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## ENGLISH TALKS FOR BUSINESS COMMUNICATION: THE USE OF FREE4TALK IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

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### ABSTRACT

*This study investigates the students' perceptions and experiences of using Free4Talk, an online language exchange platform, to enhance English for Business Communication among vocational students. Employing a mixed-method design, the research collected quantitative data through a 20-item five-point Likert-scale questionnaire and qualitative data through semi structured interviews with 20 Business Administration students at Kupang State Polytechnic. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the questionnaire, while thematic analysis was applied to interpret interview responses. The findings revealed that students hold positive perceptions of Free4Talk across four key dimensions: usability and accessibility ( $M=3.73$ ), motivation and engagement ( $M=3.59$ ), language and business communication skills ( $M=3.45$ ), and intercultural communication competence ( $M=3.43$ ) all categorized as "high." The results indicate that Free4Talk effectively fosters speaking fluency, confidence, and intercultural awareness through authentic, real time interaction with global users. Students valued its accessibility, user friendly design, and motivational features that encouraged frequent speaking practice beyond the classroom. In conclusion, integrating Free4Talk into vocational English instruction bridges academic and workplace communication needs, supporting the development of globally competent communicators. It is recommended that future research employ experimental or longitudinal approaches to examine measurable gains in fluency, accuracy, and pragmatic competence, as well as to explore the integration of lecture guidance and feedback mechanisms in technology-mediated language learning.*

**Keywords:** *Free4Talk, business communication, vocational education*

### INTRODUCTION

The Industrial Revolution 4.0 era has reshaped workplace expectations, requiring graduates to demonstrate not only technical expertise but also strong communication, collaboration, and digital literacy skills (Matar et al., 2021). In this context, English proficiency has become a core competency in vocational education, as it supports participation in global business, technology, and industry environments (Adawiyah, 2022; Han, 2024). As vocational institutions aim to prepare work-ready graduates, English communication skills particularly speaking must extend beyond basic linguistic knowledge to professional, situational, and internationally oriented competence (Koerniawaty & Nova, 2021).

Despite the integration of English into vocational programs in Indonesia, many students still struggle with speaking skills required in business contexts, especially in terms of fluency, accuracy, and confidence (Murdariah, 2023; Simanjuntak et al., 2024). This challenge is largely attributed to limited opportunities for authentic practice and classroom centered instructional approaches that offer few real communicative interactions (Sri et al., 2025). Consistent engagement with speaking partners both peers and native speakers is essential for developing natural communication patterns, spontaneous response skills, and confidence (Lestari et.al, 2025). However, geographic and contextual constraints restrict students' access to such interaction, creating a gap between classroom learning and workplace communication demands (Ross-Sokolovsky et al., 2024; Fitriani et al., 2024). This result in a mismatch between what is taught and the communication skills required in professional and global business environments.

Advancements in educational technology provide potential solutions to these constraints, particularly through online language exchange platforms that allow real time communication regardless of location (S. Zeng, 2020). Platforms such as Free4Talk offer flexible, interactive speaking environments that simulate authentic professional communication and provide opportunities for cultural exposure and immediate feedback (AB. Rahim & Mah, 2022; Salhy, 2023). Recent evidence highlights that such platforms especially those supported by AI features such as real time feedback and adaptive delivery can improve vocabulary development, speaking fluency, motivation, and engagement among vocational learners (Dewantara et al., 2024). Thus, leveraging digital communication spaces aligns with vocational education principles emphasizing hands on practice, employability skills, and industry relevance (Koerniawaty & Nova, 2021).

Although prior studies have discussed English learning challenges and the role of technology in language learning, there is still limited empirical research focusing on the use of specific online language exchange platforms, such as Free4Talk, within vocational higher education settings for business communication purposes. Additionally, existing studies rarely explore learner perceptions and learning experiences using such platforms in real practice. Most existing research tends to examine general English improvement rather than its relevance to workplace-oriented communication demands. Furthermore, studies that investigate digital speaking tools often focus on AI-driven applications or classroom

integrated platforms, rather than open access peer communication environments. Research on authentic online interaction for vocational students remains scarce, particularly in relation to fluency development, confidence building, and communicative adaptability in professional settings. Therefore, further investigation is needed to understand how platforms like Free4Talk may bridge the gap between formal instruction and real-world communication needs.

