
“ELSA SPEAK” IN AN ONLINE PRONUNCIATION CLASS: STUDENTS’ VOICES

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ABSTRACT

Developing productive skills such as pronunciation requires more than just comprehension. Students should have ample opportunities to practice their knowledge. With the strike of Covid-19 that has abruptly shifted learning from offline to an online setting, lecturers have tried to employ technologies such as Elsa Speak in teaching pronunciation online. With the rising popularity of this application, there should be a study investigating how the students perceive Elsa Speak in online pronunciation learning. To do so, this present study employed a mixed-method approach to know the attitudes of 112 English Department students toward Elsa Speak used in their online pronunciation class. Through an analysis of data collected from questionnaires and interviews, the study found that most participants had a positive attitude toward Elsa Speak concerning its use in their online pronunciation class. Even though there were some negative comments from the participants, the benefits outweighed the downside. To make the integration of Elsa Speak into online pronunciation learning more accommodating to students’ needs, lecturers could take some pedagogical measures, such as supplementing the materials provided by Elsa Speak with those from other resources, increasing their involvement during the learning process, and promoting collaborative activities.

Key Words: Elsa Speak; online learning; pronunciation

ABSTRAK

Mengembangkan keterampilan produktif seperti pengucapan membutuhkan lebih dari sekedar pemahaman. Siswa harus diberi banyak kesempatan untuk mempraktikkan pengetahuan mereka. Dengan adanya wabah Covid-19 yang mengubah sistem pembelajaran dari luring ke daring, dosen menggunakan teknologi seperti Elsa Speak dalam mengajar mata kuliah pengucapan secara daring. Dengan meningkatnya popularitas dari aplikasi ini, harus ada penelitian yang menyelidiki bagaimana persepsi siswa tentang Elsa Speak dalam pembelajaran pengucapan secara daring. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan metode campuran untuk mengetahui sikap 112 mahasiswa Jurusan Bahasa Inggris terhadap Elsa Speak yang digunakan di kelas pengucapan daring mereka. Melalui analisis data yang dikumpulkan dari kuesioner dan wawancara, peneliti menemukan bahwa sebagian besar mahasiswa memiliki sikap positif terhadap Elsa Speak terkait penggunaannya di kelas mereka. Meskipun terdapat beberapa komentar negatif dari partisipan, manfaat Elsa Speak lebih besar daripada kerugian yang ditimbulkan. Supaya integrasi Elsa Speak ke dalam pembelajaran pengucapan secara daring lebih mengakomodasi kebutuhan mahasiswa, dosen dapat mengambil beberapa langkah pedagogis, seperti menggunakan materi tambahan untuk memberi variasi terhadap materi yang disediakan oleh Elsa Speak, meningkatkan keterlibatan dosen selama proses pembelajaran, dan mengimplementasikan kegiatan pembelajaran yang kolaboratif.

Kata Kunci: Elsa Speak; pembelajaran daring; pengucapan

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INTRODUCTION

When teaching pronunciation, teachers might encounter many challenges, either those related to the linguistic or pedagogical aspects. The non-nativeness of the teachers often becomes the culprit behind the linguistic constraints, leading to the avoidance of teaching pronunciation (Li & Zhang, 2016; Vančová, 2019; Wong, 2018). Meanwhile, factors such as pedagogical priorities, inadequate teaching materials, limited time allocation, unclear teaching methodology, and the absence of training in teaching pronunciation could be the causes of the pedagogical problems (Darcy, 2018; Dixon, 2018).

In the Indonesian context, in which most pronunciation teachers are non-native speakers of English, teaching pronunciation has become a great challenge. Lack of confidence due to non-nativeness often hinders teachers from teaching pronunciation in a well-planned teaching session. Often, teachers only insert pronunciation materials as a supplement, not as a specific skill, resulting in low pronunciation abilities (Kholis, 2021; Samad & Ismail, 2020). This unfortunate condition must be seriously addressed since pronunciation is vital for language development and is connected with other language skills (Gómez & Pablo, 2020). Hence, teaching pronunciation should be given high

priority, just like the other language skills, to maximize the outcomes of the English teaching and learning process. To do so, non-native English teachers could utilize technology as an alternative means of teaching pronunciation skills.

