



Revealing High-Achieving Students' Experiences in Leveraging EPISODEN for Practicing Speaking: Case Study of Islamic Boarding School Students

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Article Info	Abstract
Received: 2026-04-07 Revised: 2026-05-19 Accepted: 2026-09-18 Keywords: Islamic boarding school, speaking practice, online platform DOI: 10.24256/ideas.v14i2.12268 Corresponding Author: Emy Rosida emyrosidabusiness1@gmail.co m Jago Bahasa Inspira, Kediri, Jawa Timur	<i>Speaking in foreign languages is an unavoidable challenge especially when those languages become school subjects. The same challenge is faced by English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners in Indonesia, who often encounter psychological and environmental obstacles that limit their opportunities to practice spoken English, particularly within Islamic boarding school settings. This qualitative case study explores how four high-achieving Grade 10 students (two female, two male) from one Islamic boarding school in Sidoarjo, Indonesia, experienced approximately one year of practicing English speaking through EPISODEN, an online video-conference platform that pairs learners with international interlocutors for short conversational sessions. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews supported by observation and analyzed across four dimensions: cognitive, emotional, social, and pedagogical. Findings indicate that participants perceived several benefits, including increased confidence, expanded vocabulary, opportunities for real-time communication with international interlocutors, reduced speaking anxiety, and space for self-regulated learning. However, participants also reported constraints related to inconsistent interlocutor engagement and a lack of systematic corrective feedback from the platform. Beyond the platform itself, boarding-school conditions, including strict daily schedules, restrictions on electronic device use, and limited access to private spaces, further constrained participants' ability to make full use of EPISODEN. These findings suggest that online conversational platforms can meaningfully supplement students' self-reported</i>

speaking practice and confidence, though their usefulness in boarding-school settings depends strongly on institutional flexibility and consistent teacher support.

1. Introduction

Learning second languages especially when it comes to production skills such as speaking and writing is undeniable challenging thing. It becomes more rigorous when someone learns her/his foreign language when his/her surrounding does not communicate using that language daily. Speaking is a complex interactive process consists of receiving, processing, and producing information. According to Brown et al. (2004), speaking is divided into 5 parts namely imitative, intensive, responsive, interactive, and extensive speaking. Interactive speaking is when someone has an impromptu interaction with his/her interlocutors. Having an interactive speaking activity could be a challenging thing when we utilize our foreign language. Lativi and Hasnawan (2023) support this idea by mentioning that people often struggle in revealing what they want to say and give responses that are in line with their topic discussing in their foreign language. A party who often experiences this obstacle is English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners.

EFL learners are non-native English speaker who learns English in their school. They come from countries that do not use English as their daily communication language such as Indonesia. As EFL learners from non-English speaking country, EFL learners in Indonesia commonly undergo significant internal and external obstacles when practicing their speaking ability. It also happens in Islamic boarding school students when the culture in Indonesia requires the Islamic boarding school students to communicate with Arabic, Indonesian, or their local languages. Consequently, students in Islamic boarding school have limited opportunity to have real and contextual interaction using English (Sari, 2025).

Despite the challenges and culture, Islamic boarding school faces the future demand that they need to prepare young generation with global competencies (Muhaemin and Muin, 2024) as English ability becomes one of those demands. It encourages this institution to explore more opportunity for students to communicate using English. However, many scholars reveal some challenges faced by Islamic boarding school students when they are pursuing their English speaking habit such as lack of English vocabulary, being afraid of making grammar mistakes Lativi and Hasnawan (2023), being worried of getting negative feedback, and many more. Besides the internal factors mentioned, EFL learners also have external factors influenced their performance in speaking such as perceived as showing off by their friends (Sari, 2025), the tendency of using mother tongue Lativi and Hasnawan (2023) and lack of opportunity to practice (Setiawan et al., 2024).

Not only those two factors, but there are other factors influencing

someone's fluency in communication. One of other factors is cognitive fluency (Ericsson and Johansson, 2023). Cognitive fluency is defined as someone's ability to comprehend the topic during her/his conversation. Having this ability is crucial to maintain the discussion being integrate and mobilize steadily. This notion of cognitive fluency underlies the cognitive dimension in the four-dimensional framework of students' conversational-agent experiences proposed by Ericsson and Jansson (2021). Beyond the cognitive dimension, this framework also comprises the emotional dimension, concerning learners' affective responses such as confidence and anxiety; the social dimension, concerning learners' sense of connection and engagement with their interlocutors; and the teaching dimension, concerning the pedagogical affordances learners draw on, such as feedback and self-regulated learning. This study adopts all four dimensions as its analytical framework to examine participants' experiences in a more holistic manner. Regardless, nowadays there have been several ways to deal with those obstacles. One of them is practicing our speaking through online platform as low-anxiety environment.

