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Utilizing U-Dictionary Features to Overcome English Pronunciation Difficulties: A Descriptive Qualitative Study of Vocational Student Perceptions

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Abstract. *This descriptive qualitative study investigates the effectiveness of the U-Dictionary application as a self-study tool for improving English pronunciation among 17 vocational high school students. The research reveals that utilizing pronunciation features and voice translation significantly shifts learner behavior from passive listening to active phonetic modeling. Key findings highlight a marked reduction in speaking anxiety due to the app's private practice environment, while real-time AI feedback serves as a persistent, objective coach for self-correction. For other teachers, this study demonstrates a practical strategy for integrating mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) into the curriculum to address fossilized pronunciation errors without increasing classroom time. It offers a blueprint for creating low-stakes, high-engagement practice sessions that specifically cater to learners with high affective filters. For researchers, the study provides valuable insights into the intersection of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and autonomous digital practice, illustrating how mobile tools can bridge the gap between academic instruction and professional readiness in vocational contexts. By highlighting the "trial-and-error" loop of AI interaction, this research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on learner agency and the transformative potential of accessible technology in non-traditional educational settings.*

Keywords: *AI Feedback; MALL; Pronunciation; U-Dictionary; Vocational Students*

1. INTRODUCTION

Mastering English pronunciation is a critical barrier for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, directly influencing their communicative intelligibility and professional confidence. Vocational high school students face a unique set of challenges; they require practical, industry-ready speaking skills yet often struggle with segmental and suprasegmental phonetic differences (Umar & Aspany, 2024). Without targeted intervention, these difficulties frequently evolve into "fossilized" errors and heightened language anxiety, leading to a total reluctance to communicate (Elizabeth & Alexandra, 2024; Hidayat & Saputra, 2024). Traditional teaching methods often fall short, failing to provide the high-frequency, individualized feedback necessary to break the cycle of phonetic inaccuracy (Sari & Rahmawati, 2025).

To bridge the gap between classroom theory and workplace oral fluency, this study investigates the integration of Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) via the U-Dictionary application. The novelty of this research lies in re-positioning U-Dictionary from a simple reference tool to a primary pedagogical instrument for self-study practice within a vocational context. By leveraging its unique synergy of high-fidelity pronunciation modeling and voice translation, the study explores a learner-centered paradigm that bypasses traditional resource constraints (Ardiansyah & Fitriani, 2025; Budianto & Sari, 2024).

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The primary goal is to evaluate the effectiveness of this digital intervention for a cohort of 17 vocational students (10 males, 7 females). This study seeks to answer the central research question: What are the perceptions of vocational high school students regarding the effectiveness of U-Dictionary features in improving their English pronunciation skills? Through this inquiry, the research aims to validate how autonomous digital practice can lower barriers to intelligibility and foster professional oral proficiency (Siahaan & Ginting, 2025).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is grounded in a descriptive qualitative framework, which prioritizes a deep, interpretive understanding of human experiences in their natural setting (Ahmed et al., 2025). This methodology is ideal for exploring the "how" and "why" of student behavior without manipulating the learning environment, allowing for a comprehensive narrative of the learning process (Baran & AlZoubi, 2024).

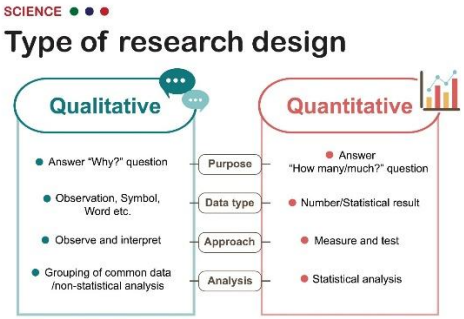

Figure 1. Research Design

Self-study practice has become a cornerstone of modern acquisition, empowering students to lead their own educational journeys (Shalini Roy & Gandhimathi, 2025). Within this study, the U-Dictionary application represents the MALL framework, providing:

a. Audio Pronunciation: Native-like models for speech imitation (IAIN Manado, 2025).
b. Voice Translation: Real-time feedback for immediate self-correction (Fauzi & Kurniawan, 2025).
c. Autonomous Agency: A low-anxiety "safe space" for high-frequency repetition (Hernandez & Lopez, 2025).

