

# THE USE OF MOBILE-ASSISTED LANGUAGE LEARNING APPLICATION IN PRONUNCIATION TRAINING

Siti Fatimah

Universitas Gunadarma, siti\_fatimah@staff.gunadarma.ac.id

## ABSTRACT

*Pronunciation is one of the most important things to master when it comes to Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Nowadays, mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) applications have been emerging. Learners can practice at the reach of their fingertips through the use of their own mobile devices. This study aims to investigate whether the existing mobile-assisted language learning application (ELSA Speak) is effective to help EFL learners train and improve their pronunciations. This study also seeks to know the most difficult sounds to pronounce by Indonesian EFL learners and highlights learners' thoughts on the application itself including the ease of use, the clarity of pronunciation models by native speakers, as well as the strength and weaknesses of the application. 15 EFL learner participants were involved in this study. They were asked to do a pretest before using the application. The participants then practiced their pronunciation on their own using this application for a week. A post-test was conducted to know their pronunciation progress. They were also given a questionnaire to examine their perceptions of the application. The results show that the mobile-assisted language learning application ELSA speak is quite effective to help learners train and improve their pronunciation. This application is also easily operated and has a lot of features that help learners train their pronunciation easily. Thus, it supports distance language education (DLE). The most difficult English sounds to pronounce according to the participants are  $\theta$ , t, f, v, tf, e, æ, ð, and d, with  $\theta$  and t as the majority. Lastly, despite being considered as a helpful and convenient pronunciation training application, some things need to be improved, such as the need for Indonesian translation on the words provided to enrich learners' vocabulary at the same time.*

*Keywords: Pronunciation, Pronunciation Training App, Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL), Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Distance Language Education (DLE)*

## INTRODUCTION

When it comes to Second Language Acquisition (SLA), some important skills need to be mastered by second language (L2) or foreign language (FL) learners, namely, listening, reading, writing, and speaking. In speaking, pronunciation plays an important role in delivering the message from the speaker to the interlocutor (Bram, 2019). Unclear pronunciation may lead to misunderstanding or thwart the communication between both sides (O'Connor, 1980). Therefore, mastering

pronunciation is one of the significant factors in SLA.

According to Mulatsih (2015), teaching pronunciation presented several challenges. Firstly, teachers frequently found that they owned not enough time to provide appropriate attention to this part of English Instruction. Even when they had the time to hold forth to pronunciation instruction, it often covered the demonstration and training of monotonous and irrelevant subjects. Repeating sounds many times (e.g., minimal pair work) often produced disheartening results, and disheartened

teachers and students were eventually willing to refrain from pronunciation together.

Celce Murcia and Goodwin (1991) reported that a lot of teachers use a "listen and imitate" method including the demonstration of minimal pairs, such as the words tear and tore. Their study showed that only reiteration of sounds was not an efficient way for students to train their L2 pronunciation or to listen to them. If a sound was not a part of students' speech sound repertoire beforehand, it would be linked to the nearest equivalent in the learners' repertoire.

Students inherit pronunciation mistakes from their non-native speaker teachers. It is expected that the students produce the same mistakes as they inherit the inaccurate pronunciation from their teachers (Luo, 2014). Upon entering university, the pronunciation issues become fossilized or hard to change (Selinker, 1972). The best-case scenario would be to learn from native teachers who would acquire educational materials, audios, and videos, that would extend the students' exposure to a larger area of native L2 speech. Nonetheless, the number of native teachers that to was rather restricted due to scheduling and financial hindrance (Celce Murcia & Goodwin (1991).

In this advanced science and technology era, that kind of problem seems to have a solution. Along with the increasing number of smartphone users, mobile application developers are constantly creating numerous kinds of applications that can easily be downloaded through Play Store or App Store. In the realm of education, there are a lot of mobile apps that offer brand new ways of learning without having to meet face to face with the teacher. This kind of application is supposed to support distance language learning (DLL).

