

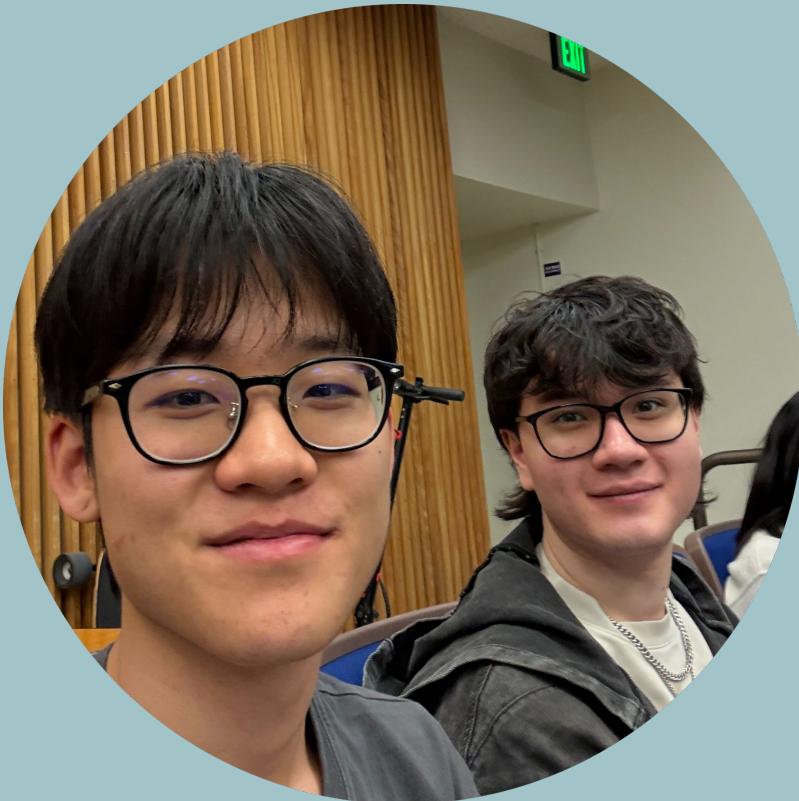
Language Learning

GR2



Meet the Team!

Ryan
UCSB '26



Victor
UCSB '26

Domain Selection

AI relevance, literally how
computers interact with
fundamental human element
(language)

Personal Interest!

Potential application!

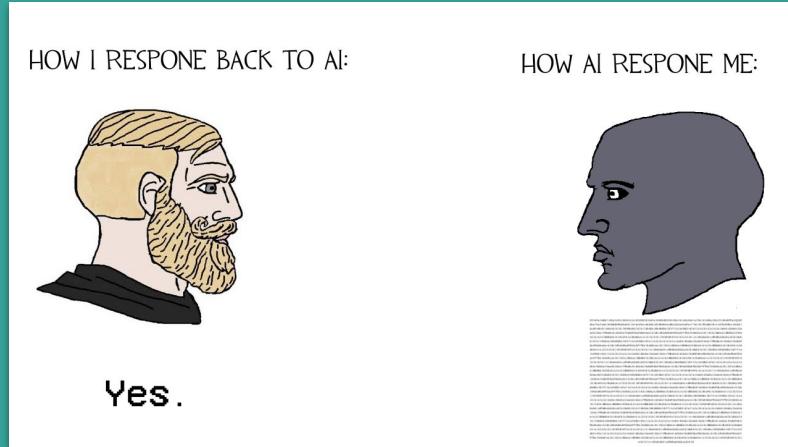
Original Domain Selection

Language Learning With AI



Refined Domain Selection

Conversational Practice with AI



ADDITIONAL NEEDFINDING

02

Finding More Participants

Target Demographics: Non-user middle aged adults, post-grad average users who use AI for conversational practice

Variety in Needs: People who desire conversational practice for different reasons, whether it be to be more comfortable in their new language environment or to be able to speak to people they already know in a conversational way

Previous Interviewees



Amanai
19-year-old Chinese
International SBCC Student

Extreme User, Asked to
interview as a foreigner
assimilating with America



Gojo
21-year-old Korea
Connoisseur from the Bay
Area

Non-user, Asked to
interview someone
passionate about Korean
culture, doesn't use AI to
learn languages



