

Indonesian EFL Students' Perspective on Free4Talk: A Novice vs. Expert User Study

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Abstract

This study investigates the perceptions of final-year English major students toward the Free4Talk platform by comparing novice and expert users. A total of 15 participants were purposively selected from a public university in North Sumatra, Indonesia, comprising 12 novice users (with less than three months of experience) and 3 expert users (with more than one year of experience). Adopting a qualitative descriptive-comparative design, data were collected through questionnaires from all participants and interviews with eight volunteers. Thematic analysis was applied to interpret the data. Findings reveal that both groups perceived Free4Talk positively, particularly for its accessibility, discussion rooms, and opportunities for authentic speaking practice. Novice users frequently encountered initial anxiety, challenges in comprehending various accents, and inconsistent motivation, whereas expert users exhibited greater confidence, consistent engagement, and long-term motivation. Both groups shared common challenges related to technical issues and limited content moderation. The study highlights that user experience, affective readiness, and prior familiarity with the platform significantly impact engagement, confidence, and speaking development, offering practical insights for online speaking platforms and English language instruction.

Keywords: *Free4Talk, EFL students, speaking skills, novice vs. expert users*

Introduction

Developing speaking skills is crucial for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners globally, as it is essential to build practical and comprehensible communication skills in both academic and professional settings. In the modern world, mastering English has become increasingly important due to its global significance (Salhy & Darir, 2024). As the world becomes increasingly globalized, practical English-speaking skills are no longer seen as a privilege but as a necessity. Hamdi (2023) emphasizes that integrating critical language awareness into EFL curricula is important for enhancing learners' ability to engage in global discourse and access broader educational and career opportunities. In line with these ideas, Essabari and Hiba (2025) argue that democratizing the EFL classroom through a negotiated syllabus strengthens student voice and critical engagement.

In some EFL countries, speaking English remains a significant challenge due to limited exposure and interaction opportunities. According to Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), language learning is most effective when it occurs through social interaction within a supportive environment. It implies that EFL learners need meaningful communication and guidance—conditions that are often lacking in non-English-speaking contexts. José A. Sarmiento (2024) mentioned the difficulty level of learning English as a foreign language and found that students often struggle due to the

lack of exposure and practice in their daily lives. The restricted exposure hinders learners' ability to develop communicative competence, as they often find themselves in artificial classroom environments that prioritize grammar and written tasks over authentic interpersonal engagement. A significant challenge faced by many long-term English learners is their inability to effectively apply the language, as they recognize their capacity to understand but struggle with communication skills (Gelen & Tozluoglu, 2021).

In Indonesia, English is officially included in the national education curriculum, especially at the secondary and tertiary levels. Despite this formal inclusion, a significant number of Indonesian students continue to face challenges in developing practical English-speaking skills. Farhani et al. (2020) examine the challenges that Indonesian students encounter in developing proficiency in English, despite their extensive study. This persistent gap highlights the distinction between academic training and practical language application. English education in Indonesia often places greater emphasis on grammar rules, reading comprehension, and written exercises, while opportunities for authentic spoken interaction remain scarce. According to the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia (2013), despite achieving high marks on written assessments, many Indonesian high school graduates continue to struggle with real-world English communication. Many Indonesian junior high school students still find speaking to be the most difficult skill due to psychological, linguistic, and contextual challenges (Hasibuan & Rahman Hz, 2025).

To address these challenges, the use of technology in language education has become increasingly valuable. Online platforms and mobile applications now offer flexible and engaging ways for learners to practice speaking English. These tools enable students to connect with others worldwide, engage in real-time conversations, and receive instant feedback, thereby helping them overcome limitations in their local environment. Technology-based learning supports self-directed learning and provides practical exposure to the language, making the learning experience more dynamic and relevant. One such platform is Free4Talk, an online website that connects language learners worldwide through voice-based chatrooms. It enables users to find speaking partners, practice communication, and improve fluency in various languages, including English (Apandi et al., 2022). Learners can engage in informal conversations with both native and non-native speakers, which helps build confidence and communicative competence. Gelen and Tozluoglu (2021) note that Free4Talk allows users to interact in multiple languages, supporting both language learning and cultural exchange in an accessible online space.

