

Exploring EFL Students' Perceptions of Authentic Online Conversation through Episoden and Speaky for Speaking Practice

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study addresses the limited comparative research on Episoden and Speaky by exploring senior high school EFL students' perceptions of using these two authentic online conversation applications to support their speaking practice. Thirty-five eleventh-grade students used both platforms to converse with native English speakers and fellow learners abroad, either through live face-to-face video calls (Episoden) or through voice notes, voice calls, and text chat (Speaky). Data were collected through an open-ended, semi-structured questionnaire and analysed using inductive thematic analysis, in which responses were open-coded and grouped into broader categories to identify recurring patterns. Nearly all students described initial anxiety when first speaking with an unfamiliar interlocutor, which most reported as diminishing with repeated exposure: 27 of the 35 responses were coded as reporting perceived gains in speaking confidence and motivation, while 8 were coded as reporting little or no perceived change. Episoden was perceived as more spontaneous but more anxiety-inducing, whereas Speaky was perceived as more flexible and comfortable for less confident speakers; accent comprehension, limited vocabulary, unstable internet connectivity, and sustaining conversation topics were identified as recurring challenges. All 35 students expressed willingness to continue the activity, provided teachers offer adequate guidance and do not make live video conversation mandatory. These findings offer comparative, learner-derived evidence on how differing modes of authentic online conversation are perceived to support EFL speaking confidence, with implications for sequencing platform use in the Indonesian senior high school context.

KEYWORDS

Authentic Online Conversation, Episoden and Speaky, Speaking Confidence, Willingness to Communicate, EFL Learners

ABSTRAK

Studi kasus kualitatif ini merespons terbatasnya penelitian komparatif mengenai Episoden dan Speaky dengan mengeksplorasi persepsi siswa SMA pembelajar Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing terhadap penggunaan kedua aplikasi authentic online conversation tersebut untuk mendukung praktik speaking mereka. Sebanyak 35 siswa kelas XI menggunakan kedua platform untuk berbicara dengan penutur asli bahasa Inggris dan sesama pembelajar dari berbagai negara, baik melalui video call langsung secara tatap muka (Episoden) maupun melalui voice note, panggilan suara, dan chat teks (Speaky). Data dikumpulkan melalui kuesioner terbuka semi-terstruktur dan dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik induktif, di mana jawaban dikoding secara terbuka dan dikelompokkan ke dalam kategori yang lebih luas untuk mengidentifikasi pola yang berulang. Hampir seluruh siswa melaporkan kecemasan awal saat pertama kali berbicara dengan lawan bicara yang belum

KATA KUNCI

Authentic Online Conversation, Episoden dan Speaky, Kepercayaan Diri Berbicara, Kesiapan Berkomunikasi, Pembelajaran EFL

dikenal, yang menurut sebagian besar berangsur menurun seiring bertambahnya pengalaman: 27 dari 35 jawaban dikoding sebagai melaporkan persepsi peningkatan kepercayaan diri dan motivasi berbicara, sedangkan 8 jawaban dikoding sebagai melaporkan perubahan yang minim atau tidak ada perubahan. Episoden dipersepsikan lebih spontan namun lebih menimbulkan kecemasan, sedangkan Speaky dipersepsikan lebih fleksibel dan nyaman bagi siswa yang kurang percaya diri; kesulitan memahami aksen, keterbatasan kosakata, koneksi internet yang tidak stabil, dan mempertahankan topik percakapan diidentifikasi sebagai tantangan yang berulang. Seluruh 35 siswa menyatakan kesediaan untuk melanjutkan kegiatan ini, dengan syarat guru memberikan pendampingan yang memadai dan tidak mewajibkan percakapan video langsung. Temuan ini memberikan bukti komparatif berbasis persepsi pembelajar mengenai bagaimana moda authentic online conversation yang berbeda dipersepsikan mendukung kepercayaan diri speaking EFL, dengan implikasi bagi pengurutan penggunaan platform dalam konteks SMA di Indonesia.

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INTRODUCTION

Speaking is widely regarded as one of the most demanding yet essential skills to master in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, as it requires learners to process language in real time while simultaneously managing linguistic accuracy, fluency, and the psychological pressure of being understood (Bygate, 1987; Seraj & Hadina, 2021; Thornbury, 2005). In many EFL classrooms, however, opportunities for authentic and unpredictable spoken interaction remain limited, since students mostly practice speaking with classmates or teachers who share the same first language and a similar proficiency level (Richards, 2008). This constrained practice environment often fails to replicate the spontaneity and communicative pressure of real-world conversation, leaving many students underprepared and anxious when they are required to use English with unfamiliar interlocutors.