Miwa
20-year-old College Student

Average User, Local LA
resident who attends
Language Exchange
events, uses AI frequently
while studying Japanese

New Interviewees



leiri
63-year-old retired art
teacher

Non-user, still assimilating
with America and the
culture



Mechamaru
24-year-old SWE

Average user, enjoys
learning Spanish,
converses with AI on
occasion

leiri



Location: Rocky Nook Park

User Type: Non-user

Interviewer: Victor

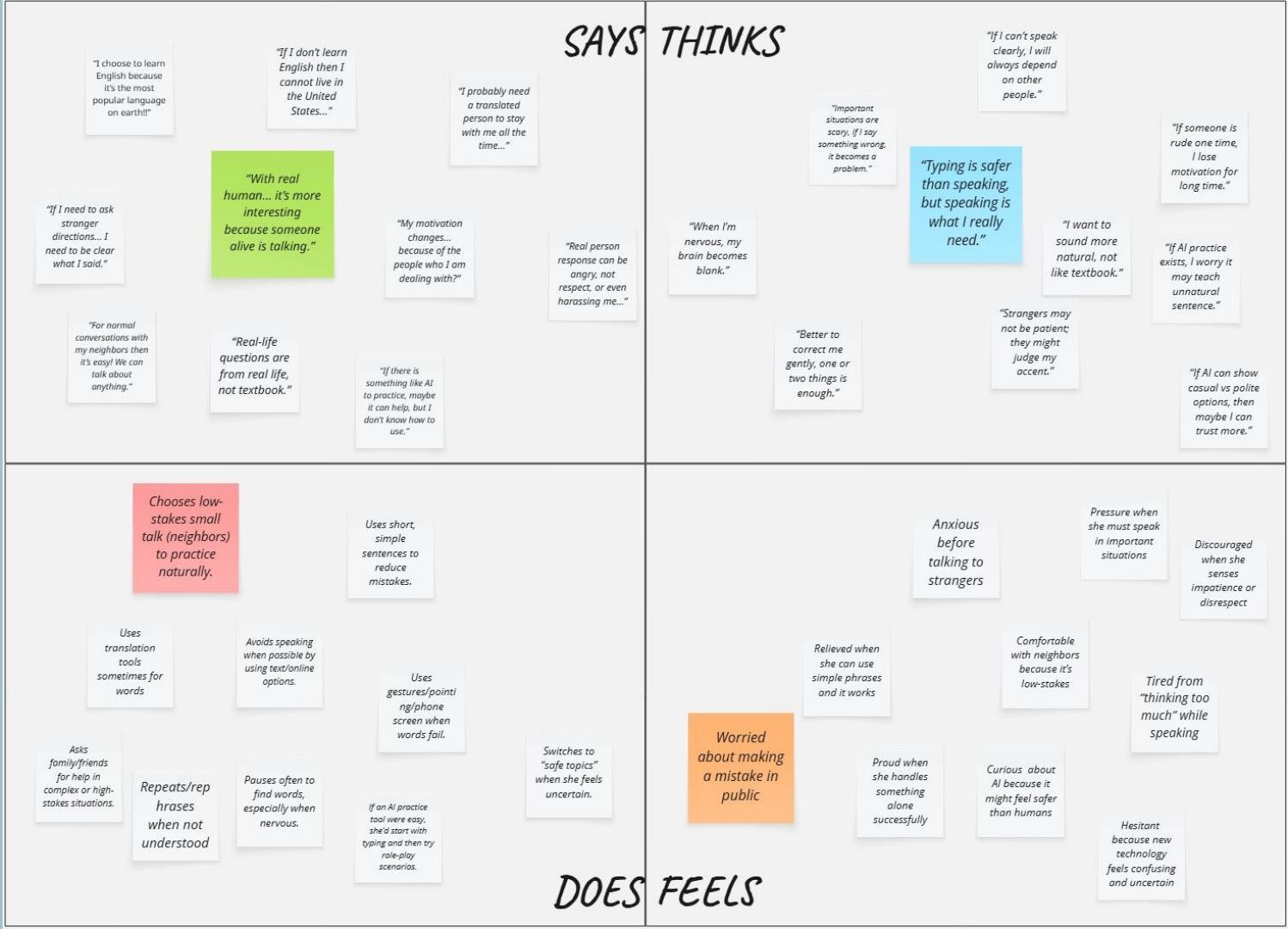
Scribe: Ryan

- Moved to the US many years ago with little to no English speaking experience
- AI did not exist at the time, had to learn conversational skills naturally
- Still feels as though her conversational skills could use a lot of improvement, but has no familiarity with AI



