

## Research Articles

## The effect of the EchoEnglish application on EFL students' speaking skills

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## Abstract

Thai government have created and promoted an application named the EchoEnglish application which aims to help Thai people to improve their English communication. The aim of this application is to increase level of confidence in speaking. Learners can achieve their learning goals and relieve their fear when they are speaking, keeping motivated. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the effect of the EchoEnglish application on EFL students' speaking skills.

This result was conducted to investigate the effects of EchoEnglish application on EFL students' speaking skill (total scores), to investigate the effects of EchoEnglish application on EFL students' sub speaking skills (Fluency, Pronunciation, Vocabulary), and to compare the effects of EchoEnglish application on the speaking skills of Math-Science students to those of English-Chinese students. Furthermore, this study was aimed to explore EFL students' opinions about learning English speaking through the EchoEnglish application. This chapter presents the results of the study. The results of the research objectives regarding the effects of EchoEnglish application on EFL students' speaking skills (total scores), the effects of EchoEnglish application on EFL students' sub speaking skills (Fluency, Pronunciation, Vocabulary), the comparison of the effects of EchoEnglish application on the speaking skills of Math-Science students to those of English-Chinese students. It showed the differences between the students' speaking before and after the experiment. Furthermore, students' opinions about learning English speaking through the EchoEnglish application were presented.

**Keywords:** *EchoEnglish application, EFL students, speaking skills*

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## Introduction

English has undoubtedly become important in daily life. English is more worldwide than all other spoken languages. In addition to the 341 million native speakers, there are 150 to 300 million speakers who use it as a second language and 100 to 1,000 million speakers who use it as a foreign language (Gerard, 2000; Mahu, 2012). Moreover, English is now the major communication media among nations, parts of nations, and organizations. For example, it is the official language for the United Nations and the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). It is also the most commonly used language for acquiring access to the world's resources. Books, magazines, and newspapers written in English are available in many countries around the world. English is also the most commonly used language in the internet. Due to its increasing importance, English proficiency is an advantage.

English is also essential in Thailand. The ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), launched in 2015, intends to open up a free labor market between the ten ASEAN member countries; as a result, professionals and skilled workers with advanced English language proficiency have an advantage during job seeking because English is the common medium for international communication in both public and private sectors. Consequently, strong English language skills are necessary for Thai students if they are to gain maximum advantage of the 2015 AEC opportunities. Accordingly, the Ministry of Education (2002) put great emphasis on English language communication (Ministry of Education, 2002). This development made the need for advanced communication in English even greater.

Speaking is considered the most important among all four English skills. Speaking is the process of producing and receiving information in language between speakers and receivers through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols. Many scholars claim that speaking is the most important skill, especially in foreign language learning, because people use it to communicate for different functions and purposes (Kayi, 2006; Khamkhien, 2010; Nunan, 1991). Moreover, speaking is used twice as much as reading and writing in our communication (Rivers, 1987). In addition, speaking is the most important quality that employers require of graduates. As Harvey (2000) noted, possessing good speaking skills is an indicator to succeed in job application because it is first seen by employers. Therefore, mastering speaking skills is the most important aspect of learning a second or foreign language (Harvey, 2000)

However, developing speaking skills is not easy for EFL students. Many research studies revealed that Asian countries where English is learnt as a foreign language find difficulties. (Sawir, 2005; Tanveer, 2007; Tuan & Mai, 2015). Similarly, Thai students still face difficulties in speaking English although they have studied English for many years. It was found that many Thai students could not use English skills effectively, especially listening and speaking (Jaiyai et al., 2005). There are a lot of teaching methods employed to improve English speaking skills; however, it leads to insufficient results (Wanich, 2014)

There are many factors that cause difficulties in speaking English among Thai students. They hardly have chances to use English in their daily lives. They use English only inside classroom and are rarely exposed to authentic English language environments that allow them to use English. The most important factor is that they are lack of confidence to speak English with their teacher and classmates. Confidence factor, as an important aspect of the affective factors, is generally assumed to have a significant role in successful learning. Numerous research studies have reported that learners with high confidence are able to perform easily while learners who lack confidence are usually not able to develop their speaking skills (Dornyei, 2001; Krashen, 1981; Viswat & Jackson, 1993). Confidence also provides learners with the motivation and energy to become positive about their own learning and drive them to acquire the targeted language. On the other hand, students who lack confidence are fearful, timid, and reluctant to speak in class ((Ni, 2012). Therefore, it is very important to provide students with environments where they have the opportunities to use English at ease and which are supportive to develop confidence.