Extensive studies have been carried out in the realm of technology integration in teaching pronunciation. Various Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) media have been employed and developed to facilitate pronunciation learning. MALL is generally characterized as a learning mode that allows students more flexibility in managing their own learning by using personal and portable devices such as mobile phones, digital notebooks, laptops, tablets, etc. (Cohen & Ezra, 2018; Hoi & Mu, 2021). The application of MALL in teaching pronunciation improved students' pronunciation abilities (Abduh, 2019; Miqawati, 2020; Sufi & Shalmani, 2018). With their rich exposure to native pronunciation, these MALL applications could benefit teachers and students. They provide students with the correct pronunciation input and help teachers reduce their anxiety in delivering the materials.

With the strike of the Coronavirus Disease (Covid-19), the use of MALL in the online teaching and learning process has become more prominent, including in teaching pronunciation. Without face-to-face interaction

between teachers and students, it is difficult for teachers to assist students in practicing their pronunciation skills. In this case, MALL could be a great way of providing students with abundant native input of English that, in some cases, could be better than that delivered by their own teachers. Through MALL, students could learn the materials and practice their pronunciation skills anytime and anywhere without a heavy dependence on their teachers.

One example of MALL media popularly used in teaching pronunciation is ELSA (English Language Speech Assistant) Speak. It is an Artificial Intelligence (AI)-based language application developed to help its users to improve their pronunciation skills. With in-house speech recognition, deep learning technology, and automated feedback, ELSA Speak could be a great means of learning pronunciation in an online learning situation. Teachers could integrate it into their curriculum, build their own module on the app, and assist the students with personalized help. In addition, with its Teacher Dashboard feature, teachers could effectively keep track of their students' progress and performance in learning pronunciation (ELSA Corporation, 2021). For the students, ELSA Speak could help them identify their weaknesses in

pronunciation as they would get precise feedback instantly from the application. Students could also practice English conversations using stimulating games that include various sub-skills in pronunciation, such as intonation, rhythm, and word stress.

For its remarkable features, ELSA Speak has attracted many researchers to investigate its implementation in the teaching and learning process of pronunciation. Yilan (2019) investigated Turkish students' perspectives on learning English using two MALL media, i.e., ImmerseMe and ELSA Speak. Through qualitative data analysis, she found that Speech Recognition Technology (SRT) effectively facilitated students' learning. In another study, Samad and Ismail (2020) tried to verify ELSA Speak's effectiveness in improving Indonesian students' pronunciation skills. Through quantitative data analysis using pre- and post-test, they concluded that ELSA Speak effectively enhanced students' pronunciation with a t-test score of 6.28. In a recent study, through a pronunciation test and an interview with English Department students, Kholis (2021) affirmed that ELSA Speak could engage the students in learning pronunciation and thus effectively improve their pronunciation skills.

Considering the potential of ELSA Speak in teaching pronunciation, the researchers assumed that the use of ELSA Speak could be further scrutinized in areas that other researchers had not explored. Since most studies on this topic were carried out quantitatively in an offline learning setting, further study could be focused on the application of ELSA Speak in the online learning setting with a mixed-method design in which the data were obtained from both quantitative and qualitative sources. Given this motive, the researchers aimed to investigate students' attitudes toward the use of ELSA Speak in the teaching and learning process of pronunciation during online learning. This study was guided by the following research questions: 1) What is students' attitude toward ELSA Speak in developing their pronunciation skills during online learning? and 2) What measures could be taken to maximize the use of ELSA Speak in facilitating students' pronunciation learning? The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the teaching and development of pronunciation skills, particularly in the online learning era. Furthermore, the results are also expected to become a useful reference for teachers in teaching pronunciation with more confidence.

METHOD

Research Design

This study aimed to investigate students' perspectives toward applying ELSA Speak in online pronunciation learning settings and examine the most practical actions to boost its positive impact on students' pronunciation skills. To achieve these two goals, this present study employed a mixed-method approach. Creswell and Creswell (2017) define a mixed-method as a research design to investigate an issue thoroughly by employing quantitative and qualitative data in a single study. This method was selected since this study aimed to scrutinize two aspects that would complement and validate one another's results.

