OPTIMIZING WHATSAPP FEATURES IN IMPROVING ENGLISH SPEAKING PROFICIENCY: A CLASSROOM ACTION RESEARCH

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Article Info	Abstract
	The problem underlying this study is the low level of English proficiency among students, while the importance of technology in education is increasingly recognized. To overcome this, the study implements a Classroom Action Research (CAR) approach by using WhatsApp features such as voice messages and video calls as media to encourage students to practice speaking. The purpose of this action is to provide opportunities for students to develop their speaking proficiency. This research was conducted through three cycles of action involving the planning, implementation, observation, and reflection stages. Data were collected through pre-tests, observations during cycles one, two, and three, and interviews with students. Data analysis focused on measuring the increase in speaking fluency, reduction in pronunciation errors, decrease in the frequency of pauses, and increase in students' confidence levels, as part of the reflection process in each cycle. The results of the action cycles showed a significant increase in students' speaking fluency. In the first cycle, many students reached 81-90 words per minute, while in the second cycle, the speaking rate increased to 91-100 words per minute. Some students even reached 100-110 words per minute in the third cycle. The frequency of pronunciation errors decreased consistently, and no students showed an increase in the number of errors after the actions in each cycle. The decrease in the frequency of pauses during speaking also indicated an increase in students' fluency and confidence. Overall, the reflections from these CAR cycles indicate that the use of the WhatsApp features is contributes in increasing speaking fluency, reducing pronunciation errors, decreasing the frequency of pauses, and increasing students' confidence in speaking English. However, further action cycles are needed to continue to support students who are still at a low level of fluency and help more students achieve the expected standard.

INTRODUCTION

English proficiency is essential in today's globalized world, particularly in professional settings. Gonzalez (2022) highlights that strong English skills enhance workplace communication and foster collaboration in international business environments, supporting career advancement and effective engagement across global contexts. Since Indonesia's entry into the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) in 2015, English proficiency has become increasingly important for Indonesian workers. Smith (2019) notes that English is crucial for navigating the expanded economic landscape, enhancing competitiveness in both domestic and regional job markets.

Fluent English significantly boosts professional competitiveness and global collaboration. Miller and Johnson (2018) emphasize that fluency is key to success in international business and technology, enabling professionals to engage in global markets and technological advancements. Similarly, Baker and Wright (2021) argue that English

proficiency is vital for diplomacy and international cooperation, fostering better global relationships.

Despite the importance of English, many 11th-grade students at SMKN 4 Tarakan struggle with speaking proficiency. Initial findings show that students face challenges such as limited vocabulary, gaps in understanding, low fluency, and a lack of self-confidence. A pre-test revealed that students had not reached the expected level of fluency, with limited word counts, frequent mispronunciations, and pauses, coupled with low self-confidence. These issues are worsened by students' fear of making mistakes, unengaging teaching methods, and insufficient use of modern tools like mobile applications (Awada, 2016 & Nurazizah, et al., 2016).

Additionally, many students' shyness and lack of self-confidence act as barriers to improving their speaking skills. Fear of making mistakes limits their practice, and the absence of opportunities to practice in a supportive environment hinders their progress. To address these challenges, this research focuses on utilizing WhatsApp's voice note and video call features, which have been shown to improve speaking proficiency in previous studies (Cetinkaya, 2017; Susanti & Tarmuji, 2018).

Various strategies have been developed to improve English speaking proficiency, ranging from traditional methods to innovative approaches. One common strategy is Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which encourages students to actively participate in conversations using English in meaningful contexts (Richards, 2006). Technology, particularly instant messaging apps like WhatsApp, has emerged as a valuable tool in language learning. WhatsApp allows students to send voice messages, engage in group discussions, and receive real-time feedback from teachers and peers, enhancing their speaking practice (Bouhnik & Deshen, 2014).