There are some ways in improving speaking skills by using online media, ranging from talking with Artificial Intelligence assistance to registering in web-based platforms for having a conversation with people from other countries. These practices fall under the broader concept of computer-mediated communication (CMC), defined as human interaction facilitated through digital technology rather than face-to-face contact, which has become increasingly influential in language teaching and learning (Warschauer, 1997). Within CMC, synchronous video interaction, where users communicate in real time through video and audio, has been of particular interest because it more closely resembles face-to-face spoken interaction than text-based or asynchronous forms of communication, while still allowing learners to connect with target-language speakers conveniently and at any time (Kessler et al., 2021). Previous scholars have investigated some online media to support students having better speaking ability. Ericsson and Johansson (2023) investigated how secondary students practice their speaking with Artificial Intelligence assistance, Al-jamili et al. (2024) examined how students can acquire English speaking skill better through online computer games, Wahyuningsih and Nurona (2024) analyzed the improvement of university students' speaking skill through OME TV platform, a synchronous video-chat service.

Beyond platform-specific outcomes, CMC and synchronous video interaction have also been examined in relation to learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) and speaking anxiety, two constructs closely tied to learners' emotional and social experiences in speaking practice. Alqarni (2021) found that learners reported higher WTC and lower speaking anxiety in online settings compared to face-to-face contexts, while Chen et al. (2022) reported that online peer interaction was associated with reduced foreign language anxiety. Similarly, Zhang et al. (2024) and Liu et al. (2024) demonstrated that interacting with conversational agents and peers through technology-supported platforms can

facilitate learners' willingness to communicate over time. Taken together, this body of research suggests that technology-supported EFL interaction, particularly through synchronous video platforms, can serve as a lower-anxiety and higher-engagement medium for speaking practice, positioning WTC and speaking anxiety as relevant lenses for understanding learners' experiences in such environments.

High-achieving students are commonly defined as learners who consistently demonstrate superior academic performance relative to their peers, often reflected in class ranking or subject-specific achievement (Şentürk, 2016). This population is theoretically significant to investigate because high achievers tend to employ more structured metacognitive and self-regulation strategies in their learning process (Şentürk, 2016), which may shape how they engage with autonomous, feedback-scarce learning environments such as online conversational platforms. This characteristic is particularly relevant to EPISODEN, where learners are required to initiate and sustain conversations independently, negotiate topics in real time, and evaluate their own performance with minimal external correction. Examining how high-achieving students, who are assumed to possess stronger self-regulatory capacity, experience and respond to these conditions can reveal whether such capacity translates into more effective and confident use of independent speaking-practice platforms, or whether contextual constraints, such as the boarding-school environment, limit these individual advantages regardless of academic standing.

EPISODEN is a free online video-conversation platform designed to give language learners opportunities to practice speaking with interlocutors from other countries. Its core mechanism automatically matches users with a conversational partner for a fixed seven-minute session, encouraging both parties to sustain a spontaneous, real-time exchange within a limited timeframe. To support the conversation, the platform provides topic prompts covering everyday and general-interest themes, which users may follow or move away from as the conversation develops. EPISODEN also includes a chat-box feature that allows users to type words or phrases when verbal communication breaks down, functioning as an on-the-spot vocabulary aid. Because the platform does not provide structured feedback, correction, or performance tracking, users largely rely on self-monitoring, incidental correction from their interlocutors, and self-reflection to gauge their own progress, positioning EPISODEN as an autonomous, learner-driven speaking-practice environment. These characteristics — random partner-matching, time-bound sessions, topic prompts, free accessibility, and the absence of built-in feedback — make EPISODEN a relevant case for examining how learners' experiences unfold across the four-dimensional (cognitive, emotional, social, and pedagogical) framework used in this study, particularly among learners situated in a restrictive institutional environment such as an Islamic boarding school.

Referring to the aforementioned description, various online tools have been utilised to support EFL learners' speaking practice, ranging from AI-based

conversational agents to online games and video-chat platforms. However, most of these studies have been conducted with general EFL learners in relatively unrestricted technological and social environments. What remains underexplored is how high-achieving EFL students, who are assumed to possess stronger self-regulatory capacity, experience synchronous international interaction through a platform such as EPISODEN while situated within the highly regulated technological and linguistic environment of an Islamic boarding school, where electronic device use is restricted and daily communication is conducted primarily in Arabic, Indonesian, and local languages rather than English. This intersection of learner profile, interactional mode, and institutional context has received little empirical attention, positioning the present study to offer a novel contribution to the literature on technology-supported EFL speaking practice. Therefore, this present study aims to explore Islamic boarding high school students' perspective on the use of EPISODEN guided by 2 research questions as follows:

1. How do high-achieving Islamic boarding school students experience the use of EPISODEN for English speaking practice across cognitive, emotional, social, and teaching dimensions?
2. What challenges do these students encounter when using EPISODEN within an Islamic boarding-school environment?