Based on the novelty above, the researcher aimed to investigate the students' perception and experience in using Free4talk platform in enhancing business oriented speaking skills among the students of Kupang State Polytechnic. To achieve the aim of the study, the following specific objectives were formulated: 1) To examine students' perceptions of using the Free4Talk platform for practicing business oriented English speaking. 2) To explore students' learning experiences while engaging in speaking activities through the Free4Talk platform.

## **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

### ***Learner Engagement Frameworks***

Learner engagement is widely recognized as a multidimensional construct that plays a critical role in successful language learning, particularly in technology-enhanced environments. Early conceptualizations of engagement emphasized learners' active involvement in learning tasks; however, contemporary frameworks view engagement as a dynamic interaction between learners, tasks, and learning contexts (Hiver et al., 2024). In EFL settings, engagement is especially crucial because meaningful language acquisition depends on sustained interaction, motivation, and communicative participation.

One of the most influential frameworks categorizes learner engagement into three interconnected dimensions: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement (Zhang, 2020). Behavioral engagement refers to learners' observable participation, such as speaking turns, task completion, and interaction frequency. Emotional engagement involves learners' affective responses, including interest, enjoyment, and reduced anxiety during communication activities. Cognitive engagement relates to learners' investment in understanding, problem-solving, and strategic language use. Research in digital language learning environments suggests that effective platforms can simultaneously activate these

three dimensions by offering interactive tasks, supportive peer interaction, and meaningful communicative goals (Brugriela, 2024).

With the growth of online and digital learning, scholars have extended engagement frameworks to account for technology-mediated interaction. The Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework, for example, emphasizes the interaction of social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence in online learning environments (Menggo & Darong, 2022). In language learning contexts, social presence is particularly relevant as it influences learners' willingness to communicate and interact orally. Studies indicate that digital speaking platforms with low-stakes, informal interaction spaces foster higher social presence and emotional engagement, which in turn supports speaking development (R. Wu, 2023).

Despite broad agreement on the importance of engagement, debates remain regarding how engagement should be measured and sustained in digital EFL environments. While many studies rely on self-reported motivation or participation frequency, fewer examine engagement as a process emerging from authentic communicative practice, especially in vocational or professional English contexts (Eustaquio et al., 2025). Moreover, existing engagement frameworks have predominantly been applied to formal online courses rather than open-access speaking platforms that enable spontaneous interaction with global users.

In vocational and business English education, learner engagement frameworks are increasingly linked to employability-oriented outcomes, such as communicative confidence, professional identity formation, and workplace readiness (Putra et al., 2025). However, empirical research exploring how digital speaking platforms operationalize engagement across behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions in business communication contexts remains limited. Addressing this gap, the present study adopts learner engagement frameworks to examine how participation in Free4Talk voice rooms promotes active involvement, positive affect, and cognitive investment in English business communication tasks.

### ***English for Business Communication***

English for Business Communication has increasingly been positioned as a core component of vocational education due to growing global demands for graduates who possess not only technical expertise but also effective professional communication skills.

Previous studies consistently emphasize that English functions as a lingua franca in international business settings, enabling vocational graduates to participate in cross-cultural collaboration and professional interactions (Agustiana, 2024). Research in this area largely agrees that communicative competence in English enhances employability, particularly in business and service-oriented sectors where oral and written communication are integral to daily operations (Mariano & Tantoco, 2023). At the same time, scholars highlight the need to contextualize English instruction within authentic workplace communication genres such as meetings, negotiations, presentations, and business correspondence to ensure the transferability of skills from classroom learning to professional practice (Murdariah et al., 2021).