However, the integration of technology in education is not without challenges. Some schools have limited access to technological infrastructure, and not all students have smartphones or stable internet connections, which can hinder the use of apps like WhatsApp in learning (Awada, 2016). Additionally, many teachers are not trained to effectively use technology and remain reliant on traditional methods, which limits their ability to adapt to digital tools (Cetinkaya, 2017).

Despite these obstacles, integrating tools like WhatsApp into language learning remains crucial. Given its widespread use, WhatsApp offers an opportunity to enhance interaction and engagement between students and teachers. By effectively utilizing its features, educators can create dynamic learning environments that encourage active communication and language use in real-world contexts. This approach addresses students' linguistic challenges and aligns with contemporary educational practices that adopt technology to enrich learning outcomes (Cetinkaya, 2017).

The purpose of this research is to evaluate the impact of WhatsApp features on improving English speaking proficiency among 11th-grade students at SMKN 4 Tarakan. Through this approach, educators can bridge the gap between traditional teaching methods and the evolving needs of students in a globalized world, ensuring they are competitive in the international job market.

In conclusion, improving English proficiency through innovative educational practices is crucial, especially in the context of globalization. Integrating digital tools like WhatsApp into secondary education can transform language learning, particularly in enhancing speaking fluency. This research evaluates the contribution of these tools in improving the speaking proficiency of 11th-grade students at SMKN 4 Tarakan, equipping them with the skills needed for success in both local and international contexts.

The use of WhatsApp features in education has gained popularity for improving students' English speaking proficiency (Gonulal, 2019). WhatsApp offers convenience and

accessibility, enhancing foreign language learning. Cetinkaya (2017) found that WhatsApp creates an interactive environment, with the voice note feature enabling students to practice speaking anytime. They can record, listen, and track their progress, which boosts engagement and proficiency. Susanti and Tarmuji (2018) in Indonesia discovered that WhatsApp voice notes and discussion groups increased students' confidence and improved pronunciation and fluency through repeated practice. Barhoumi (2019) supported this, noting that WhatsApp enhances motivation and speaking skills in North African secondary schools. Johnson and George (2020) emphasized the role of feedback in learning, with WhatsApp allowing teachers to provide personalized feedback via voice notes. This method effectively accelerates students' speaking proficiency improvement.

Speaking proficiency in this research refers to the ability of 11th-grade students of SMKN 4 Tarakan to express ideas clearly and appropriately in various contexts. According to Harmer (2015), this involves organizing words, sentence structure, and intonation to convey meaning. Mastery of vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and sentence construction is essential (Nation, 2018). Speaking proficiency, a key skill in global communication, enhances self-confidence and the ability to participate in academic, professional, and social interactions (Jenkins, 2018; Brown, 2000). Reddy and Tan (2019) highlight integrating technology to support speaking development. This research focuses on fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, and confidence, essential for effective communication (Harmer, 2015).

Fluency refers to the ability to speak smoothly, with a natural pace, minimal pauses, and confidence. According to Nation and Newton (2020), fluency includes varied vocabulary and sentence structures. It can be measured by words per minute and error frequency. Fluent students communicate effectively in both daily life and academic settings, contributing to clearer and more convincing ideas (Tuan & Doan, 2021). Hunter (2017) suggests that task repetition helps improve fluency, making students more confident speakers. Fluency also supports listening, reading, and writing skills, enhancing overall language proficiency (Richards, 2006). Derwing, Munro, and Thomson (2008) note that while speaking speed is crucial, other factors like lack of pauses, intonation, and rhythm also determine fluency. Speakers can vary in speed but still be fluent if they use language naturally.

Mastery of a broad vocabulary allows speakers to express themselves more precisely, significantly influencing speaking fluency (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020). In this research, vocabulary mastery is key to developing the English speaking proficiency of 11th-grade students, as more vocabulary leads to greater fluency (Hirsch, 2020). Nation (2001) emphasized that vocabulary mastery enhances speaking fluency, not just by knowing words, but using them appropriately. Kubina and Morrison (2000) suggested fluency can be measured by speed, accuracy, and pauses during speech. Alqahtani (2015) stressed that vocabulary is essential for language mastery, while Segalowitz (2016) highlighted that L2 fluency involves speed, accuracy, and adaptability in communication. Laufer and Goldstein (2020) added that a wide vocabulary helps speakers avoid long pauses, improving clarity. Nation (2001) further noted that vocabulary mastery is critical for effective language proficiency.