Recent studies have consistently highlighted the platform's effectiveness. Tobing and Damanik (2025) reported that Indonesian EFL students perceived Free4Talk as highly effective for developing self-confidence and speaking ability due to the supportive and interactive environment. Bahar and Dalimunte (2025) also demonstrated that Free4Talk significantly contributed to fluency and grammatical accuracy, with 63.7% of students' speaking skill improvement attributed to platform use. In line with these findings, Tresna and Handayani (2024) found that 78% of participants had positive perceptions of Free4Talk for real-time speaking practice, although some mentioned technical challenges and difficulty sustaining engagement. From the Moroccan context, Salhy and Darir (2024) found that Free4Talk increased learners' confidence, speaking frequency, and enjoyment. Over 97% of their participants would recommend the platform to others, with improved self-assurance cited as a key benefit. However, challenges such as partner availability and accent differences were also noted.

Handayani (2024) further supports these findings by documenting how Indonesian university students use Free4Talk and similar platforms (HelloTalk, InterPals) to expand their fluency and vocabulary through spontaneous interaction, despite facing technical barriers like limited connectivity and variable partner quality. Additionally, Saputri and Fuady (2023) emphasized the importance of user motivation and perceived enjoyment in sustaining platform use. Their study found that learners are more likely to continue engaging with Free4Talk when they perceive it as fun, visually appealing, and socially rewarding. Meanwhile, Tozluoglu (2021) emphasized that the platform provides a free and safe environment that significantly contributes to learners' expressive language development and boosts their motivation to engage in language learning.

While numerous studies have highlighted the effectiveness of Free4Talk in improving speaking fluency, motivation, and learner confidence, limited research has specifically explored how final-year Indonesian EFL students majoring in English perceive and experience the platform. Furthermore, existing literature often treats users as a homogeneous group, overlooking potential differences based on their level of experience with the platform. To address this gap, the present study aims to investigate the perceptions of final-year Indonesian university students toward the use of Free4Talk as a language learning tool, with a specific focus on comparing two distinct user groups: novice users and expert users. This leads to the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of final-year Indonesian EFL students toward the use of Free4Talk as a language learning platform?
2. In what ways do novice and expert users differ in their perceptions, challenges, and experiences of using Free4Talk?

This comparison between novice users and expert users introduces a novel analytical lens, offering deeper insight into how user familiarity shapes the perceived value, usability, and learning outcomes of Free4Talk as a speaking practice tool.

Method

Study Design

This research employed a qualitative methodology, utilizing a comparative descriptive approach. Creswell (2014) asserts that qualitative research aims to investigate and understand the meanings individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human phenomenon. This strategy allows the researcher to examine data that is abundant in context and detail from the participants' perspectives.

According to Sukardi (2013), descriptive comparative research is employed to compare two or more groups, aiming to identify both their commonalities and distinctions. Meanwhile, Sandelowski (2000) explains that qualitative descriptive studies aim to provide a comprehensive and straightforward summary of participants' experiences, presenting findings in everyday terms without imposing abstract theoretical interpretations. This design was therefore considered suitable for exploring and comparing the perceptions of novice and expert users of Free4Talk.

Participants

This study involved 15 final-year undergraduate students majoring in English Language Education at a state university in North Sumatra, Indonesia. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, a method in which individuals are deliberately chosen based on characteristics relevant to the research focus (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). They were categorized into three expert users, who had used

Free4Talk regularly for over a year, and twelve novice users, who had less than three months of experience. This classification follows Dumas and Redish's (1999) distinction, where novice users have little prior experience and expert users demonstrate sustained engagement.

The selection of final-year students was expected to demonstrate greater linguistic proficiency and broader insight due to students' extended academic training, aligning with Borg's (2009) view that expert study fosters higher metalinguistic awareness and expertise.