In this study, participants have experienced joining one of online video-conference websites namely EPISODEN for a year. The researcher explored their self-reported experiences using the platform, guided by the research questions aforementioned.

2. Method

Informed by the gap and novelty identified in the literature, this study employed a qualitative approach to discover students' perspectives on their experiences using the EPISODEN platform. This section describes the research design and case boundary, the research context, participant selection, data collection procedures, and data analysis, research ethic, and trustworthiness adopted in this study.

Research Setting

The study was conducted in one of Islamic boarding school located in Sidoarjo, East Java. English is taught as a compulsory subject within the school's formal curriculum, and students' daily communication is generally required to be conducted in Arabic and Indonesian as part of the school's and dormitory's language program. Students' opportunities to practice English outside formal instruction are relatively limited. Based on participants' accounts, most reported having conversational practice with their English teacher only twice a week which is during their English class. Access to personal electronic devices, including laptops and mobile phones, is restricted under the school's boarding regulations; students are permitted to use such devices only under teachers' supervision at

designated times. This regulated environment forms an important part of the case boundary, as it directly shapes the extent to which students can engage with online platforms such as EPISODEN.

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore students' educational experiences and challenges in using EPISODEN, an online video-conference platform, to practice English speaking. A case study design was considered appropriate because this study investigates a contemporary phenomenon, students' experiences with a specific speaking-practice platform, within its real-life context, an Islamic boarding school, where the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly evident (Merriam, 2009). The case in this study is bounded by three parameters: place (one Islamic boarding school in Sidoarjo, East Java), participants (four high-achieving Grade 10 students), and time (approximately one year of EPISODEN experience prior to data collection). This bounded-case approach allows the researcher to examine the participants' experiences in depth while accounting for the particular institutional conditions that shape their engagement with the platform.

Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, specifically criterion sampling, in which individuals are selected because they meet predetermined characteristics relevant to the research questions (Merriam, 2009). The researcher established three criteria: (1) participants were senior high school students, (2) participants were at least 16 years old prior to registering on the EPISODEN platform, and (3) participants ranked in the top five in English achievement in their class.

The age criterion was applied because EPISODEN's platform policy requires users to be at least 16 years old to register. The English-achievement criterion was applied to operationalize "high-achieving students" for this study, as high achievers have been reported to demonstrate more structured metacognitive and self-regulation strategies in language learning (Şentürk, 2016), making them a theoretically relevant population for examining how such learners engage with an autonomous, low-feedback platform like EPISODEN.

Table 1
Profile of the Participants

Participants	Gender	Grade	Age	Number of session
P1	Female	10 th	16 years old	16 sessions
P2	Female	10 th	16 years old	16 sessions
P3	Male	10 th	16 years old	14 sessions
P4	Male	10 th	16 years old	12 sessions

Data Collection

The primary data collection instrument was semi-structured interviews, consisting of twelve open-ended questions covering the four dimensions of students' experiences: cognitive, emotional, social, and teaching aspects. Each interview lasted approximately three hours and was conducted in *Bahasa* to allow participants to express their experiences comfortably; participants' responses were later translated into English for reporting purposes.

In addition to interviews, the researcher conducted observation to support the interview data. Observations focused on participants' behavior and engagement during EPISODEN sessions, conducted over three observation sessions, and recorded through phone.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study was conducted by working directly from the audio-recorded interviews rather than producing full verbatim transcripts. This approach involves repeated listening to audio recordings as the primary means of engaging with and interpreting interview data, and has been recognised as an appropriate alternative to verbatim transcription, particularly for qualitative studies involving a small number of participants and a clearly defined analytical focus (Halcomb and Davidson, 2006).

The researcher listened to each interview recording multiple times to ensure an accurate understanding of participants' responses. During this repeated listening process, relevant segments were translated directly from Indonesian into English by the researcher and recorded as written notes for further analysis. This process allowed the researcher to remain closely engaged with participants' original wording and intended meaning throughout the analysis, rather than relying on a separate transcription stage.

Categorisation of the data occurred concurrently with this repeated listening process. Each response was manually identified according to which research question it addressed and further classified into one of four a priori dimensions, cognitive, emotional, social, and teaching, based on the framework proposed by Ericsson and Jansson (2021). Responses that did not correspond to these four dimensions, particularly those describing environmental constraints within the boarding-school setting, were grouped inductively into an additional challenges category that emerged directly from participants' accounts. This category-assignment process was revisited iteratively; the researcher returned to the audio recordings on several occasions to confirm that each response had been placed within the most appropriate category and to ensure consistency in categorisation across participants.