Clear and precise pronunciation is crucial for effective communication, ensuring that the message is understood by the listener. This includes intonation, word stress, and sound articulation (Celce-Murcia et al., 2017). Proper pronunciation enhances speaking fluency and prevents misunderstandings, as intonation conveys emotion and word stress emphasizes key points. Good sound articulation is essential in English, where many words have similar sounds but different meanings (Jenkins, 2021). Mispronunciation can hinder fluency, making messages unclear and reducing students' confidence. Therefore, teaching correct pronunciation is vital for improving fluency and ensuring clear communication (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010).

Pauses between words are essential for speaking fluency and listener comprehension, especially for English learners. Appropriate pauses can emphasize key points, aiding in effective communication. Brown (2007) notes that pauses give listeners time to process information, crucial in learning contexts. However, long or frequent pauses can disrupt fluency and hinder the listener's understanding (Segalowitz & Higa, 2020). While brief pauses help speakers organize thoughts and avoid mistakes, excessive or prolonged pauses negatively impact conversation flow. Properly managed pauses support fluency, while frequent ones signal difficulty in speaking fluently.

Self-confidence significantly influences speaking fluency (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2017). High self-confidence encourages individuals to communicate, take risks, and correct mistakes. It also reduces anxiety, a major barrier to fluent speaking (Lee & Kim, 2021). Dörnyei (2005) emphasizes that self-confidence motivates language learners to engage in verbal interactions, improving their speaking skills. Confident students participate more in discussions (Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2017), and positive experiences boost confidence (Nguyen & Tran, 2018). "Willingness to Communicate" (MacIntyre et al., 2018) is linked to self-confidence, while supportive environments and peer support also enhance confidence (Khodadady, E., & Khodabakhshzadeh, H. (2020).; Zhang & Zhou, 2023).

RESEARCH METHOD
Research Design
This study employs a Classroom Action Research (CAR) approach to optimize the speaking proficiency of 11th-grade vocational school students in Tarakan through the utilization of WhatsApp features. CAR is chosen due to its iterative nature, which emphasizes collaboration between researchers and practitioners in addressing practical classroom challenges. The research adopts the model proposed by Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon (2014), consisting of a cyclic process of planning, action, observation, and reflection. The iterative nature of this design enables the identification of obstacles and successes, ensuring continuous improvement in teaching and learning. Two cycles are implemented, with each cycle's reflection informing subsequent interventions, following the principles outlined by Arikunto (2013). This approach prioritizes the development of processes over immediate outcomes, aligning with the views of Norton and McLellan (2017).

Research Participants
The participants of this study are 11th-grade students at vocational schools in Tarakan. The selection is based on their need to develop English-speaking proficiency as part of their vocational and academic requirements. Teachers also actively participate in the study, serving as collaborators in planning and implementing interventions, as well as reflecting on the outcomes. This collaborative approach fosters a shared responsibility for improving classroom practices and student learning experiences. The students' active engagement in WhatsApp-based activities is central to achieving the research objectives, with their responses and feedback guiding iterative modifications to the teaching strategies.

Research Instruments and Data Collection
Speaking tests serve as the primary instrument for data collection, focusing on key aspects of speaking proficiency, including speaking speed, pronunciation accuracy, speech pauses, and confidence levels. These tests are administered at the end of each cycle to evaluate the effectiveness of the WhatsApp-based interventions. Observational notes and reflective journals from both teachers and researchers complement the test data, providing qualitative insights into classroom dynamics and student responses. Data collection is designed to be flexible and adaptive, allowing researchers to make real-time adjustments based on observed needs and challenges during the study. This approach integrates both