leiri

Location: Rocky Nook Park
User Type: Non-user
Interviewer: Victor
Scribe: Ryan



Insight

- She believes English is required for independence, otherwise she will rely on others to translate
- She feels a strong contrast between real humans being more interesting and also more risky
- She worries most about making a mistake in public, so high stakes speaking becomes stressful
- Typing feels safer than speaking, even though speaking is what she really needs
- One rude interaction can drop her motivation for a long time



Need

- A safe way to practice speaking that reduces fear of public mistakes
- High stakes role-play practice that builds confidence before real interactions
- A gradual path from typing practice to speaking practice
- Support to stay motivated even after negative real world interactions
- A practice partner that feels human and engaging, but not judgmental or harsh

Mechamaru



Location: Googleplex

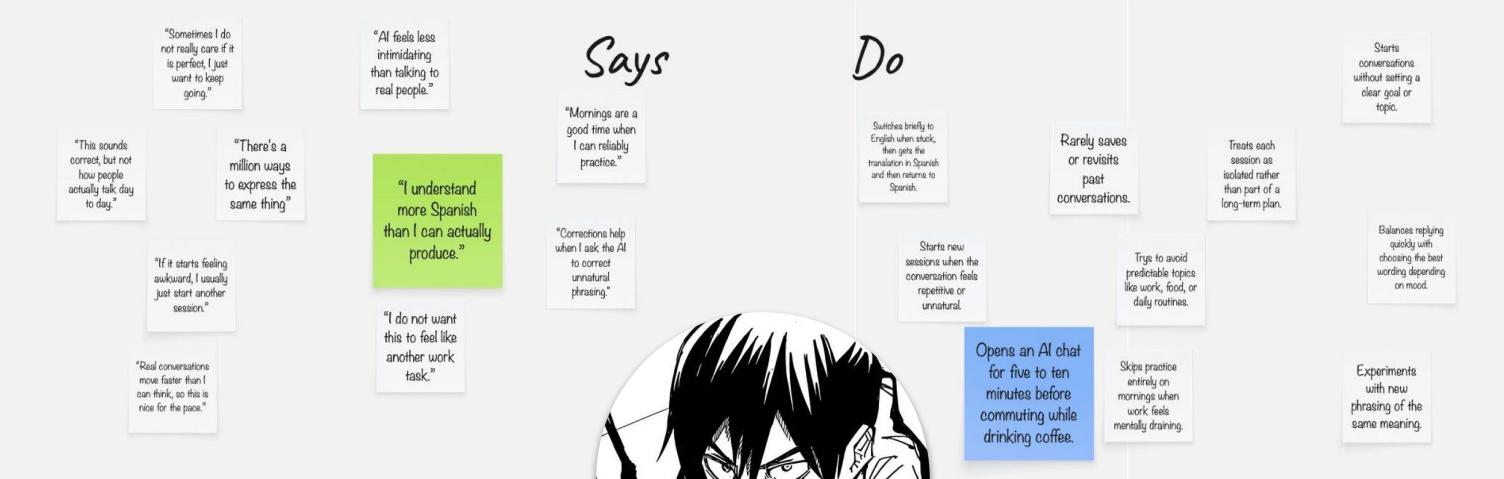
User Type: Average User

Interviewer: Ryan

Scribe: Victor

Habits

Mechamaru is a Software Engineer living in San Jose. They work a 9-5 job, and are currently learning Spanish in their free time. On occasion, they practice their conversational skills with AI in the morning before work, focusing on talking vocally.



Think

Feels



Mechamaru

Insight

Mechamaru values AI conversational practice because it allows them to pause, think, and speak at their own pace without social or time pressure.

