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ChatGPT as a Speaking Partner: Investigating Its Impact on Students' Speaking Anxiety

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how the use of ChatGPT, an AI-driven chatbot, influences learners' speaking anxiety and their spoken performance in an English as a Foreign Language setting. The analysis is guided by a framework of language-learning anxiety that highlights three key components of speaking anxiety: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. A qualitative approach was employed, involving 30 university students from Eastern Indonesia. Data were collected through a 25-item Likert-scale questionnaire adapted from FLCAS, six open-ended questions, and semi-structured interviews with 10 selected participants. The findings reveal that ChatGPT plays a crucial role in reducing communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety, allowing students to practice speaking English in a low-pressure environment. Notably, findings showed that after using ChatGPT in speaking practice, 60% of students experienced moderate speaking anxiety, while 26.67% exhibited high levels and 13.33% reported low anxiety. Additionally, frequent AI-assisted interaction enhances fluency, confidence, and structured speech formulation, improving oral proficiency. However, limitations were identified in pronunciation feedback, conversational naturalness, and expressive interaction, suggesting that AI should serve as a supplementary tool rather than a standalone language learning solution. Given these findings, future AI improvements should focus on voice recognition for pronunciation accuracy, adaptive conversational dynamics, and multimodal interaction strategies. This study underscores ChatGPT's potential to effectively reduce speaking anxiety while advocating for integrated AI-human interaction approaches in language education to support comprehensive and immersive speaking practice.

Keywords: *AI-Assisted Learning; ChatGPT: EFL; Oral Proficiency; Speaking Anxiety.*

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, technological advancements have significantly impacted various aspects of life, including education Selwyn, (2011).Technology continues to evolve rapidly, creating various innovations that influence how we learn and teach. One of the greatest innovations in technology is the presence of Artificial Intelligence (AI). AI

allows machines to perform tasks that typically require human intelligence. AI has been used in various fields, including medicine, finance, and education Faishal et al., (2023).In the context of education, AI has opened many new opportunities to enhance students' learning experiences. AI can assist in creating more interactive teaching materials, providing rapid feedback, and offering learning companions that can be accessed at any time. One of the AI applications in education is in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). AI can help students learn English more effectively and enjoyably through various tools and applications specifically designed for this purpose Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, (2008).

One example of an AI application in English language learning is ChatGPT. ChatGPT is an AI-powered conversational agent that enables students to practice speaking English in real time. It offers a supportive and low-pressure environment where learners can engage in spoken interaction without the social anxiety that often arises when speaking with teachers or peers. Through ChatGPT, students can access speaking practice anytime and anywhere, receive immediate feedback, and gradually build their confidence in using the language Carrera Nuñez et al., (2025).

This becomes particularly important because one of the most persistent challenges in learning to speak English is speaking anxiety, which can significantly hinder students' communicative performance. English-speaking anxiety refers to the nervousness, fear, and hesitation students feel when responding to questions or engaging in oral tasks in the classroom. Anxiety itself is an emotional state marked by tension, worry, and apprehension, and when students experience speaking anxiety, they often display low confidence, embarrassment, a trembling voice, rapid heartbeat, sweating, difficulty producing speech, dizziness, a sense of weakness, and even fear of being laughed at by others Kurniasy et al., (2019). These emotional and physiological reactions can severely affect learners' willingness to participate.

This aligns with findings from previous studies showing that many students feel nervous, fear making mistakes, and lack confidence when speaking English, especially in formal settings Horwitz et al., (1986) and Suhery et al., (2022). Such negative emotions often lead to hesitation and avoidance, resulting in reduced participation in speaking tasks and fewer opportunities to develop oral proficiency Tallon, (2009). To address this ongoing issue, innovative tools like ChatGPT are increasingly recognized as valuable resources that can help students reduce anxiety, practice more comfortably, and gradually strengthen their confidence in speaking English Naseer et al., (2024).

Several previous studies have examined how AI technology can support English-speaking practice. Mingyan et al., (2024) found that AI-based chatbots can improve students' speaking fluency and reduce their anxiety, as students feel more comfortable expressing themselves without fear of negative judgment. Another study by Aliakbari et al. (2025) showed that interacting with chatbots helps students build their fluency and confidence in speaking because they can practice in a relaxed and flexible setting. Additionally, research conducted by Klos et al. (2021) demonstrated that the use of AI chatbots as a conversational partner provides a satisfying experience, enhancing student engagement in learning while also significantly reducing anxiety symptoms.

