

Speaklish: The AI-Powered Solution for IELTS Speaking Preparation—Challenges, Evolution, and Future Potential

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Abstract

This paper explores Speaklish, an AI-driven mobile application and Telegram bot designed to assist English language learners in preparing for the IELTS speaking exam. Initially facing challenges related to the reliability of its assessments, the app has undergone several refinements to improve its evaluation process, resulting in a more trustworthy feedback mechanism. This paper analyzes the evolution of Speaklish's AI capabilities, the app's impact on user engagement, particularly among younger learners, and its simple yet effective monetization model. While the app has achieved significant success in its niche market, its potential for global scalability is limited by its focus on English and a narrow user base. This study concludes by suggesting areas for improvement, including expanding language support and refining AI algorithms to enhance the app's accuracy and marketability.

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1. Introduction

With the advent of **Technology-Enhanced Language Learning (TELL)**, digital platforms have transformed how learners engage with foreign languages, particularly in preparation for high-stakes exams like the **International English Language Testing System (IELTS)**. As the global demand for English proficiency grows, especially in countries like Uzbekistan, AI-powered language learning tools have gained traction for their ability to provide personalized, on-demand learning experiences. Among these tools, *Speaklish* has emerged as a promising solution aimed at improving learners' speaking skills for the IELTS exam. Available both as a downloadable mobile app on Google Play and the Apple Store, and as a Telegram bot, *Speaklish* offers an AI-driven speaking assessment tool that evaluates user responses after completing practice sections based on the IELTS speaking test.

However, while the app's core functionality is beneficial, it faced initial criticism regarding the accuracy of its assessments, with many users reporting discrepancies between their AI-generated scores and the actual IELTS results. This paper aims to critically examine the development and evolution of *Speaklish*, focusing on its challenges, enhancements, user reception, and future growth potential.

2. Problem Statement

Speaklish was initially launched with the promise of providing reliable, AI-driven evaluations of user speaking abilities. However, it quickly became apparent that the app's assessments were unreliable, often overestimating or underestimating the users' speaking skills compared to their official IELTS scores. This misalignment in performance evaluations led to frustration among users, many of whom questioned the app's ability to deliver trustworthy feedback.

Furthermore, the app's initial structure lacked adequate speaking answer samples, comprehensive rubrics, and evaluation criteria, which were critical for providing accurate and meaningful feedback (Kukulska-Hulme, 2009). As a result, users felt that the system was not delivering the quality of feedback they expected for a language learning tool designed to help them pass a rigorous exam.

Despite these initial setbacks, the development team of *Speaklish* responded quickly by refining its AI algorithms and implementing several key improvements. These changes aimed to enhance the accuracy of the speaking assessments, leading to greater user satisfaction.

3. Theoretical Framework

Several pedagogical and technological theories can be applied to understand the evolution and impact of *Speaklish*:

- **Technology-Enhanced Language Learning (TELL):** According to Chapelle (2001), the integration of technology into language learning offers significant advantages in terms of personalized learning experiences. *Speaklish* embodies this principle by providing users with individualized speaking assessments based on AI-generated feedback.
- **Self-Determination Theory (SDT):** The SDT framework, developed by Deci and Ryan (1985), emphasizes the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in fostering motivation. *Speaklish*'s ability to provide a non-judgmental, self-paced learning environment supports learners' autonomy, thereby enhancing their intrinsic motivation to improve their speaking skills.
- **Artificial Intelligence in Education:** AI has been recognized as a transformative tool in education, particularly in language learning (Heffernan & Heffernan, 2014). The use of AI in *Speaklish* to offer real-time, automated speaking evaluations holds significant potential for improving language acquisition, though it requires continuous refinement to enhance its reliability and user experience.

4. Challenges and Enhancements: Improving the AI Evaluation System

The initial version of *Speaklish* struggled with the accuracy of its assessments. Early users reported that the app often overestimated or underestimated their speaking abilities when compared to the IELTS test, undermining their confidence in the platform (Boud, 2000). The AI-driven feedback lacked contextual understanding of learners' diverse linguistic backgrounds, which contributed to the inaccuracies.