Nowadays, advances in information and communication technologies offer new opportunities for enhancing the quality and effectiveness of language teaching and learning. The possibility of mobile technology plays an important role to motivate students to participate in communicative activities. Mobile learning can offer students multimedia interaction with their peers, like listening to each other and recording their spoken production. Moreover, mobile technology makes more convenient for students to conduct a wide range of activities, particularly those that can make students interact with each other and share what they have studied. More importantly, mobile learning creates a safe environment for the students to practice and to gain more confidence in English speaking. According to Kelso (2010), technology assists English language students to excel in a 21st-century education environment; teaching English through technology can provide a less threatening environment for language learning (Kelso, 2010). That is, when students practice speaking on their own with the aid of a mobile learning application, the stress and anxiety entirely decreases. Therefore, mobile devices may become a good alternative to teach speaking skills.

Recently, Thai government have created and promoted an application named the EchoEnglish application which aims to help Thai people to improve their English communication. The aim of this application is to increase level of confidence in speaking. Learners can achieve their learning goals and relieve their fear when they are speaking, keeping motivated. Thai government has promoted the application to be used to enhance speaking skills among Thai people in schools and workplaces. Research studies on the effect of this application on speaking skills have not found yet; its impacts are not clear yet. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the effect of the EchoEnglish application on EFL students' speaking skills

## Objectives

1. To investigate the effects of EchoEnglish application on EFL students' speaking skills in Science-Math Program

2. To investigate the effects of EchoEnglish application on EFL students' speaking skills in Chinese-English Program
3. To compare the effects of EchoEnglish application on the speaking skills of Science-Math Program' to those of Chinese-English Program.
4. To investigate the EFL students' opinions about learning English speaking through the EchoEnglish application.

### Research Design

The present study relies on a triangulation method: combining quantitative and qualitative data collection. According to Cresswell (2002), the purpose of a triangulation method is “to simultaneously collect both quantitative and qualitative data, merge the data, and use the results to understand a research problem” (Creswell, 2002). The quantitative data will consist of students' pretest and posttest scores from speaking test and scores obtained from a questionnaire. The qualitative data will include the open-ended part of the questionnaire and an interview. The data from the open-ended part and interview data will be triangulated each other.

The participants will consist of 70 tenth-grade students studying in the second semester of the 2019 academic year at Surasakmontree school. These participants are selected via purposive sampling and will be divided into two experimental groups. The participants will be taught using the EchoEnglish application.

#### Instruments

The instruments in this study will include lesson plans, an English speaking test, a questionnaire, a semi-structure interview, and the rubric of speaking skills.

The researcher will ask three specialists to review the instruments, an English speaking test, and a questionnaire in order to determine their validity. Each specialist will determine whether each instrument is valid and will also comment on the language use. The reliability and item facility will be determined in the pilot phase study. To determine the reliability, all research instruments will be tried out with students who are not the participants in this study. The instruments will be analyzed using the reliability coefficient Cronbach's alpha

### Data Collection

This study will last 8 weeks. In the second week of the second semester in 2019 academic year, the participants will be asked to sign the consent form and will complete the pretest. Soon after the pretest, two experimental groups will be taught by lesson plans based on the EchoEnglish application. After the instruction, the students in both groups will take the posttest and complete the questionnaire to study their opinions. The researcher will ask students in both experimental groups to volunteer for the interview; the interview will be conducted after students' completing the questionnaire

## Results and Discussion

### The effects of EchoEnglish application on EFL students' speaking skills (total scores)

To investigate the effects of the EchoEnglish application on EFL students' speaking skills. The mean scores of the pretest and the posttest were calculated using descriptive statistics for the means and standard deviation, and then the mean scores of the pretest and the posttest of the participants were compared using a paired t-test. Table 1 showed the overall means scores of the pretest and the posttest of the experimental group 1 and the experimental group 2.

**Table 1:** The overall means scores of the pretest and the posttest of the experimental group 1 and the experimental group 2.

