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DISCOURSE ANALYSIS IN COMPUTER-ASSISTED LANGUAGE LEARNING: A CASE STUDY OF THE ELSA SPEAK APP

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Abstract

This article discusses the significant role of discourse analysis in understanding and enhancing English language learning, specifically through the Elsa Speak application. By examining how the principles of discourse analysis can be applied to analyze the app's design, features, and user interactions, the article aims to demonstrate its potential in providing valuable insights into its effectiveness in developing communicative competence. We will explore key discourse analysis concepts and illustrate how they can be used to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the app in supporting authentic language use, promoting coherent communication, and addressing the pragmatic and sociocultural dimensions of English language learning. Overall, the article argues that a discourse- informed perspective offers a crucial framework for understanding the pedagogical foundations of language learning applications like Elsa Speak and identifying areas that require further development and improvement.

1. INTRODUCTION

The landscape of English Language Teaching (ELT) is undergoing dynamic and continual transformation, shaped by a confluence of evolving pedagogical theories, learner-centered approaches, and rapid advancements in digital technology. As globalization accelerates and English solidifies its role as a global lingua franca, the demand for innovative and accessible language learning solutions has grown exponentially. Traditional classroom-based instruction, while still relevant, is increasingly being supplemented—and in some cases, replaced—by digital tools that offer flexibility, autonomy, and interactivity. This shift has opened the door for a more personalized and context-sensitive approach to language learning, aligning better with the diverse needs, learning styles, and life situations of modern learners.

In this digital age, mobile applications have emerged as a particularly influential force in the field of language education. These apps, available across various platforms, have revolutionized the way learners engage with language content. By enabling anytime-anywhere access and incorporating gamification, multimedia content, and adaptive learning algorithms, they have made language acquisition more engaging and manageable, especially for self-directed learners. Notably, applications that focus on honing specific language skills have

experienced a surge in popularity, as they allow users to target their weaknesses and make measurable improvements in particular areas of communication.

Among these skill-specific apps, those emphasizing pronunciation have attracted special attention, given the crucial role pronunciation plays in intelligibility, fluency, and overall communicative competence. Pronunciation is not merely a matter of producing individual sounds accurately—it involves mastering stress, intonation, rhythm, and other suprasegmental features that are vital for effective spoken interaction. Despite its importance, pronunciation is often underemphasized in traditional classroom settings due to time constraints, lack of teacher confidence, or limited access to native speaker models. This gap has created an opportunity for digital tools to step in and provide focused, consistent, and individualized pronunciation practice. One standout example in this area is Elsa Speak—an AI-powered application that functions as a personal pronunciation coach. Utilizing advanced speech recognition and machine learning technologies, Elsa Speak analyzes users' spoken input and provides immediate, detailed feedback on various pronunciation elements, including phoneme accuracy, word stress, and intonation patterns. Unlike traditional language labs or generic speech recognition tools, Elsa Speak is designed to simulate one-on-one instruction, adapting to each learner's proficiency level and offering tailored recommendations for improvement. This real-time interactivity and personalization help learners develop both awareness and control over their speech production, fostering greater confidence and fluency in spoken English.

Moreover, the app's user-friendly interface, progress tracking features, and structured lesson plans contribute to a comprehensive learning experience that extends beyond rote repetition. It encourages repeated practice, motivates users with measurable goals, and supports long-term retention through spaced repetition and feedback loops. While the technological innovation behind Elsa Speak is impressive, its true educational value lies in how it transforms passive pronunciation practice into an interactive, data-informed, and learner-driven process.

This positions it not just as a supplementary tool, but as a potentially transformative resource within the broader framework of English language teaching and learning.