Although some teachers were still hesitant about the significance of distant language learning or merely concern that the development of technology in online learning would replace their role in the classroom (Cheng, 2015), Allen and Seaman's (2018) study showed that there was undeniable progress in distance education admission with a 17.2% increased from 2012 to 2016. Approximately one-third (31.6%) of all students in the U.S higher education held an online learning experience once they graduated. This was an expected phenomenon considering the various benefits of online learning, such as enabling flexible access to instructions for adult learners with professional commitments and family responsibilities regardless of their geographic restrictions (Baralt & Gómez, 2017).

In second or foreign language instruction, Computer Assisted Pronunciation Training (CAPT) has been a broadly used tool as it supports a stress-free situation where learners can practice on their own and get almost unlimited input (Neri, Cucchiari, Strik & Bovers, 2002). This can enhance their pronunciation through problem assessments and providing automatic feedback (Engwall, 2012). Recently, as an extension of CAPT, Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) has been emerging. Learners are allowed to practice on their own at anytime and anywhere through the use of their own mobile devices.

Similar to the conventional technique used by most teachers, most of these mobile pronunciation training applications also employ the "listen and imitate" technique but in a more advanced way. They show the words, phonetic symbols, or minimal pair as well as the sounds produced by native speakers through recordings. Then, the learners have to try to imitate the

sounds they have heard by recording their voices. Lastly, the application will show the results of whether the learners pronounce the sounds correctly or not as well as feedback on what needs to be improved. This method of learning pronunciation is considered unique and convenient as it allows learners to practice their pronunciation at their own pace.

Previous research about the employment of Computer-Assisted Pronunciation Training (CAPT) and Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) app to support Distance Language Learning (DLL) have been carried out. Martin (2020) conducted a study on pronunciation improvement and instruction in distance language education. The participants in this study were English learners learning German as their L2. The pronunciation training method used in this study is called innovative Cued Pronunciation Readings (iCPR). The study indicated that learners' pronunciation skills did not show a significant improvement over the semester in the absence of targeted pronunciation training. Further results suggested that learners who received targeted pronunciation training showed meaningful improvements from pre to post-test and exceeded learners in a control group on perception measures and accuracy of production at the end of the semester. These findings indicated that targeted pronunciation training can be beneficial for distance language education.

Fouz-González (2020) has also done a study on the potential of the English File Pronunciation (EFP) app to help foreign language learners improve their pronunciation. This study aimed to investigate the potential English File Pronunciation (EFP) app to assist FL learners to enhance their perception and production of a repertoire of English sounds. Spanish EFL learners registered in an English Studies degree were the

participants. The result showed that the training promoted significant improvements in the learner's perception and prediction of the target features.

While the first study conducted by Martin (2020) focused on iCPR in Computer-Assisted Language Learning and the second study conducted by Fouz-González (2020) focused on the EFP app to assist FL learners to enhance their perception, the present study seeks to fill the void of the prior studies by examining another Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) application in pronunciation training. After reviewing several MALL pronunciation training apps, the writer determined that *ELSA Speak* app suits the objectives of the current study. This decision was influenced by language learning and pronunciation training features available in this app.

*ELSA Speak* app teaches pronunciation with phonetic symbols to help learners learn the correct way of producing sounds and discern native from accented production. It also encourages learners to pronounce and speak English in a neutral and global American accent, employing a leading speech recognition technology.

The app provides Free Assessment Test for learners to find out their English-speaking proficiency level. It recognizes and analyzes learners' pronunciation challenges, like 'shwa' and 'diphthong' sounds, and provides automatic feedback on every sound that the learners make. Thus it encourages learners to self-monitor their own production. The app also includes a dictionary that helps learners know the meaning of the words they learn immediately.

*ELSA Speak* has 22 most practical topics and more than 800 of fun lessons to help learners pronounce common idioms, expressions and daily conversation in English (Figure 1).

This study highlights whether the present generation of MALL app (*ELSA Speak*) is effective to facilitate pronunciation training in DLE in order to improve EFL learners' pronunciation. The present study also seeks to investigate which English speech sounds are the most difficult to pronounce for Indonesian learners of English. Lastly, this study also seeks to know the strengths and weaknesses of the application according to learners' perceptions (Figure 2).

