

EXPLORING THE ROLE OF ELSA SPEAK IN REDUCING SPEAKING ANXIETY AMONG FIRST-YEAR EFL STUDENTS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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Abstract: Speaking anxiety is one of the most common challenges faced by EFL students, often hindering their confidence and willingness to communicate in English. This study aimed to explore first-year EFL students' experiences in using ELSA Speak and their perceptions of its role in reducing speaking anxiety. A qualitative method with a phenomenological design was employed in this study. The participants were five first-year students of the English Language Education Study Program at Universitas Islam Malang who experienced speaking anxiety and had used ELSA Speak for speaking practice. They were selected through purposive sampling based on specific criteria and the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). Data were collected through outside-classroom observations and semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Creswell's (2007) phenomenological data analysis procedures. The findings revealed that students experienced ELSA Speak as a flexible, self-directed platform that enabled them to practice speaking at their own pace through features such as AI Chat, Pronunciation Coach, Speech Analyzer, and Grammar Coach. Furthermore, students perceived ELSA Speak as a supportive and non-judgmental learning environment that helped reduce their fear of making mistakes and negative evaluation. The immediate feedback and consistent practice provided by the application also increased their confidence and willingness to communicate in English. Despite certain limitations, including restricted daily access and occasional technical difficulties, students regarded ELSA Speak as a beneficial digital tool for supporting speaking practice and alleviating speaking anxiety. Therefore, ELSA Speak was perceived as a useful application that creates a more comfortable and confidence-building environment for speaking practice among first-year EFL students.

Keywords: ELSA Speak, students' experiences, students' perceptions, speaking anxiety, first-year EFL students, phenomenological study.

INTRODUCTION

English plays an important role as an international language in education, technology, and professional communication. Consequently, developing speaking proficiency has

become one of the primary goals of English language learning. Among the four language skills, speaking is often considered the most challenging because it requires learners to communicate ideas accurately and fluently in real time (Madhavi et al., 2023). However, many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students struggle to speak confidently due to speaking anxiety, which limits their classroom participation and overall language development.

Speaking anxiety is recognized as one of the major psychological barriers to successful oral communication. Horwitz et al. (1986) explained that foreign language anxiety consists of communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Similarly, Spielberger (1972) identified situation-specific anxiety, which frequently occurs during speaking activities when learners are required to perform in front of others. Students who experience speaking anxiety often hesitate to express their ideas, fear making mistakes, and avoid speaking opportunities, resulting in lower confidence and slower improvement in speaking skills (Ruimiyati & Seftika, 2018).

First-year EFL students are particularly susceptible to speaking anxiety because they must adapt to a new academic environment while developing their English communication skills. Many students have limited experience using English in authentic communication despite being required to participate in presentations, discussions, and other speaking activities. In addition, linguistic challenges such as limited vocabulary, grammatical inaccuracies, and pronunciation difficulties further increase their anxiety (Sampelolo et al., 2021; Franscy & Ramli, 2022). These conditions highlight the need for learning strategies that provide a supportive environment for speaking practice.

The integration of technology into language learning offers opportunities to address this issue. Technology-assisted learning allows students to practice speaking independently in a low-pressure environment while receiving immediate feedback on their performance (Chen, 2024; Morris & Rohs, 2023). Such learning environments enable students to identify and correct mistakes without fear of negative evaluation, potentially reducing speaking anxiety while improving speaking ability.

One technology that has attracted considerable attention is ELSA Speak, an artificial intelligence (AI)-based application that utilizes Automatic Speech Recognition (ASR) technology to evaluate learners' pronunciation and provide instant corrective feedback. Through self-paced practice, learners can repeatedly improve their pronunciation and speaking performance anytime and anywhere (Yuliawati & Suryadi, 2023). The opportunity to practice without classroom pressure may help students feel more confident and reduce their anxiety when speaking English (Sholekhah & Fakhurriana, 2023).