theoretical and practical perspectives to address specific difficulties faced by students in speaking English.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study follows a qualitative approach, utilizing the framework of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data condensation involves organizing and simplifying the collected data, focusing on patterns and themes related to speaking proficiency and classroom interactions. Data display involves presenting the findings in a coherent format, such as tables or narrative summaries, to facilitate interpretation. The final step includes drawing conclusions based on the patterns and verifying them through triangulation with observational notes and reflective journals. This iterative analysis process aligns with the principles of CAR, emphasizing continuous improvement and responsiveness to student needs, thereby enhancing the overall effectiveness of the intervention.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
Research Findings
Speaking Speed Increases

Research findings show significant improvements in students' speaking speed through the use of WhatsApp voice messages and video calls. Initially, students had a speaking speed of 81-90 words per minute, demonstrating a basic level of proficiency. After incorporating WhatsApp, there was a notable increase in the second cycle, with students speaking at 91-100 words per minute. By the third cycle, some reached 100-110 words per minute, proving the platform's effectiveness. This growth in speaking speed, combined with increased confidence, shows that technology can play a key role in advancing language proficiency when used consistently.

Decrease in Pronunciation Errors

At the beginning of the study, students made frequent pronunciation errors, with many in the 6-15 error range. However, after using WhatsApp for speaking practice, errors decreased notably. In the first cycle, more students moved into the 0-5 error range, and by the third cycle, 12 students had significantly reduced their errors. The consistent use of WhatsApp's voice messaging helped students correct their pronunciation and refine articulation. The technology enabled more frequent practice, resulting in gradual improvement and showing that digital tools are effective in reducing pronunciation mistakes in language learning.

Decreased Frequency of Speech Pauses

Before the intervention, 28 students paused frequently while speaking, signaling low fluency. After the first cycle, more students (3 students) paused occasionally, indicating slight progress. By the third cycle, 16 students paused occasionally, and the number of students pausing frequently decreased. These results illustrate that regular speaking practice through WhatsApp, where students can engage in voice messaging and video calls, helped improve fluency. The significant reduction in pauses points to the platform's role in enhancing students' comfort and proficiency in speaking English, as students became more fluent and confident with continuous practice.

Increase in Confidence Level

Initially, most students lacked confidence in speaking English, with only a few showing sufficient self-assurance. After the first cycle of using WhatsApp, students' confidence began to improve, with a significant reduction in the number of less-confident students. By the third cycle, 20 students had moderate confidence, and 6 showed high levels of confidence. The technology-enabled environment helped students practice in a non-threatening setting,

promoting increased self-assurance. This growth in confidence reflected positively in their speaking speed, fluency, and reduced errors, highlighting how technology can boost self-esteem in language learners.

Contribution of Using WhatsApp Features

WhatsApp features like voice messages and video calls greatly contributed to improving students' speaking proficiency. These tools allowed students to practice speaking in a supportive, low-pressure environment, where they could self-reflect on their pronunciation and receive instant feedback. The video call feature simulated real-life interactions, enhancing conversational skills. However, the study also notes the need for additional support for students struggling with fluency due to motivational or technological barriers. Overall, the integration of WhatsApp features into language learning proved effective in fostering both technical proficiency and positive attitudes towards English learning.

Discussion

The use of WhatsApp features to optimize the English speaking proficiency of 11th-grade students demonstrated significant improvements across various dimensions of speaking skills. These improvements, observed from the pre-test to the third cycle, highlight the efficacy of this intervention in enhancing students' fluency, pronunciation accuracy, speech coherence, and self-confidence. The iterative nature of the intervention allowed for gradual but consistent progress, ensuring that students overcame initial challenges and developed their speaking abilities.

In terms of speaking fluency, as measured by the number of words spoken per minute, there was a notable increase throughout the cycles. Initially, most students performed within the lower word range of 51-70 words per minute. However, with continuous practice and iterative feedback, more students transitioned to higher word ranges, particularly between 91-100 words per minute by the third cycle. This increase indicates a significant enhancement in the students' ability to articulate their thoughts more quickly and fluidly (Hamsia, 2024; Akkara, Anumula, & Mallampalli, 2020). Although a few students experienced stagnation or minor setbacks during certain cycles, the overall trend showed substantial improvement, underscoring the effectiveness of WhatsApp's voice note and video call features in promoting fluency.