Data Collection Techniques and Instruments

This study employed two primary instruments: a closed-ended questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire was distributed online via the Google Forms platform and consisted of ten statements related to the use of Free4Talk. The questionnaire comprised 10 closed-ended statements using a 5-point Likert Scale (i.e., Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree). To facilitate comparative analysis, two separate versions of the questionnaire were developed—one for expert users and another for novice users—tailored to the respective user experiences of each group. The questionnaire items were presented in both English and Indonesian to ensure clarity and enhance participants' comprehension. The survey results were presented in the form of percentages and displayed in separate tables, allowing for a clear visual comparison between the two user groups.

For the interview phase, eight participants were selected, comprising three expert users and five novice users. Participants were chosen through convenience sampling, a non-probability technique in which individuals are recruited based on their availability and willingness to participate (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, allowing for a guided yet flexible exploration of individual user experiences, as is characteristic of this approach (Kvale, 1996). Due to the timing of the data collection during the academic break, all interviews were conducted online. Each session lasted approximately 15 minutes, was audio-recorded with consent, and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data from semi-structured interviews were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's (1994) interactive model of thematic analysis, which consists of three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. In the data reduction phase, transcripts were coded and condensed into key points related to participants' experiences with Free4Talk. These codes were then organized into thematic categories and visualized in tables for easier interpretation. To support the study's comparative focus, a comparative analysis was conducted to identify patterns and differences between novice and expert users (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002; Silverman, 2011). This approach enabled the researcher to uncover how user perspectives varied based on their level of experience, contributing to a deeper understanding of their engagement with online speaking platforms.

Result

After conducting data analysis, the questionnaire data are displayed in a percentage table to show the proportion of data obtained from each questionnaire statement. The data is divided into two sections, with the NU code referring to data from Novice users

and the EU code referring to data from expert users. The data were taken from two separate forms and presented separately to facilitate the comparison process. The data show students' perspectives towards Free4Talk as a language learning platform, based on the 10 questionnaires presented in the table below.

Table 1.1. Comparison of Novice and Expert Users' Questionnaire

No	Statements	NU					EU				
		SA	A	N	D	SD	SA	A	N	D	S D
1	I find Free4Talk simple to use as a language learning platform.	33,3 %	66,7 %	0%	0%	0%	100 %	0%	0%	0 %	0 %
2	I find it easy to find suitable speaking partners on Free4Talk.	0%	66,7 %	33,3 %	0%	0%	0%	100 %	0%	0 %	0 %
3	I find the features provided by Free4Talk very helpful for speaking practice.	41,7 %	50%	0%	8,3 %	0%	66,7 %	33,3 %	0%	0 %	0 %
4	In my opinion, the quality of users on Free4Talk creates a good learning environment.	25 %	66,7 %	8,3 %	0%	0%	0%	100 %	0%	0 %	0 %
5	In my opinion, using Free4Talk makes language learning feel more practical.	33,3 %	66,7 %	0%	0%	0%	33,3 %	66,7 %	0%	0 %	0 %
6	I feel that most of my interactions on Free4Talk have led to high-quality speaking practice.	25 %	66,7 %	8,3 %	0%	0%	0%	100 %	0%	0 %	0 %
7	I feel Free4Talk provides a good opportunity to learn about different cultures and perspectives from around the world.	41,7 %	58,3 %	0%	0%	0%	66,7 %	33,3 %	0%	0 %	0 %
8	I feel that using Free4Talk can help increase my confidence in speaking English.	25 %	75%	0%	0%	0%	66,7 %	0%	0%	0 %	0 %
9	I feel motivated to speak English more often after using Free4Talk.	33,3 %	58,3 %	33,3 %	0%	0%	66,7 %	100 %	0%	0 %	0 %
10	I plan to continue using Free4Talk in the future to improve my speaking ability.	8,3 %	50%	0%	8,3 %	8,3 %	33,3 %	33,3 %	0%	0 %	0 %

SA= Strongly Agree; A= Agree; N=Neutral; D=Disagree; SD=Strongly Disagree

From the data analysis, three main themes were identified, each representing a core aspect of students' perceptions and experiences with Free4Talk. These themes were further divided into subthemes, particularly derived from the interview data, to capture more specific dimensions of their views.