Group		Mean	S.D	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
1	Posttest	12.29	1.13	26.398	34	0.000
	Pretest	5.86	1.56			
2	Posttest	12.34	1.28	21.566	34	0.000
	Pretest	5.89	2.00			

As present in the table 1, for the experimental group 1, the results show there was a significant difference between the mean scores of the pretest and the posttest at the 0.05 level. The mean scores of the posttest (M=12.29, S.D=1.13) were higher than the mean scores of the pretest (M=5.86, S.D=1.56). For the experimental group 2, the results show there was a significant difference between the mean scores of the pretest and the posttest at the 0.05 level. The mean scores of the posttest (M=12.34, S.D=1.28) were higher than the mean scores of the pretest (M=5.89, S.D=2.00). It can be concluded that the EchoEnglish application effected on the EFL students' speaking skills. Several scholars conducted research studies on the use of mobile technology and its applications for improving speaking skills. Mobile technology and applications are viewed as potentially significant aids to language learning. For example, Hwang et al (2014) studied EFL students' attitudes toward learning activities supported by a mobile learning system to develop EFL students' listening and speaking skills. The finding showed that students were more motivated to practice English skills when they used a mobile learning system. Moreover, it was found that their attitudes toward the learning activities are positive (Hwang, 2014)

The effects of EchoEnglish application on EFL students' sub speaking skills (Fluency, Pronunciation, Vocabulary)

To investigate the effects of the EchoEnglish application on EFL students' sub speaking skills (Fluency, Pronunciation, Vocabulary). The mean scores of the pretest and the posttest of the sub speaking skills were calculated using descriptive statistics for the means and standard deviation, and then the mean scores of the pretest and the posttest of the sub speaking skills were compared using a paired t-test. The table 2 showed the

overall mean scores of the pretest and the posttest of sub speaking skills of the experimental group 1 and the experimental group 2.

**Table 2:** The overall mean scores of the pretest and the posttest of sub speaking skills of the experimental group 1 and the experimental group 2

Sub skills	Group		Mean	S.D	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Fluency	1	Posttest	4.03	0.71	14.083	34	0.000
		Pretest	2.03	0.79			
	2	Posttest	4.06	0.73	15.796	34	0.000
		Pretest	1.74	0.82			
Pronunciation	1	Posttest	4.00	0.64	16.498	34	0.000
		Pretest	1.89	0.68			
	2	Posttest	4.11	0.58	17.198	34	0.000
		Pretest	1.94	0.80			
Vocabulary	1	Posttest	4.26	0.61	18.059	34	0.000
		Pretest	1.94	0.74			
	2	Posttest	4.17	0.77	12.635	34	0.000
		Pretest	2.20	0.80			

As presented in table 2, for the experimental group 1, the results showed that there was significant difference between the mean scores of the pretest and the posttest at the 0.05 level. The mean score of the posttest of fluency (M=4.03, S.D=0.71) were higher than the mean scores of the pretest (M=2.03, S.D=0.79), the mean scores of the posttest of pronunciation (M=4.00, S.D=0.64) were higher than the mean score of the pretest (M=1.89, S.D=0.68), and the mean scores of the posttest of vocabulary (M=4.26, S.D=0.61) were higher than the mean scores of the pretest (M=1.94, S.D=0.73). In the same way, for the experimental group 2, the results showed that there was significant difference between the mean scores of the pretest and the posttest at the 0.05 level. The mean scores of the posttest of fluency (M=4.06, S.D=0.73) were higher than the mean scores of the pretest (M=1.74, S.D=0.82), the mean scores of the posttest of pronunciation (M=4.11, S.D=0.58) were higher than the mean scores of the pretest (M=1.94, S.D=0.80), and the mean scores of the posttest of vocabulary (M=4.17, S.D=0.66) were higher than the mean scores of the pretest (2.20, S.D=0.80). This means that the mean scores of the posttest of sub skills were significantly higher than the mean scores of the pretest in both the experimental group 1 and the experimental group 2. It can be concluded that the EchoEnglish application effected on EFL students' sub speaking skills (Fluency, Pronunciation, Vocabulary).

The comparison of the effects of EchoEnglish application on the speaking skills of Math-Science students to those of English-Chinese students.