Speaking anxiety, particularly in unfamiliar or evaluative speaking situations, has long been documented as a significant barrier to second language oral performance (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Learners who experience high levels of foreign language anxiety tend to avoid speaking opportunities, produce shorter and less elaborate utterances, and report lower confidence in their communicative ability even when their underlying linguistic competence is adequate (Daymiel et al., 2022; MacIntyre et al., 1998; Woodrow, 2006). This pattern continues to surface in current research. Hussain et al. (2025), synthesizing a broad body of literature on foreign language speaking anxiety, identify teacher-related pressure, fear of negative evaluation, and limited vocabulary as recurring triggers across EFL settings. Juríková (2025) similarly reports that eighty percent of the adolescent learners in her study fell within a moderate-to-high anxiety range, with fear of peer judgment and limited proficiency cited as the most common causes. Within the Indonesian EFL context specifically,

where English functions primarily as a foreign rather than a second language, learners' exposure to authentic spoken English beyond the classroom is typically minimal, a condition that may compound both the anxiety they experience and the general lack of real-world speaking practice available to them, a pattern documented in recent Indonesian EFL research showing that learners have few opportunities for authentic spoken interaction outside formal instruction (Hidayah & Gunawan, 2025; Lestari & Andiansyah, 2024).

In recent years, developments in Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) technology have opened new possibilities for learners to engage in authentic spoken interaction beyond the physical classroom. Telecollaboration and virtual exchange connect language learners with native speakers or fellow learners abroad, providing meaningful opportunities to practice speaking in genuine communicative contexts (O'Dowd & Dooley, 2020; Thorne, 2003). Ross-Sokolovsky et al. (2024) found that a multi-country virtual exchange project increased both speaking confidence and willingness to communicate among university EFL students, while Yeh et al. (2024) observed comparable gains in intercultural communicative competence among Taiwanese learners paired with partners in Australia and New Zealand. Outside formal telecollaboration programs, commercially available applications that connect learners directly with strangers online, such as Hallo (Suhardi et al., 2024) and Free4Talk (Sitanggang & Purnomo, 2025), have likewise been reported to support speaking confidence while introducing distinct emotional and technical demands depending on the platform's design; these and other app-mediated platforms are discussed further in relation to the present findings in the Discussion section.

Within this landscape, applications such as Episoden and Speaky have emerged as accessible tools that connect learners directly with speakers from around the world. Episoden requires synchronous, face-to-face video interaction, replicating the immediacy and spontaneity of live conversation, whereas Speaky offers a more flexible range of interactional modes, including voice notes, voice calls, and text chat, allowing learners to choose a format that matches their comfort level. Despite the growing interest in digital tools for language learning illustrated above, empirical studies examining how EFL learners, particularly at the secondary school level, perceive and respond to these differing modes of authentic conversation technology remain limited, and to date no study appears to have directly compared Episoden and Speaky as complementary platforms within a single group of learners.

The Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996) posits that language acquisition is facilitated through the negotiation of meaning that occurs during interaction, particularly when learners encounter communication breakdowns and must work collaboratively to achieve mutual understanding. Applications such as Episoden and Speaky create precisely these conditions by exposing learners to authentic interlocutors whose accents, speech rates, and conversational styles differ from what they typically encounter in the classroom. From another perspective, Willingness to Communicate (WTC) theory (MacIntyre et al., 1998) suggests that a learner's decision to initiate communication in a second language is shaped by situational and psychological factors, including perceived competence and anxiety, both of which may be influenced by the mode of communication, such as synchronous video interaction versus more flexible, lower-pressure formats. Recent empirical work lends some support to this theoretical link: e-tandem exchange has been found to raise both speaking scores and willingness-to-communicate scores relative to conventional classroom practice (Rahimi & Fathi, 2024), and a quasi-experimental comparison of metaverse-based and videoconferencing-based speaking

tasks found that both formats produced significant gains in willingness to communicate relative to a non-intervention control group (Namaziandost & Çelik, 2025). These theoretical perspectives, together with the accumulating empirical evidence behind them, provide a lens for interpreting how students' perceptions of anxiety, confidence, and motivation might differ depending on the interactional demands of the platform they use. In this study, these theoretical perspectives are used as an interpretive lens, rather than as a basis for causal claims: because the study examines self-reported perceptions by students, rather than directly measurable changes in confidence or willingness to communicate, these perspectives are used, respectively, to address the Research Questions without assuming that either platform caused the perceptions reported.

While previous studies have explored a range of digital tools for EFL speaking practice, no study to date appears to have directly compared how secondary-school EFL learners perceive two authentic conversation platforms with contrasting interactional demands, live video interaction versus flexible multimodal interaction, within the same group of learners. This comparative gap constitutes the specific novelty of the present study: rather than evaluating a single platform in isolation, as most prior research has done, it examines how learners themselves differentiate between two contrasting modes of authentic conversation. Accordingly, this study aimed to explore senior high school EFL students' perceptions of using Episoden and Speaky to support their speaking practice, focusing specifically on: (1) their emotional experiences and perceived speaking confidence, (2) the perceived benefits and affordances of each platform, (3) the challenges they encountered, and (4) their willingness to sustain this form of practice beyond the classroom.

METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive design to explore EFL learners' perceptions of using authentic online conversation applications for speaking practice. A case study approach was used, focusing on a single class of eleventh-grade students at a senior high school during the 2024/2025 academic year. A case study approach was chosen because it enables an in-depth, contextualized understanding of a bounded group's experience with a specific pedagogical intervention (Yin, 2018), which suited the study's aim of exploring the range and texture of students' perceptions within one intact class rather than generalizing findings across a wider population.

All 35 students in the class took part in the speaking practice activities using Episoden and Speaky and subsequently completed the study's questionnaire. Participants were purposively included as they had directly experienced both platforms under the researcher's instruction as their English teacher. Because the researcher also served as the students' English teacher, this dual role may have introduced a power dynamic that influenced participants' responses, for instance through a tendency toward socially desirable answers. To help mitigate this risk, students were assured that their participation and the content of their answers would not affect their academic evaluation, and all responses were anonymized prior to analysis.

During the activities, students' speaking practice was guided by six key aspects commonly used to assess EFL speaking performance: (1) fluency, (2) suitable vocabulary, (3) grammar accuracy, (4) pronunciation, intonation, and stress, (5) interactive communication, and (6) coherence and organization. These aspects served as the pedagogical focus of the practice sessions rather than as a scored assessment instrument, giving both the teacher and

students a shared reference point for the speaking skills being developed through the authentic conversation activities.

Two web- and application-based platforms were introduced to the students. Episoden requires synchronous, face-to-face video-call interaction with a partner, replicating a live conversational setting comparable to an in-person exchange. Speaky, in contrast, allows more flexible modes of interaction, including voice notes, voice calls, and text-based chat, enabling learners to choose a communication format that matches their comfort level. Both platforms connect users with native English speakers as well as fellow English learners from various countries.

Students were introduced to both the platforms. and trained on their responsible and safe use, including basic etiquette for online conversation with unfamiliar interlocutors. They were then given the opportunity to practice speaking using either or both platforms, both during scheduled class time and independently outside class hours. The choice of platform, conversation partner, and topic was primarily left to the students' own preference, allowing them autonomy in determining how and with whom they practiced. The activity was carried out over 8 weeks within one semester, during which students were asked to complete a minimum of 2 speaking sessions per platform per week

Upon completion of the activity, all 35 students completed an open-ended questionnaire containing eight semi-structured questions. The questions asked about: (1) their overall experience using Episoden and Speaky, (2) the aspects they liked most about the platforms, (3) whether the platforms helped build their speaking confidence, (4) their initial feelings when first speaking with someone from another country, (5) their perceived differences between Episoden and Speaky, (6) the difficulties they encountered, (7) whether the activity motivated them to learn speaking, and (8) their views on whether such an activity should continue to be used in speaking instruction. The questionnaire was administered in Indonesian so that students could express their perceptions freely without being constrained by their English proficiency.

Responses were analysed using an inductive thematic analysis approach, following the phase-based procedure described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The researcher conducted open coding of all 35 responses to identify meaningful units related to students' emotional experiences, perceived benefits, platform comparisons, challenges, and willingness to continue. These initial codes were then grouped into broader categories and organized into overarching themes representing shared and contrasting patterns across participants. Representative quotations were translated from Indonesian into English for reporting purposes while preserving their original meaning as closely as possible. To support the trustworthiness of the analysis, the researcher maintained written definitions for each code and theme, revisited the coded dataset iteratively to check for consistency across coding rounds, and specifically searched for and reported disconfirming cases rather than only patterns of agreement. Coding was conducted collaboratively by three researchers, with regular discussions held to resolve disagreements and reach consensus on code application. This collaborative approach enhanced the credibility of the analysis, and readers are encouraged to interpret the frequency counts reported in the Findings as indicative of pattern strength within this coded dataset.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to participation, students were informed about the purpose of the study and their right to decline participation in the questionnaire without any academic consequence. Students'

identities were anonymized using participant codes (P1–P35) throughout data analysis and reporting, and no identifiable personal information was included in this publication. As the activity involved communication with unfamiliar individuals online, students were also given guidance on safe and responsible online interaction prior to using the platforms. This study received ethical approval from the school, and because participants were secondary-school students under 18 years of age, informed consent was obtained from both the students and their parents or legal guardians prior to participation, in addition to the school's institutional permission to conduct the study.