While there is broad consensus on the importance of authenticity in English for Business Communication, studies differ in their approaches to achieving this goal. Task-based and hybrid learning models have been widely reported as effective in increasing learner engagement and confidence by integrating real-world business tasks with language instruction (Murdariah, 2023). Similarly, technology-mediated learning environments are believed to expand opportunities for speaking practice and exposure to realistic business communication scenarios, particularly through online interaction tools (Tran et al., 2024). These findings collectively suggest that meaningful, practice-oriented communication activities supported by technology can facilitate fluency development and pragmatic awareness among vocational learners. However, some studies caution that the effectiveness of such approaches depends heavily on instructional design and learner support, as technology alone does not guarantee meaningful interaction or sustained engagement.

Despite these positive findings, the literature also reveals persistent challenges in vocational English for Business Communication instruction. Several studies report that students continue to experience limited exposure to authentic communicative environments, insufficient opportunities to interact with diverse speaking partners, and a lack of timely and constructive feedback during speaking practice (Jon et al., 2021). This tension in the literature indicates that while pedagogical models and technological tools show promise, their practical implementation in vocational contexts remains uneven. Furthermore, although interaction-based theories such as the Interaction Hypothesis and Output Hypothesis underline the importance of regular, authentic communicative

exchanges for language development, empirical studies rarely examine how specific online interaction platforms operationalize these theoretical principles in vocational business communication settings.

Notably, existing research has predominantly focused on general English or academic English contexts, with comparatively limited attention given to English for Business Communication in vocational education, particularly within developing country contexts. Moreover, while studies acknowledge the potential of technology-mediated interaction, few have systematically explored learners' engagement, motivation, and speaking development when using specific online communication platforms designed for real-time interaction. As a result, there remains a gap in understanding how such platforms can effectively support business oriented speaking practice and align with the communicative demands of Industry 4.0.

Therefore, this study addresses these gaps by examining the use of an online communication platform, Free4Talk, in enhancing vocational students' English for Business Communication skills. By focusing on learner engagement, motivation, and speaking experiences in technology-mediated interaction, this research seeks to extend existing literature beyond descriptive accounts and provide empirical evidence on how digital platforms can bridge the gap between classroom instruction and real-world business communication needs.

### ***Digital Platform for English Communication***

Digital platforms for English communication have gained increasing attention in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) research due to their potential to facilitate authentic interaction and learner-centered communication. Previous studies consistently show that digital platforms enable learners to engage in meaningful language use through real-time and asynchronous interaction, which is often limited in conventional classroom settings (Jha et al., 2024). Through features such as voice chat, video conferencing, and collaborative tools, learners are exposed to authentic linguistic input and spontaneous communication that support the development of communicative competence.

A growing body of research highlights the effectiveness of synchronous digital platforms in improving speaking fluency, pronunciation, and confidence. Platforms that allow real-time oral interaction have been found to reduce communication anxiety and promote active participation, particularly in EFL contexts where opportunities for spoken

English are scarce (Ling Huang, 2024). These findings suggest that digital platforms function not merely as technological tools but as communicative spaces that encourage negotiation of meaning and interactional competence.

However, scholarly debate remains regarding the extent to which digital platforms can effectively support professional and vocational communication skills. While many studies focus on general speaking improvement or informal communication, fewer investigations address how digital platforms contribute to English for Specific Purposes (ESP), particularly business and workplace communication (Alauddin et al., 2025). Some researchers argue that without pedagogical scaffolding, digital interaction may remain superficial and fail to meet professional discourse demands.

In vocational education contexts, digital platforms are increasingly viewed as essential tools for preparing students for Industry 4.0, where communication, collaboration, and digital literacy are critical competencies (J. Wu et al., 2025). Studies indicate that technology enhanced communication supports the development of transferable skills such as problem-solving, teamwork, and intercultural awareness, which are crucial for employability. Nevertheless, empirical evidence specifically linking digital speaking platforms to business communication outcomes remains limited, particularly in developing country contexts.