Although stress-free practice enables consistency, the usefulness of spoken sessions depends on whether the AI's responses sound natural and conversational rather than formal or scripted.



Need

Mechamaru needs conversational practice that supports iteration and experimentation in speech without penalizing hesitation or revision.

Mechamaru needs spoken conversational partners that respond in natural, everyday Spanish so practice feels relevant to real interactions.

Key Insights

1. Safety First, Practice More

When conversation feels judgmental or high stakes, learners avoid speaking, so low pressure practice is what unlocks consistency. (leiri, Mechamaru)

2. Pace and Pauses Enable Growth

Being able to pause, think, and revise without social or time pressure makes it easier to experiment and keep a speaking habit. (Mechamaru)

3. Naturalness Determines Trust

Practice only feels useful if the responses sound like everyday speech and not scripted or overly formal, otherwise it does not transfer to real interactions. (Mechamaru, leiri)

4. Real Life Scenarios Beat Generic Chat

Learners want practice tied to real situations like directions, appointments, and small talk, with a gradual path from typing to speaking so confidence builds before the real moment. (leiri)

POV DEVELOPMENT
+ HMW's
03 & 04

IEIRI
03-A



Point of View

We met..

leiri is a 63-year-old retired art teacher who moved to the US with little English speaking experience. She learned conversational English mostly through daily life, and she still wants to feel more confident in everyday speaking, especially when she has to talk to strangers.

We were surprised to realize that...

Her biggest barrier is not grammar or vocabulary, but the emotional risk of being judged. She said, "my motivation changes sometimes because of the people who I am dealing with," and described how "real person response can be angry, not respect, or even harassing me." High-stakes moments like asking directions feel especially stressful because she "need[s] to be clear what I said," yet she also values real conversation because "it's more interesting because someone alive is talking." This reveals a tension: the practice she needs most is the practice that feels the most socially unsafe.

We wonder if this means...

For learners like leiri, conversational practice breaks down when the listener feels unpredictable or judgmental. Confidence is the real bottleneck, and negative reactions can push learners toward avoidance even when speaking is essential for independence.

It would be game-changing if...

leiri could build confidence for high-stakes everyday conversations in a way that feels safe enough to keep trying, while still preparing her for the realism of talking to actual people.

leiri



Location: Rocky Nook Park

User Type: Non-user

Interviewer: Victor

Scribe: Ryan

make high-stakes speaking feel safer
and lower pressure?

create practice that
feels realistic but still
non-judgmental?

rehearse phone calls
and appointments
without the stress of a
real person?

ensure feedback is gentle and
focused, not overwhelming?

reduce fear of making mistakes when
talking to strangers?

help learners stay motivated after
rude or impatient interactions?

let learners rehearse
asking for directions
until it feels
automatic?

How might we..

support a gradual path
from typing practice to
speaking practice?

help learners feel less dependent
on translators or family in daily
life?

keep AI practice engaging so it does
not feel boring or fake?

How might we..

create practice that
feels realistic but still
non-judgmental?

MECHAMARU

03-B



Mechamaru



Location: Googleplex

User Type: Average User

Interviewer: Ryan

Scribe: Victor

Point of View

We met..

Mechamaru, a 24 year old software engineer in San Jose who practices spoken Spanish with AI in the mornings

We were surprised to realize that...

having unlimited time to think and rephrase while speaking is what makes AI practice effective for her, not realism or speed.

We wonder if this means...

that removing time pressure is essential for helping early speakers build confidence and express meaning before worrying about fluency or correctness.

It would be game-changing to...

support stress free spoken practice that lets Mechamaru think, revise, and speak at her own pace while still feeling conversational and natural.

let learners pause and think while speaking?

help learners sound like themselves?

support stress free spoken practice?

make slow speech feel conversational?

encourage experimentation without pressure?

How might we..

keep spoken practice engaging without speed?

balance natural responses with flexible pacing?

support meaningful short speaking sessions?

build confidence through low pressure speech?

make AI speech sound casual and natural?

How might we..

let learners pause and
think while speaking?

Amanai
03-C



Amanai



Location: Isla Vista User

Type: Extreme User

Interviewer: Victor

Scribe: Ryan

Point of View

We met..