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research method. According to Sherman and Webb (1988) qualitative research is concerned with meaning as they appear to or are achieved by persons in lived social situations. Furthermore, Bogdan and Biklen (1982) state that qualitative research is descriptive which the data is collected in the form of words and pictures rather than numbers.

According to Natasha Mack (2005) qualitative research can be defined as a type of scientific research that has some characteristics as follows: (1) Seeks answers to questions, (2) Systematically uses a predefined set of procedures to answer the question, (3) Collects evidence, (4) Produces findings that were not determined in advance, (5) Produces findings that are applicable beyond the immediate boundaries of the study.

Robson, Shannon, Goldenhar, and Hale (2001) describe four methods of gathering qualitative information:

1. Interviews and focus groups
2. Questionnaires with open-ended questions
3. Observation and
4. Document analysis.

Miles and Huberman (1994) break down the analysis of qualitative data into three processes of nonsequential steps that happen at the

same time repeatedly as shown in figure 3. The processes are collecting the data, reducing the data, displaying the data, and drawing/ verifying conclusions. As stated by Maxwell (1992: 70) and Alwasilah (2011:103), the participants selected in the study are the ones who can provide the information that the researcher needs that cannot be taken from other people.

The participants in this study were selected deliberately. They are Indonesian students of English at a university with different levels of proficiency. They have never heard of or used *ELSA Speak* app before. After selecting the *ELSA Speak* app to be the object of the research, the writer then contacted the participants and gave them an explanation on how the research would be conducted.

Firstly, the participants were asked to register themselves on the app. Then they took a pretest available on the app. Next, the participants were instructed to use the app to train their pronunciation on their own every day within a week. During the practice phase, the participants were prompted to imitate English pronunciation produced by native speakers through recordings. Then they recorded themselves pronouncing the sounds and received automatic assessment and feedback shortly afterward so they can monitor their performance. This step can be repeated until they were satisfied with their own production.

Upon completing the training, the participants took a post-test to know if there is a significant improvement in their pronunciation. Lastly, the participants were given questionnaire es to explore the participants' perceptions and experiences on *ELSA Speak* App

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

15 participants were asked to take a pretest (free assessment test on the application) first before using *ELSA*

Speak. Then they were instructed to practice their pronunciation using the application. Upon completing the pronunciation training for seven days, they also took a posttest. Here are the results.

10 out of 15 participants have shown progress. 2 out of 15 participants have shown no progress, and 3 out of 15 participants have setbacks. This shows that after getting treatment of pronunciation training using this application for 7 days, most learners have shown that their pronunciations have improved. Upon taking the post-test, few participants have shown no progress or even setbacks. Some factors are influencing this phenomenon. One of the participants reported that she encountered an inconvenient situation when she was recording her voice on post-test, that is, noisy surroundings in her place. Another reported case is the unstable internet connection that caused the participants to redo the test all over again. Thus, the technical problems might be one of the factors causing few participants to have no progress. The findings show that 67% of participants' pronunciations have increased. It implies that mobile assisted pronunciation training application, *ELSA Speak*, works effectively in distance language education (DLE)

### **Learners' Thoughts On Mobile-Assisted Pronunciation Training Application: *Elsa Speak***

When asked about their views on whether this application is helpful for them, all of the participants agreed that the application was very reliable to help them learn and practice their pronunciation at their own pace. Here are their thoughts.

### **EASE OF REGISTERING AND USE**

When asked about the ease of registering on this application, all of the participants agreed that it is very easy to register themselves. There is no hindrance upon registering. During the 7 days pronunciation training, all of the participants also agreed that the application is very easy to use and can be accessed anywhere and anytime at their fingertips. Thus, it can be inferred that this application is quite user-friendly.

### **Clarity of Pronunciation Models**

Upon the clarity of pronunciation models by native speakers (NS), 100% of participants agreed that the pronunciation examples that they heard on the application are very clear and understandable. They had no difficulty in understanding the words being pronounced by NS through the recordings.