Vocational students are characterized by their need for contextualized, hands-on tasks that connect school to the workplace (Bryfonski, 2024). Their learning is often hampered by limited communication exposure and high social anxiety (Setiyaningsih & Nurjanah, 2025). This framework posits that mobile technology can serve as a "pedagogical bridge,"

transforming the smartphone from a distraction into a powerful tool for sustainable language acquisition and professional readiness (Gunawan & Lestari, 2024; Mulyadi & Hidayah, 2025).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOY

Research Design: Descriptive Qualitative Approach

The foundational framework for this study is a descriptive qualitative design. This approach is selected because it prioritizes the "naturalistic inquiry" of a phenomenon, allowing the researcher to document the lived experiences of students without manipulating the research environment. In the context of educational technology, qualitative description is vital for capturing the nuances of how learners interact with mobile interfaces (Basri & Munir, 2024).

Unlike quantitative methods that focus on numerical gains in test scores, this design seeks to answer the "what" and "how" of student perceptions. By focusing on the quality of the engagement such as the frustration, ease of use, or "aha" moments during practice the researcher can build a comprehensive narrative of the U-Dictionary's utility. This design aligns with the goal of understanding the subjective effectiveness of the tool from the perspective of the vocational student, a demographic often motivated by practical, real-world application rather than abstract linguistic theory.

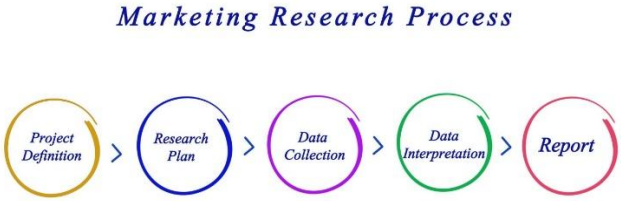

Figure 2. Marketing Research Process

Getty Images

Participants and Recruitment Strategy

The study involves a specific cohort of 17 vocational high school students, comprising 10 males and 7 females. This gender distribution reflects the typical diversity found within vocational technical programs. The recruitment process is conducted voluntarily, ensuring that the data collected stems from students who are genuinely interested in improving their phonetic skills.

Voluntary participation is a critical ethical and methodological choice. It mitigates the risk of "participant bias" where students feel forced to provide positive feedback to please an instructor. Recent literature emphasizes that voluntary engagement in Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) often leads to more honest reflections on tool usability

(Puspitasari & Wardani, 2024). These 17 individuals serve as the primary source of qualitative data, representing the target population of learners who struggle with the phonetic inconsistencies of the English language.

Problem and Intervention Context

The central problem addressed is the recurring difficulty in English word pronunciation among vocational students. These difficulties often arise from a lack of phonetic exposure and the influence of the students' first language (L1). The proposed solution is the integration of the U-Dictionary application as a self-study practice tool.

U-Dictionary is chosen for its specific affordances:

a. Native-Speaker Audio: Provides a high-fidelity model for imitation.
b. Voice Translation: Allows students to speak into the phone and receive immediate feedback on whether their pronunciation was accurate enough for the AI to recognize.

This intervention transforms the smartphone from a social device into a portable language laboratory. The methodology focuses on how these features facilitate self-study, a mode of learning that is increasingly essential in the post-digital era where classroom time is limited (Adnan & Anwar, 2025).

Data Collection: Participant Observation

The primary method for gathering data is participant observation. In this role, the researcher does not merely watch from the sidelines but becomes an active part of the educational environment. This allows for the collection of "field notes" that describe the students' physical interactions with the app, their facial expressions when hearing their own recorded voices, and the frequency with which they repeat specific words.