FINDINGS

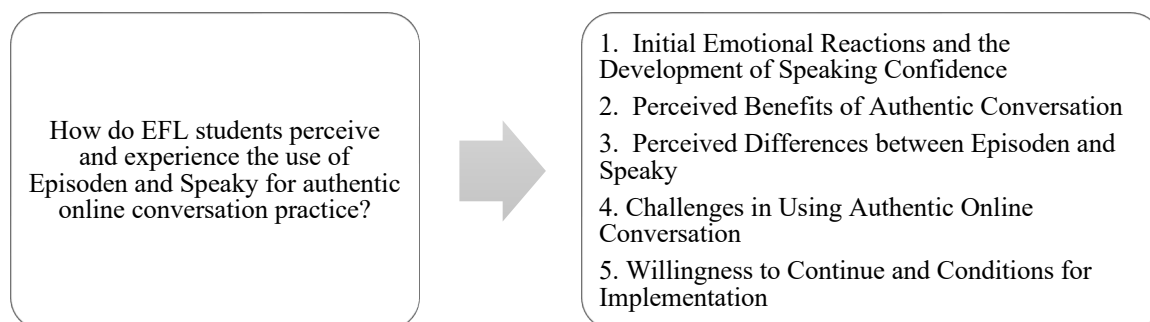


Figure 1. Thematic categories of the findings

The analysis of the open-ended questionnaire responses revealed five major themes concerning students' experiences and perceptions of authentic online conversation through Episoden and Speaky. The themes illustrate how students responded emotionally to unfamiliar interlocutors, perceived the benefits and affordances of the two platforms, distinguished between the platforms' differing interactional demands, negotiated various linguistic and technological challenges, and evaluated the possibility of continuing this form of speaking practice. Although the themes are presented separately, they are interconnected in explaining how authentic online interaction shaped students' speaking experiences. The following sections discuss each theme in detail.

Initial Emotional Reactions and the Development of Speaking Confidence

Across the 35 responses, 31 of 35 students reported feeling nervous, anxious, or shy the first time they had to speak with someone from another country. Of these, students specifically described this initial reaction as a fear of being misunderstood or of making mistakes in front of an unfamiliar interlocutor.

Participant 3: *"At first I was very nervous because I didn't know that person's English ability and was afraid I couldn't understand them."*

Participant 9: *"The first time, I was very scared and could only answer in short responses."*

For most students, this anxiety was reported as diminishing with repeated exposure. Responses from 27 of the 35 students were coded as reporting a perceived increase in speaking confidence after using the platforms several times, with many directly attributing this perceived change to the accumulation of practice.

Participant 1: *"At first I was afraid of making mistakes, but after trying several times I became braver to speak."*

Participant 7: *"I feel more confident because it turns out I can communicate even though my English isn't perfect."*

This shift, however, was not universal. Responses from eight students were coded as indicating that the activity contributed to their confidence only slightly or not at all, suggesting that the perceived impact of authentic conversation practice on confidence may depend on individual factors beyond mere exposure.

Participant 33: *"It didn't really help my confidence."*

Participant 17: *"There wasn't much change."*

Perceived Benefits of Authentic Conversation

When asked what they liked most about the platforms, 21 of 35 students mentioned the opportunity to talk with people from different countries, exposure to different accents and cultures, and the sense that they were using English for genuine communication rather than classroom exercises.

Participant 1: *"What I liked most was being able to talk with people from other countries and learn how they use English."*

Participant 18: *"I liked the intercultural experience."*

Participant 19: *"I liked the voice call feature because it felt like a real conversation."*

Consistent with this, 27 of 35 students reported feeling more motivated to learn speaking as a result of the activity, often connecting this motivation to a clearer sense of purpose in learning English.

Participant 7: *"I feel that speaking isn't only learned from books. I want to learn more vocabulary so I can speak more fluently."*

Participant 34: *"Yes, because I want to improve my speaking ability."*

A smaller group of eight students, largely overlapping with those who reported limited confidence gains, reported feeling only slightly motivated.

Participant 8: *"I'm interested in using the application, but I'm not always motivated to speak."*

Perceived Differences between Episoden and Speaky

Students consistently distinguished between the two platforms based on the format of interaction they required. Episoden was described as more spontaneous and direct because it demands live, face-to-face video conversation, while Speaky was seen as more flexible and less pressuring because it allows learners to begin with text or voice notes before a live exchange. Coded responses showed this distinction was widely shared: 30 of 35 students explicitly described Episoden as more demanding or spontaneous, while 22 of 35 specifically described Speaky as more comfortable or flexible, indicating that the platform distinction was one of the most consistently reported patterns across the dataset.

Participant 1: *"Episoden is more challenging because it's directly face-to-face. Speaky is more relaxed because you can start from chat or voice notes."*

Participant 6: *"Episoden is more spontaneous, while Speaky gives time to think before answering."*

For 12 of 35 students, this difference in demand translated directly into a stated preference for Speaky, explicitly linked to the anxiety associated with live video interaction.