Students' Initial Perceptions towards Free4Talk

Based on the questionnaire data above, questions 1, 2, 3, and 5 cover a single theme. In the first questionnaire, it was found that approximately 33.3% of novice users strongly agreed that the Free4Talk platform is easy to use, and the remaining 66.7% agreed. Meanwhile, 100% of expert users strongly agree that Free4Talk is an easy-to-use language learning platform. There is no indication of negative aspects related to the ease of use of Free4Talk based on the two user groups. In the second statement, 66.7% of novice users agree, and 33.3% are neutral regarding the ease of finding speaking partners in language practice. Meanwhile, for expert users, 100% agree that finding speaking partners in Free4Talk is easy. Both user groups have positive views regarding the ease of finding speaking partners in Free4Talk. In the third statement, it was found that around 41.7% of novice users strongly agree that the features in Free4Talk help in language practice, 50% agree, and 8.3% disagree. Compared to expert users, 66.7% strongly agree, and the remaining 33.3% agree. Expert users tend to be more positive about the effectiveness of Free4Talk features. In the fifth statement, 33.3% of novice users strongly agree that the Free4Talk platform makes language learning more practical, and 66.7% agree. Similar to expert users, 33.3% strongly agree and 66.7% agree. Both user groups showed positive responses.

This theme explores students' first impressions of the platform and is divided into two subthemes. The first theme, *First Encounters and Emotional Reactions*, provides an overview of how students initially approached and responded to Free4Talk. The second, *Perceptions of Usability and Accessibility*, outlines students' general views on the platform's practicality and ease of use.

First Encounters and Emotional Reactions

The interview data revealed that students' first encounters with Free4Talk were shaped by strong emotional reactions, ranging from apprehension and self-doubt to curiosity and excitement. While both novice and expert users reflected on the emotional impact of these initial experiences, their perspectives varied in how they interpreted and responded to the platform's social dynamics.

"My first impression was that I felt scared and nervous. I didn't know how to respond, and since my English wasn't very good, I was afraid I wouldn't be able to answer what others were saying. I was also worried about being judged or even laughed at by people from abroad." (NU2)

"At first, my impression of Free4Talk seemed exciting and useful. But since I am not someone who enjoys speaking much, joining a room felt like a struggle because I had to keep talking and answering questions. It became tiring, and some users were extremely talkative. While the platform is meant to practice speaking, for people like me who don't talk a lot, it sometimes feels overwhelming." (NU3)

For novice users, the platform's highly interactive environment presents a significant initial challenge. These learners must navigate both affective barriers, such as fear of judgment and self-doubt, and the practical demands of maintaining continuous conversation. This combination can make the experience feel overwhelming and exhausting for those unaccustomed to spontaneous, high-volume interaction.

"When I first used Free4Talk, I was amazed because it felt like a kind of learning platform. Even though it is not officially designed as a learning platform, it can actually be used as one, and it truly facilitates people who want to learn English. So, I was amazed." (NU4)

In contrast to the experiences of other novice users, NU4's statement highlights that curiosity and amazement also shaped the initial encounter, as they discovered new opportunities for authentic language learning through the platform.

"The impression was interesting because we don't personally know the people we talk to, so we don't feel embarrassed when learning. For example, if we practice speaking English with someone we already know, there might be judgment. But with strangers, instead, they tend to support and guide us." (EU3)

This indicates that expert users perceive anonymity as a positive feature that reduces embarrassment and fosters a supportive learning environment. In comparison, novice users' first encounters were marked by nervousness, amazement, and even fatigue due to the demands of communication. In contrast, expert users perceived Free4Talk more confidently as a safe and judgment-free environment that supported their learning from the outset.

