

EXPLORING GEN ALPHA STUDENTS' LIVED EXPERIENCES IN DEVELOPING ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILLS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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Abstract

Gen Alpha grew up within a highly digitized ecosystem filled with diverse forms of English usage, including social media, online video platforms, digital games, and interactive educational applications. Their immersive interactions with these technologies have cultivated unique perspectives and approaches to mastering spoken English. While there is growing recognition of Gen Alpha's interest in English learning, much remains to be understood regarding how their motivations shape specific speaking strategies amidst a shifting technological landscape. This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of Gen Alpha learners in secondary education in Malang, focusing on the primary factors driving their motivation and the learning strategies they employ to hone their oral communication skills. Employing a qualitative phenomenological design, data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with three purposely selected Gen Alpha learners aged 12–15 years and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed three distinct motivational trajectories: intrinsic-media driven, familial-habitual, and achievement-oriented environmental drives. To enhance speaking skills, participants deployed a combination of cognitive strategies (contextual sentence construction, shadowing, and song lyrics repetition), metacognitive regulation, and social interaction strategies (family conversations, peer practice in English clubs, and tutor-guided evaluation). Technology-enhanced exposure served as a continuous catalyst for spontaneous oral practice. The study concludes that integrating digital media exposure, metacognitive self-regulation, and supportive social environments creates a robust framework for fostering oral communicative competence among Generation Alpha EFL learners.

Keywords: Gen Alpha, English speaking skills, phenomenological study, language learning motivation, learning strategies, digital media.

INTRODUCTION

In the evolving educational landscape, the emergence of Generation Alpha (individuals born from 2010 onward) presents new opportunities and challenges for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. As true digital natives, Generation Alpha exhibits distinct learning preferences, cognitive processing patterns, and social behaviors compared to previous generations, such as Millennials and Generation Z (Bennett & Maton, 2020; Kirkland & Johnson, 2021). Growing up in an era characterized by ubiquitous internet access, artificial intelligence, interactive applications, and online gaming, Gen Alpha learners encounter English not merely as an academic subject in a classroom setting, but as an integral medium of daily digital entertainment and global communication (Kim & Hwang, 2021; Sutherland et al., 2022).

Early exposure to digital media has been shown to facilitate organic language acquisition among young

learners by embedding the target language into authentic, meaningful contexts (Marsh et al., 2020). Through engaging digital content, learners naturally encounter specialized vocabulary, colloquial expressions, and native pronunciation patterns that are rarely emphasized in traditional structural curricula. This informal exposure fosters self-directed curiosity and intrinsic motivation to learn English independently (Gonzalez & O'Brien, 2022). Furthermore, parents increasingly recognize English proficiency as an essential competency for global mobility and academic achievement, actively encouraging their children's engagement with English digital media from early childhood (Sutherland et al., 2022).

While Millennials generally acquired English through structured formal instruction, textbooks, and grammar-focused exercises, and Generation Z utilized mobile-centric tools and social media for pragmatically oriented communication (Beauchamp, 2020; Chik, 2022), Generation Alpha engages with English through highly interactive, immersive, and gamified environments (Hofrova et al., 2024). However, despite high levels of receptive familiarity gained through media consumption, active oral production remains a critical hurdle for many young EFL learners (Kim & Hwang, 2021; Tran & McCarthy, 2023). Developing speaking skills requires deliberate practice, structured output, interactive feedback, and strategies that foster both accuracy and fluency (Nguyen, 2023).

Existing research has extensively explored general motivational frameworks and learning strategies among senior high school and university students (Amelia et al., 2024; Zuhairi & Mistar, 2023; Mistar et al., 2014). However, relatively few empirical studies have investigated the lived experiences, subjective motivations, and specific speaking strategy choices of Generation Alpha learners within digitalized learning environments (Hofrova et al., 2024). To address this gap in the literature, this phenomenological study examines the lived experiences of Gen Alpha secondary school students in Malang. Specifically, the study seeks to answer two central research questions:

1. What are the primary factors influencing Gen Alpha's motivation in learning English?
2. What strategies does Gen Alpha implement in enhancing their English speaking skills?

