# CHAPTER 1
# INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the background, research question, significance, purpose, and contributions of the study. Each subsection will explain different reasons for conducting this study in detail.

## 1.1 Background of the research

Indonesia still faces challenges in English education, despite its growing importance for academics, careers, and global engagement. The 2024 EF English Proficiency Index ranks Indonesia 80th out of 116 countries, placing it in the Low Proficiency category and 12th among 23 Asian nations (EF, 2024). This highlights a significant gap between the government's objectives, which view English as a vital 21st-century skill, and the reality that many university graduates lack the communication skills needed for effective international interaction. While English has become a form of linguistic capital in Indonesia (Bourdieu, 1991), systemic and structural barriers within higher education prevent many students from benefiting fully from it.



A contributing factor to this gap is the unequal access to digital resources. National internet penetration stands at 79.5%, yet significant disparities exist: 82.2% in urban areas versus 74% in rural regions (APJII, 2024; BPS, 2023). This inequality restricts rural students' opportunities to participate in innovative digital learning methods, which are essential for language acquisition in globalized environments. In the absence of intervention, the digital divide is likely to exacerbate educational inequality and marginalize significant groups of students from opportunities contingent upon English proficiency.

Indonesian universities typically focus on grammatical accuracy, translation, and written exams at the institutional level (Renandya & Widodo, 2016). While these

approaches enhance reading and writing skills, they do little to foster speaking fluency, confidence, or pragmatic conversational skills. Students seldom experience task-based learning, project work, or interactions with native speakers. As a result, speaking anxiety is widespread, with studies indicating that students often hesitate to communicate in English when opportunities are limited or the stakes are high (Lie, 2017; Zein, 2017). These structural issues reveal a gap between curriculum design and the actual communicative demands of real-life English use.

This issue is especially critical as Indonesia continues to integrate into global markets and knowledge economies. Employers now expect graduates to communicate in English with international colleagues, clients, and on digital platforms. However, higher education still primarily imparts theoretical knowledge while lacking in oral communication skills. Without reforms in teaching methods and digital access, Indonesia risks graduating a generation that cannot fully engage in global exchange networks.

In this context, technology acts as a promising bridge. Artificial intelligence (AI), especially, provides opportunities to address classroom limitations through interactive, personalized, and scalable learner support. AI-powered language platforms like *HelloTalk* use voice recognition, real-time feedback, and conversation simulation to mimic real communicative situations. Unlike traditional methods, these tools create flexible, low-pressure environments for students to practice speaking and get immediate, adaptive feedback. Studies show these platforms promote learner autonomy, boost motivation, and lessen anxiety by allowing learners to control their pace and environment (Wang & Liao, 2011; Chiu, Liou, & Yeh, 2007).

Early research in Indonesia indicates positive outcomes. *HelloTalk* has been linked to enhanced participation, confidence, and speaking fluency among university students (Hapsari, 2020). Likewise, AI pronunciation tools like ELSA Speak have demonstrated improvements in pronunciation accuracy and learner motivation through automatic speech recognition (Prihatin, 2019; Rausch, 2019). However, these studies are limited in scope and rarely address the specific challenges of Indonesian

higher education, such as uneven digital access, varying teacher preparedness, and deeply rooted exam-focused practices. As Zein (2017) notes, without systemic readiness, digital innovations risk creating fragmented, rather than transformative, impacts.

This research explores how *HelloTalk* functions as a tool to improve English speaking skills among Indonesian university students. Based on Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which stresses the importance of interaction and scaffolded learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Lantolf, 2000), and Krashen's Input Hypothesis, emphasizing the need for comprehensible input slightly above learners' current level (Krashen, 1985), this study views *HelloTalk* not just as a technological innovation but as a pedagogical strategy supported by theory. By enabling authentic, adaptable, and feedback-rich interactions, *HelloTalk* acts as a digital mediator consistent with these core theories of language acquisition (Xu & Wang, 2019; Chen, 2018).

This research notably fills a gap in current scholarship. Global literature highlights the benefits of AI-powered tools in language education; however, there is a scarcity of studies addressing the Indonesian context, characterized by low national proficiency, unequal infrastructure, and exam-driven curricula that influence learners' opportunities and limitations. This study reports the impact of *HelloTalk* on pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary, motivation, and confidence, thereby contributing to international second language acquisition research and local teaching practices. The findings may provide policymakers and educators with actionable insights on how AI can enhance traditional instruction, mitigate disparities, and improve the attainability of English-speaking skills for Indonesian university students.