Despite the growing interest in online interaction tools, research gaps remain in three key areas. First, limited studies explore the use of open-access speaking platforms that allow spontaneous interaction with global users. Second, there is insufficient focus on vocational higher education students, especially those in business-related programs. Third, existing research rarely examines how digital platforms support authentic business communication practices rather than general conversational English. Addressing these gaps, the present study investigates the use of Free4Talk as a digital platform for enhancing students' business communication skills, thereby contributing to the underexplored intersection of digital technology, vocational EFL, and professional communication.

### ***Free4Talk: A Platform for Authentic Speaking Practice***

Authentic communication practice is widely recognized as a central element in developing speaking competence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL), particularly because it enables learners to use language for meaningful, real-world purposes. Recent

studies increasingly highlight online interaction platforms as viable alternatives to traditional classroom-based speaking activities, with Free4Talk emerging as one of the most prominent tools for real-time oral communication. Unlike conventional instructional settings, Free4Talk allows learners to engage in spontaneous voice-based interaction with speakers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, thereby promoting authentic language use and communicative fluency (Gelen & Tozluoglu, 2021). Scholars generally agree that such unscripted interaction supports autonomy and self-directed learning, as learners actively select topics and manage conversations in ways that mirror real-life communication (Bahar & Dalimunte, 2025). These characteristics align closely with Communicative Language Teaching principles, which prioritize meaningful interaction as both the means and goal of language learning.

From a theoretical perspective, Free4Talk-based interaction reflects key assumptions of the Interaction Hypothesis and the Output Hypothesis, both of which emphasize the role of negotiation of meaning and pushed output in second language development. Empirical evidence suggests that through repeated conversational exchanges on Free4Talk, learners have opportunities to notice linguistic gaps, receive implicit feedback, and adjust their speech to achieve communicative goals. Studies involving Indonesian EFL learners report perceived improvements in fluency, pronunciation, and pragmatic competence, largely due to exposure to varied accents, speech styles, and communicative strategies (Sitanggang & Purnomo, 2025). At the same time, this intercultural exposure is argued to contribute to the development of intercultural communicative competence, an increasingly important skill in global communication contexts.

In addition to linguistic gains, several studies emphasize the affective benefits of Free4Talk use. Learners frequently report reduced speaking anxiety and increased confidence when interacting on the platform compared to formal classroom settings (Tobing et al., 2025). This finding is consistent with broader research on computer-mediated communication, which suggests that online environments can lower affective barriers and encourage greater participation by minimizing fear of negative evaluation. However, while motivation and willingness to communicate are often highlighted as positive outcomes, existing studies tend to rely heavily on self-reported perceptions,

leaving the extent of sustained engagement and long-term speaking development open to debate.

Within vocational education, Free4Talk has been increasingly discussed as a potential tool for English for Business Communication, as it allows learners to simulate professional interactions such as meetings, negotiations, and customer service exchanges. Researchers argue that integrating online speaking platforms into vocational curricula can help bridge the gap between classroom instruction and workplace communication demands, particularly in contexts where authentic English interaction is limited (Musdariah, 2023). By engaging in spontaneous discussions, vocational students practice functional and pragmatic language use that is essential for professional readiness. Nevertheless, the literature also points to notable limitations. The open-access nature of Free4Talk results in inconsistent partner quality, uneven participation, and limited pedagogical feedback, which may constrain its effectiveness if used without instructional guidance.

Despite growing interest in Free4Talk, several gaps remain in the existing literature. Most studies focus on general EFL contexts and emphasize perceived benefits rather than systematically examining learner engagement, motivation, and speaking development within vocational English for Business Communication courses. Furthermore, there is limited research that critically explores how Free4Talk can be pedagogically integrated through structured tasks, reflection, and feedback to maximize its learning potential. Addressing these gaps is essential to move beyond descriptive accounts and toward a more nuanced understanding of how technology-mediated speaking platforms can effectively support vocational learners' communicative competence.