Pronunciation accuracy also exhibited marked progress across the cycles. In the pre-test, the majority of students were making a high number of pronunciation errors, with most falling within the range of 6-15 errors. After the first cycle, an improvement was observed, with an increasing number of students reducing their errors to the range of 0-5. By the third cycle, a significant shift occurred, with 12 students consistently achieving this minimal error range. This progress reflects the role of iterative feedback and self-monitoring facilitated by WhatsApp's features (Akkara, Anumula, & Mallampalli, 2020; Fitri et al., 2021). Voice notes allowed students to replay their recordings and refine their pronunciation, while instructor feedback ensured that errors were addressed in a constructive manner.

The frequency of speech pauses, an indicator of fluency and coherence, also decreased significantly over the course of the intervention. During the pre-test, 28 out of 36 students exhibited frequent pauses, disrupting the natural rhythm of their speech. By the end of the first cycle, this number had dropped to 17, and by the third cycle, only 12 students continued to exhibit frequent pauses, while 16 students had improved to the point where they paused only occasionally. This improvement demonstrates the benefit of structured speaking tasks and repeated practice through WhatsApp (Solanki, Mehta, & Mehta, 2020; Naqsyabandiyah & Dehghanitafti, 2023), which enabled students to become more comfortable speaking in extended stretches and maintaining a steady flow of communication.

Self-confidence, a crucial factor in effective speaking, saw substantial growth as well (Dheressa, Olana, & Bekele, 2023; Maharani & Afifi, 2024; Saidah, 2024). Initially, most students reported feeling insecure when speaking English, with 30 out of 36 students categorized as lacking confidence. The first cycle brought a marked improvement, reducing this number to 16 and increasing the number of moderately confident students to 19. By the third cycle, six students had become very confident speakers, a testament to the supportive and low-pressure environment fostered by WhatsApp. The platform's asynchronous communication features, such as voice notes and one-on-one chats, provided a safe space for students to practice and build their confidence gradually without fear of immediate judgment.

These findings are supported by the integration of WhatsApp features into the learning process. The platform's voice notes and video calls emerged as particularly effective tools. Voice notes allowed students to practice speaking at their own pace, with the ability to rerecord and self-monitor their performance (Young & West, 2018; Alghamdy, 2019). This iterative process helped students address specific areas of difficulty, such as pronunciation and fluency. Video calls facilitated real-time interaction, creating opportunities for spontaneous speaking practice and fostering a sense of connection between students and instructors (Salem et al., 2018). The informal nature of WhatsApp communication encouraged students to take risks and experiment with language, contributing to their overall growth.

Moreover, WhatsApp's multimedia sharing capabilities enriched the learning experience by providing diverse resources for speaking practice (Young & West, 2018; Alghamdy, 2019). Instructors could share pronunciation guides, sample dialogues, and video prompts, which served as models for students to emulate. These materials catered to different learning styles and provided practical reference points for students, helping them internalize correct language patterns (Ningsih & Yulianti, 2023; Oktapiani et al., 2024). Additionally, the accessibility and convenience of WhatsApp ensured that students could engage with learning activities anytime and anywhere, promoting consistent practice and steady progress.

The collaborative aspect of WhatsApp's group chat and video call features further enhanced the learning outcomes. Group activities, such as role plays, debates, and discussions, encouraged peer interaction and created a dynamic environment for practicing speaking skills (Warni et al., 2024; Daflizar, 2024). Students were able to exchange ideas, provide mutual feedback, and learn from one another's strengths and weaknesses. This sense of community and shared purpose motivated students to participate actively and strive for improvement. Group discussions also simulated real-life communication scenarios, preparing students for authentic language use in social and professional contexts.