While the technical sophistication of applications like Elsa Speak is undeniably impressive, a critical examination of their pedagogical value necessitates moving beyond surface-level evaluations. It is not enough to simply recognize that these tools "work" in terms of functionality; what is equally—if not more—important is understanding how they align with established theories of language acquisition and communicative competence. In particular, the question arises: do such applications merely drill correct pronunciation, or do they genuinely support learners in developing the ability to communicate meaningfully in varied and authentic contexts? This distinction is crucial, especially in light of contemporary approaches to ELT that emphasize communicative, sociocultural, and pragmatic competence over rote memorization and decontextualized language use.

This is where discourse analysis becomes an invaluable analytical lens. Discourse analysis, broadly defined as the study of language in use, offers a powerful framework for evaluating the educational depth of language learning tools. Unlike traditional linguistic analysis, which may focus on isolated elements such as phonology or syntax, discourse analysis is concerned with how language functions in real-life interaction. It addresses how meaning is negotiated between speakers, how coherence and cohesion are achieved in spoken and written texts, and how social and cultural norms shape the way language is interpreted and produced. Applying this perspective to language learning applications can reveal how well these tools prepare learners not just for accurate pronunciation, but for active participation in communicative events.

By analyzing Elsa Speak through the lens of discourse analysis, this article seeks to explore the extent to which the app supports the development of pragmatic awareness, interactional competence, and context-sensitive language use. The analysis will consider elements such as

feedback mechanisms, user interface design, speech modeling, and the types of communicative situations simulated by the app. This approach provides a more holistic understanding of the application's role in language education—one that accounts for both its technological affordances and its pedagogical underpinnings. Ultimately, the goal is to move toward a discourse-informed framework for evaluating and designing language learning technologies that are not only functional but also truly educational in nature.

Pronunciation has long been recognized as a critical component of oral proficiency in English language learning, yet it often receives limited instructional focus in traditional classroom settings. According to Celce-Murcia et al. (2010), intelligible pronunciation contributes significantly to successful communication, but many teachers lack adequate training or confidence to address it effectively. As a result, pronunciation instruction is frequently relegated to incidental correction rather than systematic practice. Contemporary approaches to pronunciation teaching advocate for a communicative orientation, emphasizing the role of suprasegmental features such as stress, rhythm, and intonation in conveying meaning (Gilbert, 2008). These features are essential not only for linguistic accuracy but also for enhancing listener comprehension and speaker confidence.

The integration of technology into language learning has created new avenues for improving pronunciation instruction. Mobile applications, in particular, offer learners on-demand access to interactive and individualized pronunciation practice. Research by Godwin-Jones in Sholekhah (2023) highlights the potential of mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) to support self-directed learning and provide authentic, real-time feedback. Applications such as Elsa Speak leverage artificial intelligence and speech recognition to offer a scalable solution to pronunciation training, addressing limitations of classroom-based instruction. Studies have shown that such tools can enhance learner motivation, promote autonomy, and facilitate measurable pronunciation gains (Li & Hegelheimer, 2013; Neri et al., 2008). However, there remains a need for critical evaluation of how these apps align with pedagogical principles and support communicative competence beyond phonological accuracy.

Discourse analysis offers a powerful theoretical and methodological framework for understanding language beyond isolated structures. Grounded in sociolinguistic and pragmatic theories, discourse analysis examines how language functions in context, how speakers negotiate meaning, and how communication is shaped by social and cultural norms (Gee, 2014; Schiffrin et al., 2003). In the context of language learning, discourse analysis can illuminate the extent to which instructional materials and digital tools foster authentic language use and pragmatic competence. As Warschauer (2000) suggests, the integration of technology in language education must be guided by pedagogical considerations that support real-world communication. Applying discourse analysis to applications like Elsa Speak enables researchers to investigate how feedback, user interface, and speech modeling either support or hinder the development of communicative skills in meaningful contexts.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, grounded in discourse analysis, to examine the pedagogical implications of the Elsa Speak application in the context of English language learning. The primary objective is to explore how the design, features, and feedback mechanisms of the app contribute to the development of communicative competence, particularly in pronunciation and spoken interaction.