Amanai, a student who uses English daily for school and everyday life and practices speaking with AI because it feels safe and always available.

We were surprised to realize that...

even though AI feels non-judgmental, Amanai still doubts whether what she practices actually matches how people speak in real life.

We wonder if this means...

that when a language is tied to survival and social belonging, learners need reassurance that their words will sound natural before they feel confident using them publicly.

It would be game-changing to...

offer low-stakes speaking practice that protects Amanai's confidence while validating that what she says would work in real conversations.

help Amanai trust that what she says sounds natural?

validate spoken practice without adding pressure?

help learners know if people would actually say this?

make low-stakes practice feel socially relevant?

reduce fear of social mistakes while speaking?

How might we..

bridge safe AI practice and real-life usage?

build confidence before real-world conversations?

help learners check tone and appropriateness safely?

help learners feel prepared without being judged?

support confidence when language feels socially risky?

How might we..

help learners know if
people would actually
say this?

SOLUTIONS & PROTOTYPES

05 & 06

Brainstorming Solutions

**HMW Help
learners know if
people would
actually say this?**

A "Would a native say this?" toggle after each spoken response

AI plays back two versions: textbook vs natural

Quick labels like "sounds natural", "a bit formal", "awkward but understandable"

Example snippets of real conversations using the same phrase

Side-by-side rewrites with explanations of when each is used

App that compares textbook vs real speech

AI responds in character, like "friend", "coworker", "stranger"

App that answers "would people actually say this?"

Region-based feedback like "common in Mexico, uncommon in Spain"

An app with a realism slider that makes the conversation more casual and fast over time

AI explicitly says "Yes, people actually say this" or "Not really"

**HMW Let
learners pause
and think while
speaking?**

AI explicitly says "No rush, take your time"

A visible "take your time" indicator during pauses

A speaking practice app that never interrupts and waits as long as you need

AI encourages thinking aloud in English, then switching back

Visual cues instead of verbal prompts during silence

Pause button that freezes the conversation

Ability to restart a sentence mid-speech without penalty

Option to slow down the AI's speech pace dramatically

"Draft out loud" mode where users talk through thoughts messily

**HMW Create
practice that feels
realistic but still
non-judgmental?**

AI adopts a casual persona instead of a teacher role

Mistakes are acknowledged implicitly, not corrected explicitly

A website where you speak and it tells you if it sounds natural

Scenarios based on everyday low-stakes situations

Speaking app that responds naturally even when input is imperfect

AI asks follow-up questions like a real person would

Optional realism slider from very safe to more real

No scores, grades, or error counts

Encouraging language instead of evaluative language

Conversational interruptions like "oh yeah" or "that makes sense"

Feedback delayed until the end of the conversation

Narrowing Scope

HMW Help learners know if people would actually say this?

HMW Let learners pause and think while speaking?

HMW Create practice that feels realistic but still non-judgmental?

An app where you speak and it tells you whether you sound natural or not

A speaking practice app that never interrupts and waits as long as you need

An app with a realism slider that makes the conversation more casual and fast over time

How might we...

create practice that feels realistic
but still non-judgmental?

an app with a realism
slider that makes the
conversation more
casual and fast over
time

Prototype

Critical Assumption:

Gradually increasing realism keeps learners practicing and builds confidence better than starting with fully realistic conversation.

Description:

One participant plays the learner and the other plays the conversation partner. They act out the same real-life scenario three times in a row, but the partner changes their style each round.

Round 1 is slow and supportive. Round 2 is normal speed and more natural. Round 3 is faster, more casual, and includes light real-world friction like asking for clarification.



Participants:
UCSB students (friends)

Results

What worked:

Participants liked starting safe and moving up
Participants reported higher confidence after
the first round before attempting the final
round

What didn't work:

The jump to the fastest round felt too
sudden for some
Some wanted clearer guidance on when
to increase difficulty

New Learnings:

Realism needs smaller steps to feel
manageable
Tone changes affect confidence as much
as speed changes

Validity and going forward..

