

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A. Background of The Study

For junior high school students, especially those in eighth grade, speaking represents one of the basic skills that must be developed during English lessons. At this stage, learners are expected to express opinions, ideas, and information orally in English within everyday communicative situations. The ability to speak goes beyond forming grammatically correct sentences; it also covers several important elements, such as fluency, accuracy, and comprehension, when expressing ideas verbally. Ansari et al. (2022) describe communication skills as the capacity to exchange views, emotions, and feelings with other people. (Ork et al., 2024) similarly note that speaking involves actively using language to deliver meaning during communication. Hence, developing speaking ability is one of the priorities in English instruction. Developing this ability calls for creative and interactive teaching tools, one of which is the Stimuler application, which enables students to engage in speaking practice in a livelier and more enjoyable manner.

Even so, for EFL learners speaking is often considered the toughest skill to master (Rahmat et al., 2025). Students experience various difficulties in speaking ability, such as a

limited vocabulary, difficulty in pronunciation, low fluency, apprehension about making errors, and a lack of self-confidence. In addition, other factors such as learning strategies, curriculum, and learning environment also exacerbate students' difficulties in speaking (Andriani Putri et al., 2020). This condition hinders students from expressing their ideas and thoughts verbally with confidence. In addition to factors originating with students, the classroom learning process also poses problems for the enhancement of speaking abilities. English classes still tend to rely on teacher-centered, traditional methods, leaving students with fewer chances to actively practice speaking actively. Consequently, students tend to remain passive in speaking activities and are not accustomed to expressing their opinions verbally.

According to preliminary observations at SMP Negeri 11 Bengkulu Tengah, a number of problems concerning students' speaking abilities were found. Many students had difficulty expressing their ideas verbally during classroom activities. Their participation in speaking tasks was still limited, and only a few students were actively involved in discussions. This condition indicates that students' speaking abilities still require further improvement. These problems can be classified into several specific aspects.

Interviews conducted with English teachers during teaching practicum at SMP Negeri 11 Bengkulu Tengah

showed that students still struggle a great deal when speaking English. According to the teachers, heavy reliance on the whiteboard as the primary teaching tool makes lessons repetitive and less interactive, thereby negatively impacting students' motivation to practice speaking. Even though the teachers know about the Stimuler app, they still lack the knowledge needed to apply it effectively in class.

Based on these observations, several issues related to students' speaking abilities can be identified. First, students' vocabulary remains limited, so they have difficulty expressing ideas, thoughts, or concepts in English. Second, students also experience difficulties in pronunciation due to differences in the sound systems between English and their native languages. Third, students' fluency is still low, as evidenced by frequent pauses, repetitions, and hesitations when speaking. Fourth, some students are apprehensive about making mistakes when speaking in English, which reduces their participation in speaking activities in class. Fifth, low self-confidence is also a factor that inhibits students from expressing their ideas verbally. Sixth, the process of learning is still largely teacher-centered, which reduces students' chances to actively engage in speaking practice. These problems indicate that students' speaking skills require further enhancement through the implementation of more innovative and interactive learning strategies and media.

To overcome these problems, digital-based learning innovations can be one possible solution. Digital learning tools can make materials easier to access and understand, cut down student boredom, and sharpen focus during lessons, all while adjusting to today's changing needs (Iberahim et al., 2023). Blending technology into language teaching has been shown to raise students' motivation, engagement, and involvement in speaking tasks.

Out of many digital apps available, Stimuler was chosen for this study since it is specifically built to develop speaking ability through interactive, AI-driven features. Unlike general language learning applications that emphasize vocabulary memorization or grammar exercises, Stimuler offers interactive speaking exercises, pronunciation analysis, automatic assessment, and real-time feedback. Such features directly address the problems this study identified weak pronunciation, low fluency, and low confidence. Through artificial intelligence (AI)-based feedback, students can practice repeatedly without fear of being judged, which can reduce anxiety and increase confidence. Digital resources such as Stimuler provide dynamic and engaging methods for practicing speaking as technology continues to grow in influence in the language learning process (Sari & Rahman, 2025).