Research Ethic

This study adhered to ethical research principles throughout its conduct. Written informed consent was obtained directly from each participant prior to their involvement in the study, explaining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and participants' right to withdraw at any stage without

consequence. Institutional permission was also obtained from the boarding school prior to data collection. To protect participants' identities, all data were anonymised: participants are referred to using pseudonymous codes (P1–P4) rather than their real names, and identifying details about the school, including its name, have been withheld throughout this article.

Thrustworthiness

To support the credibility of the findings, this study incorporated a limited form of data triangulation between interviews and observation. Observational data were used specifically to confirm that participants' interactions with their interlocutors on the EPISODEN platform were consistent with what participants described during the interviews, thereby providing a basic check on the accuracy and consistency of participants' self-reported accounts. In addition, the researcher maintained written records of participants' self-reported responses throughout the data collection and analysis process, which served as a basic audit trail that allowed the researcher to trace how each finding was derived from participants' original statements.

The researcher acknowledges, however, that several commonly recommended strategies for enhancing trustworthiness in qualitative case study research were not employed in this study. Member checking, whereby interpreted findings are shared with participants for confirmation or clarification, was not conducted; consequently, the interpretations presented in this study reflect the researcher's understanding of participants' accounts rather than an interpretation validated directly by participants themselves. Similarly, peer debriefing, in which another researcher reviews the coding and interpretation process, was not carried out, meaning that the categorisation of data into the four dimensions and the challenges category was determined solely by the researcher without independent verification. These represent limitations of the present study's methodological rigour, and future research employing a similar design is encouraged to incorporate member checking and peer debriefing to further strengthen the credibility of findings.

3. Result

This section provides the outcome of the study, namely the students' speaking experiences on EPISODEN covering four interrelated dimensions of students–conversational agent experiences, cognitive, emotional, social, and pedagogical/instructional (Ericsson and Jansson, 2021), and the challenges faced by the participants during their use of EPISODEN within their Islamic boarding school environment. Table 1 summarizes the key findings across these dimensions before each is discussed in detail.

Table 2

Summary of Positive and Negative Experiences Across Dimensions

Dimension	Positive Experience	Negative Experience	Representative Evidence	Pedagogical Meaning
Cognitive	Perceived improvement in discourse organization and response formulation via time-bound, real-time sessions	Persistent vocabulary retrieval difficulties for most participants	"It trains my ability to explain something...more structured" (P3)	Time pressure appears to support perceived fluency more than vocabulary acquisition
Emotional	Enjoyment from being corrected/complimented (P1, P2); enjoyment from same-age rapport (P3, P4)	Frustration with disengaged (P1, P2) or overly dominant (P3, P4) interlocutors	"I feel annoyed when there's someone who didn't put the same effort" (P1)	Emotional experience is contingent on random interlocutor quality, not the platform design
Social	Sense of immersion/connection with real interlocutors (P1, P2)	Reduced engagement from a passive interlocutor (P1); low salience of social factor (P3, P4)	"We talk with real humans...it can be less-anxious" (P1)	Relational engagement varies by individual disposition, not systematically by group
Pedagogical /Instructional	Free, accessible features; self-regulated vocabulary learning (P1, P2, P3)	Absence of built-in corrective feedback; reliance on incidental teacher-partners	"I can't assess whether it is correct or not" (P2)	Autonomous learning is supported, but structured feedback still requires human/teacher involvement
Challenges	—	Institutional schedule, device restriction, lack of privacy, preference for offline practice	"Rules...are so strict, especially...electronic devices" (P2)	Institutional context substantially constrains platform usability, independent of learner motivation

Educational Experiences
Cognitive Aspect

Across the four participants, the cognitive dimension of their EPISODEN experience can be distinguished into several interrelated cognitive sub-processes: comprehension, response formulation, vocabulary retrieval, discourse organization, and cognitive fluency (Ericsson and Johansson, 2023).

At the outset, three participants (P1, P2, P4) reported difficulties primarily in response formulation and vocabulary retrieval rather than comprehension itself. P2 explained that she generally understood her interlocutors but struggled to express her thoughts clearly, while P4 described relying on fillers due to infrequent English use outside the classroom, and P1 linked her difficulty to an unsupportive social environment that discouraged her from practising aloud. P3, by contrast, reported no comprehension or retrieval difficulties, instead framing his goal as exposure to a wider range of accents.

"I know some English vocabularies, but I never practice due to my unsupportive environment. It makes me stuttering when I need to speak in English." — P1

"I can say that I do understand what my speaking partners are talking, but somehow I am struggling in giving responses. I do not know how to express my thought clearly." — P2

"I can answer English questions in my exam, but when it requires me to speak, I will make some fillers. I only [speak English] with my English teacher, and it's only once a week." — P4

Following sustained use of EPISODEN, all four participants reported perceived improvement in discourse organization and response formulation, rather than a measured gain in speaking proficiency. P1 and P4 associated this with the platform's real-time format, while P3 explicitly linked the fixed seven-minute session format to improved discourse organization, a view echoed by P1, who reported the time constraint pushed her to retrieve vocabulary she otherwise would not access.