### 1.2 Research Problems

Despite the growing interest in AI-assisted language learning, the integration of mobile-based applications such as *HelloTalk* in Indonesian higher education remains underexplored, particularly within faith-based university contexts. Previous studies have predominantly been conducted in technologically advanced or culturally different settings, leaving a gap in understanding how such tools perform in

environments where English exposure is limited, cultural sensitivities are heightened, and digital literacy varies among learners.

In the case of UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, there is no empirical evidence assessing whether *HelloTalk* can effectively improve speaking performance when embedded in a blended learning framework, nor how students perceive its usability, motivational impact, and cultural appropriateness. Moreover, the relationship between measurable speaking gains and learner perceptions has not been thoroughly investigated, limiting the ability to make informed pedagogical recommendations. Therefore, this study addresses the following research problems:

1. The extent to which *HelloTalk* can improve the overall English-speaking performance of Indonesian EFL learners in an Islamic university context.
2. How learners perceive *HelloTalk* in terms of usefulness in improving speaking proficiency, motivational influence, and the role it holds as a tool for learning.

## 1.3 Research Questions

To better understand how *HelloTalk* influences various aspects of students' English speaking proficiency, these questions need to be answered.

1. To what extent does the use of *HelloTalk* improve overall English-speaking performance among Indonesian EFL learners in a university context?
2. How do Indonesian EFL learners perceive the use of *HelloTalk* in enhancing their speaking skills, particularly in relation to motivation, confidence, and interactive engagement?

## 1.4 Purposes of the Research

The primary purpose of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of integrating the *HelloTalk* mobile application into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction at UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, particularly in enhancing learners' speaking proficiency. Specifically, this research aims to:

1. Examine the extent to which *HelloTalk* improves overall English-speaking performance, with attention to key sub-skills such as pronunciation, fluency, lexical resource, and grammatical accuracy.

2. Explore learner perceptions regarding the usefulness, motivational impact, and implementation of *HelloTalk* as an AI-mediated learning tool in an Islamic university setting.

By addressing these objectives, the study seeks to generate empirically grounded and contextually relevant recommendations for incorporating AI-assisted tools into Indonesian EFL curricula in ways that are pedagogically sound, culturally sensitive, and adaptable to resource-constrained learning environments.

## 1.5 Significance of the Research

Theoretically, it contributes to the growing body of research on Artificial Intelligence (AI) in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, particularly within contexts that have received limited scholarly attention, such as Indonesian Islamic universities. While most prior studies on *HelloTalk* have been conducted in Western or East Asian settings, this research examines the platform's applicability in a socio-cultural environment characterized by varying levels of digital literacy, limited access to authentic English communication, and strong cultural and religious values. By integrating Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, Krashen's Input Hypothesis, and principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) with the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), this study provides an evidence-based framework for understanding how AI-supported, mobile-based platforms can enhance speaking skills in such contexts.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings have the potential to influence curriculum design and teaching practices in Indonesian higher education. The study demonstrates how *HelloTalk* can be embedded into a blended learning approach to improve oral communication skills, boost student motivation, and bridge the gap between classroom instruction and real-world language use. These insights may support educators in aligning English language teaching with communicative methodologies while ensuring that technological innovations remain sensitive to local socio-cultural norms and institutional values.

Practically, the research addresses key policy and institutional concerns regarding the integration of educational technology in resource-limited environments. By combining quantitative measures of speaking performance with qualitative insights into learner perceptions, the study delivers evidence-based recommendations for deploying AI-powered language-learning tools in ways that are culturally responsive, cost-effective, and pedagogically sound. These findings are relevant not only for educators and curriculum developers, but also for policymakers and technology designers seeking to modernize English language programs in non-Western, faith-based institutions. Ultimately, the results offer a model that can be adapted to similar educational contexts, ensuring that technology integration balances innovation with cultural and institutional realities.