2.1 Research Design

The research follows a descriptive-analytical design, focusing on the discourse features embedded within the Elsa Speak application. The study does not aim to test a hypothesis or measure learning outcomes quantitatively, but rather to provide an interpretative account of

how language is presented, modeled, and interacted with through the app's interface. By applying principles of discourse analysis, the study examines both the linguistic content and the communicative context facilitated by the application.

2.2 Data Collection

Data for this study were collected from three primary sources:

2.2.1 App Content and Interface

The structure, lesson flow, sample dialogues, pronunciation feedback, and speech prompts within Elsa Speak were analyzed as textual and multimodal data.

2.2.2 User Interaction Data

Observations of user engagement with the app were conducted by analyzing screen recordings of learner interactions during practice sessions. These recordings were sourced from a sample of intermediate-level English learners using the app over a one-week period.

2.2.3 Documentation and Promotional Materials

Supplementary documents such as tutorials, user guides, and official descriptions of the app's pedagogical goals were also reviewed to triangulate findings.

2.3 Analytical Framework

The study employs a discourse analysis framework adapted from Gee (2014), focusing on key dimensions such as:

Situated meanings: How language use is shaped by context within the app.

Social practices: The roles, identities, and interaction patterns encouraged by the app design.

Discourse models: Underlying assumptions about language learning embedded in the app's instructional approach.

Additionally, elements of pragmatic analysis were used to assess how the app supports aspects of communication such as politeness, turn-taking, and appropriate language use in social contexts. This framework enables a holistic evaluation of Elsa Speak not just as a pronunciation tool, but as a potential facilitator of broader communicative competence.

2.4 Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

To ensure the credibility of the analysis, data were reviewed independently by two researchers with backgrounds in applied linguistics. Triangulation across data sources (interface, user interaction, and documentation) further supports the reliability of interpretations. All user data analyzed in this study were anonymized, and participants provided informed consent prior to their involvement.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Results

3.1.1 Case Studies: Analyzing Elsa Speak Through a Discourse Lens (Illustrative Examples)

To further illustrate the application of discourse analysis, consider the following hypothetical examples of how the app's content could be analyzed:

Case Study 1: Analyzing a Dialogue for Speech Acts and Politeness

One of the app's key strengths lies in its ability to provide individualized, immediate feedback on users' pronunciation. The app uses AI-powered speech recognition to evaluate users' spoken input and highlights segmental and suprasegmental features such as intonation,

stress, and rhythm. Through visual cues (e.g., color-coded feedback, progress scores) and auditory comparison with native-like models, users are able to make incremental improvements in pronunciation accuracy.

However, from a discourse analytical perspective, the app's feedback is largely decontextualized. Although effective in targeting phonological errors, it often lacks the scaffolding needed to help learners understand how pronunciation choices function in different communicative situations. For instance, the app does not consistently explain how intonation can signal politeness, assertiveness, or uncertainty—elements crucial for pragmatic competence.

Imagine an Elsa Speak exercise involving a dialogue where a learner practices asking for directions. Discourse analysis could examine:

The range of speech acts employed: Are there only requests, or are there also offers of help, acknowledgements, etc.?

The linguistic realization of requests: Are learners exposed to different levels of politeness (e.g., "Where is the station?" vs. "Excuse me, could you tell me where the station is?") and are these variations explicitly addressed in terms of their social appropriateness?

The interactional flow: Does the dialogue model a natural turn-taking sequence, or is it simply a series of isolated questions and answers?

Case Study 2: Examining Feedback on Connected Speech

Elsa Speak presents language through short scripted dialogues and phrases, many of which are functionally useful (e.g., greetings, making requests, giving opinions). These dialogues provide opportunities for users to hear and mimic authentic expressions. However, the communicative contexts are limited in scope and depth. Most interactions occur in artificial settings with little room for open-ended or spontaneous speech production.