Stimuler fits the idea of Technology-Enhanced Language Learning (TELL) an approach that uses technology to boost engagement and interactivity while supporting student-centered learning. Research by Sniukiene et al. (2020) shows that this application has become popular among teachers and students in various countries. It is designed to make speaking exercises more accessible, especially for students who have fewer opportunities to speak English in their daily lives. Through AI, Stimuler assesses pronunciation, fluency, and accuracy, letting students monitor how they are progressing. (Nugraha et al., 2025) explains that the implementation of artificial intelligence (AI) in speaking practice significantly plays a role in enhancing students' language skills, fostering interactive learning experiences, and alleviating repetitive burdens in the teaching process.

Several previous studies have explored how digital applications contribute to developing students' speaking skills. These studies commonly indicate that technology can increase motivation along with pronunciation and fluency. However, most of them only offer a general overview of digital applications and are largely limited to senior high or university-level participants. Research specifically examining the effect of Stimuler on junior high, particularly eighth-grade, students' speaking skills remains limited.

By grade eight, students are starting to build basic communication ability, including sharing opinions and holding simple English conversations. This makes it important to use suitable methods and tools-such as a gamified language-learning app-to help students practice speaking more actively and confidently.

B. Identification of The Problems

Based on the background described above, the following issues can be identified:

1. Students' vocabulary is still insufficient, causing difficulty in expressing ideas and communicating effectively in English.
2. Students have difficulty with pronunciation, which makes their speech unclear and reduces the effectiveness of communication.
3. Many students have low fluency, characterized by frequent pauses and slow speech, which affects their ability to speak smoothly.
4. Students are often afraid of committing errors, which inhibits their active participation in speaking tasks.
5. Students' low self-confidence further inhibits their willingness to speak in English and express themselves.
6. The English language learning process still relies on teacher-centered methods, which limit opportunities for interactive, student-centered speaking practice.

C. Limitations of The Problems

1. This study was limited to grade-eight EFL students at SMP Negeri 11 Bengkulu Tengah in the 2026/2027 academic year, who were assigned to the experimental group and the control group.
2. This research concentrates on Stimuler, a gamification-based application used to assist students in practicing English speaking. The app offers several speaking-practice functions, pronunciation checking, and automatic feedback that assist students in building their speaking skills.
3. The focus of this research is restricted to the speaking ability of junior high school students within English class sessions.

D. Research Question

Is there a significant effect in the speaking ability of students before and after using the Stimuler application in eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 11 Bengkulu Tengah?

E. Research Objective

The purpose of this study was to determine whether there was a significant effect in the speaking ability of students before and after using the Stimuler application in eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 11 Bengkulu Tengah.

F. Significance of The Research

This research is expected to offer both both theoretically and practically contributions, as described below:

This research is anticipated to make contributions both theoretically and practically to English language instruction, particularly in enhancing students' speaking skills. In theory, this study adds to existing literature on digital learning tools particularly Stimuler-for developing EFL students' speaking skills..

Practically, this research offers an alternative teaching strategy for speaking classes through the use of interactive digital apps. Using Stimuler can create a livelier learning atmosphere that helps students practice speaking with greater confidence. In addition, this study may act as a source of reference for future researchers who wish to conduct similar research on digital learning tools for enhancing speaking skills.

G. Definitions of Key Terms

1. Speaking Ability

In this research, speaking ability means how well students can voice their ideas or information in English, covering pronunciation, fluency, and confidence.

2. Stimuler Gamification

Stimuler Gamification here refers to Stimuler's role as a gamification-based tool that supports students'

speaking practice using interactive activities, pronunciation drills, and automatic feedback.

3. Eighth-Grade

In this research, eighth graders refers to grade-eight students at SMP Negeri 11 Bengkulu Tengah in the 2026/2027 academic year who were the research subjects, assigned to an experimental group and a control group.