In sum, Free4Talk offers significant potential as an authentic, interactive speaking platform that aligns with communicative and task-based pedagogies. However, its effectiveness depends not only on access to technology but also on pedagogical scaffolding and instructional design. This study responds to the identified gaps by examining the role of Free4Talk in enhancing learner engagement, motivation, and business-oriented speaking skills in vocational education, thereby contributing empirical evidence to an underexplored area of technology-mediated English for Business Communication.

## METHODOLOGY

### *The research design*

This study employed a mixed method approach that integrates both quantitative and qualitative methods to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of using the Free4Talk platform in enhancing students' business communication skills. Mixed method research combines the use of both qualitative and quantitative approaches within a single study. Mixed method research is a design that merges qualitative and quantitative research approaches in scientific inquiry (Lall, 2021). This approach was chosen because it allowed the researcher not only to analyze data statistically but also to explore students' experiences, perceptions, and reflections within the context of technology-based learning (Mekheimer, 2025).

### *Data Sources and Analysis*

The quantitative data were obtained through a structured questionnaire administered at the end of the instructional intervention. Responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics, specifically mean scores, to determine students' overall perceptions of each questionnaire item. A five-point Likert scale was used, ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). The mean scores were interpreted using a predefined categorization scale, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Mean Range Interpretation

Mean Range	Interpretation	Category
1.00 – 1.80	Strongly Disagree	Very Low
1.81 – 2.60	Disagree	Low
2.61 – 3.40	Neutral	Moderate
3.41 – 4.20	Agree	High
4.21 – 5.00	Strongly Agree	Very High

To ensure instrument reliability, the internal consistency of the questionnaire was examined using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The reliability analysis yielded an alpha value of  $\alpha \geq 0.70$ , indicating acceptable internal consistency for educational research. In terms of content validity, the questionnaire items were reviewed by two experts in English for Business Communication and educational technology to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the research objectives. Minor revisions were made based

on expert feedback prior to data collection.

### ***Qualitative Data Analysis***

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis, following a systematic coding process. The analysis was guided by an inductive analytical framework, allowing themes to emerge from the data rather than being predetermined. The coding process involved three main stages:

1. *Open coding*, in which interview transcripts were read repeatedly to identify meaningful units related to students' experiences aspects of using Free4Talk.
2. *Axial coding*, where related codes were grouped into broader categories by identifying patterns and relationships among them.
3. *Selective coding*, during which overarching themes were refined and finalized to represent key dimensions of students' learning experiences.

To enhance trustworthiness, the researcher conducted member checking by summarizing key interpretations and confirming them with selected participants. This process helped ensure that the identified themes accurately reflected students' perspectives. Each interview lasted approximately 20 –30 minutes and was conducted in English to capture authentic reflections on students' communicative experiences.

### ***Data Collection Procedures***

Data collection was conducted over four weeks period. Students participated in English Talk sessions through Free4Talk twice a week. Topics for discussion were aligned with business communication themes such as *introducing products, presenting ideas, handling customer inquiries, and participating in meetings*. At the end of the implementation period, the questionnaire was distributed online via Google Forms. Then, there were ten students interviewed to gain a deeper understanding their experiences in using Free4talk.

### ***Participants***

The participants in this study were 20 students from the Business Administration Study Program who enrolled in the English for Business course and had prior experience using the Free4Talk platform. The participants were selected through purposive

sampling, based on specific criteria relevant to the objectives of the study (Henry Laverty & William Kelly, 2023). The participants were chosen based on considering their active involvement in Free4Talk based learning activities focused on business communication contexts. The selection criteria for participants included the following: 1) The active students in the current semester and enrolled in the English for Business course, 2) The students had participated in at least eight sessions of business communication practice using the Free4Talk platform, and The students were willing to participate in completing the questionnaire and/ semi structured interview. These criteria were designed to ensure that participants had sufficient experience in using the platform within a professional communication context.