### **Difficult Sounds to Pronounce**

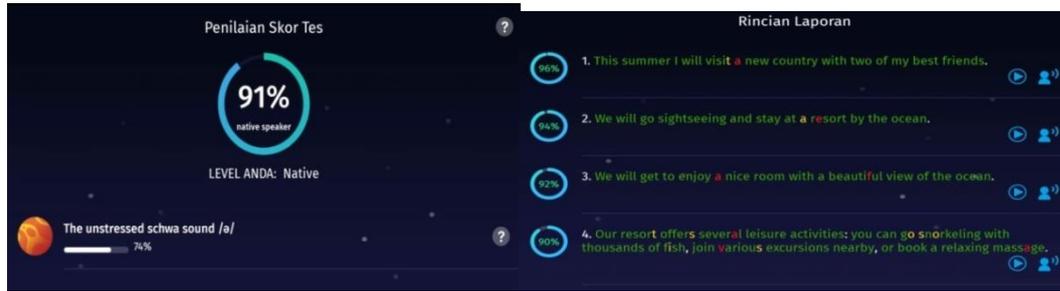
According to the participants, the most difficult English speech sounds to pronounce are  $\Theta$ , t, f, v, tʃ, e, æ, ð, and d. In minimal pairs, 50% of participants think that the sound  $\Theta$  and t are the most difficult to pronounce. For example, the word three/tree, thank/tank, thought/taught, etc. 13% of participants think the sounds ð and d are the most difficult as in the word they/day, those/dose, etc. Another 13% of participants think that the sounds e and æ are the most difficult to pronounce, as in the word beg/bag, said/sad, bed/bad, etc.

12% of participants think the sounds tʃ and t are the most difficult as in the word time/chime, cat/catch, chip/tip, etc. The last 12% of participants think the sounds f and v are the most difficult to pronounce, as in the word, ferry/very, safe/ save, laugh/love, etc.

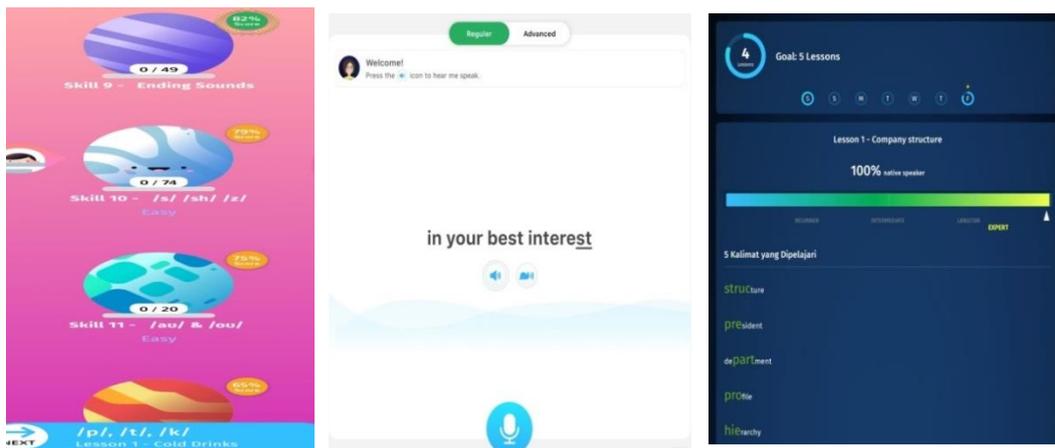
**WEAKNESS OF THE APPLICATION**

Even though all participants agreed that the application was really

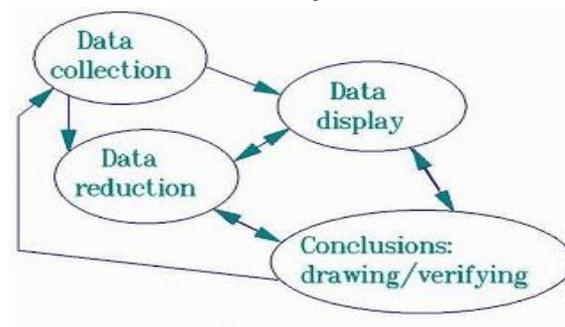
helpful, some things still need to be improved according to them (Table 3).