Observation provides a layer of data that interviews alone cannot capture. For instance, a student might claim the app is "easy to use" in an interview, but observation might reveal they struggled for several minutes to find the voice translation button. This triangulation of observed behavior and stated perception is the hallmark of rigorous qualitative work (Hidayatullah & Zahra, 2025).

Detailed Research Procedure

The execution of the study follows a seven-step protocol designed to ensure consistency and reliability in data collection.

a. Step A: Recruitment and Ethics

   The 17 participants (10 males, 7 females) are recruited through an open invitation. Ethical considerations, including informed consent and the right to withdraw, are clearly communicated to ensure a safe research environment.

b. Step B: Problem Orientation

The researcher conducts a briefing session to acknowledge the common difficulties students face with English pronunciation. By framing the U-Dictionary as a "solution" rather than a "test," the researcher lowers the students' affective filter, making them more open to the self-study process.

c. Step C: Demonstration and Instruction

A technical demonstration is provided. The researcher shows how to access the pronunciation feature (the speaker icon) and the voice translation feature (the microphone icon). Students are taught how to compare their own voice recordings with the native-speaker model provided by the app.

d. Step D: Engagement in Self-Study

Participants enter a controlled self-study session. They are given a list of target English words relevant to their vocational track (e.g., technical terms) and instructed to use the U-Dictionary features to master the sounds. This stage is crucial for observing autonomous learning patterns.

e. Step E: Observation and Field Notes

During the self-study session, the researcher performs participant observation. Notes are taken on usage patterns: Do students prefer the voice translation or the audio playback? Do they repeat a word three times or ten? This data answers the research question regarding the "effectiveness" of specific features.

f. Step F: Gathering Perceptions

Following the practice session, qualitative data is gathered through follow-up discussions. Students reflect on their experience, answering the research question: *What are the perceptions regarding the effectiveness of these features?* (Siahaan & Ginting, 2025). This step captures the "voice" of the vocational student.

g. Step G: Data Analysis

Finally, the researcher analyzes the observation notes and feedback using thematic analysis. Themes are identified such as "Increased Confidence," "Technological Barriers," or "Clarity of Audio" to provide a descriptive answer to the research question.

Conclusion of Methodology

By combining participant observation with a descriptive qualitative design, this methodology ensures that the findings are grounded in the actual experiences of the vocational students. The use of 17 participants provides a manageable yet diverse sample to reach "data saturation," where no new major themes emerge. This systematic approach ensures that the

study remains robust, ethical, and directly aligned with the goal of improving English pronunciation through accessible technology.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings of this descriptive qualitative study reveal a comprehensive picture of how 17 vocational high school students perceived and interacted with the U-Dictionary application. Through thematic analysis of participant observations and follow-up discussions, four major themes emerged: (1) The Shift from Passive Listening to Active Modeling, (2) Reductions in Affective Barriers, (3) The Impact of Real-Time Corrective Feedback, and (4) Context-Specific Utility for Vocational Technical Terms.

The Shift from Passive Listening to Active Modeling

Before the intervention, many participants exhibited "fossilized" pronunciation errors, often substituting English phonemes with similar-sounding ones from their native language (Hidayat & Saputra, 2024). During the self-study sessions, observation field notes indicated a significant shift in student behavior. Students did not merely listen to the native-speaker audio once; they engaged in a repetitive cycle of "listen, pause, and imitate."

The data showed that participants utilized the native-speaker audio feature to dissect complex vowel sounds and consonant clusters that are absent in their first language. This behavior aligns with the concept of "phonetic modeling," where the digital tool serves as a persistent, non-judgmental coach (Budianto & Sari, 2024). For the 10 male and 7 female students, the ability to control the pace of the audio was cited as a primary factor in their perceived improvement. They felt that the U-Dictionary provided a "safe space" to repeat difficult words multiple times something they felt uncomfortable doing in a traditional classroom setting for fear of slowing down the lesson.