Foreign studies have shown various positive results in using AI for English language learning. However, few studies have been conducted domestically that specifically investigate the use of ChatGPT to address students' speaking anxiety. Local research can provide more specific insights into the context and needs of students in Indonesia. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by investigating students' perceptions of using ChatGPT as a speaking partner and how this technology affects their speaking anxiety. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the field of education, particularly in developing technology-based learning strategies to enhance students' speaking skills in EFL settings. Practically, the results can help educators consider the integration of AI technology into speaking curricula while also providing insights for students on how they can utilize this technology to improve their speaking proficiency independently. Thus, this study not only contributes to the theoretical understanding of AI in language learning but also offers practical implications for enhancing the effectiveness of speaking instruction in EFL contexts.

METHOD

This qualitative study examines students' experiences using ChatGPT for English-speaking practice, focusing on its impact on speaking anxiety and skill development. Participants, selected through convenience sampling, are 30 EFL students from a university in Eastern Indonesia. Data collection includes a Likert-scale questionnaire consisting of 25 items, adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986). The FLCAS is a widely used tool for measuring anxiety in foreign language learning contexts and identifies three primary sources of speaking anxiety: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. For this study, the original FLCAS items were reviewed and adapted to align with the specific context of using ChatGPT in English-speaking practice, ensuring relevance and clarity for the participants. Additionally, the study utilized six open-ended questions to further explore participants' experiences in using ChatGPT for speaking practice. These questions focused on how students incorporate ChatGPT into various speaking situations, the primary benefits they perceived, the challenges encountered during practice, and the changes in anxiety and confidence levels after consistent interaction with the AI. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 selected respondents based on their frequency of ChatGPT usage and varying levels of speaking anxiety. These interviews explored their initial experiences, preferred practice scenarios, improvements in speech fluency, and major challenges in using ChatGPT in speaking practice. Quantitative data is analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data undergoes thematic analysis Braun & Clarke, (2006). To ensure validity, findings are triangulated across multiple data sources Creswell & Guetterman, (2021). In this study, triangulation was conducted by comparing and integrating information obtained from three instruments: the Likert-scale questionnaire, open-ended written responses, and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire provided measurable insights into students' levels of speaking anxiety and their perceptions of using ChatGPT. Open-ended responses allowed participants to express

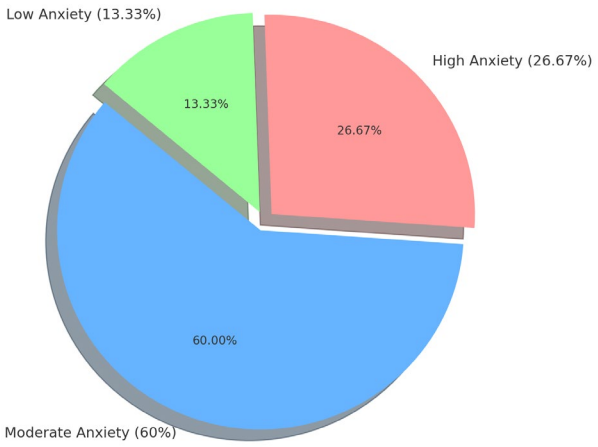
their experiences and opinions more freely, adding depth to the numerical trends. Meanwhile, semi-structured interviews offered rich, narrative data that captured individual experiences and contextual factors more deeply. By cross-analyzing the consistency of themes and patterns across these different sources the study strengthened the credibility of its findings and minimized potential bias. This approach ensures that the conclusions drawn are not based on a single method or perspective but are supported by converging evidence from multiple angles of

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study highlight how ChatGPT has become a valuable tool in the daily language learning habits of EFL students, especially in supporting their speaking skills. Most participants (87%) indicated that they use ChatGPT several times a week, with 20% stating that they interact with it daily. Interestingly, 73% of the students said they preferred practicing speaking with ChatGPT over more traditional approaches like talking with peers or practicing alone. This preference was largely driven by ChatGPT's ease of access, its flexible nature, and the safe, pressure-free space it offers. Students who used the AI tool more consistently noted noticeable improvements in their speaking fluency, the ability to generate ideas more quickly, and a boost in their confidence when speaking in English.

Furthermore, concerning the reduction of speaking anxiety through the use of ChatGPT as a speaking partner, the findings are illustrated in the following diagram based on the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). The diagram shows the distribution of students' speaking anxiety levels.

Figure 1. The distribution of students' speaking anxiety levels.