Platform Usability and Accessibility

Furthermore, the interview analysis uncovered key findings regarding Free4Talk's perceived utility and strengths, specifically in terms of its features and unique advantages.

"It is very easy to access, just by clicking a link. The platform is fun and simple to use, so there is no hassle in operating it as long as there is internet access." (NU2)

"I was interested because each room has its own theme. For example, if we want to join a discussion on a certain issue, we can enter that room, which allows for broader topics of conversation." (NU3).

"In Free4Talk, we can choose rooms, whether with Advanced users, beginners, or even create our own with friends. There are also fun features like games, which let us practice English in real contexts, so it's not boring or just talking formally." (NU4)

"The advantage is that we can filter by language and choose whether to open the camera, speak, or just chat. It feels more flexible and relaxed since users are friendly, so we can adjust based on our mood." (NU5)

Taken together, these responses illustrate that novice users primarily value Free4Talk for its ease of access, thematic discussion rooms, flexible interaction modes, and additional features that make language practice both engaging and authentic. For many, the platform's user-friendly design and customizable options provide not only convenience but also a sense of control and comfort, enabling them to explore language learning in ways that are less intimidating and more enjoyable.

"One advantage of Free4Talk is its security and the fact that it is completely free with no limits. The rooms are organized by topics, so we can easily choose what to discuss. It also supports many languages, not only English. Another interesting feature is that we can even watch YouTube videos without ads, which makes the platform feel even more impressive." (EU1)

"It is very easy to access, and the sound quality is clear for both me and my speaking partners. I often communicate with people from different countries, but the main language is English. Since Free4Talk is a free website and simple to use, it feels very positive and user-friendly." (EU2)

These statements indicate that expert users value security, accessibility, and technical reliability while also appreciating the platform's linguistic diversity, organized discussion topics, and unique multimedia features. For them, Free4Talk is not only a safe and user-friendly space but also a resource-rich environment that supports sustained intercultural communication and continuous language practice.

Students' Engagement and Interaction on Free4Talk

Statements 4, 6, and 7 indicate a similar theme. In question number 4, as many as 25% of novice users strongly agree that the quality of Free4Talk users creates a good learning environment, 66.7% agree, and 8.3% are neutral. Whereas expert users, as many as 100%, agree. This indicates that expert users show a more positive response. For statement 6, as many as 25% of novice users strongly agree that interactions on Free4Talk lead to quality speaking practice, 66.7% agree, and 8.3% are neutral. Compared to expert users, 100% agree with the statement. In the following statement, 41.7% of novice users strongly agree that Free4Talk is a means of learning about culture and worldwide perspectives, and the remaining 58.3% agree. On the other hand, 66.7% of expert users strongly agree, and 33.3% agree. This indicates that both users have a positive view.

This theme pertains to students' experiences when interacting with others on the platform. Divided into two themes, the first subtheme, *Perceptions of the User Community on Free4Talk*, discusses how students viewed the nature of interaction within the user community. The second, *Challenges in Using the Platform*, highlights the kinds of obstacles students generally reported during their participation.

Perceptions of the User Community on Free4Talk

"From the many rooms I have joined, most people were genuinely eager to learn the language, and their interactions were very positive and educational." (NU1)

"On Free4Talk, most people are also learners, so they respect each other. There is no judgment or mockery, and some even give compliments like 'Your English is good.' The people there are generally supportive, positive, and enjoyable to interact with." (NU2)

Both statements illustrate that novice users perceive the Free4Talk community as highly supportive, respectful, and motivating. Interactions are generally positive and encouraging, with participants demonstrating genuine eagerness to learn and offering affirmations, which helps novice learners feel safe, confident, and motivated to engage in language practice without fear of judgment. The rest of the novice users have similar statements about the user community on Free4Talk, which are positive.