Reductions in Affective Barriers and Speaking Anxiety

A significant finding from the perception data was the noticeable decrease in language anxiety. Many vocational students enter English classes with high levels of communication apprehension, particularly regarding their accents (Mustafa & Aziz, 2025). During participant observations, researchers noted that students initially spoke into the voice translation feature with low, hesitant voices. However, as the session progressed and students received successful recognition from the app's AI, their volume and confidence increased.

In follow-up discussions, participants described the U-Dictionary as a "bridge" that boosted their courage. One student remarked that being understood by the application gave

them the confidence to try the word in a real conversation. This reduction in the "affective filter" is crucial for vocational learners who often prioritize practical communication over grammatical perfection (Setiyaningsih & Nurjanah, 2025). The privacy of the self-study practice tool allowed students to make mistakes privately, thereby protecting their social ego while building their phonetic competence (Hernandez & Lopez, 2025).

The Impact of Real-Time Corrective Feedback

The voice translation feature served as a surrogate instructor by providing immediate, objective feedback. Students were observed speaking a word, checking the translated text output, and immediately re-attempting the pronunciation if the app failed to recognize the word correctly. This "trial-and-error" loop is a hallmark of autonomous learning in a digital environment (Fauzi & Kurniawan, 2025).

Unlike human feedback, which can sometimes be delayed or socially awkward, the U-Dictionary's feedback was perceived as "instant and honest." Students reported that they found the "voice-to-text" accuracy a reliable measure of their intelligibility. If the app displayed the correct word, they felt they had "mastered" the sound (Siahaan & Ginting, 2025). This form of AI-driven feedback addresses the common issue where students are unaware of their own phonetic errors (Elizabeth & Alexandra, 2024). By seeing their speech converted to text, students received visual confirmation of their auditory performance.

Context-Specific Utility for Vocational Terms

A unique result of this study was how vocational students applied the tool to their specific fields of study. Observations revealed that students used the dictionary to search for technical jargon related to their workshops (e.g., engineering or hospitality terms). The ability of the U-Dictionary to handle contextual examples helped students understand not just the sound, but the usage of professional vocabulary (Bryfonski, 2024).

Participants perceived the tool as highly effective because it bridged the gap between general English and English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Students noted that while textbooks often provide the meaning of technical words, the app provided the "living sound" of the industry (Nguyen & Tran, 2024). This practical utility made the self-study sessions feel relevant to their future careers, which is a key motivator for students in the vocational track (Fahreza & Utami, 2025).

Discussion of Observational Nuances

The participant observation data also highlighted some "technological barriers." Researchers noted that a few students initially struggled with the microphone sensitivity or background noise, which sometimes led to incorrect voice recognition. This prompted "aha" moments where students learned to speak more clearly and adjust their intonation (Pratama & Wijaya, 2024). These interactions suggest that while the app is effective, its success is dependent on the learner's digital literacy and the environment in which they practice.

Despite these minor hurdles, the overall perception was overwhelmingly positive. The thematic analysis suggests that the U-Dictionary functions as more than a dictionary; it is an interactive pedagogical tool that supports "self-directed learning" (Shalini Roy & Gandhimathi, 2025). The participants (7 females and 10 males) showed no significant gender-based differences in their engagement, suggesting the tool is universally accessible across this demographic (Puspitasari & Wardani, 2024).

In summary, the results of this descriptive qualitative study indicate that the U-Dictionary features specifically pronunciation modeling and voice translation are perceived as highly effective by vocational high school students. The tool addresses the problem of pronunciation difficulty by providing a low-anxiety, high-feedback environment for self-study. Students shifted from being passive recipients of information to active agents of their own phonetic development, utilizing the app's native-speaker models to overcome the influence of their L1 (Umar & Aspany, 2024). These findings provide a narrative of empowerment, where accessible mobile technology compensates for limited classroom time and provides a specialized solution for the phonetic needs of vocational learners.