*Figure 1 ELSA Speak Free Assessment Test with detailed feedbacks*



*Figure 2 ELSA's Lessons with NS voice, phonetic symbols, voice recognition and detailed feedbacks*



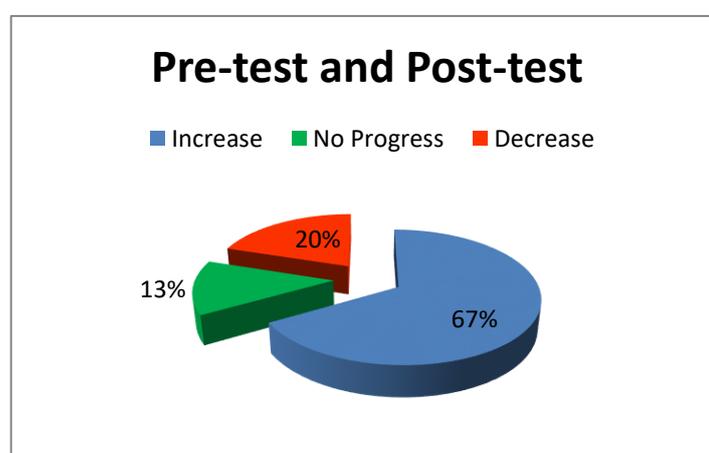
*Figure 3 Technique of Analyzing Data*



*Figure 4 Research Design (Method of Collecting the Data)*

**Table 1.**  
**Pre-test and Post-test Scores**

No.	Participants	Pre-test Score	Post-test Score	Progress
1.	Participant A	68	73	7,3 %
2.	Participant B	63	65	3,1 %
3.	Participant C	64	61	-4.6 %
4.	Participant D	66	67	1,5 %
5.	Participant E	69	73	5,7 %
6.	Participant F	71	69	-2.8 %
7.	Participant G	65	65	0 %
8.	Participant H	63	64	0 %
9.	Participant I	60	63	5 %
10.	Participant J	62	68	9,7 %
11.	Participant K	65	64	-1,5 %
12.	Participant L	72	73	1,3 %
13.	Participant M	75	83	10,65
14.	Participant N	71	71	0%
15.	Participant O	68	72	5,9%



**Figure 5 Pretest and Posttest**

**Tabel 2.**  
**Learners' Thoughts on ELSA Speak**

Participants	Comments
Participant A	<i>'It's really helpful.'</i>
Participant B	<i>'It is quite helpful and easy to use.'</i>
Participant C	<i>'It is really easy to use, helps me with train my pronunciation.'</i>
Participant D	<i>'This application is really helpful. At first my I found it difficult to pronounce words, but after a week of training it became easier for me.'</i>
Participant E	<i>'Very helpful. Easy to use and helps me learn pronouncing English words correctly.'</i>
Participant F	<i>'Absolutely helpful to help me practice my pronunciation'</i>
Participant G	<i>'Really helpful. I love the appearance of this application. It makes the learning process more fun.'</i>

Tabel 2 lanjutan

Participant H	<i>'It's very helpful.'</i>
Participant I	<i>'It is easy to use, allows me to learn pronunciation anytime, anywhere.'</i>
Participant J	<i>'It's helpful because it has structured lesson plan'</i> <i>'I love it because it has examples by native speakers on how to pronounce words correctly.'</i>
Participant K	<i>'It quite helpful because it can easily be accessed, and the lessons are interesting'</i>
Participant L	<i>'I gained more pronunciation knowledge.'</i>
Participant M	<i>'The lessons are easy to follow and understandable.'</i>
Participant N	<i>'It's helpful because it really helps me practice my pronunciation anywhere.'</i>
Participant O	