To compare the effects of EchoEnglish application on the speaking skills of Math-Science students to those of English-Chinese students, the data were analyzed by using mean score and standard deviation. To compare whether there was significant difference between the mean score of the students in Math-Science group and English-Chinese group, an independent t-test analysis were employed. The results were presented in table 3

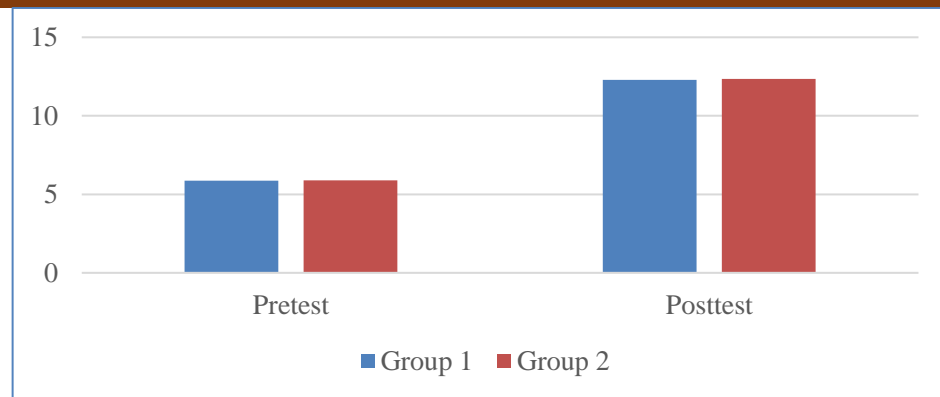
**Table 3:** The comparison of speaking skills of Math-Science students to those of English-Chinese students.

	Group	Mean	S.D	df	t	p-value
<b>Pretest</b>	Math-Science	5.86	1.56	68	-0.067	0.947
	English-Chinese	5.89	2.00			
<b>Posttest</b>	Math-Science	12.29	1.13	68	-0.198	0.844
	English-Chinese	12.34	1.28			

As presented in table 3, the results revealed that before the experiment, there was no statistical difference between the mean scores of the students in the Math-Science group and those of the English-Chinese group ( $t=-0.067$ ,  $p=0.947$ ). The mean scores from the speaking skills pretest of the Math-Science students and the English-Chinese students were 5.86 and 5.89 with the standard deviations of 1.56 and 2.00 respectively. It can be concluded that the students in the Math-Science group and the English-Chinese group were in the same level.

After the experiment, the result showed that there was no statistical difference between the mean scores of the students in the Math-Science group and those of the English-Chinese group ( $t=-0.198$ ,  $p=0.844$ ). The mean scores from the speaking skills posttest of the Math-Science students and the English-Chinese students were 12.29 and 12.34, with the standard deviations of 1.13 and 1.28 respectively. This means that the mean scores of the posttest were higher than the mean scores of the pretest in both groups.

Figure 1 illustrates a graphical comparison of the mean scores of speaking skills of students in the Math-Science group and the English-Chinese group before and after the experiment.



**Figure 1:** The mean scores of the Math-Science and the English-Chinese students

As shown in Figure 1, the results showed that after the experiment the mean scores of students in the Math-Science group and the English-Chinese group were higher than those of before the experiment. That is, the mean score of the posttest outperformed the mean score of the pretest. The results also indicated that after the experiment, the students in the Math-Science group and the English-Chinese group improved their speaking skills. It can be concluded that the EchoEnglish application effected on EFL students' speaking skills both Math-Science students and English-Chinese students. Similarly, Bitter and Meylani (2016) studied the effects of a mobile English speaking application (Qooco Kids English) on the speaking ability of students in two schools. The significant statistical findings indicated that the Qooco Kids English application increases student achievement in both spoken and written English (Bitter & Meylani, 2016) and Kusmaryani et al (2019) investigated the influence of mobile applications on students speaking skills and critical thinking in English language learning. The study used a mixed method to obtain the quantitatively and qualitatively data. The statistic result showed that mobile applications used as learning assistance positively optimized students' speaking skills and critical thinking in English language learning. The result from the interview revealed that students were very enthusiastic exploring and practicing English skills by using mobile learning applications. They also suggested that mobile learning applications are applicable for any subjects (Kusmaryani, Musthafa, & Purnawarman, 2019) Students' opinions about learning English speaking through the EchoEnglish application.