Research Site and Participants

This study was carried out from March to September 2021 in one of the state universities in Central Java, Indonesia. The data were collected from 112 students majoring in English Education who used ELSA Speak in their online Pronunciation and Accent course in the even semester of the academic year of 2020/2021. All students in 4 classes were selected as the research participants. Since the study was about personal viewpoints, the researchers seriously took into

consideration the participants' personal confidentiality. Therefore, before giving their data, the participants were asked to give their consent to this study. In addition, the researchers protected participants' identities by using pseudonyms throughout this study to ensure that the information they gave was not associated with them.

Data collection and analysis

For this mixed-method study, the data were obtained from both quantitative and qualitative sources. The quantitative data were collected using a four-point Likert scale questionnaire, while the qualitative data were obtained from a semi-structured interview. The questionnaire was administered to all research participants and was distributed using Google Form. The closed-ended questionnaire covered items focusing on the students' attitudes toward ELSA Speak in an online pronunciation learning setting. Five students were interviewed online via Zoom Meeting to validate and support the quantitative data. The interview focused on what the students expect from applying ELSA Speak in online pronunciation learning that could eventually enhance their learning outcomes. Table 1 shows the demographic information of the interview participants.

Table 1. Interview Participants

Participant	Pseudonym	Sex
1	Tiara	F
2	Bekti	F
3	Wulan	F
4	Zayin	M
5	Denny	M

The data obtained from the questionnaires were then analyzed quantitatively through categorization into frequency and conversion into percentages. At the same time, those obtained from the interview were evaluated qualitatively by employing content analysis to gain a deeper understanding of the matter (Tight, 2017). The raw data from the interview were grouped into themes, coded, and analyzed to find links. The analysis results from both instruments were then evaluated to yield comprehensive findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As mentioned earlier, this present study aimed to investigate the students' perspectives toward the use of Elsa Speak in the teaching and learning process of pronunciation during online learning and to propose some ways to boost the use of Elsa Speak in teaching pronunciation. This section presents the study's findings and the discussion in one elaborated section.

General Attitudes toward Elsa Speak in Facilitating Online Pronunciation Learning

What is students' attitude toward ELSA Speak in developing their pronunciation skills during online learning? To answer this question, first, the researchers asked the participants to rate their general attitudes toward the use of Elsa Speak in their online pronunciation course on a four-point scale, with one being very negative (VN), two negative (N), three positive (P), and four very positive (VP). Table 2 summarizes the responses of 112 students taking part in this study.

Table 2. General Attitudes toward Elsa Speak in Online Pronunciation Learning

Indicator	VN	N	P	VP	Mean
General attitude toward studying Pronunciation online using Elsa Speak.	0	17	78	17	3

With a mean score of 3, students' attitudes toward the use of Elsa Speak during their online pronunciation course could be categorized as positive. This positive attitude could be related to some indicators. First, as many as 86 students (96%) agreed that Elsa Speak

helped them to study pronunciation independently during online learning. To verify this finding, the researchers interviewed the five participants. Denny mentioned

"During the online learning, our interaction with the lecturer is very limited. Most of the time, the online meeting is used only for delivering the theories. We don't have enough time to practice. So, I think Elsa Speak is very useful to help us learn independently".

In addition, Bekti said that Elsa Speak has everything they need to study pronunciation independently at their own pace and various levels. The students could learn how to pronounce words and sentences correctly with the right intonation, word stress, and various accents. Even sometimes, Elsa Speak gave better explanations about the pronunciation topics than the lecturers.

This finding is similar to that of Carter et al. (2020), stating that the flexibility offered by technological media in online learning supports learner autonomy. With the use of technology, students with limited data bundles or from poor connection areas can catch up with the teaching and learning process by studying independently at any time and from anywhere.

In addition, Adnan and Anwar (2020) affirmed that technologies could help minimize the lack of teacher-student interaction during online learning, supporting students in learning independently. One of the interview participants, Tiara, expressed her interest in using technologies during online learning, especially Elsa Speak, saying

“During the online pronunciation learning, my lecturer directly customized the class in Elsa Speak. She adjusts the learning process to our progress. It helps us monitor our learning even if we don’t interact face-to-face with the lecturer”.