The data revealed a substantial impact on all three core components outlined by Horwitz et al. (1986): communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. Quantitative findings showed that 60% of students experienced moderate speaking anxiety, while 26.67% exhibited high levels and 13.33% reported low anxiety. Qualitative responses illustrated that practicing with ChatGPT in private, distraction-free settings (e.g., in their rooms or before bed) allowed students to focus more effectively and reduced the pressure typically associated with speaking tasks. Interview data

supported this by highlighting how students' initial hesitation faded over time as they grew accustomed to the AI's consistent and non-judgmental responses. Many expressed that the absence of a human audience gave them the freedom to experiment with language without fear of making mistakes. Similarly, the fear of negative evaluation was significantly diminished through ChatGPT's supportive interface. Students appreciated the freedom to make errors without criticism, which enabled them to explore varied expressions and develop their speaking skills without fear of being judged. This freedom from evaluation encouraged learners, especially those prone to classroom reticence, to become more active participants in speaking activities. The tool also served as a preparatory resource for assessments, helping alleviate test anxiety. Students often used ChatGPT to simulate test scenarios and rehearse presentations, reporting a greater sense of preparedness and reduced stress as a result. The ability to practice repetitively in a low-stakes environment contributed to increased feelings of control and confidence during actual speaking evaluations.

Fluency development emerged as a dominant theme, consistently reported across all data sources. Students experienced greater spontaneity in speaking, improved organization of thoughts, and reduced reliance on pauses during speech production. Regular interaction with ChatGPT was perceived as a key factor in strengthening these aspects, fostering automaticity in sentence construction, and enabling more coherent and structured oral output. Participants also reported growth in vocabulary use and syntactic variety, as ChatGPT offered a safe environment to test different sentence forms and word choices. Notably, 80% of students found ChatGPT's text-based feedback beneficial for improving idea organization, lexical selection, and the logical flow of their speech. Despite these positive outcomes, students also acknowledged several limitations in using ChatGPT for speaking development. Around 40% of participants noted that the feedback provided by the AI was inadequate in addressing suprasegmental features such as pronunciation, intonation, and rhythm. The lack of phonological feedback meant that students had to seek alternative resources to refine their spoken accuracy. Furthermore, ChatGPT's responses were often described as overly formal and lacking the flexibility needed for everyday conversational practice. This rigidity was seen as a barrier to developing pragmatic competence, as the interactions did not always reflect natural speech patterns. The AI's inability to convey emotion or mimic authentic human interaction also limited students' ability to develop sociolinguistic awareness. In response to these shortcomings, students suggested several improvements, including the integration of voice recognition features, audio-based pronunciation feedback, and customizable conversational modes (e.g., formal, academic, casual). These recommendations underscore the growing need for AI tools that not only support linguistic competence but also promote real-world communicative competence in dynamic and contextually appropriate ways.

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence that the integration of ChatGPT in EFL speaking practice significantly reduces foreign language speaking anxiety and enhances fluency. These outcomes resonate with the theoretical underpinnings of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Theory by Horwitz, Horwitz,

and Cope (1986), who identified communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety as the three primary sources of anxiety that hinder speaking performance in foreign language classrooms. The current study confirms that ChatGPT, as an AI-driven conversational tool, offers a low-anxiety environment that directly addresses these affective barriers.

To begin with, the noticeable decrease in communication apprehension among participants reinforces Dewaele, (2013) view that structured, low-pressure speaking environments can significantly boost learners' confidence. Many students reported feeling more at ease practicing their speaking skills with ChatGPT in private, where they didn't have to worry about being judged by their peers or teachers. ChatGPT seems to help lower this filter, creating a more relaxed space for language acquisition.

Secondly, the reduced fear of negative judgment mirrors what Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) found that anxiety often arises from worrying about making mistakes in front of others. With ChatGPT, students were free to try out new vocabulary and sentence patterns without fear of being criticized. This sense of psychological safety encouraged experimentation and self-correction, both of which are crucial for developing interactive fluency and overall communicative competence Batool & Nawaz, (2025).

Lastly, the positive impact of ChatGPT on students' test anxiety aligns with earlier studies on the benefits of repeated practice and self-directed learning in easing performance-related stress Teimouri et al., (2019). Being able to rehearse test-like speaking tasks with ChatGPT helped students feel more prepared and in control, reducing their anxiety before assessments. This finding supports Jackson (2022) Cognitive-behavioral theory explains that consistent exposure to anxiety-inducing situations, when managed in a safe environment, can help learners become more resilient and confident.