"The Free4Talk community is generally good. I met people from abroad, socialized a lot, and shared experiences. Most of them really want to learn English, but a small number only look for friends to chat with, and some even use it like a dating app to find a girlfriend or boyfriend." (EU1)

"Most of the people I met and communicated with were very positive." (EU2)

"The environment on Free4Talk is diverse since we interact with people from different backgrounds. Sometimes there are toxic users who try to lead conversations in a negative direction. That is why we need to choose our partners carefully." (EU3)

Expert users perceive the Free4Talk community as generally positive and supportive, with most participants motivated to learn English. However, they also recognize occasional non-academic or negative behaviors, such as participants seeking social connections or steering conversations unproductively, leading them to engage selectively and strategically to maintain effective learning.

Challenges in Utilizing the Platform

"The main problem is that sometimes the microphone doesn't work, and if the internet connection is unstable, I get disconnected." (NU1)

"One challenge is the accent. For example, when I talked with someone from India, I couldn't understand what they were saying at first because of the accent, even though they were just asking which country I was from." (NU3)

"Since it depends on the internet, sometimes the signal is weak, and I need to ask my partner to repeat what they said. It feels a bit embarrassing because we don't know them personally. Other than that, the main challenge is just technical issues." (NU4)

These statements indicate that novice users primarily face technical and linguistic challenges on Free4Talk. Issues such as unstable internet connections and malfunctioning microphones disrupt their speaking practice, while exposure to unfamiliar accents can create comprehension difficulties. Additionally, these technical and communication barriers may lead to affective challenges, including embarrassment and reduced confidence during interactions.

"One challenge is the network, but another problem is that Free4Talk updates too often, which sometimes causes errors and makes it difficult to open." (EU1)

"I feel it's too monotonous because there are no other features besides communication. That's why I couldn't stay consistent. I used to join almost every day, but now only once a month or two." (EU2)

Novice and expert users encounter technical challenges on Free4Talk, including unstable connections, microphone issues, and platform errors. Novice users are particularly affected by immediate technical and linguistic barriers, such as difficulty understanding accents, which can undermine their confidence. In contrast, expert users, while generally more confident, are also influenced by motivational factors, including monotony and limited platform features, which can lead to selective or less frequent participation.

Students' Perceived Impact on Language Learning and Motivation

This section covers questions 8 to 10, where statement number 8 indicates that 25% of novice users strongly agree with the statement about increasing confidence, and the remaining 75% agree. In addition, expert users also showed positive percentage results, with 66.7% strongly agreeing and 33.3% agreeing. In the following statement related to the influence of Free4Talk motivation, 33.3% of novice users strongly agree because they feel motivated to speak English after using Free4Talk, 58.3% agree, and 8.3% are neutral. Compared to expert users, 66.7% strongly agree and 33.3% agree. This indicates that novice users have a higher tendency to increase motivation. Furthermore, in the last statement, related to continued use, 8.3% of novice users strongly agree to continue using Free4Talk in the future as a means of language practice, 50% agree, 25% are neutral, 8.3% disagree, and 8.3% strongly disagree. In contrast to novice users, who showed a percentage of 33.3% strongly agree and 66.7% agree. Here, it can be seen that some novice users are not interested in using Free4Talk in the future, while expert users have shown a positive response to continuing to use Free4Talk.

This theme addresses the role of Free4Talk in supporting students' language learning and motivation. The subtheme *Confidence and Improvement* introduces students' overall impressions of how the platform contributed to their development, while *Motivation and Continued Use* explains students' general perspectives on their willingness to keep using the application.

Confidence and Improvement

"The app helps with speaking and listening because we can hear new accents we haven't heard before and learn different ways people speak." (NU1)

"The impact is that now I'm braver to speak. I improved in both speaking and listening... I gained more vocabulary and felt more confident speaking because my partners were supportive. It made me realize speaking wasn't as difficult as I thought." (NU2)

"This platform is good for learning about the world and different cultures. It improves knowledge, especially cultural knowledge, through exchanging ideas with people from other countries." (NU3)

"I feel motivated, especially to learn new vocabulary and imitate native speakers' voices from movies, so I can apply it in conversations. But I'm not sure yet about my actual skill improvement." (NU5)

From the statements, Novice users perceive Free4Talk as a valuable platform for improving listening and speaking skills, gaining confidence, expanding vocabulary, and engaging with diverse accents and cultures, while also motivating independent practice despite some uncertainty about measurable progress.