## 1.6 Contribution of the Research

From a practical standpoint, this research provides several specific contributions to the field of English language teaching and technology integration. By addressing both linguistic outcomes and learner experiences, the study generates insights that extend beyond the immediate context of UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, offering value to scholars, educators, and policymakers concerned with the effective adoption of AI-assisted tools in culturally diverse EFL settings.

### 1.6.1 Empirical Contribution

This study offers an empirical contribution by examining the effectiveness of *HelloTalk*, an AI-based language-learning app, in improving the English-speaking skills of Indonesian college students. Existing research has highlighted the benefits of AI-powered language-learning platforms in promoting language proficiency; however, most studies focus on learners in Western or East Asian contexts, with limited data specific to Indonesia (Golonka et al., 2014; Rausch, 2019). Since Indonesian students often lack practical speaking opportunities and exposure to native speakers, empirical data on the impact of AI tools within this population is essential (Lauder, 2008). By evaluating improvements in pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary acquisition, and overall speaking confidence, this study closes a gap in the literature

by providing evidence on the specific outcomes of using *HelloTalk* in an Indonesian educational setting. This contribution not only broadens the existing empirical evidence on mobile-assisted language learning but also provides data relevant to stakeholders interested in adopting similar technologies in other non-native English-speaking environments (Mustafa, 2015).

### 1.6.2 Contextual Contribution

Another important contribution of this study is its contextual analysis, which explores how AI-driven language tools like *HelloTalk* can be tailored to Indonesia's unique educational environment. Indonesian students encounter specific socio-cultural and practical challenges when learning English, such as limited technological infrastructure in rural areas, a shortage of native speakers, and curricula that emphasize grammar and reading over conversational skills (Lie, 2017; Zein, 2017). Research has shown that language-learning tools often need to be adapted to meet regional needs effectively, as socio-cultural factors and access to technology can significantly impact learning outcomes (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008; Godwin-Jones, 2011). This study assesses *HelloTalk*'s usability, motivational influence, and engagement among Indonesian students, offering insights into how local issues like internet availability and digital literacy levels influence the effectiveness of AI language applications. By placing the findings in context, the research advances a nuanced understanding of how digital language-learning platforms can be optimized for success in diverse educational settings.

### 1.6.3 Practical Contribution

This research offers targeted recommendations for integrating AI-driven language tools into Indonesian higher education. It provides teachers with specific strategies for using *HelloTalk* as a supplementary platform to improve speaking practice beyond classroom hours. Structured activities like peer correction and voice-note exchanges help develop fluency and reduce anxiety in low-stakes settings. The research emphasizes the importance of incorporating AI-supported tools into speaking courses within blended learning models, ensuring that mobile learning enhances, not

replaces, teacher-led instruction. This approach helps universities create curricula that focus on student engagement and authentic communication rather than just traditional grammar. The study also highlights the need for policy-level investment in digital literacy, internet access, and selecting AI platforms that align with Indonesia's cultural and ethical values. It presents a locally relevant framework for using AI applications to boost speaking skills in Indonesian EFL education, addressing classroom practices, institutional design, and policy support. These findings may also be useful in other resource-limited and culturally diverse settings.

### 1.7 Operationalization

To ensure clarity and consistency, the following key terms are defined as used in this study:

1. *HelloTalk*: A mobile language exchange application connecting learners with native speakers for text, voice, and video communication, featuring AI-powered corrections, translation, and partner matching for practical lessons.
2. Speaking Proficiency: Oral communication effectiveness measured via IELTS criteria (pronunciation, fluency/coherence, lexical resource, and grammatical range/accuracy) scored holistically from 0-9 bands.
3. Indonesian EFL (English as a Foreign Language): Learning contexts where English is taught academically but holds minimal functional presence in daily socio-cultural environments, specifically referring to Indonesian university students in this study.
4. Artificial Intelligence (AI): The integration of artificial intelligence technologies (machine learning, natural language processing, automatic speech recognition) into language platforms to provide personalized, adaptive, real-time feedback.
5. Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL): Pedagogical approaches leveraging portable devices (smartphones, tablets) for accessible language practice transcending classroom boundaries.

6. Mixed-Methods Study: A convergent parallel research design where quantitative and qualitative data are collected simultaneously, analyzed independently, then merged during interpretation for comprehensive triangulated findings.