From a pedagogical perspective, WhatsApp proved to be an effective platform for integrating speaking practice with other language skills. For example, text-based group chats served as pre-speaking activities, helping students organize their thoughts and prepare for oral communication. Similarly, multimedia prompts inspired reflective discussions, encouraging students to articulate their opinions and narrate experiences (Ningsih & Yulianti, 2023; Oktapiani et al., 2024). This holistic approach not only improved speaking proficiency but also supported the development of critical thinking and expressive skills.

Despite its many advantages, the use of WhatsApp for improving speaking skills is not without challenges. Technical issues, such as poor internet connectivity or device limitations, occasionally hindered seamless communication. Additionally, the informal nature of WhatsApp communication sometimes led to a lack of seriousness among students, necessitating clear guidelines and expectations from instructors. Addressing these challenges required a balanced approach that combined WhatsApp-based activities with traditional classroom practices, ensuring that students received comprehensive support in their learning journey. Research on the efficacy of WhatsApp in EFL contexts corroborates these findings. Studies have consistently demonstrated that learners who engage actively in WhatsApp-based

speaking activities show significant improvements in pronunciation, fluency, and self-confidence (Hamsian, 2024; Daflizar, 2024; Young & West, 2018). The iterative process of recording, reviewing, and refining voice notes enables learners to track their progress and address specific areas for improvement. Additionally, the interactive nature of group chats and video calls fosters a supportive and collaborative learning environment, encouraging active participation and sustained engagement.

The use of WhatsApp features, such as voice notes and video calls, has proven to be an effective intervention for enhancing the speaking proficiency of 11th-grade students. By addressing key dimensions of speaking skills—including fluency, pronunciation accuracy, speech coherence, and self-confidence—this approach has demonstrated its potential to transform language learning experiences. The iterative and flexible nature of WhatsApp-based activities allows for continuous improvement and adaptation to learners' needs. However, to maximize the platform's potential, educators must adopt a structured and thoughtful approach, integrating WhatsApp activities with other instructional methods and addressing any technical or motivational challenges that arise. Through careful planning and implementation, WhatsApp can serve as a powerful tool for fostering speaking proficiency and empowering learners to communicate effectively in English.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of WhatsApp as a tool for enhancing the English-speaking proficiency of 11th-grade students demonstrated significant progress across multiple dimensions of speaking skills. The study highlighted improvements in fluency, pronunciation accuracy, speech coherence, and self-confidence, emphasizing the transformative potential of integrating mobile technology into educational practices. WhatsApp's features, particularly voice notes and video calls, provided learners with flexible and accessible avenues to practice speaking. These tools encouraged iterative learning, enabling students to refine their skills gradually and develop confidence in their communication abilities. The observed outcomes, such as increased words per minute, reduced speech pauses, and fewer pronunciation errors, reflect the platform's effectiveness in addressing specific linguistic challenges. Furthermore, WhatsApp fostered a supportive learning environment where students could engage in collaborative tasks, exchange constructive feedback, and participate actively in language activities. These aspects underscored its value as both a standalone intervention and a complementary tool to traditional classroom instruction.

However, the efficacy of WhatsApp extends beyond immediate skill development, showcasing its role in fostering long-term learner engagement and motivation. The platform's accessibility and ease of use allowed students to practice speaking in a variety of contexts, promoting consistent improvement over time. By integrating multimedia resources, instructors enriched the learning experience, catering to diverse learning styles and providing practical reference points for students. Collaborative group activities further enhanced the learning outcomes by encouraging peer-to-peer interaction and simulating real-life communication scenarios. Despite challenges such as technical limitations and the informal nature of the platform, the study demonstrated that these could be mitigated through structured planning and clear instructional strategies. The findings suggest that WhatsApp can be a powerful tool for bridging gaps in traditional language education, particularly in settings with limited resources. Moving forward, the exploration of WhatsApp's broader application across different learning contexts offers exciting possibilities for creating innovative, accessible, and impactful educational practices.

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