"Because 1 session requires us to speak for 7 minutes with our partner, it trains my ability to explain something becomes more structured." — P3

"By having a 7-minute session, we are encouraged to think creatively about how to maintain the conversation...It makes me think hard to explore the passive vocabularies that I have." — P1

"I can imitate the way [my partners] explain something...I forget some vocabularies and just mentioned something came up to my mind then my speaking partner repeated what I said with the proper vocabularies." — P1

"By joining the session in this platform, I can have a real-time conversation practice which is very good for my improvement. Hopefully my English is not like a textbook anymore." — P4

Taken together, these accounts suggest EPISODEN's time-bound, real-time format may support participants' self-reported cognitive fluency, particularly in response formulation and discourse organization, more than it addresses foundational vocabulary gaps; three of the four participants continued to describe vocabulary retrieval as an ongoing challenge even after roughly a year of use.

Emotional Aspect

Participants' emotional responses to EPISODEN evolved across two broad phases, initial engagement and post-exposure experience, and included both encouraging and discouraging emotions.

In their initial encounters, P1 and P2 both described feeling nervous and self-conscious. P3 and P4 did not report comparable initial anxiety; given the small number of participants, this difference is treated here as individual variation rather than evidence of a gender-based pattern in emotional response.

"I am afraid of making mistakes. I am afraid that they laugh at me. I am afraid that they will not understanding me and I feel self-conscious because of that." — P1

"I didn't confident at all, but I convinced myself that it will be good for myself. Although I was afraid and nervous in the beginning, I kept trying." — P2

As participants gained experience, all four reported positive emotions tied to specific interactional moments. P1 and P2 linked their enjoyment to being corrected or complimented by interlocutors.

"There is someone [who] said that I learn English too early...She said that she loves my confidence...I feel flattered. It boosts my spirit." — P1

"Once I met someone who said that my English has been good for students in my age...I feel honoured." — P2

P3 and P4 associated enjoyment with connecting with same-age interlocutors over shared topics such as hobbies and future plans.

"I met someone in my age. We actually just discuss some simple topics such as weather, cultures, game, and others but I can feel a highly engaged conversation between us." — P3

"My discussion becomes interesting when I met a girl in my age. We discussed a lot about our favourite subjects, our plans for college, and compare some universities in other countries." — P4

Negative emotional experiences were also participant-specific. P1 and P2 reported frustration with disengaged or inattentive interlocutors.

"I feel annoyed when there's someone who didn't put the same effort as me in maintaining our conversation...Not everyone responses properly." — P1

"I feel annoyed when someone is not in a proper position to have an online session. Sometimes, someone is outside and it became very noisy." — P2

P3 and P4 reported the opposite difficulty, feeling drained or confused by interlocutors who dominated the conversation or spoke in accents they found hard to follow.

"I felt drained when my speaking partners talked a lot and didn't give me the opportunity to explain something as much as them." — P3

"I felt confuse many times because most of my speaking partners are so talkative. I frequently cannot understand what they are saying because their accents are confusing." — P4

These contrasting accounts suggest participants' emotional experiences were shaped less by a fixed disposition and more by the specific, randomly assigned interlocutor encountered each session, an inherent feature of EPISODEN's matching mechanism.

Social aspect

P1 and P2 emphasized the relational quality of their interactions, describing a sense of immersion in speaking with real people and feeling their interlocutors were fully attentive.

"I think the environment is suitable for me. We talk with real humans, but in online setting. It can be less-anxious speaking environment." — P1

"I am happy when I feel that my interlocutors are all ears towards what I am saying." — P2

P1 additionally described one session in which a reserved interlocutor caused her own participation to become similarly subdued, illustrating how the assigned interlocutor's disposition could shape her own conversational behaviour within a single session.

"I actually consider myself as a talkative person, but when I met such quite people in EPISODEN my mood changed, and I became quite too...Fortunately I only meet that kind of person once." — P1

P3 and P4 did not foreground the relational quality of their interactions to the same extent, instead prioritizing the functional value of the practice regardless of interlocutor disposition.

"I have already talked with so many people and I know sometimes people are friendly, but some others might be not. I deal with that. As long as I can learn something, it's not a big deal." — P3

"I didn't really pay attention on people's behaviour in this platform. It may be because I was too excited to talk to foreigners." — P4

As with the emotional dimension, this divergence is interpreted as individual variation in how participants approached the social aspect of the platform, rather than a generalizable difference between female and male learners, given the limited number of participants in each group.