"I became braver to speak English even though it was still messy. At first, I was shy, but then I met someone who motivated me. After that, I used Free4Talk more often, practiced my accent, and learned new vocabulary. For example, before I only used 'how are you,' but from Free4Talk I learned many other expressions." (EU1)

"I actually feel more confident speaking there than with my friends who are good at English because I don't worry about being judged or corrected. It makes me feel free to speak and builds my confidence." (EU2)

"The impact is very positive. My English has become more fluent, especially my pronunciation, which has improved a lot. This app is truly beneficial." (EU3)

Expert users report notable improvements in fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, and accent, which they attribute to regular engagement and supportive, nonjudgmental interactions on Free4Talk. The platform enables them to practice freely, take risks, and experiment with language, leading to increased confidence and tangible language development.

Motivation and Continued Use

"For now, I don't want to use Free4Talk again because I prefer practicing individually, like in front of a mirror. On the platform, conversations feel endless and make me anxious." (NU3)

"The improvement I felt was in motivation. After using Free4Talk, I wanted to use it again because it's free, judgment-free, and lets me meet many people. It helps me practice English with more confidence, so I will use it again when I have free time." (NU4)

"Sometimes I feel tired of talking with strangers because the conversations can be repetitive, like 'how's your day,' which feels boring. But some people share interesting life stories, so I still want to use the app again, though it depends on my mood." (NU5)

These statements indicate that novice users' engagement with Free4Talk varies depending on affective and contextual factors. While the platform can boost motivation, confidence, and provide a supportive environment, some novice users experience anxiety, discomfort, or boredom during interactions, leading to fluctuating participation and a preference for independent practice at times.

"I set a routine to join Free4Talk at least 20 minutes every day for two months. For me, it is the most effective platform so far, and I will keep using it." (EU2)

"I became interested in Free4Talk after seeing a friend's English improve significantly. I won't stop using this application. Finding this app is truly like finding gold." (EU3)

These statements indicate that expert users engage with Free4Talk consistently and purposefully, motivated by the platform's perceived effectiveness and tangible improvements in language skills. They view the application as valuable and indispensable, sustaining regular practice and long-term commitment.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that Free4Talk provides both novice and expert EFL learners with meaningful opportunities to develop speaking and listening skills, gain confidence, and engage with diverse accents and cultures. Both groups perceived the platform as user-friendly, accessible, and supportive, which aligns with Tobing and Damanik's (2025) findings that Indonesian EFL students regard Free4Talk as highly effective for building confidence and improving speaking ability through its interactive environment. Bahar and Dalimunte (2025) highlighted that learners' fluency and grammatical accuracy improved significantly through engagement with Free4Talk, supporting the current study's observation that learners perceived tangible gains in vocabulary, pronunciation, and oral expression.

Novice users in this study often experienced initial anxiety, nervousness, and fear of judgment, consistent with Ur's (1996) discussion of affective factors in language learning and Tao's (2021) findings that anonymity reduces social inhibition and encourages participation. For some novice learners, high levels of interactivity and exposure to unfamiliar accents created cognitive and emotional challenges, echoing Alifah's (2021) report on difficulties in understanding diverse accents and constructing accurate responses. In contrast, expert users approached the platform with confidence, perceiving it as a safe space that fostered experimentation and autonomous learning patterns, also observed in Handayani's (2024) study, which found that routine use of Free4Talk and similar platforms (HelloTalk, InterPals) led to sustained confidence and linguistic development.

Novice and expert users emphasized the value of thematic chat rooms, flexible interaction modes, and multimedia features. Expert users additionally highlighted technical reliability, organized discussion topics, and security, allowing them to concentrate on language improvement rather than platform limitations. This observation supports Tozluoglu's (2021) conclusion that Free4Talk provides a free, safe environment that promotes expressive language development and motivation. However, the current study also confirms findings by Salhy and Darir (2024) that occasional partner-related challenges, accent differences, and unmoderated interactions can hinder some learners' engagement, highlighting the need for careful navigation and strategic participation.

