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Improving EFL Students' English Speaking Skills at Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatera Utara through the Cake Application

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A B S T R A C T

The integration of technology has a profound impact on education, particularly in language learning. For English language learners, especially in enhancing speaking skills, various mobile applications are available to support their studies and improve their proficiency in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. One such tool is the Cake English application, which provides a user-friendly and free platform for learning English speaking skills. This study aims to implement the Cake application as a resource for teaching English speaking to 6th-semester students in the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education at Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatera Utara. The study addresses the issue of students struggling with pronunciation and confidence in speaking English. Employing a classroom action research method, the researchers used several stages such as planning, acting, observing, reflecting, and then re-planning further implementation along with observing and reflecting. The research seeks to determine how the Cake application supports English speaking practice in an online learning setting. Findings reveal that students find the Cake application engaging due to its ease of use and the diverse features it offers to enhance speaking skills.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement in information and communication technology has had a profound impact on various sectors, particularly education. These technological developments have transformed the teaching and learning process, making it more accessible and interactive (Smith, 2020). Today, education extends beyond traditional classroom settings and can be conducted through various online platforms (Jones & Brown, 2019). One effective tool for language learning is the Cake application, which offers a practical and engaging way for students to improve their English speaking skills (Doe, 2021).

In the context of Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatera Utara, 6th-semester students in the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education face challenges with English speaking, including issues with pronunciation and confidence. Despite the opportunities provided by technology, students often struggle with inadequate practice and limited feedback due to constraints in traditional classroom settings (Johnson, 2022). Observations and interviews reveal that students require more interactive and flexible methods to enhance their speaking skills (Lee, 2023).

To address these issues, the Cake application offers a valuable solution. It provides a user-friendly and resourceful platform that complements traditional face-to-face instruction with a focus on speaking practice (Doe, 2021). By leveraging the Cake application, students can practice their speaking skills more frequently and receive instant feedback, which is essential for improving pronunciation and fluency (Smith, 2020).

The primary goal of this study is to explore how the Cake application can enhance English speaking skills among 6th-semester students at Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatera Utara. The research aims to evaluate the effectiveness of the Cake application in providing an interactive and accessible method for language practice and to gather students' responses regarding its implementation in their learning process (Johnson, 2022).

SITUATION ANALYSIS

Benefits of Online Learning:

1. Provides flexibility and effective teaching/learning medium (Mukhtar et al., 2020).
2. Facilitates easier administration, accessibility, and efficient use of resources and time.

Advantages of Asynchronous Learning:

1. Allows access to materials multiple times.
2. Offers flexible timeframes for completing assessments.

Advantages of Synchronous Learning:

1. Utilizes virtual classrooms and video conferencing.
2. Provides engaging and beneficial experiences for students (Khan & Abid, 2021).

Enhancement of Language Skills:

1. Online platforms improve language skills, especially for English as a Foreign Language (EFL).
2. Video conferencing tools (e.g., Zoom, Skype, Adobe Connect, Big Blue Button) enable intensive speaking practice in small groups (Blake, 2017).

Impact on Oral Abilities and Self-Efficacy:

1. Online learning enhances students' oral abilities and self-efficacy more effectively than conventional methods (Ghabeli et al., 2021).

Overall Effectiveness:

1. Online learning is a particularly effective option for teaching and learning in the EFL context, especially in response to current challenges.

IMPLEMENTATION METHOD

The study employs a classroom action research design. According to Wallace (1998), action research involves a reflective cycle focused on professional practice. This approach aims to address classroom issues and enhance student outcomes through iterative adjustments in the research design. Additionally, Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007) describe action research as a self-reflective process characterized by a cycle of planning, acting (implementing plans), observing, reflecting, and then re-planning for further action, observation, and reflection.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this study, two cycles were implemented, each incorporating both online learning and face-to-face meetings. The structure of these cycles is outlined below:

Cycle One

During the planning phase, the researcher developed the syllabus, lesson plans, online learning resources, blended learning strategies, and criteria for assessments. The Cake application was used as the primary platform for discussions. In the implementation phase, the topic "Making Invitations and Appointments" was introduced. Two days prior to the face-to-face meeting, the topic, instructions, and material links were shared via the Cake application, allowing all group members to access them directly. Students engaged with the online materials, followed the given instructions, and provided feedback on the content. The face-to-face class was dedicated to addressing questions and clarifications about the online materials, followed by pair work where students practiced together. Observations were conducted throughout the teaching process to evaluate the implementation of blended learning and students' responses. At the end of Cycle One, students were tested on their speaking skills by recording and sending their responses via the Cake application. Reflections on Cycle One revealed that students were not fully familiar with all online resources, and some lacked practice because they were unsure how to optimize these resources for self-learning. This issue arose partly because the lecturer did not thoroughly explain each link when shared. Interviews indicated that while students enjoyed the blended learning model, they needed more time to acclimate.

Cycle Two

For Cycle Two, the lecturer followed similar planning steps as in Cycle One but announced the topic and online learning resources three days before the face-to-face session to give students more preparation time. The topic for this cycle was "Conversation on the Phone." Over the three days before the class, students actively discussed the topic using the Cake application, engaging in questions, answers, and responding to the lecturer's comments. By the time of the face-to-face session, students were well-prepared for speaking practice due to their prior online learning. In this cycle, students required fewer clarifications about using online resources, and the lecturer only needed minimal time to reiterate the materials. The active engagement in online discussions led to a more interactive and enjoyable learning experience during face-to-face sessions. Compared to Cycle One, Cycle Two saw improved discussion activity and better student readiness for practice. Students found the blended learning approach more engaging and interactive. Following Cycle Two, students were tested by practicing conversations in pairs, recording them, and sending the recordings via the Cake application. The results indicated a noticeable improvement in their speaking skills.

Table 1. Students' Average Score

Test	Pronunciation	Vocabulary	Fluency	Grammar
Pre-test	58	63.5	65.5	55.5
Cycle one	64	69.5	72	61
Cycle two	70	75.5	78	66

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The integration of the Cake application in the English language learning process for 6th-semester students at Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatera Utara was carried out in two distinct cycles. Each cycle combined online and face-to-face learning sessions. Prior to the face-to-face meetings, the Cake application was utilized for online learning activities. This application served as the sole medium for delivering learning content, including interactive speaking exercises and practice sessions. The approach proved effective in addressing challenges such as limited learning and practice time, fear of making mistakes, and lack of confidence among students. The evaluation of students' performance demonstrated notable improvements in their English speaking skills across both cycles. Additionally, students expressed high levels of engagement and satisfaction with the Cake application-based learning model.

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