Previous studies have demonstrated the positive impact of ELSA Speak on students' speaking performance and anxiety levels (Mardiah & Saadillah, 2025; Yuliawati & Suryadi, 2023). Nevertheless, most existing research has adopted quantitative approaches that primarily measure learning outcomes. As a result, little is known about how students personally experience using ELSA Speak to manage their speaking anxiety, particularly within Indonesian higher education, where opportunities to use English outside the classroom remain limited.

Based on the background, this study aims to explore students lived experience when using ELSA Speak in reducing speaking anxiety among first-year EFL students. Therefore, this research is guided by the following questions:

1. How do first-year EFL students practice speaking using ELSA Speak in their learning process?
2. How do students perceive the role of ELSA Speak in reducing their speaking anxiety?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL)

Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) refers to the integration of mobile devices into language learning to facilitate flexible and accessible learning experiences (Sathya, 2021). Through smartphones and tablets, learners can access

learning materials regardless of time and location, enabling language learning beyond traditional classroom settings (Sisouvong & Pasanchay, 2024). MALL applications commonly provide interactive features such as voice recording, pronunciation practice, multimedia resources, and automated feedback, allowing students to engage in self-directed learning.

Previous studies have highlighted several benefits of MALL. It promotes learner autonomy by enabling students to learn at their own pace and according to their individual needs (Sisouvong & Pasanchay, 2024). In addition, interactive learning environments supported by audio, video, and instant feedback enhance learners' motivation and encourage continuous speaking practice (Chen, 2024; Fitayanti et al., 2024). Immediate feedback also helps students identify and correct language errors independently, creating a less stressful learning environment that supports speaking development (Rajendran & Yunus, 2021).

Despite these advantages, MALL also presents several challenges. Technical limitations such as unstable internet connections and unequal access to mobile devices may hinder learning (Nuraeni et al., 2020). Furthermore, mobile devices may distract learners through non-academic applications, reducing learning effectiveness (Abidin, 2023). Another limitation concerns the reduced opportunity for direct interaction with teachers and peers, which remains essential for developing authentic communicative competence (Shi, 2025). Therefore, the effectiveness of MALL depends on appropriate implementation and students' learning contexts.

ELSA Speak Application

ELSA Speak is an artificial intelligence (AI)-based mobile application designed to improve English pronunciation and speaking skills. The application analyzes learners' speech by comparing it with native-speaker pronunciation models and provides immediate, personalized feedback on pronunciation accuracy (Kholis, 2021; Yuliawati & Suryadi, 2023). This instant feedback enables learners to recognize their pronunciation errors and gradually improve their speaking performance (Morris &

Rohs, 2023). Several interactive features make ELSA Speak particularly suitable for speaking practice:

1. AI Chats

AI Chats provide opportunities to communicate with an AI conversation partner in a low-pressure environment, reducing learners' fear of negative evaluation (Tran & Vu, 2024).

2. Speech Analyzer

Speech Analyzer offers detailed evaluations of pronunciation, stress, and intonation, allowing learners to identify areas requiring improvement (Senowarsito & Ardini, 2023).

3. Pronunciation Coach

Pronunciation Coach provides structured pronunciation exercises with repeated practice and scoring based on native-speaker models, helping learners improve pronunciation accuracy and confidence (Fauziah et al., 2024 ; Nguyen et al., 2025).

4. Grammar Coach

Grammar Coach supports learners in applying appropriate grammatical structures during spoken communication, reducing anxiety associated with grammatical mistakes (Ngoc & Thanh, 2023).

These integrated features create a supportive learning environment that encourages autonomous practice while minimizing learners' fear of making mistakes. Consequently, ELSA Speak has considerable potential to improve speaking performance and reduce speaking anxiety among EFL learners (Mardiah & Saadillah, 2025).

Speaking Anxiety

Speaking anxiety is one of the most common psychological barriers experienced by EFL learners during oral communication. Horwitz et al. (1986, as cited in Arnaiz & Guillén, 2013) conceptualized foreign language anxiety as consisting of communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. These

factors often reduce learners' confidence, limit classroom participation, and negatively affect speaking performance.