Participant 25: *"Episoden was too tense for me."*

Participant 11: *"Speaky is more comfortable because you don't always have to video call."*

Challenges in Using Authentic Online Conversation

Students identified several recurring difficulties. The most frequently mentioned challenge was understanding the accent and speech rate of interlocutors, followed by limited vocabulary, unstable internet connections, and difficulty sustaining a conversation once it had started.

Participant 1: *"I sometimes had difficulty understanding accents and when the other speaker talked too fast."*

Participant 4: *"I sometimes ran out of topics and didn't know how to continue the conversation."*

Participant 5: *"Internet problems and sometimes unclear audio were difficulties for me."*

These challenges correspond closely to two of the speaking aspects that guided the practice sessions, namely pronunciation/intonation/stress and suitable vocabulary, suggesting that students' self-reported difficulties aligned meaningfully with the skills the activity was intended to develop.

Willingness to Continue and Conditions for Implementation

All 35 students expressed a wish to continue using authentic online conversation as part of their speaking practice. However, 21 of 35 students attached specific conditions to this support, most commonly related to the pacing and mandatory nature of the activity.

Participant 11: *"I think it should still be used, but it shouldn't be the only method."*

Participant 6: *"It can be used, but students should be given the choice to start with Speaky before using Episoden."*

Participant 35: *"It should still be used, but teachers need to provide preparation and guidance so students don't feel too pressured."*

Participant 8: *"The teacher needs to manage the activity so it doesn't burden the students too much."*

Figure 2 presents this pattern as it emerged from the coded data, mapping how the themes were reported together rather than proposing a tested causal sequence.

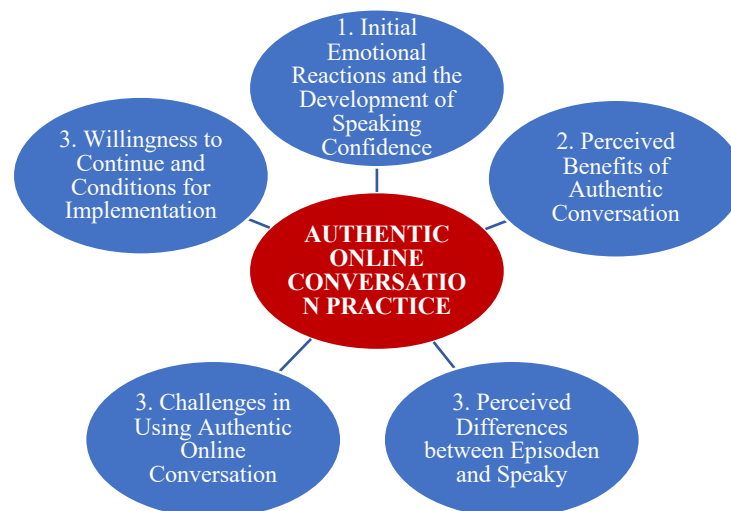


Figure 2. Interconnected thematic structure of students' experiences with authentic online conversation through Episoden and Speaky

Figure 2 presents an interpretive map of how the five themes co-occurred within students' coded responses. Initial anxiety was most often mentioned alongside descriptions of the unfamiliarity and immediacy of authentic interaction, particularly live video conversation. Reports of greater speaking confidence and motivation were, in turn, most often mentioned by students who also described repeated exposure to the platforms, though the design of this study cannot establish that exposure caused this change. The different affordances of Episoden and Speaky were consistently associated in students' responses with differing levels of reported comfort, with Speaky more often described as a lower-pressure entry point and Episoden as offering more spontaneous real-time interaction. These reports co-occurred with mentions of challenges such as unfamiliar accents, limited vocabulary, difficulty maintaining topics, and unstable internet connections. Finally, students' stated willingness to continue the practice was closely associated in their responses with the availability of teacher preparation, guidance, gradual scaffolding, and flexibility. Taken together, the five themes indicate that, in students' own accounts, authentic online conversation practice was experienced not simply as a technological activity but as an interconnected process in which emotional responses, platform characteristics, challenges, and pedagogical support were reported together.

DISCUSSION

From Anxiety to Confidence: The Role of Repeated Authentic Interaction

The near-universal presence of initial nervousness among participants is consistent with a long research tradition identifying unfamiliar and evaluative speaking situations as a primary trigger of learner anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). This pattern also matches recent findings from adolescent EFL populations. In a mixed-methods study of ninety-five sixteen-to-eighteen-year-old learners, Juríková (2025) found that speaking-related anxiety was driven primarily by fear of negative peer evaluation and limited proficiency, both of which surfaced repeatedly in the present participants' descriptions of their first conversations. Arrahmani and Ekowijayanto (2025) likewise report that Indonesian senior high school students experienced markedly less anxiety in online speaking contexts than in face-to-face classroom evaluation, a distinction that helps explain why anxiety in this study, although widespread at the outset, proved temporary rather than fixed for most participants.