To explore students' opinions about learning English speaking through the EchoEnglish application, students were required to answer the questionnaire on students' opinions about learning English speaking through the EchoEnglish application by rating each item on five-rating scales from strongly agree =5, agree = 4, neutral = 3, disagree = 2, strongly disagree = 1. The scores from questionnaire were analyzed and calculated for the mean and standard deviation. After that, the mean scores were interpreted into five levels from highly negative to very positive. Table 4 showed students' opinion about learning English speaking through EchoEnglish



application of the experimental group 1 and table 5 showed students' opinion about learning English speaking through EchoEnglish application of the experimental group 2

**Table 4:** students' opinion about learning English speaking through EchoEnglish application of the experimental group 1.

Questionnaire items	M	S.D.	Level
1. Using the EchoEnglish app to practice speaking skills is more fun.	4.17	0.86	Very positive
2. Using the EchoEnglish app to practice speaking skill is less stressful.	4.54	0.51	Very positive
3. I can use the vocabulary learnt by the EchoEnglish app better, since they provide me with more pictures, sound, definition, examples.	4.20	0.83	Very positive
4. The EchoEnglish app helps me become more confident in speaking.	4.77	0.43	Very positive
5. By participating in frequent non-threatening situations/ testing (with apps), I am now able to face more challenging ones in real life.	4.60	0.55	Very positive
6. The EchoEnglish app allows me to interact better in the class.	4.49	0.51	Very positive
7. The EchoEnglish app helps enhance my speaking skill.	4.54	0.61	Very positive
8. Learning speaking through the EchoEnglish app is more practical than through textbooks.	4.51	0.56	Very positive
9. The use of the EchoEnglish app in learning environments encourages me to participate in learning activities.	3.77	0.84	Positive
10. Interacting with the EchoEnglish helps me remember vocabulary, expressions, sentence structure better.	4.11	0.80	Very positive
<b>Average</b>	<b>4.37</b>	<b>0.22</b>	<b>Very positive</b>

As shows in table 4, the overall of the mean scores of students' opinion about learning English speaking through EchoEnglish application was very positive level (mean score = 4.37 and standard deviation = 0.22). The result revealed that the students had very positive opinion about learning English speaking through EchoEnglish application. Based on the mean scores of students' opinions, the statements which received the highest mean scores was "The EchoEnglish app helped me became more confident in speaking" (M=4.77, S.D=0.43). The second was "By participating in frequent non-threatening situations/ testing (with apps), I was able to face more challenging ones in real life" (M=4.60, S.D=0.55). The third was "Using the EchoEnglish app to practice speaking skill is less stressful" (M=0.54, S.D=0.51) and "The EchoEnglish app helps me enhance my speaking skills" (M=0.54, S.D=0.61). The statement which received lowest mean scores was "The use of the EchoEnglish app in learning environments encouraged me to participate in learning activities" (M=3.77, S.D=0.84). Although this

statement received the lowest mean scores, it was still in the positive level. It can be concluded that students had very positive opinion about learning English speaking through EchoEnglish application

**Table 5:** students' opinion about learning English speaking through EchoEnglish application of the experimental group 2.

Questionnaire items	M	S.D.	Level
1. Using the EchoEnglish app to practice speaking skills is more fun.	4.74	0.51	Very positive
2. Using the EchoEnglish app to practice speaking skill is less stressful.	4.54	0.56	Very positive
3. I can use the vocabulary learnt by the EchoEnglish app better, since they provide me with more pictures, sound, definition, examples.	4.43	0.61	Very positive
4. The EchoEnglish app helps me become more confident in speaking.	4.69	0.47	Very positive
5. By participating in frequent non-threatening situations/ testing (with apps), I am now able to face more challenging ones in real life.	4.40	0.70	Very positive
6. The EchoEnglish app allows me to interact better in the class.	4.49	0.61	Very positive
7. The EchoEnglish app helps enhance my speaking skill.	4.34	0.68	Very positive
8. Learning speaking through the EchoEnglish app is more practical than through textbooks.	4.23	0.69	Very positive
9. The use of the EchoEnglish app in learning environments encourages me to participate in learning activities.	4.17	0.86	Very positive
10. Interacting with the EchoEnglish helps me remember vocabulary, expressions, sentence structure better.	3.94	0.80	Positive
<b>Average</b>	<b>4.40</b>	<b>0.23</b>	<b>Very positive</b>

