relaxed feelings during the speaking exercises facilitated by the application.

Table 1. Summary of Students' Anxiety Levels

Level of Anxiety	Number of Students	Percentage
Very Anxious	0	0
Anxious	1	3.85
Mildly Anxious	15	57.69
Relaxed	9	34.62
Very Relaxed	1	3.85
Total	26	100

1. Anxiety Distribution Description

The largest proportion of students fell into the mildly anxious category (57.69%). These students reported experiencing moderate nervousness while using ELSA Speak, particularly when recording their voices and receiving immediate feedback. Although they admitted to occasional feelings of tension, especially when encountering difficult words or when their pronunciation score was lower than expected, they managed to participate in the activities without withdrawing from the tasks.

Approximately 34.62% of students belonged to the relaxed category, indicating a generally positive attitude toward using ELSA Speak. These students expressed confidence in practicing English pronunciation with the application and viewed mistakes as a normal part of the learning process. They appreciated the privacy and flexibility the app offered compared to speaking in front of a teacher or peers. Only one student (3.85%) was categorized as anxious, consistently expressing discomfort and hesitation when required to use the application. This student disclosed heightened worry about making mistakes, receiving low scores, and being judged by others, including both teachers and classmates.

Interestingly, one student (3.85%) was categorized as very relaxed, demonstrating exceptional confidence when using ELSA Speak. This student did not feel anxious about the scores or feedback, viewing them as constructive criticism and an opportunity for improvement. This individual exhibited resilience and self-regulation skills in managing language learning anxiety.

2. Analysis of Contributing Factors

Interviews confirmed three major contributing factors to students' anxiety:

- 1) **Communication Apprehension** was evident in students who admitted to feeling uncomfortable speaking English aloud, even when interacting with application. Some students feared their classmates might overhear their practice or judge their recorded voice. Others reported anxiety triggered by unfamiliar vocabulary or unfamiliar sentence structures within the app's exercises.
- 2) **Test Anxiety** was the most frequently cited cause of anxiety. Many students admitted feeling pressured by ELSA Speak's automatic scoring and instant feedback. The visibility of scores and the app's corrective prompts often led to fear of failure, especially when students were asked to repeat phrases multiple times.
- 3) **Fear of Negative Evaluation** emerged in interviews where students expressed concern over being negatively judged by peers, teachers or even by themselves after reviewing their scores. This was especially true when students compared their pronunciation results with classmates, sometimes leading to feelings of embarrassment or discouragement.

DISCUSSION

This study's findings reinforce earlier theories by Horwitz et al. (1986) on the multidimensional nature of language anxiety, confirming that communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation remain relevant in modern, technology-based learning environments. The unique contribution of this study lies in demonstrating how these anxiety factors manifest within an AI-assisted language learning context.

1. Mild Anxiety as a Manageable Learning Condition

The predominance of mild anxiety in this study aligns with the findings of Wulandari et al. (2024), who reported moderate speaking anxiety levels among tenth-grade students during classroom speaking tasks. The relatively mild anxiety experienced by most students using ELSA Speak suggests that digital applications, by offering a private, self-paced, and non-human-interactive platform, can buffer against the severe anxiety levels typically triggered by face-to-face speaking evaluations.

However, even within this moderately anxious group, students described distinct episodes of discomfort, particularly during unplanned tasks or when required to pronounce unfamiliar terms. These findings are consistent with Ananda (2022), who concluded that performance-based tasks, regardless of their setting, invoke anxiety due to students' internal fears of making errors and facing criticism.

2. The Impact of Test Anxiety in Technology-Enhanced Learning

Interestingly, **test anxiety** emerged as the most pervasive factor, influencing students across all anxiety categories, including those categorized as relaxed and very relaxed. This finding resonates with Imelda and Fajardini (2018), who demonstrated that evaluative situations inherently heighten language learning anxiety. Even though ELSA Speak provides formative, non-graded feedback, students perceived the app's scoring system as a form of assessment, triggering performance-related stress.

The competitive tendency of comparing scores with classmates further aggravated test anxiety, turning private learning outcomes into peer-measured performance benchmarks. This observation corroborates earlier claims by Sundayanti et al. (2023) that students often measure their self-worth based on perceived academic performance, leading to persistent anxiety.

3. Persistence of Fear of Negative Evaluation in Digital Settings

Contrary to expectations that digital tools might reduce social evaluative fears due to their private nature, this study revealed that **fear of negative evaluation** remained a significant concern for students. Several participants expressed worry about classmates discovering their low scores or overhearing their practice sessions. This indicates that students' anxiety is not only tied to formal teacher assessments but also to peer perceptions, whether actual or anticipated.

This finding mirrors Ananda's (2022) conclusions that anxiety-inducing factors in language learning extend beyond instructor feedback to include peer evaluation and self-comparison. Even in independent learning situations,

students maintained heightened sensitivity to how their performance might be judged by others.

4. ELSA Speak's Dual Role: Facilitator and Trigger

While Akriono and Isnaini (2024) highlighted ELSA Speak's benefits in pronunciation improvement, this study introduces a balanced perspective by illustrating the platform's dual impact. While the application functions as an effective learning facilitator by providing AI-generated feedback, it simultaneously acts as a stressor through its scoring feature. The psychological burden associated with repeated corrections and numeric scores, even from a machine, mirrors traditional classroom evaluation stressors.

This nuance is significant for both teachers and developers. For educators, the findings emphasize the importance of framing technology use within anxiety-reducing strategies. Teachers should emphasize the formative nature of the app's feedback and foster a classroom culture that normalizes mistakes as part of the learning process. For developers, the results suggest integrating more flexible feedback systems, such as qualitative commentary or customizable scoring visibility options, to minimize performance anxiety.

The Discussion section should be a reasoned and justifiable commentary on the importance of your findings. This section states why the problem is important; what larger issues and what propositions are confirmed or disconfirmed by the extrapolation of these findings to such overarching issues.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that most eighth-grade students at SMP Santo Thomas 3 Medan experienced mild to relaxed anxiety levels when learning English through ELSA Speak. Test anxiety emerged as the most pervasive factor, followed by communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation. Although ELSA Speak minimized extreme anxiety compared to traditional classrooms, its evaluative features contributed to performance-related stress. The findings suggest that while technology can enhance language learning, it should be paired with supportive teaching strategies and less punitive feedback mechanisms to safeguard students'

emotional well-being. Educators are encouraged to implement anxiety-reduction techniques such as peer support systems, positive reinforcement, and stress management exercises. Application developers should consider integrating adaptive scoring features and personalized feedback to mitigate test-related pressure.

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