The results of the interview confirmed the quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire that Elsa Speak could be used to facilitate students’ pronunciation development in an independent learning setting. This finding is also in accordance with that of Taqy (2021), confirming that Elsa Speak is a suitable application for autonomously learning pronunciation.

Second, Elsa Speak was considered useful in assisting students’ pronunciation learning in an online setting for as many as 98 (87.5%) and 14 (12.5%) students agreed and strongly agreed that this application provides accurate and instant feedback on their pronunciation. One of the interview participants, Zayin, mentioned

“To me, feedback is essential to improve my performance. During online learning, we don’t have enough time to show our performance before the lecturer. With Elsa Speak, we can get instant and direct feedback, and it’s very helpful”.

Quyen and Ha (2021) exposed similar concerns about the lack of feedback given by lecturers during online learning. They affirmed that the absence of offline classes had forced lecturers to shift from direct to indirect feedback, resulting in unsatisfactory learning outcomes. Correspondingly, the present study found comparable concerns as to when interviewed. Some students expressed dissatisfaction with the indirect feedback their pronunciation lecturer gave. To mention a few, Wulan said

“In my pronunciation class, the lecturer asked us (the students) to record our pronunciation practices and upload them to our university e-learning management system. She will give written feedback after some days or even weeks. Honestly, I think direct feedback is more effective for pronunciation course”.

Denny added that he rarely checked the feedback given by his pronunciation lecturer because it took time to access the system repeatedly every week. Even worse, Zayin mentioned

“When I checked the feedback given in the e-learning system a week after I submitted the work, I already forgot how I pronounced the words or sentences. So, the feedback could not improve my pronunciation”.

These assertions implied that the students needed direct feedback on improving their pronunciation skills. This could be the reason why they had such a positive attitude toward Elsa Speak. With its direct and instant feedback, the students did not have to wait for the lecturer’s feedback to correct their pronunciation.

This finding strengthens that of Dini et al. (2021), showing that Elsa Speak is particularly useful in terms of the instant feedback provided to the users. Even in an offline learning setting like that of Dini’s research, feedback provided by Elsa Speak is significant for the students. Therefore, it could be assured that the role of Elsa Speak in giving feedback to the students during online learning in this present study is undoubtedly pivotal.

Third, with an interactive user interface and interesting features, Elsa Speak was considered appropriate for online pronunciation learning.

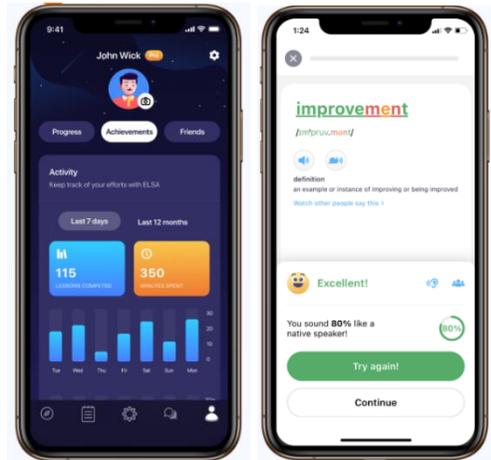


Figure 1. The User Interface and Features of Elsa Speak

Derakhshan, Kruk, Mehdizadeh, and Pawlak (2021) mentioned that students often experience boredom during online learning settings. In addition, affective filters such as motivation and stress often make the situation less conducive to learning (Yuzulia, 2021). These active affective filters are also the case in this present study. Students assessed themselves as feeling bored (51%), stressed (13%), and less motivated (48%) in their online learning. Fortunately, Elsa Speak offers interesting and varied learning activities that could stimulate students’ interest in learning pronunciation online, thus reducing their boredom and stress and increasing their motivation.

This is as mentioned by Wulan in the interview that she often felt bored and sleepy during the online

pronunciation learning, particularly when the lecturer gave a lot of theoretical explanations about the topic. Elsa Speak, with its interesting designs, various features, and interactive user interface, felt less bored and more motivated during the learning process, even when she had to learn independently. She asserted

“When the online pronunciation class was allocated for theoretical explanations, I easily got bored and felt sleepy listening to the lecturer’s talk for a long time. But when it’s time for us (the students) to practice our pronunciation using Elsa Speak, particularly the game feature, I feel so motivated and determined to win the game”.