What is notable in this study is the pattern of change reported by the majority of students: repeated, low-stakes exposure to authentic interlocutors appeared to function as a gradual desensitizing process, allowing confidence to build incrementally rather than requiring a single dramatic shift. This finding lends some support to the idea that structured, repeated authentic practice can serve as a practical classroom-based mechanism for addressing speaking anxiety (MacIntyre, 1999; Woodrow, 2006), and it converges with recent intervention research. Ross-Sokolovsky et al. (2024), for instance, documented measurable gains in speaking confidence following a semester-long virtual exchange, while Rahimi and Fathi (2024) found that e-tandem participants outperformed conventionally taught peers on willingness-to-communicate measures after a comparable period of sustained practice. Together, this evidence is consistent with, though it does not directly confirm, the possibility that the perceived confidence gains reported here reflect a broader pattern associated with repeated, authentic, low-stakes interaction across CMC formats generally, rather than a

property unique to Episoden or Speaky; because the present study relies on self-reported perceptions rather than a pre/post measure of speaking performance or confidence, this interpretation should be treated as a hypothesis for future research rather than an established finding.

Nevertheless, the minority of students who reported little change in confidence or motivation is an important finding in its own right. It suggests that exposure alone may not be sufficient for all learners, and that some students may require additional scaffolding, encouragement, or a slower introduction to unfamiliar interlocutors before authentic conversation practice becomes confidence-building rather than merely stressful. Hussain et al. (2025) reach a comparable conclusion in their review, arguing that speaking anxiety is shaped by an interaction of psychological traits, such as perfectionism and low self-esteem, that will not necessarily resolve through repeated exposure alone.

Platform Affordances and Willingness to Communicate

The consistent distinction students drew between Episoden and Speaky reflects the situational nature of Willingness to Communicate (WTC) proposed by MacIntyre et al. (1998). Episoden's synchronous, face-to-face format closely resembles naturalistic conversation and creates the kind of negotiation-of-meaning conditions associated with the Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996), but this same immediacy appears to heighten anxiety and reduce learners' in-the-moment willingness to communicate. Speaky, by offering asynchronous or text-supported entry points, appears to lower the perceived stakes of the interaction, allowing students to build confidence before attempting more demanding synchronous exchanges. This graduated pattern is consistent with Namaziandost and Çelik's (2025) comparison of Metaverse-based and Zoom-based speaking tasks, which found that both synchronous formats improved willingness to communicate, but through somewhat different affective routes, suggesting that the specific channel of synchronous interaction matters less than the presence of a graduated, learner-paced entry point beforehand.

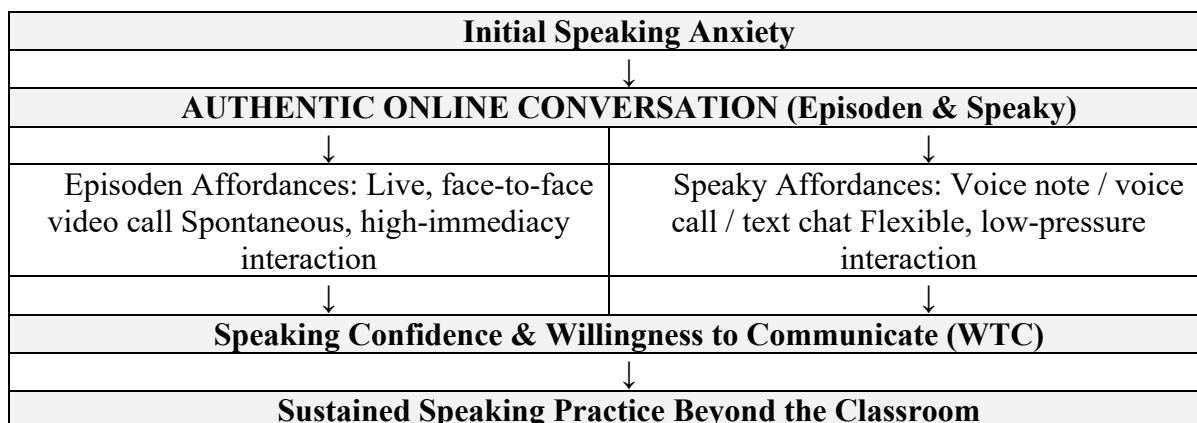


Figure 3. Authentic Online Conversation Support Framework

Figure 3 presents an interpretive framework, derived from the study's themes, of how the two platforms' differing affordances may relate to students' perceived confidence and willingness to communicate; it is offered as a conceptual synthesis rather than a validated causal model, since the study did not measure confidence or willingness to communicate directly or test a causal pathway between platform use and these outcomes. Rather than positioning one platform as superior, the themes suggest that Episoden and Speaky were

perceived by students as playing complementary roles: Speaky was associated with a lower-pressure entry point for building initial confidence, while Episoden was associated with the spontaneous, unscripted practice students linked to more authentic real-time speaking. This complementary pattern is reflected in students' own recommendation to begin with Speaky before progressing to Episoden, a sequencing logic that parallels, though it does not empirically replicate, the novice-to-expert progression documented among Free4Talk users by Sitanggang and Purnomo (2025), in which novice users reported considerably higher initial anxiety and lower confidence than long-term users of the same platform.