The number of participants was considered methodologically appropriate for a mixed-methods study in a vocational education context. For the quantitative component, the sample size allowed for meaningful descriptive analysis of students' perceptions. For the qualitative component, interviewing ten participants was deemed sufficient to reach data saturation, as recurring patterns and themes emerged across interviews. This sample size is consistent with previous small-scale qualitative studies focusing on technology-mediated language learning in vocational settings.

### *Research Instrument*

The quantitative instrument used in this study was a questionnaire employing a five-point Likert scale to measure students' perceptions of the improvement in their business communication skills after using Free4Talk (Jiao et al., 2020). Meanwhile, qualitative data were collected through semi structured interviews with selected participants to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences in using Free4Talk. The interview method was chosen for its flexibility, allowing the researcher to explore participants' views and experiences in greater depth (Ruslin et al., 2022).

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The quantitative data were analyzed to identify the students' perceptions of using Free4Talk to enhance their business communication skills. A five point Likert scale questionnaire was administered to measure students' levels of agreement on ten statements related to the platform's effectiveness. The scale ranged from *Strongly Disagree (1)* to *Strongly Agree (5)*. Meanwhile, the qualitative data were analyzed to

identify patterns and categories related to students' experiences, including benefits, challenges, and motivational aspects of using *Free4Talk*. After analyzing the data found the result as follow:

Table 2. Students' perception Toward the Usability and Accessibility of Free4Talk

Statement	Mean	Interpretation
Free4Talk is easy and practical to use for speaking practice.	4.25	Strongly Agree
The platform's features are suitable for improving speaking activities.	3.50	Agree
I can access Free4Talk easily anytime and anywhere.	3.90	Agree
Free4Talk helps me communicate more freely and naturally.	3.25	Neutral

The data revealed that the statement “*Usability and Accessibility of Free4talk*” received the highest level of agreement among the respondents. The overall mean score of students' perceptions toward the usability and accessibility of *Free4Talk* was 3.73, which falls within the “high” category. This indicates that students generally have a positive perception of *Free4Talk* as an accessible and user-friendly platform for practicing English speaking skills. This indicated that students perceive the platform as highly accessible, convenient, and user-friendly. Its simple design and flexible features encourage frequent use and reduce psychological barriers to speaking, allowing students to communicate with greater confidence and engagement.

Based on the results of the interview, it can be concluded that students perceive *Free4Talk* as a highly usable and accessible platform that effectively supports their English-speaking development, particularly in the context of business communication. The majority of students appreciate its user friendly interface, free access, and ease of use without requiring any registration or payment, which makes it suitable for vocational learners with limited resources. This finding aligns with recent empirical evidence demonstrating that online platforms offering relaxed, low pressure environments foster increased engagement and lower speaking anxiety among language learners (Suhardi et al., 2024). Furthermore, research has shown that usability features such as easy access, progress tracking, and adaptive content enhance self efficacy and sustained autonomous practice (Jeong, 2022) (Li & Bonk, 2025). The user centered design of digital language learning platforms plays a crucial role in removing psychological barriers and increasing learners' willingness to engage in communicative practice (Azarova et al., 2021).

Table 3. Students' perception Toward Motivation and Engagement

Statement	Mean	Interpretation
Using Free4Talk increases my motivation to practice English.	4.00	Agree
I feel more confident speaking English through Free4Talk.	2.90	Neutral
Free4Talk makes learning English more enjoyable and less stressful.	3.50	Agree
The platform encourages me to practice English more frequently	3.95	Agree

The second highest mean was found in the statement “*Motivation and Engagement.*” . It was 3.73 which falls within the “high” category. This reveals that students view the platform as a powerful source of motivation for continuous language practice. Motivation plays a central role in language learning success, as it encourages perseverance and active participation.

As the students stated in the interview section, students are generally highly motivated and engaged when using Free4Talk for English learning. While some of them still face confidence challenges, most participants find the platform enjoyable, accessible, and effective in promoting consistent speaking practice. The findings suggest that Free4Talk fosters a positive learning attitude, enhances self directed learning, and encourages continuous engagement in English communication.