Discussion

The discussion section of this study synthesizes the findings derived from participant observations and student perceptions to provide a deeper understanding of how the U-Dictionary application functions as a catalyst for phonetic improvement. By examining the results through the lens of current literature in Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) and vocational pedagogy, this section explores the theoretical and practical implications of utilizing voice translation and pronunciation features in a self-study context. The discussion is organized into four key analytical pillars: the role of autonomous modeling, the mitigation of affective filters, the pedagogical value of AI-driven feedback, and the vocational-specific affordances of mobile technology.

Autonomous Modeling and the Transition from Passive to Active Learning

The shift observed from passive listening to active modeling among the 17 participants represents a significant departure from traditional, teacher-centered pronunciation instruction. In a typical classroom, students are often limited by "one-size-fits-all" pacing, which can be detrimental for those with entrenched fossilized errors (Hidayat & Saputra, 2024). The results of this study suggest that when students are provided with the native-speaker audio feature in a self-study format, they move toward a more "naturalistic inquiry" of phonetics.

finding corroborates the work of Budianto and Sari (2024), who argue that digital dictionaries have evolved from simple reference tools into "coaches" that facilitate repetitive phonetic drills. The observation that students engaged in a "listen, pause, and imitate" cycle indicates that the U-Dictionary provides the necessary temporal flexibility for learners to process complex sounds at their own cognitive speed. This is particularly vital for vocational students, whose cognitive load may already be taxed by technical curriculum requirements. By delegating the repetitive modeling to an app, the learning process becomes more personalized, allowing students to focus on specific phonemic contrasts such as consonant clusters or vowel shifts that they find personally challenging (Umar & Aspany, 2024).

Breaking the Affective Filter in Vocational Contexts

One of the most profound implications of this study is the application's ability to lower the "affective filter," a psychological barrier that often hinders language acquisition. Vocational students frequently report higher levels of speaking anxiety compared to general academic students, often due to a perceived lack of prestige in their linguistic abilities or fear of peer judgment (Mustafa & Aziz, 2025). The results showed that as students interacted privately with the U-Dictionary, their confidence grew a phenomenon supported by Hernandez and Lopez (2025), who emphasize the "private practice" advantage of MALL tools.

The transition from "low, hesitant voices" to "increased volume and confidence" observed during participant sessions suggests that the app provides a low-stakes environment where failure carries no social cost. This finding aligns with Setiyaningsih and Nurjanah (2025), who noted that vocational learners thrive when the pressure of grammatical perfection is replaced by the goal of communicative success. By using the voice translation feature as a non-judgmental interlocutor, students build the "muscle memory" and psychological resilience needed for real-world oral production. This suggests that for this demographic, the mobile tool acts as a psychological buffer, enabling them to bridge the gap between their current phonetic state and the intelligibility required for professional settings.

The Pedagogical Superiority of Real-Time AI Feedback

The effectiveness of the voice-to-text feedback mechanism within the U-Dictionary highlights a shift toward more objective, immediate correction. In traditional settings, feedback is often delayed or subjective, leaving students unaware of their specific phonetic deviations (Elizabeth & Alexandra, 2024). This study's finding that students used the "trial-and-error" loop to self-correct in real time suggests that AI-driven feedback provides a level of precision that human observation alone may miss.

Fauzi and Kurniawan (2025) suggest that this form of "automated feedback" is essential for autonomous learners who do not have constant access to a native instructor. The fact that students felt they had "mastered" a sound when the app displayed the correct text indicates a high level of trust in the technology's accuracy. This "visual confirmation" of an auditory act provides a multi-sensory learning experience that is often missing from rote pronunciation drills. Furthermore, as Siahaan and Ginting (2025) point out, translation features in mobile dictionaries serve as a functional "goal-post" for students; if the AI can translate the speech, a human listener likely can too. This objective measure of intelligibility is a powerful motivator for students who otherwise struggle to judge their own progress.