This finding confirmed that of Derakhshan et al. (2021), stating that technological tools could significantly improve students’ engagement during online learning in that students were actively involved in the learning process. They were given some time to explore the materials on their own and practice what they had learned interactively.

Other than providing interesting and interactive learning features, the students assessed Elsa Speak positively due to its rich materials. Not only pronunciation materials, Elsa Speak also provides various listening and speaking materials. The interview

participants mentioned this feature as an alternative to help them eliminate boredom during online pronunciation learning. Tiara said

“When I feel bored of learning or practicing my pronunciation using Elsa Speak, I usually change my focus to improving my listening or speaking skills using this application. Kill two birds with one stone”.

This elaboration implied that even though online learning often brought about students’ boredom during online pronunciation learning, the use of Elsa Speak could help decrease the detrimental effects.

Fourth, as Elsa Speak can be accessed online anytime and from anywhere, 74 students (66%) affirmed that Elsa Speak was suitable for online learning. However, 28 students (25%) gave an opposite view about the flexibility offered by Elsa Speak. In the interview session, Bekti, Tiara, Zayin, and Denny expressed their satisfaction with being able to operate Elsa Speak whenever they wanted to learn pronunciation. Contrarily, Wulan felt that this flexibility was not enough, stating

“Elsa Speak is easy to use, and because it’s a mobile application, it can be used anytime. But one thing that annoys me is that this app slows down the performance of my mobile phone, and thus the app freezes

sometimes. It also requires a greater bandwidth when used to record or load the sounds”.

This dissatisfaction could be related to the application size, which reaches 30 MB. This size could be even bigger as the application is frequently used, resulting in some technical problems.

Furthermore, the internet connection often made the problems worse. Even though the application can be accessed at any time and from everywhere, it would not work when used in rural areas with low internet connections. Tiara said

“I live in a rural area where the internet connection is not strong. I can access Elsa Speak from home, but sometimes due to my low connection, the sounds produced by Elsa Speak are not clear enough. The application took a lot of time for loading, resulting in sentences with long pauses”.

Previous researchers in many countries frequently mention problems with the technology and the internet connection used during online learning. Hussein, Daoud, Alrabaiah, and Badawi (2020) have carried out a study in Abu Dhabi concerning students' attitudes towards emergency online learning and found that even in developed countries like the United Arab Emirates, internet connection often became the culprit behind the

obstacles faced by the students during online learning.

This elaboration affirmed that the flexibility offered by mobile learning applications is not enough to facilitate online learning. There will always be a trade-off between flexibility and cost. This is as stated by Rapanta, Botturi, Goodyear, Guàrdia, and Koole (2020) that even though asynchronous applications or tools boost flexibility, teachers or lecturers should take into consideration the greater bandwidth required to access and operate the tools that frequently burden the students financially.

Practical Measures to Optimize the Use of Elsa Speak in Online Pronunciation Learning

To address the second research question regarding the ways to optimize the use of Elsa Speak in facilitating online pronunciation learning, the researchers deepened the interview session with the five participants to come up with some solutions to be expected as options to amplify the use of Elsa Speak in this context. Three key ways could be projected to improve the quality of online pronunciation learning using Elsa Speak as summarized based on the responses of these five participants, namely exploring supplemental

pronunciation contents, increasing the lecturer's involvement during the learning process, and promoting a collaborative classroom.

First, to avoid boredom during the pronunciation online learning, lecturers could explore supplemental pronunciation contents from sources other than Elsa Speak to avoid repetitive tasks. Patall (2013) stated that even with interesting and well-designed tasks, students might still feel bored when they are not given choices. The results of this present study showed that 83.3% of the participants agreed that their lecturer relied heavily on Elsa Speak in giving them the pronunciation tasks. When given similar task types repeatedly, it is most likely that students will get bored eventually. In the interview session, Zayin argued

"At first, when the lecturer introduced us to Elsa Speak, I was interested in learning pronunciation using this technology. However, I started feeling bored after several weeks of typical tasks in this application. I know everything the lecturer would ask us to do and how to do it, so it's no longer challenging for me".

Zawodniak, Kruk, and Pawlak (2021) asserted that the lack of new stimuli and the assignment of repetitive tasks could be the reasons for students' boredom during the learning process.