Positioning Episoden and Speaky within the Broader Landscape of App-Based Speaking Practice

The perceptions reported by students in this study align closely with a growing body of research on individual speaking applications used by EFL learners, particularly within Indonesia. Suhardi et al. (2024) found that university students using the Hallo application valued its low-pressure, gamified design but also reported recurring exposure to inappropriate users and intrusive advertising, concerns that did not surface in the present data but point to a broader risk associated with unmoderated conversation platforms that connect learners with unknown interlocutors. Similarly, Asyafina (2025) documented both positive affective responses, including happiness and growing confidence, and negative responses tied to unstable internet access among byTALK users, a pairing of gains and frustrations that closely mirrors the coexistence of confidence growth and connectivity-related challenges reported by students in the present study. Wulandari et al. (2025), by contrast, reported that Memrise strengthened learners' vocabulary retention and pronunciation but offered limited opportunity for spontaneous, unscripted conversation, a limitation that Episoden, by design, directly addresses through its requirement of live interaction; more structured, algorithm-driven alternatives such as SmallTalk2Me have been reported to offer useful scaffolding while lacking the unpredictability of a genuine human interlocutor (Rambe & Daulay, 2025), further distinguishing person-to-person applications such as Episoden and Speaky from these alternatives.

The novice-expert comparison reported by Sitanggang and Purnomo (2025) among Free4Talk users offers a useful frame for interpreting the eight students in this study who reported limited confidence gains: their study found that novice users, defined as those with under three months of platform experience, reported considerably higher anxiety and lower consistency of engagement than expert users, suggesting that the limited change reported by a minority of participants here may reflect an early stage of platform familiarity rather than a stable trait. This is broadly consistent with Sidig's (2023) review of Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) applications, which notes that while such tools reliably improve fluency and reduce speaking apprehension across studies, unequal access to devices and connectivity remains a persistent obstacle, a pattern also evident in the present participants' complaints about unstable internet connections. Considered together, these studies suggest that the perceptions reported here are neither unique to Episoden and Speaky nor simply a function of novelty, but instead reflect recurring dynamics across the wider ecosystem of authentic, app-mediated speaking practice available to EFL learners today.

Addressing Common Challenges: Accent, Vocabulary, and Connectivity

The difficulties students reported, particularly understanding accents and unfamiliar speech rates, point to a practical tension in authentic conversation practice: the same unpredictability

that makes the interaction authentic also makes it linguistically demanding. This tension is well documented beyond the present context. Hidayah and Gunawan (2025) found that unfamiliar vocabulary and fast speech were the two most frequently cited listening difficulties among Indonesian EFL university students, closely matching the challenges volunteered by participants in this study, while Apriyanti et al. (2024), working with senior high school students in a comparable Indonesian setting, identified accent variation and unclear pronunciation as recurring barriers to comprehension. Because these difficulties map closely onto two of the speaking aspects that framed the activity, pronunciation, intonation, and stress, and suitable vocabulary, teachers may be able to address them directly through targeted pre-activity preparation, such as brief listening exercises with varied English accents or vocabulary previews related to likely conversation topics. Connectivity issues, by contrast, reflect an infrastructural constraint that lies largely outside the teacher's control; Lestari and Andiansyah (2024), studying Indonesian EFL learners in online discussions, similarly found that technical disruption and reduced social presence complicated spoken interaction independently of learners' linguistic competence, reinforcing the case for addressing this challenge at the institutional level, for example by scheduling sessions with reliable internet access. The accent-comprehension difficulty students described is also consistent with the broader listening literature on processing unfamiliar spoken input under real-time constraints: Shaojie et al. (2022), in a systematic review of audio-visual input and listening comprehension, note that unscripted, multi-speaker input of the kind involved in live conversation is reliably reported as more cognitively demanding than scripted or captioned input, a pattern consistent with Cognitive Load Theory (Karabiyik et al., 2022). Because Episoden and Speaky both involve live, uncaptioned speech, this body of work suggests that some of the pre-activity accent and vocabulary preparation proposed above could usefully draw on strategies shown to reduce extraneous cognitive load in comparable listening contexts (Gamal, 2022; Zhang & Zou, 2022), such as brief advance exposure to speakers of similar accents before the live conversation itself. Findings on caption and speaker-pace conditions further suggest that mental effort rises sharply when fast, uncaptioned speech is combined with unfamiliar content (Almusharraf et al., 2024), while multimodal listening practice beforehand has been shown to ease this burden without requiring the live platforms themselves to be simplified (Salmani & Rahimi, 2025).