According to Spielberger et al. (1983), anxiety can be categorized into trait anxiety, state anxiety, and situation-specific anxiety. Trait anxiety refers to a stable tendency to experience anxiety across situations, whereas state anxiety emerges temporarily in response to particular circumstances. Situation-specific anxiety occurs repeatedly in specific contexts, such as public speaking or classroom presentations. Previous studies indicate that EFL learners frequently experience a combination of these anxiety types during speaking activities (Ashari et al., 2023; Jumadin et al., 2024; Sarnilawati et al., 2024).

Several factors contribute to speaking anxiety, including limited vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties, fear of making grammatical mistakes, fear of negative evaluation, insufficient speaking practice, and previous negative learning experiences (Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2014 ; Rafada & Madini, 2017); Sarnilawati et al., 2024). These factors often result in hesitation, reduced fluency, lack of confidence, and avoidance of speaking opportunities (Febianti, 2024 ; Haq et al.,). Consequently, speaking anxiety not only influences learners psychologically but also limits their language development and communicative competence.

ELSA Speak and Speaking Anxiety

Recent studies suggest that technology-assisted language learning can create a more supportive environment for reducing speaking anxiety. ELSA Speak enables learners to practice speaking independently without the immediate pressure of teacher or peer evaluation, allowing them to develop confidence through repeated practice (Sholekhah & Fakhurriana, 2023). Furthermore, the application's personalized and immediate feedback helps learners recognize and gradually improve their pronunciation, contributing to increased self-confidence and reduced (Morris & Rohs, 2023).

Because learners can access ELSA Speak anytime and anywhere, they are provided with greater opportunities to practice speaking in a flexible and less stressful

environment (Tran & Vu, 2024). These characteristics indicate that ELSA Speak may function not only as a pronunciation-learning application but also as a tool that supports learners' emotional well-being by reducing speaking anxiety while enhancing speaking competence.

Previous Study

Previous research has consistently demonstrated the effectiveness of ELSA Speak in supporting English speaking development. Mardiah and Saadillah (2025), using a mixed-methods design with 18 participants, found that ELSA Speak significantly improved students' pronunciation, fluency, self-confidence, and reduced speaking anxiety through its real-time feedback system. Similarly, Yuliawati and Suryadi (2023) reported positive student perceptions toward ELSA Speak, highlighting its ease of use, diverse learning materials, and contribution to speaking improvement. However, their study focused primarily on learners' perceptions rather than speaking anxiety.

Indrayani et al. (2025) further examined the implementation of ELSA Speak among Indonesian university students using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach. Their findings revealed significant improvements in speaking proficiency, particularly pronunciation and fluency, while qualitative data emphasized the application's flexibility, personalized feedback, and motivational value. Nevertheless, the study also identified challenges related to internet access, premium feature limitations, and learner self-discipline.

Although previous studies have established the pedagogical benefits of ELSA Speak, most employed quantitative or mixed-methods designs that primarily measured learning outcomes. Limited attention has been given to learners' lived experiences in using ELSA Speak to manage speaking anxiety. Furthermore, phenomenological research exploring first-year EFL students' experiences in the Indonesian university context remains scarce. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by employing a phenomenological approach to explore how first-year EFL students experience the role of ELSA Speak in reducing speaking anxiety.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of first-year EFL students in using ELSA Speak to reduce speaking anxiety. Phenomenology was selected because it enables researchers to understand how individuals perceive and interpret a particular phenomenon through their personal experiences (Creswell, 2013). In this study, the phenomenon concerned students' experiences of practicing English with ELSA Speak and its perceived role in reducing speaking anxiety.

The study was conducted at the English Language Education Study Program of Universitas Islam Malang. Participants were selected through purposive sampling because phenomenological research requires individuals who have directly experienced the phenomenon under investigation. Before participant selection, the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986) was administered to identify students who experienced speaking anxiety. Five first-year EFL students who met the research criteria were selected. The participants had moderate to high levels of speaking anxiety, had used ELSA Speak independently for at least one month, and voluntarily agreed to participate in the study.