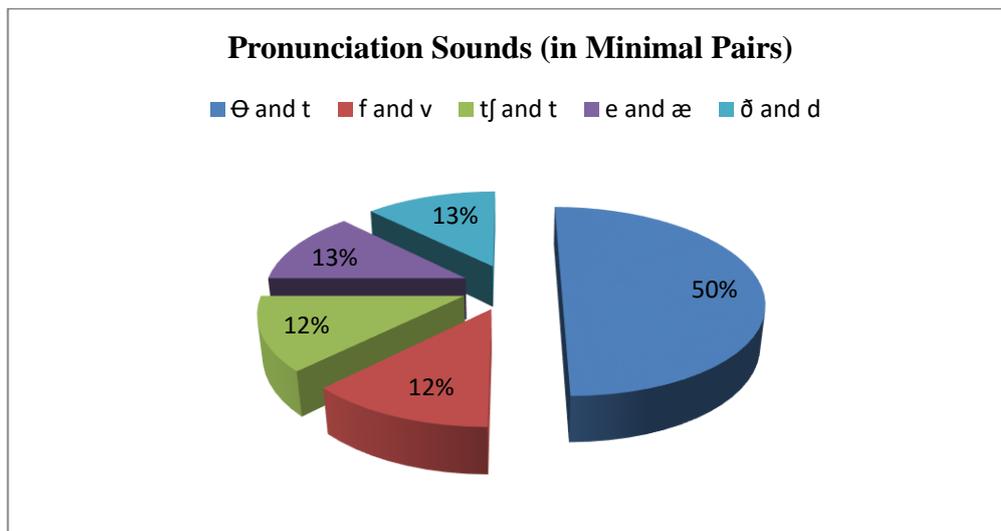


Figure 6 Difficult Sounds to Pronounce

Table 3.

**The Weaknesses of the Application**

Participants	Comments
Participant A	<i>'Even though the instructions are available in Indonesian language, the words available in the lesson don't have Indonesian translation.'</i>
Participant B	<i>'Sometimes when I was using this application, it closed abruptly. I don't know if it's because of my phone or the application itself'</i>
Participant C	<i>'Limited free lesson plans. You have to pay more to upgrade to ELSA pro.'</i>
Participant D	<i>'Sometimes the application forced to close itself when I was using.'</i>
Participant E	<i>'Too many ads to upgrade to ELSA pro.'</i>
Participant F	<i>'It helps me practice my pronunciation'</i>
Participant G	<i>'Sometimes the voice that I've recorded wasn't saved so I had to start all over again.'</i>

Tabel 3 lanjutan

Participant H	<i>'Sometimes the application runs a little bit slow.'</i>
Participant I	<i>'It needs a very secure internet connection, otherwise, it cannot run well.'</i>
Participant J	<i>'I haven't found any weaknesses of this application.'</i>
Participant K	<i>'The application often said that my internet connection is weak, but I thought my connection was fine.'</i>
Participant L	<i>'It takes quite a lot of phone memory.'</i>
Participant M	<i>'The accuracy of assessment. Sometimes when I was in a noisy situation, the noise in the background was also recorded. I hope I the future, there is noise filter feature on this app.'</i>
Participant N	
Participant O	<i>'Sometimes when I was about to finish my test, the application forced to close itself and couldn't calculate my score.'</i>

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Based on the findings and analysis, it can be inferred that In terms of the effectiveness to increase EFL learners' pronunciation, this application is quite effective and has given significant results for most of the participants. It can be seen from the result of the participants' pre-and post-test. After having pronunciation training using this application for a week on their terms, 67% of the participants' pronunciations have increased. 13% have shown no progress (the same pre-and post-test scores), and 20% have shown a decrease in their scores. Some factors are influencing this phenomenon. One of them is the noise surrounds their place causing the recording and voice recognition are not clear. It might have affected their scores. Another reported case is the unstable internet connection that caused the participants to redo the test all over again. Thus, the technical problems might be one of the factors causing participants to have shown no progress or setbacks. Other factors are yet to be found.