Both groups reported technical difficulties, although the nature of the issues differed. Novices faced immediate barriers, such as unstable internet connections, microphone issues, and difficulties comprehending unfamiliar accents, while expert users reported challenges with platform updates, monotony, and limited features. This distinction illustrates a developmental continuum in online learning, where experience, emotional resilience, and strategic engagement enable learners to overcome obstacles, consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development.

Both groups reported improvements in confidence, fluency, and vocabulary, with expert users noting more tangible, measurable progress. Motivation and sustained engagement also differed: novices' participation fluctuated depending on anxiety, conversation quality, or personal mood, while expert users maintained structured and consistent practice, driven by perceived effectiveness and observable outcomes. These results align with Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self-Determination Theory, emphasizing autonomy, competence, and relatedness as central to motivation, and correspond with Saputri and Fuady's (2023) findings that enjoyment, visual appeal, and social rewards contribute to continued platform use.

Overall, Free4Talk appears to be an effective dynamic environment for language learning, supporting both cognitive and affective dimensions. Its benefits include improved speaking ability, confidence, intercultural awareness, and community building, as shown in both Indonesian (Tobing & Damanik, 2025; Handayani, 2024; Bahar & Dalimunte, 2025; Tresna & Handayani, 2024) and Moroccan contexts (Salhy & Darir, 2024). The current findings generally corroborate those of previous studies; the research also nuances our understanding by highlighting differences between novice and expert users, specifically in terms of experience level and affective readiness, which mediate the extent to which learners can navigate technical and social challenges and sustain engagement.

Conclusion

This study examined the perceptions of Indonesian EFL learners toward Free4Talk, comparing the experiences of novice and expert users. The findings reveal that Free4Talk is perceived as a user-friendly, accessible, and supportive platform that provides meaningful opportunities for improving speaking and listening skills, expanding vocabulary, enhancing pronunciation, and engaging with diverse accents and cultures. The platform also fosters confidence and motivation by offering a judgment-free and interactive environment, which encourages learners to participate and take risks in their language use. Novice users reported initial anxiety, nervousness, and difficulties in understanding unfamiliar accents, which sometimes limited their engagement. In contrast, expert users demonstrated greater confidence, resilience, and consistent participation, benefiting from both the platform's technical features and the flexibility to engage in focused language practice. Motivation and continued use were shaped by personal affective factors, perceived effectiveness, and the ability to navigate technical and social challenges.

Eventually, Free4Talk effectively supports both the cognitive and affective dimensions of language learning, providing a dynamic space for linguistic development, intercultural awareness, and a sense of community. The findings highlight the role of user experience in shaping engagement and outcomes, suggesting that familiarity with the platform enhances confidence, strategic participation, and sustained motivation in online language learning contexts.

Suggestion

The study's limitations lie in its relatively small and imbalanced sample, as well as its reliance on self-reported perceptions rather than objective measures of language proficiency. Accordingly, the findings are best viewed as reflecting only a limited range of perspectives and are not generalizable to the broader population of Indonesian EFL learners. Future research could address these limitations by using a mixed-method

approach to assess actual language progress, such as pre-test and post-test speaking scores. Studies with larger and more balanced samples of novice and expert users are recommended. Additionally, cross-context research involving students from different universities or countries could provide a broader understanding of Free4Talk's effectiveness and applicability.

Acknowledgement

First and foremost, the researcher expresses the deepest gratitude to Allah ﷻ for His blessings and guidance in the completion of this study. Sincere appreciation is also extended to my beloved parents for their unwavering support, patience, and encouragement. Special thanks to all friends and participants who generously contributed their time, insights, and experiences, making this study possible. Special thanks are also due to the advisor and lecturers for their invaluable guidance, constructive feedback, and academic support, which greatly enhanced the quality of this research. *Jazakumullah Khairan.*

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