Recent studies confirm that mobile assisted language learning significantly increases learners' self-efficacy, accessibility to content, and sustainable self-directed study habits outside the classroom (Jeong, 2022). Through the social and interactive nature of Free4Talk, students can express themselves freely, exchange ideas with global users, and experience authentic communication, which strengthens their intrinsic motivation to improve their speaking performance. Research on self study applications demonstrates that learners adopt digital platforms for managing resources, self monitoring, and sustaining out of class learning through intrinsic motivations related to culture, travel, and personal interest (Li & Bonk, 2025). The gamified and tracking features embedded in language learning platforms provide reinforcement that maintains learner engagement over time.

Table 3. Students' perception Toward Language and Business Communication Skills

Statement	Mean	Interpretation
Free4Talk helps improve my English fluency.	4.10	Agree

Free4Talk helps me learn and use business-related vocabulary.	3.30	Neutral
I can apply what I practice on Free4Talk in real business communication contexts.	3.25	Neutral
I can practice negotiation and presentation skills through Free4Talk discussions.	3.20	Neutral
Free4Talk prepares me to communicate effectively in the global workplace.	3.40	Neutral

Statements related to fluency, vocabulary acquisition, and workplace readiness each received mean scores of 3.45 categorized ‘high’, showing students’ agreement that Free4Talk helps them improve both their linguistic and professional English skills. Continuous interaction with native and non native speakers allows learners to internalize vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, and speaking patterns in context.

In the interview section, most of the students argued that they have been able to elaborate their ideas longer, structured and rich of vocabularies. This condition supports the communicative language teaching principle, which emphasizes the importance of authentic communication as a means to develop fluency and pragmatic competence (Qasserras, 2023) . Recent evidence indicated that digital task-based interventions produce significant gains in fluency, accuracy, and complexity, with the largest effect on fluency and increased learner confidence and engagement (Saleem et al., 2025). Platform mediated communicative practice has been shown to increase motivation, social presence, and communicative competence, particularly in supporting pronunciation and oral confidence in online settings (Azarova et al., 2021). Therefore, Free4Talk serves as a bridge between theoretical learning and practical language use, enabling learners to develop the oral proficiency required for professional communication.

Moreover, empirical studies have confirmed that use of online language exchange platforms shows statistically significant positive effects on university students’ speaking scores, with particularly strong improvements in fluency and grammar (Bahar & Dalimunte, 2025). The integration of task based language teaching with digital tools has been shown to replicate communicative language teaching principles such as authentic tasks, negotiation of meaning, and feedback yielding stronger fluency and confidence in digitally mediated implementations (Saleem et al., 2025).

Table 5. Students’ perception Toward Intercultural Communication Competence

Statement	Mean	Interpretation
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I learn how to communicate with people from different cultures on Free4Talk.	3.40	Neutral
Free4Talk increases my awareness of cultural diversity in communication.	3.75	Agree
Talking to international users helps me understand global communication styles.	3.15	Neutral

Another positive finding relates to students' perception of intercultural communication development 3.43 which falls within the "high" category. This table showed that the platform allows students to engage in real cross cultural interactions, promoting both linguistic competence and cultural awareness. These experiences reflect the growing importance of global communication skills in modern workplaces and support the aims of vocational education to prepare graduates with international adaptability.

In interview result found that Free4Talk contributes positively to building their intercultural communication competence, especially by increasing their awareness of cultural diversity and providing real opportunities to engage with speakers worldwide. While students still face minor challenges in understanding global communication styles and maintaining fluent interaction across cultures, they appreciate the platform as a valuable learning space to practice tolerance, adaptability, and cultural sensitivity. Recent research demonstrates that AI driven cross cultural intelligent language learning systems enhance both linguistic proficiency and intercultural competence when usability and perceived usefulness encourage sustained engagement (Xia et al., 2024). Such intercultural exposure enhances empathy and respect for diversity, which are essential soft skills in global business contexts (Agbai et al., 2024). Studies conducted across higher education institutions confirm that integration of synchronous and asynchronous online communication tools supports the development of cross-cultural competence and highlights the communicative motive for platform use in business language contexts (H. Zeng & Luo, 2024).