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological research design, as conceptualized by Husserl (1931) and further developed by Merleau-Ponty (1962), to explore the essence of participants' lived experiences. Phenomenology was chosen because it allows the researcher to capture the subjective meanings, personal perspectives, and lived realities of learners as they develop English speaking skills within technology-rich environments.

The study was conducted in Malang, East Java, Indonesia. The participants consisted of three Generation Alpha secondary school students (aged 12–15 years, referred to as R1, R2, and R3) who were selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) born in or after 2010, (2) currently enrolled in secondary education, (3) actively learning English both formally and informally, (4) utilizing digital media

or technology-based tools for language learning, and (5) willing to articulate their learning experiences.

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews conducted online via WhatsApp voice notes to ensure a comfortable and natural environment for open expression. The interview protocol focused on three main domains: motivational drivers, speaking strategy execution, and environmental/technological influences. To complement the interview data, reflective journals and self-evaluation logs kept by the participants were reviewed. Data were analyzed following the phenomenological thematic analysis schema adapted from Hutabarat and Ubaidillah (2021) and Braun and Clarke (2006), involving repeated listening, verbatim transcription, initial coding, category grouping, theme generation, member checking, and external review for trustworthiness.

FINDINGS

The findings are structured into two primary thematic categories corresponding to the research questions: (1) Primary Motivation of Gen Alpha in Learning English, and (2) Strategies Employed to Enhance Speaking Skills.

1. Primary Motivation of Gen Alpha in Learning English

The empirical analysis revealed three distinct motivational trajectories among the participants across five key analytical dimensions: primary driver, autonomy level, role of technology, future orientation, and environmental catalysts.

Table 1: Comparative Summary of Participants' Primary Motivational Trajectories

Analytical Dimension	Respondent 1 (R1)	Respondent 2 (R2)	Respondent 3 (R3)
Primary Driver	Intrinsic interest sparked by digital pop culture	Early familial habituation & parental guidance	Academic setback turning into achievement drive
Autonomy Level	High autonomy; self-directed media consumption	Moderate-high autonomy; internalized family habit	External-to-internal shift; driven by school environment
Role of Technology	Active immersion (gaming in English, Duolingo)	Functional/pragmatic tool for communication practice	Passive/incidental exposure (TikTok short videos, films)
Future Orientation	Specific & instrumental (studying abroad,	Practical communicative necessity	Abstract/generalized awareness of future utility

Analytical Dimension	Respondent 1 (R1)	Respondent 2 (R2)	Respondent 3 (R3)
	international career)		
Environmental Catalyst	Peer collaboration in English Club & parent support	Family role models (fluent mother & older sibling)	Engaging classroom teacher & school learning activities

Intrinsic-Media Driven Trajectory (Respondent 1): R1 exhibits a highly autonomous, intrinsic motivational profile ignited by authentic digital content. The drive to master English originated from cognitive frustration while watching favorite content creators with subtitles:

"At first, it started because I like watching my idols on YouTube... I have to use subtitles... Because of that, I often cannot focus properly between reading the subtitles and watching the video itself." (R1) This intrinsic interest was further sustained by non-coercive parental support, allowing R1 to enjoy self-directed learning and set ambitious future goals related to overseas education.

Familial-Habitual Trajectory (Respondent 2): R2's motivation represents an internalized form of extrinsic motivation, originating from continuous family habituation established during early childhood:

"I learn English because my parents have taught me English since I was young and have continued to make it a habit until now... I see my mother and older sibling speaking English fluently and using it frequently in daily life." (R2) For R2, English is perceived as an organic medium for family communication and everyday social interaction.

Achievement-Oriented & Environmental Trajectory (Respondent 3): R3's motivation emerged from an academic setback and negative social evaluation, which was later converted into a strong drive for competence:

"I was once mocked by my friends because my English score was only ten. Even my teacher said that I was not talented... Because of that, I felt challenged to become fluent and good at English." (R3) Supported by an encouraging classroom teacher and participation in a school English club, R3 successfully transformed past anxiety into active academic engagement.

2. Strategies Used by Gen Alpha to Enhance Speaking Skills

The participants utilized a broad array of self-regulated learning strategies categorized across cognitive, metacognitive, and social domains.