Pedagogical/Instructional Aspect

Supportive features

P1 and P2 valued EPISODEN's free, round-the-clock accessibility and its chat-box feature for looking up vocabulary they could not catch verbally. P3 relied on self-reflection rather than any built-in feedback mechanism to evaluate his own performance.

"For a free website, EPISODEN is great and complete enough for practicing our speaking. We can access it 24/7 freely. It has a chat box feature that is helpful enough...in finding out the difficult vocabularies." — P1

"This platform really helps me in acquiring new vocabularies. Although I can't understand them well, my speaking partners can type what they mean so that I am still able to catch the new vocabularies." — P2

"Although there is no feedback or note from the website regarding our conversation, I thankfully can have a self-evaluation by reflecting to what people are saying." — P3

P4 reported a less favourable experience, continuing to find it difficult to sustain conversations due to limited vocabulary even after extended use.

"I still find it hard to explore my English because I frequently ran out of the vocabularies." — P4

Self-regulated learning

P1 and P2 described the platform as prompting them to independently seek out unfamiliar vocabulary and monitor their own grammatical accuracy. This is consistent with Şentürk (2016), who found that high-achieving learners tend to employ more structured metacognitive and self-regulation strategies. However, because all four participants were selected specifically for their high English achievement, this self-regulated engagement should not be assumed to generalize to lower-achieving EFL learners, who may require more externally structured support to benefit from an autonomous platform such as EPISODEN.

"It encourages me to explore my vocabularies when my speaking partners ask about something that I haven't known yet." — P1

"I love being in a learning-setting environment. It encourages me to produce sentences that are grammatically correct." — P2

Absence of direct corrective feedback

The most consistent finding across participants was the absence of systematic corrective feedback built into EPISODEN itself. P2 noted that while she could self-correct, she could not confirm whether her self-corrections were accurate without external input.

"I can do self-correction, but I can't assess whether it is correct or not. I just observed and compared it with what my interlocutors said. I think I need my English teacher observes me and give me constructive feedback if EPISODEN can't do so." — P2

"Although this website doesn't provide direct feedback, I love it when once I fortunately met an English teacher there who always gave me corrections toward the vocabularies I used or even my pronunciation." — P2

"EPISODEN indeed does not give us some written corrective feedback, but thankfully I am be able to evaluate myself that way." — P3

Both P2 and P3 described relying instead on incidental correction from occasional interlocutors who happened to be teachers or unusually attentive partners. This indicates that the quality and consistency of participants' corrective feedback experience depended heavily on the random, uncontrollable characteristics of whichever interlocutor they were matched with, rather than on any structured pedagogical design, a structural limitation of the platform itself rather than of participants' own learning strategies.

Challenges

Institutional constraints

P1 described the school's strict daily schedule, from morning until evening, as leaving little room for platform use.

"Practicing my English-speaking skill through this platform gains many benefits. However, it is something else when I use it in my boarding school. We have very strict agenda from morning until evening." — P1

Technological/access constraints

P2 reported that school regulations restricted personal device use, requiring teacher supervision to access a laptop.

"This platform is helpful for me. Nevertheless, rules in my boarding school are so strict especially when it relates to electronic devices. We need our teachers to be with us to be allowed to access our laptop." — P2

Environmental constraints

P4 explained that meaningful use of the platform required a quiet, private space, a condition rarely available within the school's shared living arrangements.

"It's challenging because we have to be in a private area, so there is no noise in our environment. However, in this boarding school, it's kind of impossible to have that kind of private spaces." — P4

Learner preferences

Distinct from external constraints, P3 expressed a personal preference for direct, face-to-face conversation practice with his roommate over the online platform.

"I learn a lot from this website. However, I prefer to have a direct conventional conversation with my roommate in the dormitory." — P3

Although each participant emphasized a different type of constraint, together these accounts indicate that the boarding-school environment imposes constraints across multiple, compounding levels, structural, material, spatial, and personal, any one of which alone might be manageable, but which collectively limit participants' consistent engagement with an autonomous online platform like EPISODEN.

4. Discussion

The main objectives of this present study are to explore the participants' educational experiences and obstacles in leveraging EPISODEN as their platform to practice speaking English. To mirror the four-dimensional framework and challenges reported in the Results, this discussion is organized into the cognitive, emotional, social, and pedagogical/instructional dimensions, followed by the boarding-school-specific challenges, before turning to the study's limitations and practical implications.