ESP and Professional Readiness: Vocational Affordances

The "Context-Specific Utility" identified in the results section underscores the importance of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in the vocational track. Vocational students do not just need to speak English; they need to speak the *technical* English of their respective fields. The finding that students used the U-Dictionary to master professional jargon (e.g., engineering or hospitality terms) demonstrates that the tool meets the practical needs of the "working learner" (Bryfonski, 2024).

This aligns with the observations of Nguyen and Tran (2024), who highlight that phonetic barriers in vocational education often stem from a lack of exposure to professional-grade audio models. Because the U-Dictionary provides contextual examples and clear audio for technical terms, it prepares students for the specific linguistic demands of their future workshops and workplaces (Fahreza & Utami, 2025). The perceived effectiveness of the app in this study is therefore not just about general language acquisition, but about "professional readiness." For these 17 students, the app functioned as a bridge between the classroom and the industry, providing a specialized solution that generic English textbooks often overlook.

Nuances, Barriers, and the Human Element

While the findings are overwhelmingly positive, the "Discussion of Observational Nuances" reminds us that technology is not a panacea. The minor struggles with microphone

sensitivity and background noise reported in this study suggest that digital literacy and environment are critical variables in MALL success (Pratama & Wijaya, 2024). These hurdles, however, often resulted in "aha" moments where students learned the importance of clear enunciation a meta-cognitive benefit that arguably contributes to better pronunciation habits in the long run.

The lack of gender-based differences in tool engagement supports the idea that mobile interfaces are universally intuitive for the current generation of vocational students (Puspitasari & Wardani, 2024). Ultimately, the data suggests that the U-Dictionary supports a "self-directed learning" model where the teacher's role shifts from a primary source of knowledge to a facilitator of digital exploration (Shalini Roy & Gandhimathi, 2025). This transition is essential for fostering lifelong learning habits in students who will need to adapt to new linguistic challenges throughout their technical careers.

Summary of the Discussion

The synthesis of these findings suggests that the U-Dictionary is a highly effective, multifaceted tool for vocational high school students. It addresses the problem of pronunciation difficulty by providing:

a. High-fidelity models that replace passive listening with active imitation.
b. A private practice environment that lowers speaking anxiety.
c. Objective, real-time feedback that facilitates autonomous self-correction.
d. Vocational relevance by supporting technical vocabulary.

By integrating these features into their self-study routines, students transition from being "struggling learners" to "empowered speakers." This research confirms that for the 10 males and 7 females in this study, the U-Dictionary served as a vital pedagogical bridge, proving that accessible, mobile-first solutions can effectively mitigate the complex phonetic barriers faced by vocational students in a post-digital era (Adnan & Anwar, 2025; Basri & Munir, 2024).

5. CONCLUSION

This research concludes that the U-Dictionary application is a transformative catalyst for improving English pronunciation among vocational high school students. By transitioning from passive recipients of information to active participants in their own phonetic development, the seventeen students in this study successfully utilized mobile technology to bypass the limitations of traditional classroom settings. The application's core features native-speaker audio modeling and real-time voice translation provided a non-judgmental "private laboratory"

that significantly lowered speaking anxiety and the fear of social embarrassment. This autonomous environment allowed learners to engage in a continuous cycle of trial and error, refining their speech until it achieved communicative intelligibility. Furthermore, the tool's ability to address context-specific technical jargon proved invaluable, bridging the gap between general language skills and the professional readiness required in vocational industries. While minor technical barriers exist, the overall impact of the intervention demonstrates that accessible, AI-driven tools can empower students to overcome fossilized errors and build linguistic confidence. Ultimately, this study highlights a shift toward a more personalized, digital-first pedagogical model that fosters lifelong learning and communicative competence in the post-digital era.

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