Data were collected through three instruments. First, the FLCAS served as a screening instrument to identify eligible participants and was not included in the main analysis. Second, outside-classroom observations documented participants' independent use of ELSA Speak during speaking practice. Participants submitted screenshots or photographs of their learning activities through WhatsApp, while the researcher recorded field notes concerning the application features used, learning activities, practice frequency, and challenges encountered. Finally, semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom to explore participants' experiences of using ELSA Speak, their perceptions of speaking anxiety, and the perceived influence of the application on their confidence. Each interview lasted approximately 20–30 minutes and was conducted in Indonesian and English to ensure participants could express their

experiences comfortably. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The interview data were analyzed using Creswell's (2007) phenomenological data analysis procedures. The researcher first transcribed and organized all interview recordings before repeatedly reading the transcripts to gain an overall understanding of participants' experiences. Significant statements related to speaking anxiety and the use of ELSA Speak were then identified, coded, and grouped into categories. These categories were subsequently developed into broader themes representing the essence of participants' lived experiences. Following phenomenological analysis, textural descriptions were constructed to explain what participants experienced, while structural descriptions illustrated how they experienced the phenomenon. The observation data were analyzed descriptively to provide contextual support and triangulate the interview findings.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the study adopted the criteria of credibility and transferability proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was established through member checking, whereby participants reviewed the interview transcripts and the researcher's interpretations to ensure accuracy. Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of the research context, participant characteristics, and data collection procedures, enabling readers to determine the applicability of the findings in similar educational settings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Before the interviews, participants were selected using the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986). The questionnaire was used solely as a screening instrument to identify first-year EFL students who experienced moderate to high speaking anxiety and had experience using ELSA Speak. Therefore, the FLCAS results were not included in the main analysis. Four participants used the free version of ELSA Speak, while one participant used the

Pro version. The findings are organized into three themes that emerged from the interview and observation data.

Table 1

Participant code	Gender	FLCAS level	Experience using ELSA Speak	Version
P1	Female	High	3 Month	free
P2	Female	Moderate	2 Month	free
P3	Female	High	5 Month	free
P4	Female	High	6 Month	pro
P5	Female	High	3 Month	free

Students' Lived Experiences of Using ELSA Speak

The findings revealed that ELSA Speak served as a flexible and autonomous learning tool that enabled participants to practice English speaking independently outside the classroom. Most participants preferred practicing during their free time because the application allowed them to learn at their own pace without depending on classroom schedules or teacher supervision. During their practice, participants frequently used features such as AI Chat, Pronunciation Coach, and Speech Analyzer, which provided opportunities to improve their pronunciation and speaking skills in a more relaxed learning environment. One of the most frequently mentioned experiences was the use of the AI Chat feature. Participants explained that interacting with an AI conversation partner allowed them to practice English naturally without the pressure commonly experienced during classroom speaking activities. As P2 explained:

“My experience when using ELSA Speak, I have used AI Chat, so I talk with AI using English, and it is a very good application, and I used Pronunciation Coach, so from that I know how to pronounce and how to translate the word. So it's quite helpful to translate. We can talk directly like humans, but it is an AI.” (April 2026, P2 free).”

This experience by using AI Tutor feature, which provides learners with simulated conversations resembling natural communication. Rather than interacting with teachers or classmates, participants communicated with an AI partner that responded immediately to their speech. This feature created a supportive environment where students could practice speaking without worrying about making mistakes in front of others. Similarly, P4 described ELSA Speak as a practical learning companion that provided both flexibility and meaningful pronunciation support:

“My experience using ELSA Speak is quite positive. This app helps me catch pronunciation mistakes and provides clear corrections. I also feel that studying is more flexible because it can be done at any time.” (April 2026, P4 pro)

These findings suggest that participants perceived ELSA Speak as more than a pronunciation-learning application. Instead, they viewed it as a flexible learning platform that enabled continuous speaking practice according to their own learning preferences. This finding reflects the principles of Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL), which emphasize learning beyond classroom boundaries through mobile technologies (Sathya, 2021). Likewise, Sisouvong and Pasanchay (2024) argued that MALL promotes learner autonomy by allowing students to regulate their learning according to their individual needs. Because participants were free to determine when and how often they practiced, they were able to repeat speaking exercises until they felt more confident. This flexibility also supports Rajendran and Yunus (2021), who suggested that mobile-assisted learning creates a less stressful environment that encourages learners to practice speaking without fear of negative evaluation.