In terms of fluency development, the findings of this study support previous research (e.g. Mingyan et al, (2024); Klos et al., (2021) that underscores the potential of AI chatbots to encourage spontaneous speech production. Students showed noticeable progress in organizing their thoughts, forming sentences in real time, and responding more quickly—skills that reflect key dimensions of fluency as outlined by Tavakoli & Wright, (2020), namely speed, breakdown, and repair fluency. Regular interactions with ChatGPT appeared to offer students consistent and meaningful speaking practice, helping them gradually internalize the mental and linguistic routines needed for fluent speech. However, despite these advantages, the study also brings attention to several limitations. One of the main concerns is the absence of phonological feedback, particularly in areas like pronunciation and intonation, which limits ChatGPT's ability to fully support comprehensive speaking development. This finding echoes the observations of Akinola et al. (2024), who stress that intelligibility and prosodic features are essential for effective spoken communication. Another drawback is the chatbot's tendency to use overly formal language and its lack of natural conversational flow, which may hinder students' development of pragmatic competence—an important element of sociolinguistic fluency, as highlighted by Paulikova (2025). Moreover, while the low-

pressure environment created by ChatGPT encourages more participation, it could also lead to over-dependence on the technology and reduce students' opportunities for real-world interactions. This concern is aligned with Ortega's (2019) argument that authentic communicative competence involves navigating unpredictable, socially nuanced conversations—something that AI tools currently cannot replicate. Therefore, although ChatGPT can serve as a valuable support tool, it should complement, not replace, face-to-face communication and interactive learning experiences.

In conclusion, the findings reinforce the potential of ChatGPT as a valuable supplementary tool in reducing speaking anxiety and enhancing fluency. Its integration into EFL instruction can help create low-anxiety, high-frequency speaking opportunities. Nonetheless, its limitations point to the need for balanced pedagogical strategies, combining AI-supported practice with teacher guidance, peer interaction, and speech-based technologies to achieve comprehensive speaking development.

Implications for AI Development in Language Learning

The findings of this study suggest several important implications for the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in language learning and teaching. One major implication is the potential use of AI tools like ChatGPT as a speaking practice medium within foreign language curricula. ChatGPT can support both independent practice and project-based speaking tasks. With proper guidance from teachers, AI can enhance student engagement and support blended learning approaches Hockly, (2018). From a technological perspective, further development is needed to improve ChatGPT's ability to provide accurate feedback on pronunciation and intonation. Integrating speech recognition and acoustic-based phonetic analysis would help learners identify and correct pronunciation errors that often go unnoticed. As noted by Saifi (2024), AI tools need to offer realistic feedback on learners' accents and phonological features. Moreover, the conversational mode of ChatGPT should be adapted to suit specific real-life contexts, such as job interviews, academic presentations, or informal dialogue. This would make interactions feel more authentic and align with the principles of Task-Based Language Teaching Jackson, (2022), which emphasizes meaningful use of language in real tasks.

Additionally, students need to develop adequate digital literacy to use AI tools effectively. This includes knowing how to guide conversations, assess responses, and use AI as a reflective tool to improve their speaking skills Ng, (2012). Digital literacy empowers learners to become critical and autonomous users of educational technology. Although ChatGPT offers many benefits, it should not replace the role of teachers. Instead, it should function as a collaborative partner in the learning process. Teachers remain essential in offering pedagogical direction, guiding reflection, and adapting materials to the needs of individual learners. With the right approach, human-AI collaboration can enhance the overall quality of language education Holmes et al., (2019).

CONCLUSION

This study has provided valuable insights into the role of ChatGPT as a speaking partner in reducing speaking anxiety and enhancing oral proficiency among EFL learners. By creating a low-pressure speaking environment, ChatGPT allows students to practice English without fear of judgment, addressing key psychological barriers such as communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. The findings confirm that ChatGPT is effective in building confidence, improving fluency, and encouraging spontaneous speech, supporting previous research that emphasizes the benefits of AI-assisted language learning. However, despite its advantages, limitations in pronunciation feedback, conversational flexibility, and expressive interaction suggest that ChatGPT should serve as a supplementary tool rather than a replacement for human interaction. While AI facilitates frequent and independent speaking practice, students still require structured pronunciation training and engagement with native speakers or instructors to refine their phonetic accuracy. Additionally, the rigidity of AI responses and lack of emotional nuance indicate that improvements in conversational adaptability are necessary to replicate real-world linguistic interactions more authentically. Given these findings, future research should focus on enhancing AI technology to provide phonetic feedback, integrating interactive voice recognition, and improving contextual conversational adaptability. Educators should explore hybrid approaches that blend AI-assisted speaking practice with human interaction, ensuring a more holistic language learning experience. By strategically integrating AI with traditional speaking activities and pronunciation training, learners can maximize the benefits of AI while addressing its current limitations, ultimately enhancing their linguistic competence and communicative confidence in English.

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