As shows in table 5, the overall of the mean scores of students' opinion about learning English speaking through EchoEnglish application was very positive level (mean score = 4.40 and standard deviation = 0.23). The result revealed that the students had very positive opinion about learning English speaking through EchoEnglish application. Based on the mean scores of students' opinion, the statement which received the highest mean scores was "Using the EchoEnglish app to practice speaking skills was more fun" (M=4.74, S.D=0.51). The second was "The EchoEnglish app helps me become more confident in speaking" (M=4.69, S.D=0.47). The third was "Using the EchoEnglish app to practice speaking skill is less stressful" (M=4.54, S.D=0.56). The statement which received lowest mean scores was "Interacting with the EchoEnglish helps me remember vocabulary, expressions, sentence structure better" (M=3.94, S.D=0.80). Although this statement received the lowest mean scores, it was still in the positive level. It can be concluded that students had very positive opinion about learning English speaking through EchoEnglish application.

As shows in table 4, the overall of the mean scores of students' opinion about learning English speaking through EchoEnglish application was very positive level (mean score = 4.37 and standard deviation = 0.22). As shows in table 5, the overall of the mean scores of students' opinion about learning English speaking through EchoEnglish application was very positive level (mean score = 4.40 and standard deviation = 0.23). Some researchers studied the effect of mobile applications on students' anxiety in English speaking classes. Han and Keskin (2016) explored the impact of using WhatsApp application on alleviating students' speaking anxiety (FLSA) and their feelings about the activities. The result showed that WhatsApp significantly impacted the students' language acquisition by lowering EFL speaking anxiety (Han & Keskin, 2016) In the same way, Machmud and Abdulah (2018) studied the effect of mobile applications on students' speaking skills and their anxiety. The result showed that the speaking ability of students taught by using mobile phone applications was significantly higher than the students by using conventional teaching method. The speaking ability of the high-anxiety students taught by using mobile phone applications was higher than the high-anxiety students taught by conventional teaching method, and the speaking ability of low-anxiety students taught by using mobile phone applications was also higher than low-anxiety students taught by conventional teaching method (Machmud, 2014)

#### The data from interview

The results from interviewing students supported the results from the questionnaires. That is, students had very positive opinion about learning English speaking through EchoEnglish application. It was found that students enjoyed learning English through this application in class which help them practice English speaking better. All students (100%) responded they learned how to pronounce the words or sentences and use appropriate vocabularies. Moreover, it was found that students enjoyed learning English through this application which helped them understood western culture. All students (100%) responded they learned some new western culture from the EchoEnglish application. Additionally, the EchoEnglish application encouraged students to speak English. These interview data showed that students had very positive opinions about learning English speaking through EchoEnglish application. From students' judgments above, they responded the EchoEnglish application could enhance their speaking effectively as well as their understanding of western cultures. Furthermore, they enjoyed learning English through the EchoEnglish Application and felt satisfied with studying English subject, and this led them to speak English with confidence in their daily lives. The EchoEnglish application covers all English language competence. It was created appropriate to Thai people. According to Taipetch (2019), learners will be encouraged interaction and can practice English language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing from the various contents which relates to the topics. Moreover, the contents are related to careers for example English for restaurant services, English for OTOP and SME, English for taxi, and English for spa receptionist and therapist, so the contents can be applied to learners' real life and works. Because

the content in each topic are presented both in Thai and in English, Thai people can understand the contents easily.

It can be concluded that this study confirms the advantages of using the EchoEnglish application in English speaking skills learning. That is, this application provided several advantages for students. Firstly, it supported active learning and student-centered learning styles in a diverse of the students' demographic background. Students can learn speaking themselves and students in both groups improved their speaking skills. Secondly, it helped students gained speaking knowledge by practicing their newly acquired English speaking skills in active learning environments. Furthermore, it offers greater opportunities for students to use language in real life situations. Thirdly, it also increased students' motivation and engagement for learning. Finally, this methodology can support students to be successful in 21st century. As discussed above, the EchoEnglish application could be introduced as alternative method to assist English speaking learning in EFL classroom, and improve English teaching of EFL instructors.

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