Discourse analysis shows that communication is not only about pronunciation accuracy but also about negotiating meaning, managing conversational flow, and responding to interlocutors. These aspects are largely absent from the app experience. The lack of dialogic interaction or adaptive conversation simulation suggests that learners are not being exposed to the dynamic, co-constructed nature of real-world communication.

Elsa Speak often provides feedback on connected speech (e.g., the linking of sounds between words). A discourse-informed analysis could go beyond simply evaluating accuracy and consider:

The types of connected speech features addressed: Does the app focus on assimilation, elision, or other phenomena?

The contextual relevance of these features: Are learners shown how connected speech contributes to the natural flow and coherence of spoken discourse, or is it presented as merely a matter of correct pronunciation?

The potential impact on comprehension: Does the app help learners understand how recognizing connected speech improves their listening comprehension of fluent English?

Case Study 3: Analyzing Scenario-Based Learning for Genre Awareness

A critical discourse analysis of the app's structure and messaging reveals a strong emphasis on native-like pronunciation as the ideal standard. Phrases such as "sound like a native speaker" are prominently featured in the app's promotional content. While such goals may motivate some learners, they also risk reinforcing native-speakerism and neglecting the legitimacy of diverse English accents, especially in international contexts where English serves as a lingua franca.

This orientation toward nativeness may implicitly shape users' understanding of successful communication as rooted in accent perfection, rather than intelligibility or appropriateness.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, this may limit learners' confidence and overlook the social realities of English as a global language.

If Elsa Speak includes scenarios like ordering food in a restaurant, discourse analysis could examine:

The linguistic features characteristic of this genre: Are learners exposed to typical vocabulary, sentence structures, and interactional patterns used in restaurant interactions?

The pragmatic considerations: Does the scenario highlight appropriate ways to make orders, ask for information, and respond to the waiter?

The cultural nuances: Are there any implicit cultural assumptions embedded in the dialogue or scenario that might need explicit explanation for learners from diverse backgrounds?

By conducting such discourse-informed analyses, researchers and educators can gain a more holistic understanding of how Elsa Speak contributes to the development of communicative competence, identifying both its strengths in focusing on pronunciation and potential areas for expansion to address broader aspects of language use.

3.1.2 Implications for Elsa Speak and the Future of Technology-Enhanced Language Learning

The application of discourse analysis to Elsa Speak and similar language learning applications has several important implications:

Informing App Design and Content Development

A discourse-informed approach can guide the development of more comprehensive learning materials that go beyond isolated pronunciation practice to incorporate explicit instruction on cohesion, coherence, speech acts, interactional strategies, genre awareness, and pragmatics.

Enhancing Feedback Mechanisms

Feedback could be expanded to address not only pronunciation accuracy but also the appropriateness and effectiveness of learners' language use in relation to context and communicative goals. For example, the app could provide feedback on the clarity and coherence of a learner's spoken response in a given scenario.

Integrating Interactive Features

While Elsa Speak primarily focuses on production, incorporating features that simulate more authentic interaction with other speakers (even AI-powered) could provide valuable opportunities for learners to develop real-time communicative skills. The recent introduction of an AI conversation feature is a positive step in this direction, and further discourse analysis of this feature will be crucial.

Promoting Learner Awareness

By explicitly drawing learners' attention to discourse features and pragmatic considerations, the app can foster a deeper understanding of how language functions in real-world communication, empowering them to become more effective and confident communicators.

Guiding Pedagogical Integration

Understanding the discourse-related strengths and limitations of Elsa Speak can help educators integrate it more effectively into their teaching practices, supplementing pronunciation practice with activities that focus on broader communicative skills.