Implications for Teachers Facilitating Authentic Conversation Practice

Students' conditions for continuing the activity point to a clear pedagogical role for the teacher, even though the platforms themselves connect students directly with speakers outside the classroom. This expectation is consistent with recent scaffolding research in online language instruction. Nguyen (2025) found that undergraduate ESL learners in a public speaking course valued teacher scaffolding specifically for reducing uncertainty before high-stakes speaking tasks, while Sun et al. (2023) reported that teacher scaffolding, together with perceived teacher respect, was a significant predictor of learner engagement in online EFL classes. Teachers are needed to prepare students before their first authentic conversation, to scaffold the process by introducing the less demanding platform first, to monitor the frequency and duration of the activity to avoid learner fatigue, and to ensure that authentic conversation practice complements rather than replaces other speaking instruction. These findings reinforce that authentic online conversation technology does not diminish the teacher's role in developing students' speaking skills, but rather, as Nguyen (2022) argues in a review of teacher

scaffolding strategies in internet-based classrooms, depends on deliberate, well-structured teacher involvement for successful and sustainable implementation. Drawing directly on the conditions students themselves specified, three concrete recommendations follow: (1) sequence platform introduction by beginning with Speaky before Episoden, since students explicitly requested this order; (2) provide brief pre-activity preparation targeting accent exposure and topic-related vocabulary, the two difficulties most frequently reported; and (3) avoid making live video conversation (Episoden) mandatory for every session, honoring students' stated preference for flexibility and choice.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore senior high school EFL students' perceptions of using two authentic online conversation applications, Episoden and Speaky, to support their speaking practice, with particular attention to their emotional experiences, the perceived benefits and affordances of each platform, the challenges they encountered, and their willingness to sustain this form of practice beyond the classroom.

The findings show that while nearly all students described initial anxiety when first speaking with unfamiliar interlocutors, most reported perceiving increased confidence and motivation with repeated practice, although this perceived change was not reported by all students. Episoden and Speaky were perceived as offering distinct but complementary affordances: Episoden was associated with spontaneous, high-immediacy practice, while Speaky was associated with a more flexible and lower-pressure entry point that many students preferred to begin with. Persistent challenges, including accent comprehension, limited vocabulary, and internet connectivity, were identified across a substantial number of responses, a pattern also documented in several recent Indonesian EFL studies on listening difficulty and online communication. Crucially, students' near-universal support for continuing the activity was conditional on adequate teacher guidance, gradual scaffolding, and flexibility in how the activity is implemented.

Within the scope of a single class and self-reported data, this study offers a modest but specific contribution: comparative, learner-derived evidence on how two differing modes of authentic online conversation technology, synchronous video versus flexible multimodal interaction, are perceived by EFL learners at the secondary school level, an area that remains underexamined relative to the growing body of research on telecollaboration among university-level learners. By interpreting these perceptions through Willingness to Communicate theory and the Interaction Hypothesis, and by situating Episoden and Speaky within the wider field of app-mediated speaking practice documented in recent Indonesian and international research, the study suggests a pedagogical implication rather than a validated intervention outcome: that sequencing authentic conversation activities by beginning with lower-pressure platforms such as Speaky before introducing higher-immediacy platforms such as Episoden may help scaffold students' confidence, a recommendation drawn from students' own stated preferences and one that remains to be tested directly in future intervention research. The study also underscores that authentic conversation technology, in students' own accounts, complements rather than replaces the teacher's role in speaking instruction.

This study has several limitations that should be considered in future research. First, it involved a single class from a single school, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Second, the findings rely solely on students' self-reported perceptions rather than independent

measures of speaking performance or proficiency gains. Third, the absence of a comparison group makes it difficult to determine how these outcomes differ from more traditional speaking instruction. Fourth, individual differences such as initial proficiency and personality traits were not systematically measured, though they may have shaped individual variation in reported confidence gains.

Future studies involving multiple schools, a broader range of proficiency levels, and a combination of perception data with objective speaking assessment would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how authentic online conversation technology relates to EFL speaking development. Quasi-experimental designs, which pair perception data with measurable speaking and willingness-to-communicate outcomes, offer a useful model for this direction. Researchers are also encouraged to conduct longitudinal studies with independent coding checks to determine whether the confidence gains perceived here are sustained over time and whether they correspond to measurable improvements in speaking proficiency.

For classroom practice, and limited strictly to what the present participants' responses directly support, teachers intending to adopt Episoden and/or Speaky are recommended to: begin with the lower-pressure platform (Speaky) before introducing the higher-immediacy platform (Episoden), consistent with students' own stated preference; provide brief pre-activity preparation targeting accent exposure and topic-related vocabulary, the two difficulties most frequently reported; and avoid making live video conversation mandatory for every student, in line with students' explicit request for flexibility.

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