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## Building Speaking Confidence with Call Annie

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## Building Speaking Confidence with Call Annie

### Abstract

For language students, speaking in their target language often causes anxiety. Call Annie is a language-learning app that offers students an opportunity to practice their speaking skills without needing to make mistakes in front of other students at the beginning of the process. This article will discuss how one language instructor uses the app formally and informally as a tool to build student confidence when speaking about new topics.

### Keywords

AI, speaking, confidence, role-play

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# In the Classroom



## Video Call

When in the video call mode, students have a wide range of options in terms of conversation topics. The app offers ‘conversation ideas’ for students who are not sure what to talk about. Categories such as “Recs [popcorn emoji]” and “Work strategy [upwards trending graph emoji]” offer a variety of topics to discuss or activities to practice. The “Recs” category has offerings such as gift ideas and movie recommendations. The “Work strategy” category has topics like job interviews and workplace conflict. Several more categories offer 5-11 topics within them. Students can also add custom prompts if they like to discuss a specific topic.

In practice, I have suggested the use of this open-ended video call function to students who reach out to ask about additional speaking practice but who are very nervous or shy. One student who found success with it told me that he would talk to Annie about topics that his English-speaking friends often brought up so that he could have the vocabulary at the forefront of his mind before spending time with those friends. It helped him recall phrases, which was particularly helpful as he often found it difficult to jump into conversations due to the speed with which his friends spoke and how long it took him to remember words specific to their shared hobby.

## Scenarios

The aspect of this app that I have used in my class as an activity is the scenario function. Because I only use the free version of the app in my classes, this is limited. However, even the limited version is very useful. The app has

Perhaps one of the most common problems that language students face is the fear of speaking in their target language. While they have the goal of becoming fluent, their nerves can often overshadow their motivation to practice speaking. This can be due to a lack of vocabulary, concerns about intelligibility, or simply social anxiety. No matter the reason that they are resistant to speaking practice, avoiding the necessary use of the skill can hinder a student’s ability to progress in the language. This article will describe the features of Call Annie and discuss how I use it as a confidence-building tool in my classes at Embry-Riddle Language Institute.

## Call Annie

In the age of ever-advancing technology and generative AI, there are options that can benefit students who need more encouragement and confidence before they can comfortably practice speaking in a classroom and in their life. One option is an app called Call Annie. Call Annie (callannie.ai) is an app that utilizes generative AI to hold conversations with the user. It is designed to be a language-learning app. The app interface looks like a standard video call, with options to switch to voice-only or text-only. While it can act as a text-based conversation partner, the real value is the ability to have spoken communication practice. I will focus on the voice-based practices in this article.

many scenarios for students to choose from, including going out to eat and planning a study group session. Students can customize their proficiency level for each scenario, in case they have more experience in one scenario than another.

What is especially useful about using Call Annie as a role-play partner is that she knows the terminology necessary to have a successful conversation, which promotes a fluent conversation. Students do not have to rely on their classmates right away, which gives everyone a chance to practice key vocabulary before they must use it with another person. It also eliminates frustration between partners when one is advancing faster than the other, especially right at the beginning. This extra practice gives them time to repair language issues or gaps in their knowledge. Additionally, there are options for pronunciation assessment and feedback in the app itself. Students can get real-time feedback, so they are in control of what is assessed and what is not. This is empowering to students who are actively engaged in their own learning process. The ultimate goal is that students feel confident and empowered to have classroom discussions without losing face due to errors so frequently that they become discouraged. By using the app as interim practice between learning vocabulary or grammar usage for a specific speech act and practicing it in the class, students have ample opportunity to help themselves feel prepared to speak to real people.

### **Future Uses**

The most recent updates to Call Annie on iOS were in April 2024. Several new features were added, including the ability to record video calls. In the coming semester, I plan to incorporate this feature in my class by offering students a chance to record their discussions with Annie based on the classroom content at home, so that they can practice with people in

class. By submitting conversation recordings, they can get teacher feedback before the class practice begins. Ideally, this type of at-home practice will make the classroom a place that they can improve their skills with their classmates in a way that makes them feel prepared and confident.

*Andy Mattingly is a language instructor at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. Their research interests include use of generative AI as a language-learning tool and second language writing assessment. Andy has presented on adding generative AI to the writing process, as well as how to assess student-use of generative AI as a writing tool.*