In response to these challenges, the *Speaklish* team made several key improvements:

1. **Expanded Speaking Answer Samples:** To improve the AI's accuracy in assessing speaking proficiency, the app incorporated a wider variety of sample responses from IELTS exam candidates. These samples helped the AI system compare user answers against a more extensive range of possible responses, improving its ability to evaluate speaking fluency more accurately (Searle, 2017).
2. **Refinement of Rubrics and Criteria:** The team restructured the AI's evaluation rubrics to align more closely with IELTS speaking criteria, which include fluency, coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range, and pronunciation (IELTS, 2021). This refinement helped the AI provide more detailed, accurate feedback, ensuring that assessments reflected the complexity of real-world language use.
3. **Continuous Machine Learning:** In line with trends in AI-based learning tools, *Speaklish* has continuously improved its machine learning algorithms. By analyzing large datasets of user

responses and outcomes, the app has been able to adapt and fine-tune its evaluation processes, leading to more accurate and reliable speaking assessments over time (Yang & Yang, 2020).

These changes have been instrumental in improving user trust and satisfaction, demonstrating that AI in education can evolve and improve based on user feedback.

5. User Engagement and Impact on Speaking Anxiety

One of the most notable successes of *Speaklish* is its ability to address speaking anxiety among learners. Research has consistently shown that learners often experience high levels of anxiety when speaking English in front of others, especially in exam settings (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). For many IELTS candidates, the fear of being judged by human examiners can severely hinder their performance.

By offering a platform where users can practice speaking without the fear of judgment, *Speaklish* provides a valuable service. Young learners, in particular, appreciate the opportunity to practice in a safe, anonymous environment. This feature has contributed significantly to the app's success, as users report increased confidence in their speaking skills and a sense of achievement after consistent practice (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Furthermore, *Speaklish*'s ability to track progress and offer targeted feedback has created a sense of competence among users, motivating them to continue using the platform and improve their speaking fluency.

6. Monetization Strategy and Business Model

Speaklish employs a straightforward monetization strategy. Users can access the basic features for free, but to unlock premium content such as more in-depth feedback and additional speaking practice, they must pay a subscription fee of \$30. This pricing model is effective because it aligns with the value proposition of personalized, AI-driven language assessments.

Research indicates that freemium models, where basic services are offered for free and advanced features are available for a fee, have been highly successful in the edtech market (Pappano, 2012). This approach has allowed *Speaklish* to attract a significant user base while generating revenue through subscriptions.

7. Limitations and Future Directions

Despite its successes, *Speaklish* faces several limitations:

1. **Limited Language Support:** The app's focus on English limits its potential for expansion into other markets. While it serves a niche audience of English learners preparing for IELTS, it would benefit from offering multi-language support to attract a broader user base (Garrison & Anderson, 2003).
2. **Narrow User Demographic:** The app is most popular among young learners, but its appeal may be limited in other demographics, such as older learners or non-tech-savvy individuals. Expanding the app's features to cater to these groups could help widen its market reach.
3. **AI Refinement and Speech Variability:** As with any AI-driven tool, the accuracy of *Speaklish*'s evaluations is dependent on its algorithm. While improvements have been made, ongoing refinement is necessary to account for a wider range of accents, speech patterns, and language backgrounds (Heffernan & Heffernan, 2014).

8. Conclusion

Speaklish has successfully addressed a critical need in the language learning market by offering an AI-powered platform for IELTS speaking practice. While initial challenges with assessment accuracy hindered user confidence, the app's subsequent improvements in rubrics, speaking samples, and machine learning algorithms have significantly enhanced its reliability. By addressing speaking anxiety, particularly among younger learners, *Speaklish* has carved a niche for itself in the competitive language learning landscape. However, to maximize its growth potential, the app must expand its language

capabilities, refine its AI systems, and consider ways to engage a more diverse user base.

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