Another important experience highlighted by participants concerned the application's pronunciation feedback. Participants consistently reported that ELSA Speak provided immediate corrections that enabled them to recognize pronunciation errors independently. Rather than waiting for teacher feedback during classroom activities,

they were able to identify mistakes immediately and repeat the exercises until they achieved better pronunciation. P1 explained:

“I feel better and also motivated when I use ELSA Speak because this application gives direct feedback, and I can also learn at my own pace.” (April 2026, P1free)

These experiences demonstrate the importance of immediate feedback in supporting speaking development. Morris and Rohs (2023), emphasized that ELSA Speak provides personalized pronunciation feedback that enables learners to identify specific weaknesses and gradually improve their speaking performance. Likewise, Senowarsito and Ardini (2023), reported that the Speech Analyzer feature helps learners evaluate pronunciation accuracy, word stress, and intonation, making speaking practice more focused and effective. In addition, Nguyen et al., (2025), explained that the Pronunciation Coach feature compares learners' pronunciation with native-speaker models and provides accuracy scores that encourage continuous improvement. Together, these features appear to strengthen learners' confidence because they receive clear guidance regarding what should be improved instead of relying solely on classroom correction.

Although participants generally reported positive learning experiences, they also encountered several challenges while using ELSA Speak. The most frequently mentioned limitation concerned the daily usage restriction in the free version of the application. Participants explained that this restriction interrupted their learning because they could not continue practicing after reaching the daily limit. P5 stated:

“The drawback when using ELSA Speak is that there are limits every day, so practicing speaking is a little burdensome because of these limits. Usually, I use other applications to get maximum practice every day.” (April 2026, P5 free)

This limitation interrupted continuous learning and encouraged several participants to combine ELSA Speak with other language-learning applications.

Similarly, P2 commented:

“As for the challenge, maybe it's only because of that limit, while ELSA Speak is a good application for practicing speaking in English, but yes, that's because the limit can only be used 2 times in a day”.
(April 2026, P2 free)

These findings indicate that, although ELSA Speak provides substantial support for autonomous speaking practice, successful implementation also requires learners to adapt to its technological features. Similar challenges were identified by Indrayani et al. (2025), who found that limited access to premium features and technical constraints reduced the continuity of students' learning experiences. Likewise, Nuraeni et al. (2020) argued that technological limitations remain one of the major challenges in implementing Mobile-Assisted Language Learning. Nevertheless, unlike technical barriers that completely discourage learning, participants in the present study remained motivated to continue practicing by combining ELSA Speak with other learning resources. This suggests that the perceived benefits of the application outweighed its limitations, making ELSA Speak an effective supplementary tool for independent speaking practice among first-year EFL students.

Students' Perceptions of the Role of ELSA Speak in Reducing Speaking Anxiety

The second theme that emerged from the analysis concerns students' perceptions of the role of ELSA Speak in reducing their speaking anxiety. Before using the application, participants described experiencing considerable anxiety when speaking English in front of their classmates. Their anxiety was reflected not only in emotional feelings such as nervousness and fear but also in physical reactions, including sweating, trembling, and a shaky voice. P2 described this experience as follows:

“Yes, I often feel anxious when speaking in front of the class, especially when speaking. I feel very nervous. Then after that, it's like I'm really sweaty or I'm shaking straight away. So my voice was also shaking. Even though I've tried to be confident, I still can't.”
(April 2026, P2 free)

The participants' descriptions that speaking in front of others created considerable psychological pressure. These findings are consistent with K. and Alamelu (2020), who explained that physical symptoms such as trembling, sweating, increased heart rate, and a shaky voice are common indicators of speaking anxiety among EFL learners.

Similarly, Spielberger (1972) categorized this type of situation-specific nervousness as state anxiety, which appears when learners encounter stressful speaking situations. This interpretation is supported by Sarnilawati et al. (2024), who found that Indonesian EFL students frequently experience state anxiety during classroom speaking activities. Previous studies have also identified fear of making mistakes, limited vocabulary, lack of preparation, and low self-confidence as major causes of speaking anxiety (Damayanti & Listyani, 2020).