Overall, the findings from both the quantitative and qualitative analyses confirmed that Free4Talk serves as an effective, accessible, and motivating platform that supports the enhancement of business communication skills among vocational students. The integration of Free4Talk into English learning enables learners to engage in authentic, real-time communication that strengthens their fluency, motivation, and intercultural competence key components of global employability. Students' positive perceptions across usability, engagement, and language development domains highlight the platform's

role in bridging classroom learning with real-world communication experiences. Moreover, the results underscore the relevance of incorporating digital, learner centered tools in vocational education to cultivate self directed, confident, and culturally adaptable communicators. In line with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), Free4Talk exemplifies how technology enhanced language learning can democratize access to meaningful communication practice and prepare students for participation in international and professional environments.

In synthesizing, the findings from both quantitative and qualitative data collectively address the research aim of examining the effectiveness of Free4Talk in enhancing vocational students' English business communication skills. Students' positive perceptions of the platform's usability and accessibility indicate that Free4Talk provides a low-barrier, user-friendly environment that supports frequent and autonomous speaking practice. This accessibility, combined with increased motivation and engagement, creates favorable conditions for sustained language use beyond the classroom. Furthermore, improvements in fluency, vocabulary use, and communicative confidence demonstrate that authentic, real-time interaction on Free4Talk facilitates meaningful language development aligned with business communication needs. In addition, students' growing intercultural awareness highlights the platform's contribution to preparing learners for global workplace communication. Taken together, these findings suggest that Free4Talk functions not merely as a speaking practice tool but as an integrated digital learning space that bridges theoretical instruction and real-world communication. Thus, the study confirms that Free4Talk effectively supports the development of linguistic, motivational, and intercultural competencies essential for vocational students' readiness in professional and international contexts, in line with the broader goals of technology-enhanced and learner-centered education.

## CONCLUSION

This study investigated the students' perceptions of using *Free4Talk* to enhance their English business communication skills in a vocational education context. The findings revealed that *Free4Talk* is perceived as an effective, accessible, and user-friendly platform that promotes active engagement, motivation, and authentic communication practice. The quantitative results indicated positive perceptions across four key areas

usability and accessibility, motivation and engagement, language and business communication skills, and intercultural communication competence with overall mean scores categorized as “high.” These results were further supported by qualitative interview data, which highlighted that students felt more confident, motivated, and engaged while using *Free4Talk*, as it allowed them to communicate freely and interact with speakers from diverse cultural backgrounds.

In summary, the integration of *Free4Talk* in English for Business Communication courses effectively bridges classroom learning and real world communication, fostering self directed learning, intercultural awareness, and the development of essential professional communication skills required in global workplaces. The platform not only enhances students’ fluency and confidence but also provides authentic exposure to business-related communication practices aligned with vocational education goals.

For future research, it is recommended to conduct longitudinal and experimental studies to measure specific improvements in students’ speaking performance such as fluency, accuracy, and pragmatic competence after consistent use of *Free4Talk*. Further exploration of instructor roles, feedback mechanisms, and task based integration within platform mediated learning environments is also suggested to optimize the pedagogical potential of *Free4Talk* in supporting sustainable, technology enhanced language learning and contributing to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education).

Despite the positive findings, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the relatively small sample size and the focus on a single vocational education context may limit the generalizability of the results to other institutions or learner populations. Second, the study relied primarily on self-reported questionnaire and interview data, which may be subject to personal bias and may not fully reflect actual improvements in speaking performance. Finally, the short duration of platform use did not allow for the measurement of long-term language development outcomes. These limitations suggest that the findings should be interpreted cautiously and highlight the need for broader and more longitudinal investigations in future research.

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