Table 2: Comparative Summary of Speaking Strategies Deployed by Participants

Strategy Domain	Respondent 1 (R1)	Respondent 2 (R2)	Respondent 3 (R3)
Cognitive Strategies	Contextual sentence construction; gamified practice (Duolingo).	Immediate verbal self-expression; repetitive song lyric singing.	Imitating/shadowing animated movie dialogues (Disney); singing.
Receptive-Productive Link	Dual use of reading (vocabulary) and listening (pronunciation).	Heavy reliance on listening to train auditory processing for speech.	Exclusive preference for listening over reading due to auditory models.
Metacognitive & Goal Setting	Goal-oriented; structured time management (English Club + self-study).	Flexible/unstructured practice during free time; broad goals.	Schedule-bound to school lessons; general oral fluency aspiration.
Social & Evaluation	Guided evaluation via private tutor; peer practice in English Club.	Conversational practice and evaluation with family members (mother).	Self-evaluation via subtitle matching; social benchmark with peers.
Strategic Adjustment	Shifted from rote memorization to active sentence construction.	Accepted casual forgetting; maintained flexible daily exposure.	Derived study motivation when encountering superior peer fluency.

In the cognitive domain, participants transitioned away from passive rote memorization toward contextual sentence creation (R1), spontaneous verbalization of thoughts (R2), and shadowing/imitation of animated film dialogues (R3). Metacognitive strategies ranged from structured time management and intentional goal setting to flexible self-monitoring during leisure media consumption. Social strategies provided vital avenues for validation, including structured exercises with private tutors, authentic conversations with family members, and peer collaboration within school English clubs.

DISCUSSION

The findings illustrate a dynamic interplay between Generation Alpha learners' motivational orientations and their speaking strategy choices. Consistent with second language acquisition theories, motivation functions not merely as a static trait, but as an interactive driver that directs strategy selection and persistence (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021; Chen & McDonough, 2023).

Respondent 1’s intrinsic motivation aligns with Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020), where autonomy and curiosity lead to high metacognitive awareness and active strategy adaptation (Zhang & Head, 2021; Nguyen & Habók, 2025). Respondent 2’s familial habituation reflects Sociocultural Theory

(Lantolf & Thorne, 2021), illustrating how language learning is mediated through meaningful social interaction and supportive home environments (Smith & Kim, 2022; Walsh & Li, 2024). Meanwhile, Respondent 3's achievement-oriented drive demonstrates how initial extrinsic pressures can be internalized into competence motivation when supported by positive pedagogical interventions (Lin & Zhang, 2022; Ozturk & Savas, 2024).

Regarding strategy efficacy, the integration of technology-mediated input (such as YouTube videos, streaming platforms, and gamified apps) provided participants with rich auditory models, fostering natural pronunciation and vocabulary acquisition (Hofrova et al., 2024; Park & Kim, 2025). The findings emphasize that speaking development among digital natives is most effective when cognitive media exposure, metacognitive self-regulation, and authentic social interaction are combined (Oxford, 2017; Kim & Lee, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Gen Alpha learners develop English speaking skills through diverse motivational pathways, including intrinsic interest in digital media, early familial habituation, and academic achievement drives. To enhance their oral communication skills, these learners employ a flexible combination of cognitive strategies (contextual sentence construction, dialogue shadowing, and song lyric repetition), metacognitive self-regulation, and social interaction strategies (family conversations, peer practice, and tutor feedback). The study demonstrates that simple, technology-enhanced routines and supportive social environments serve as vital linguistic catalysts for Gen Alpha EFL learners.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are offered:

- **For English Teachers:** Integrate authentic digital media (e.g., short-form videos, interactive apps, and gamified tasks) into speaking instruction, and explicitly teach metacognitive strategies (goal setting and self-reflection) to promote learner autonomy.
- **For Students:** Combine digital media exposure with active production techniques, such as shadowing native speech, making original sentences, and engaging in regular conversations with peers or family members.
- **For Future Researchers:** Conduct longitudinal or mixed-method studies with larger participant samples across diverse geographical and socioeconomic backgrounds to evaluate the long-term impact of specific digital tools on speaking fluency.

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