This is not to say that repetitive tasks do not benefit students. Bygate (2018) claimed that repetition could positively impact students' learning outcomes. Still, some concerns about using similar tasks for a long time could result in boredom and disengagement.

In this case, the lecturers could anticipate boredom among the students by trying to supplement the pronunciation materials from Elsa Speak with those from other sources to enrich the tasks given to the students. It is undoubtedly necessary to employ various materials and avoid repetitive activities to ensure that the students are always cognitively challenged and affectively motivated during online pronunciation learning.

Second, it would be better for the students if the lecturers tried to increase their involvement in the online pronunciation classes. With the use of Elsa Speak in this learning context, the lecturers often let the students explore and learn from the application on their own without sufficient guidance. Bektı said

"Online learning has significantly diminished the intensity of lecturer-student interaction. And with Elsa Speak as our main pronunciation learning tool, I personally feel that the lecturer has 'abandoned' us".

Additionally, Denny specified that even though the lecturer had managed to organize the class and monitored their progress in Elsa Speak, he often missed the lively discussion with his lecturer. He contended

"I feel that now Elsa Speak has dominated our pronunciation class. The lecturer's involvement in the learning process is not what I expected from this course. I wish to interact more with the lecturer, not with a machine".

These assertions confirmed the findings of Rapanta et al. (2020) that teacher presence in either offline or online learning settings is pivotal. In their study, it is mentioned that teachers should be present cognitively (considering students' readiness to participate in the learning process), socially (maintaining teacher-student and student-student interaction), and facilitator (facilitating and mentoring the students).

In this study, the lecturer's social presence was considered insufficient to support the students' learning process. The fact that the students had to learn in an online learning setting had already negatively affected this interaction. When added to the lack of lecturer involvement during the process, it is most likely that the outcomes of pronunciation learning would not be satisfactory. Therefore, it

is suggested that lecturers should make sure Elsa Speak does not dominate the classroom interaction, although they use it as the main learning tool in this online learning setting.

Third, the lecturer could integrate the use of Elsa Speak in a more collaborative setting. This study affirmed that Elsa Speak promoted students' autonomy during online learning. However, working all the time individually using one mobile application for the whole semester would not greatly develop students' communicative competence. As Gomez and Pablo (2020) have mentioned earlier, pronunciation skills support the development of other language skills as they could not be learned separately.

This study also found similar findings as 66.7% and 33.3% of the participants agreed that the pronunciation skills they learned from Elsa Speak helped them boost the development of other language skills, especially listening and speaking. In the interview session, Bakti added that Elsa Speak was a great application to develop pronunciation skills independently. Even so, she needed to practice her pronunciation in a more varied learning setting. She wanted to compare her performance with her friends and practice her listening and speaking skills at once. Therefore, even

with Elsa Speak, the lecturers should balance the modes of classroom management (i.e., individual, pair, group, or whole-class work) to reduce monotonous learning activities that could lead to boredom and increase student cooperation.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTION

The present study sought to find out how students perceived the process of pronunciation teaching and learning using Elsa Speak during online learning. The data analysis confirmed that students had positive attitudes toward Elsa Speak used in their online pronunciation learning. As concluded in many previous studies, technology played a significant role in facilitating online learning. These tools were interesting and stimulating and provided the students with more flexibility and opportunities to develop their autonomy.

However, some areas could still be improved to maximize the benefits of Elsa Speak for the students. Hence, the researchers propose some practical measures such as integrating various pronunciation materials to supplement those provided by Elsa Speak, enhancing the lecturer's involvement during the learning process, and promoting collaborative learning settings. Through these steps, it is

expected that Elsa Speak could be continuously used to facilitate online pronunciation learning without eliminating the presence of lecturer-student active interaction.

Based on the findings of this study, some recommendations for future application of technology in an online learning setting could be offered. First, the university should invest more in lecturer professional development. It is crucial to update lecturers' pedagogical competencies to satisfy the students' needs during online learning with technologies. Second, lecturers and students should promote a positive attitude toward online learning. This situation is not easy for anyone. Thus, there should be more understanding of the situation and communication between lecturers and students to develop a learning contract that accommodates both needs. At last, since online learning requires more autonomy during the learning process, students are expected to have more self-regulation to manage their learning process.

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