Participants explained that after using ELSA Speak, they gradually became more confident because they were able to practice speaking privately without worrying about being judged by classmates or lecturers. The application created a more comfortable learning environment where they could practice repeatedly before speaking in class. P4 explained:

“Yes, I feel more comfortable and helpful when using ELSA Speak because this application provides direct feedback. I also feel more confident because I can practice alone without fear of being judged by others.” (April 2026, P4 pro)

These findings demonstrates how the application immediately evaluates students' pronunciation and provides corrective feedback. According to the participants, this feature helped them recognize pronunciation errors before performing in the classroom, making them feel more prepared and reducing their fear of making mistakes.

As participants continued practicing with ELSA Speak, they reported becoming more confident when speaking English in classroom situations. They explained that regular practice and continuous AI feedback helped them feel better prepared and less worried about making pronunciation mistakes. P5 stated:

“Yes, I feel more confident speaking in class after using ELSA Speak. Before, I was always worried about mispronouncing words, so I often stayed quiet. After practicing regularly and receiving feedback from the application, I became less afraid of making mistakes and more willing to participate in classroom speaking activities.” (April 2026, P5 free)

Similarly, P4, who used the Pro version, described additional benefits:

“Because I used the Pro version of ELSA Speak, I could access more speaking exercises and practice without limitations. The detailed feedback helped me correct my pronunciation and speaking mistakes more often. Because I practiced regularly, I felt much more confident when speaking in front of the class. I wasn't as afraid of making mistakes as I used to be.” (April 2026, P4 pro)

These findings suggest that ELSA Speak contributed to reducing participants' speaking anxiety by increasing their confidence through repeated speaking practice and immediate feedback. Although the participant who used the Pro version experienced additional benefits due to unlimited practice opportunities, all participants perceived ELSA Speak as a useful tool for improving classroom speaking confidence.

Overall, the findings support previous studies reporting the effectiveness of ELSA Speak in improving speaking confidence among EFL learners. Mardiah and Saadillah (2025) found that students became more confident after receiving continuous corrective feedback through ELSA Speak. Likewise, Yuliawati and Suryadi (2023) reported that students viewed ELSA Speak positively because regular practice improved both pronunciation and speaking performance. Therefore, the findings of this study indicate that ELSA Speak serves not only as a pronunciation-learning application but also as a supportive learning environment that gradually helps first-year EFL students reduce speaking anxiety and participate more confidently in classroom speaking activities.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This study investigated the lived experiences of first-year EFL students at Universitas Islam Malang in using ELSA Speak to reduce speaking anxiety. The findings revealed that ELSA Speak served as a flexible and independent learning tool that enabled students to practice English outside the classroom through features such as AI Chat, Pronunciation Feedback, and Speech Analyzer. Although participants experienced several challenges, including daily usage limits in the free version and initial difficulties in using some features, they continued to use the application because of its benefits for speaking practice.

The study also found that ELSA Speak helped reduce students' speaking anxiety by providing a private and supportive environment for speaking practice. Regular practice and immediate AI-based feedback gradually increased students' confidence and reduced their fear of making mistakes when speaking English. Overall, ELSA Speak can be considered a valuable technology-assisted learning tool that supports both speaking development and confidence among first-year EFL students.

Based on these findings, students are encouraged to use ELSA Speak regularly as an additional speaking practice tool to improve pronunciation, fluency, and

confidence. Lecturers are also encouraged to integrate technology-assisted applications such as ELSA Speak into speaking courses to provide students with more opportunities for independent learning outside the classroom. Finally, future researchers are recommended to involve more participants from different universities and employ quantitative or mixed-method approaches to examine the effectiveness of ELSA Speak in improving other aspects of speaking performance, such as pronunciation accuracy, fluency, and learner autonomy.

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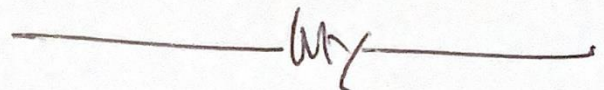
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