Cognitive Dimension

In the cognitive dimension, the finding that participants gained new information from previously unfamiliar interlocutors is consistent with Wahyuningsih and Nurona (2024), who similarly reported this benefit among online-conference platform users. However, participants also reported difficulty maintaining conversations when the given topic did not align with their personal interest, prompting them to prepare alternative, simpler topics in advance. This finding is consistent with the challenges anticipated by task-based language teaching theory (Ellis et al., 2020), which assumes task engagement is partly contingent on learners' interest in the task itself; the participants' need to substitute simpler topics suggests their cognitive fluency in unfamiliar or disengaging topics may still be developing, rather than indicating a shortcoming of the task-based approach itself.

Emotional Dimension

From the emotional dimension, participants experienced both anxiety, when they could not interpret their interlocutors, and support, when interlocutors shared common interests or offered compliments. This is consistent with Wahyuningsih and Nurona (2024), who found that a cheerful, connected atmosphere correlates with better self-perceived communication outcomes, and with Liu et al. (2024), who identified emotional support as their participants' most frequently cited factor in sustaining engagement. The finding also aligns with Chen et al. (2022), who reported that online communication can help reduce foreign language anxiety.

These findings are consistent with Krashen's (1981) Affective Filter Hypothesis, which posits that lower anxiety and higher motivation create more favourable conditions for language acquisition. Beyond simply confirming this general association, the present findings suggest a more specific mechanism: EPISODEN's synchronous, real-time video format appears to lower the perceived stakes of conversation compared to more formal or evaluative speaking contexts, since sessions are time-bound, effectively anonymous beyond a single encounter, and not tied to any assessment. This low-consequence structure may explain why several participants described attempting spontaneous speech despite initial nervousness, consistent with the broader literature suggesting synchronous video interaction can support learners' willingness to communicate by reducing the social risk typically associated with speaking errors in more permanent or evaluative settings (Alqarni, 2021; Zhang et al., 2024).

Social Dimension

In the social dimension, P1 and P2 found the relational quality of their interactions important, reporting increased comfort and reduced anxiety in initiating conversation, consistent with the higher willingness-to-communicate scores in online settings reported by Alqarni (2021). This finding contrasts with Pakpahan and Gultom (2022), who reported that their low-anxiety participants struggled to sustain deep interaction with online speaking partners; a possible explanation for this divergence is that EPISODEN's random, one-off pairings with international interlocutors may create a different social dynamic than the sustained, repeated pairings used in Pakpahan and Gultom's study. P1 and P2's sense of immersion is further consistent with Zhang et al. (2024), who noted that interacting with real people requires a human touch that can both increase engagement and heighten self-consciousness, a duality apparent in P1's account of enjoying attentive partners while becoming quieter around a reserved one. As reported in the Results, P3 and P4 did not foreground these relational elements to the same extent; given the small, unequal-sized subgroups, this is interpreted as individual variation rather than a systematic difference between female and male

learners.

Regarding platform features, participants' generally positive experience with EPISODEN's free access contrasts with Apoko and Waluyo (2025), who found that premium features on some social media platforms hindered users' experience; EPISODEN's free-access model appears to remove this particular barrier to sustained use. P4's continued difficulty accessing vocabulary is consistent with Lativi and Hasnawan (2023).

Participants' engagement in self-regulated learning, exploring unfamiliar vocabulary independently and monitoring their own grammatical accuracy, is consistent with Şentürk (2016), who found that high-achieving learners tend to employ more structured metacognitive and self-regulation strategies. This alignment is unlikely to be coincidental: because all four participants were purposively selected for their high English achievement, their capacity to self-correct and sustain autonomous engagement with an unstructured platform such as EPISODEN may be closely tied to the very achievement profile that qualified them for this study, rather than a general effect of using EPISODEN. This raises an important theoretical and practical implication: EPISODEN's autonomous, low-scaffolding design may not confer equivalent benefits on average- or lower-achieving EFL learners, who typically demonstrate less developed self-regulatory strategies (Şentürk, 2016) and may need more externally structured support, particularly given the platform's absence of direct instructional feedback.

This absence of feedback deserves closer attention. Previous scholars have argued that clear, actionable, future-oriented feedback meaningfully supports language development (Ji et al., as cited in Ericsson and Jansson, 2021; Zhang et al., 2024), yet EPISODEN provides no such mechanism; participants who received corrective input did so only incidentally, when paired with an interlocutor who happened to be a teacher or unusually attentive. Consistent with Dashti and Abdulsalam (2025), Jeon (2024), and Liu et al. (2024), who each emphasize the added value of professional or teacher support in technology-assisted language learning, this suggests EPISODEN functions more convincingly as a speaking-practice environment than as a complete, self-sufficient language-learning environment: it offers abundant opportunities for spontaneous production and exposure but leaves accuracy-oriented feedback largely to chance.