Some English speech sounds are difficult to pronounce according to learners. Most of them are the sounds  $\Theta$ , t, f, v, tʃ, e, æ, ð, and d. In minimal pairs, 50% of participants think that the

sound  $\Theta$  and t are the most difficult to pronounce. For example, the word three/tree, thank/tank, thought/taught, etc. 13% of participants think the sounds ð and d are the most difficult as in the word they/day, those/dose, etc. Another 13% of participants think that the sounds e and æ are the most difficult to pronounce, as in the word beg/bag, said/sad, bed/bad, etc. 12% of participants think the sounds tʃ and t are the most difficult as in the word time/chime, cat/catch, chip/tip, etc. The last 12% of participants think the sounds f and v are the most difficult to pronounce, as in the word, ferry/very, safe/ save, laugh/love, etc.

In terms of strengths and ease of use, all the participants think that this application is very helpful to help them practice their pronunciation anytime and anywhere at the reach of their fingertips. It is very easy to use, there are no reported obstacles during the training. It also very has structured plans, so they don't have to worry about where to start or what to learn next. In terms of clarity of pronunciation models by native speakers, learners think that the examples by native speakers on the application are quite clear. Upon weaknesses of the application, some things need to be improved according to learners. Some of them think that the application needs

a very secure internet connection, otherwise it cannot run well. Others think that it would be better to have Indonesian translation to the words being studied. So not only the instruction that has already been available in Indonesian, but also the words being studied are expected to have Indonesian translation to enrich students' vocabulary as well.

## REFERENCES

- Alwasilah, A. C. (2011). *Pokoknya kualitas*. Bandung: Pustaka Jaya
- Aliaga, M. and Gunderson, B. (2002) *Interactive Statistics*. [Thousand Oaks]: Sage Publications.
- Baralt, M., & Morcillo Gómez, J. (2017). Task-based language teaching online: A guide for teachers. *Language Learning & Technology*, 21(3), 28–43. <http://dx.doi.org/10125/44630>
- Bram, Barli. 2019. Academic Word List Pronunciation of the First Year English Education Students. *Voices of English Language Education Society*, 3(2), 92.
- Bogdan, R.C., Biklen, S.K. 1982. *Qualitative Research for Education: an Introduction to Theory and Method*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon. Inc
- Celce Murcia, M., & Goodwin, J. (1991). Teaching pronunciation. In Celce Murcia (Ed.), *Teaching English as a second language*. New York: Heinle and Heinle.
- Cheng, T.-J. (2015). *The reality behind the hype – Online world language teaching and instructional design*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Teachers College, Columbia University, New York City, NY.
- Engwall, O. (2012). Analysis of and feedback on phonetic features in pronunciation training with a Virtual Teacher. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 25, 37-64.
- Fouz-González, Jonás. 2020. Using apps for pronunciation training: An empirical evaluation of the English File Pronunciation app. *Language Learning & Technology*, 24(1), 62-85.
- Luo, Beate. (2014). Peer reviewed pronunciation reading, *Teaching English Language and Literature at Home and Abroad* (pp.99-130). Feng Chia University.
- Mack N., Woodsong C., Macqueen K, Guest G., Namey E. (2005). *Qualitative research methods: a data collector's field guide*. North Carolina: FLI USAID.
- Martin, Ines A. 2020. Pronunciation development and instruction in distance language learning. *Language Learning & Technology*, 24(1), 86-106
- Maxwell, J. A. 1996. *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach*. California. Sage Publications
- Miles M.B., Huberman A.M. 1984. *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Sourcebook of New Methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage
- Mulatsih, Devi. 2015. Pronunciation Ability by Using English Song in Indonesian Student of Unswagati Cirebon. *Journal of English Language and Learning*, 2(2), 294.
- Neri, A. Cucchiarini, C., Strik, H., & Boves, L. (2002). The pedagogy-technology interface in computer assisted pronunciation training, *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 15, 441-467.
- O'Connor, J. D. (1980). *Better English pronunciation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University
- Patton, M. Q. 2002. *Qualitative evaluation and research methods (3rd ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Seaman, J. E., Allen, I. E., & Seaman, J. (2018). *Grade increase: Tracking distance education in the United*

*States*. Babson Park, MA: Babson  
Survey Research Group.

Sherman, Robert R., Webb, Rodman B.  
1988. *Qualitative Reasearch in  
Education: Focus and Method*.  
London: FalmerRoutledge.