Assumption seems directionally valid
Next step is adding more levels and
letting the learner choose the pace of
progression

How might we...

let learners pause and think
while speaking?

a speaking practice app
that never interrupts
and waits as long as you
need

Prototype

Critical Assumption:

If the system never interrupts and allows long pauses, learners will speak more and feel less anxious.

Description:

One participant plays the learner and the other plays the conversation partner. They run the same speaking prompt twice. In the first run, the partner does not interrupt and waits through any silence until the learner finishes their thought. In the second run, the partner responds normally with quicker follow-ups and natural back-and-forth. After both runs, the learner compares which version made speaking feel easier.



Participants:
UCSB students (friends)

Results

What worked:

Participants spoke longer when they were not interrupted

Participants said the pace felt less stressful and more controlled

What didn't work:

Some pauses felt awkward without reassurance that silence was okay

A few participants wanted gentle prompts to keep the conversation moving

New Learnings:

Waiting helps, but the learner needs clear permission to pause

Participants prefer feedback after speaking, not during

Validity and going forward..

Assumption seems valid for anxious speakers

Next step is adding an optional gentle prompt while keeping the no-interruption rule

How might we...

help learners know if people
would actually say this?

An app where you speak
and it tells you whether
you sound natural or
not

Prototype

Critical Assumption:

If learners receive simple, non-judgmental validation about naturalness, they will feel more confident using phrases in real conversations.

Description:

Two people, A face-to-face role-play where one person speaks a phrase and the other gives simple naturalness validation without correction.

Participants:

UCSB students (friends)

Result:

After receiving validation, participants reused the phrase without hesitation later in the conversation.



Results

What worked:

Participants reused validated phrases later in the conversation without hesitation.
Simple, non-judgmental feedback helped them continue speaking confidently.

What didn't work:

Binary validation did not always capture nuance.
Some participants wanted light context for why a phrase was uncommon.

New Learnings:

Hearing “people would actually say this” was often enough to restore confidence. Social validation mattered more than grammatical explanation.

Validity and going forward..

Observed phrase reuse supports the assumption that validation builds confidence.
Next, we can add minimal context without introducing pressure.

Realism Slider Conversation App

- **Impact:** Medium, because it can build confidence for anxious speakers, but it may not improve language accuracy without additional coaching.
- **Reach:** Medium-high, because many learners want low-pressure practice, but the “slider” concept may not appeal to users who prefer structured lessons.
- **Novelty:** Medium, because roleplay practice already exists, and this is mainly a pacing and framing improvement.

Unlimited Wait Speaking Practice App

- **Impact:** Medium, because it reduces pressure and helps people speak more, but it does not automatically teach natural phrasing or vocabulary growth.
- **Reach:** Medium, because it is most useful for anxious beginners, and less attractive for confident or advanced speakers.
- **Novelty:** Medium-low, because “no time pressure” is often available implicitly, even if it is not the main focus of the product.

Natural Language App

- **Impact:** High, addressing a real pain point around confidence and trust in spoken language for everyday conversations.
- **Reach:** High, focused on language learners who rely on speaking for school, work, or daily life and feel socially at risk when making mistakes.
- **Novelty:** High, AI language tools exist, but explicit naturalness validation for spoken language is less explored.

NEXT STEPS

07

We chose to move
forward with..

An app where you speak
and it tells you whether
you sound natural or
not

Because...

This solution directly addresses a validated need for confidence in spoken language without adding pressure. Our prototype showed that simple naturalness validation led participants to reuse phrases confidently, suggesting strong potential for real-world impact, and it builds on the strengths of AI practice while remaining lightweight and scalable.

And the populations served are..

language learners who rely on speaking for daily life, school, or work and feel socially at risk when making mistakes. Additionally it's especially useful for early to intermediate speakers who value confidence and naturalness over perfection, but may be less helpful for advanced learners seeking detailed correction.

Appendix

1. Intro - slides 1 to 5
2. Additional needfinding results and key insights - slides 6 to 17
3. POV development - slides 20, 24, and 28
4. HMWs - slides 21 to 22, 24 to 25, 29 to 30
5. Solutions - slides 31 to 33, 37, 40
6. Experience prototypes - slides 35 to 36, 38 to 39, 41 to 42
7. What's next? - slides 46 to 49
8. Appendix - slide 50