This points to a broader tension between authenticity and unpredictability running through several dimensions of these findings. On one hand, EPISODEN's real, randomly matched interlocutors offer authentic exposure to varied accents, cultural perspectives, and genuinely spontaneous responses, arguably a richer form of practice than scripted or AI-based alternatives (Ericsson and Johansson, 2023). On the other hand, this same authenticity is the source of the platform's central limitations: inconsistent corrective feedback, uneven conversational participation, interlocutors joining from distracting environments, and accents participants found difficult to follow. The very feature that makes EPISODEN

valuable as an authentic speaking-practice tool is inseparable from the unpredictability that limits its reliability as a structured learning tool.

Despite these advantages, participants' boarding-school environment constrained their ability to gain maximum benefit from EPISODEN. The strict daily schedule and restricted device access, consistent with Asgara et al. (2022) in a comparable Islamic boarding school context, limited how often and how flexibly participants could engage with the platform. Within this environment, one participant expressed a preference for direct conversation practice with his roommate over independent EPISODEN use; while this reflects a genuine individual preference, it represents one participant's view rather than an experimentally established comparison between the two practice modes, and should not be read as evidence that roommate conversation is inherently more effective than platform-based practice in general.

A more defensible interpretation is that, within this particular boarding-school environment, institutionally supported face-to-face English practice may currently be more feasible than independent EPISODEN use, given the school's restrictions on device access and time. This also helps explain the apparent contrast with Tai (2024), who found that technological assistants offered valuable accessibility and flexibility; the boarding-school participants in this study did not experience EPISODEN with that same accessibility, not because of a shortcoming in the platform itself, but because their institutional context prevented them from exercising the autonomy that makes such platforms beneficial elsewhere. This points to a contextual contribution of the present study: technology affordances are institution-dependent. A platform that is flexible and accessible for most EFL learners may become comparatively inaccessible within a boarding school with restricted device use and tightly controlled schedules, regardless of the platform's own design. Fitria (2023) similarly emphasized the importance of integrating foreign-language use into the daily life of Islamic boarding schools; the findings here suggest such integration may need to be institutionally facilitated rather than left to individual students' independent initiative.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, the study involved only four participants from a single Islamic boarding school, which limits the transferability of the findings to other institutions or larger populations. Second, participants were purposively selected for their high English achievement; the findings therefore reflect the experiences of high-achieving learners specifically and may not generalize to average- or lower-achieving EFL students, particularly given the role of self-regulated learning discussed above. Third, the findings rely primarily on participants' self-reported experiences rather than objective measures of speaking performance; the study did not include pre-

or post-use speaking assessments, and terms such as *improvement* in this study refer to participants' perceived improvement rather than a demonstrated gain in proficiency. Finally, although observation was conducted to support the interview data, it played a comparatively limited role in the analysis, used mainly to confirm the consistency of participants' interactions rather than as an independent, equally weighted source of evidence. Future research employing a larger, more diverse sample and objective speaking assessments would help address these limitations.

Practical Recommendations

Based on these findings, several practical steps may help Islamic boarding schools and similar institutions better support students' use of platforms such as EPISODEN. Rather than expecting students to use the platform entirely independently, schools could provide supervised EPISODEN sessions within the existing schedule, allocate scheduled device-access windows for speaking practice, designate quiet spaces for uninterrupted conversation, incorporate teacher-guided reflection following each session, and introduce structured post-session corrective feedback from teachers to compensate for the platform's lack of built-in feedback. Together, these measures would allow students to benefit from EPISODEN's authentic, low-anxiety speaking opportunities while addressing the institutional and pedagogical gaps identified in this study.

5. Conclusion

This study explored high-achieving Islamic boarding school students' perspectives on their experiences of using EPISODEN, an online video-conference platform, to practice English speaking within a highly regulated institutional environment. Findings across the cognitive, emotional, social, and pedagogical/instructional dimensions indicate that participants perceived several benefits from the platform, including increased confidence, expanded vocabulary, opportunities for real-time communication with international interlocutors, and space for self-regulated learning, benefits that appear closely tied to participants' status as high achievers. At the same time, participants' experiences were constrained by the platform's lack of systematic corrective feedback and by institutional factors specific to the boarding-school context, including strict daily schedules, restricted device access, and limited private space.

Rather than concluding that EPISODEN is an ineffective tool, these findings suggest that its usefulness in this particular setting is institution-dependent: the same autonomous, low-scaffolding design that supports flexible practice in less restrictive environments becomes considerably harder to sustain when students' time, devices, and privacy are tightly regulated. Within the boarding-school context examined in this study, institutionally supported and teacher-guided speaking practice, whether through structured use of EPISODEN or complementary face-to-face activities, may be more feasible and sustainable than expecting students to use the platform entirely independently. Future research involving larger and more

diverse samples, objective speaking assessments, and comparative or experimental designs is needed to further examine how online conversational platforms can be most effectively integrated into similarly regulated educational environments.

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