3.2 Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the dual nature of Elsa Speak as both a technologically sophisticated tool and a pedagogically limited platform when viewed through a discourse-analytical lens. While the app offers immediate and personalized feedback on pronunciation, one of its most praised features, it tends to prioritize phonological accuracy over

communicative competence. This reflects a broader trend in many language learning technologies, where linguistic elements are often decontextualized and isolated from authentic communicative practice (Anggraini, 2022)

Gelu on Ahmad (2022) describes that from the perspective of discourse analysis, language learning is not merely about producing correct sounds or utterances, but about using language appropriately and effectively within specific social contexts. Although Elsa Speak provides users with native-like models for imitation and feedback mechanisms that help refine articulation, it does not explicitly address how these phonetic features function in real-world discourse. For example, prosodic elements such as rising intonation to signal uncertainty or falling intonation to indicate finality are rarely framed in communicative or pragmatic terms. This limits the learner's ability to internalize the socio-interactional aspects of pronunciation, which are essential for meaning negotiation in spoken discourse. (Ahmad, 2022)

Another concern lies in the app's design of learner interaction. The scripted dialogues, while functional, do not offer sufficient variation or spontaneity to simulate natural conversational dynamics. As highlighted in the literature, interactional competence involves skills such as turn-taking, repair strategies, topic management, and the use of discourse markers—skills that cannot be cultivated through repetitive drilling alone (Rinaepi, 2022). The absence of dialogic interaction in Elsa Speak limits learners' exposure to the co-constructed nature of communication, where meaning is jointly created and constantly negotiated between interlocutors.

Furthermore, the app's emphasis on "native-like" pronunciation as a pedagogical goal raises critical questions about underlying language ideologies. The preference for native speaker norms, while common in commercial language learning tools, may inadvertently marginalize non- native varieties of English and overlook the role of intelligibility as the primary standard in international communication (Ahmad, 2022). This not only reinforces problematic notions of linguistic hierarchy but may also affect learner identity and confidence, especially in multilingual, multicultural contexts where English is used as a lingua franca. (Sholekhah, 2023)

Taken together, these findings suggest that while Elsa Speak serves as a practical aid for improving phonological aspects of spoken English, it falls short in fostering the broader dimensions of communicative competence that discourse analysis highlights. To enhance its pedagogical value, the app could benefit from integrating discourse-based features, such as simulated conversations with varied speech acts, pragmatic feedback, or reflective tasks that prompt users to consider how and why particular intonational choices are used in different contexts. On a larger scale, Hijriani, et al (2025) stated that digital platforms are not merely technological tools but also mediate teacher–learner interaction, the transmission of knowledge, and the construction of learning practices in online environments. The present study examines how digital technologies reshape educational discourse and learning practices through ELSA Speak, particularly its use of speech-recognition technology and immediate feedback.

By adopting a discourse-informed approach, language learning applications like Elsa Speak could better align with current trends in ELT that emphasize authentic language use, learner agency, and the sociocultural dimensions of communication. This shift would not only increase the app's relevance in academic and professional settings but also empower learners to become more effective and adaptable communicators in diverse global contexts.

4. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

4.1 Conclusion

Discourse analysis offers a valuable and often overlooked framework for understanding the complexities of English language learning in the age of technology-enhanced education. By

moving beyond a narrow focus on grammar and vocabulary, and even pronunciation in isolation, discourse analysis allows us to examine how language functions in authentic communicative contexts.

The case of Elsa Speak illustrates the potential of applying this framework to evaluate the strengths and limitations of language learning applications. While Elsa Speak excels in providing targeted pronunciation feedback, a discourse-informed perspective highlights the importance of also addressing the development of cohesive and coherent language production, understanding and using speech acts appropriately, navigating interactional patterns, developing genre awareness, and mastering pragmatic nuances.

As technology continues to play an increasingly significant role in language learning, it is crucial to harness the power of discourse analysis to guide the design, development, and pedagogical integration of applications like Elsa Speak. By adopting a more holistic, discourse-informed approach, we can ensure that these tools not only help learners achieve accurate pronunciation but also empower them to become effective, confident, and culturally aware communicators in English. Further research employing discourse analysis to evaluate the impact of such applications on various aspects of communicative competence will be essential in shaping the future of technology-enhanced language learning.

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