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From Classroom to Chatbot: The Use of AI in Developing Speaking Proficiency

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the use of ChatGPT as a conversational partner to support speaking practice among first-semester EFL students in a blended learning setting. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through classroom observations, reflective responses, and informal interviews with sixty-five English Literature students. The findings show that AI-supported rehearsal mainly influenced students' emotional readiness and willingness to participate rather than immediate linguistic improvement. Many learners used ChatGPT to practise privately, organise their ideas, and prepare for classroom interaction, which reduced the fear of judgement and encouraged more active participation. At the same time, students recognised that AI could not replace authentic peer communication, particularly during spontaneous discussions. The study suggests that conversational AI functions most effectively as a preparatory space that complements classroom speaking activities. These results contribute to ongoing discussions about the role of AI in EFL speaking development by highlighting how private rehearsal and collaborative interaction can work together to support early-stage university learners.

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INTRODUCTION

Students entering university English programs are often expected to speak spontaneously, respond to peers, and participate in discussion-based learning. In practice, many are still developing the confidence and fluency needed to manage real-time interaction. Speaking in English-related majors involves more than grammatical accuracy; learners must organise ideas while speaking, respond to others, and remain engaged in collaborative exchanges. Research on EFL speaking highlights how communicative activities and interactive practice can support engagement, yet classroom time and structured teaching routines do not always allow sustained individual rehearsal (Elmahdi et al., 2025; Gultom et al., 2022; Panggua et al., 2025; Yu et al., 2024). As expectations for oral participation increase, both teachers and students continue to seek additional spaces where speaking practice can extend beyond scheduled lessons.

One response to these constraints has been the growing exploration of artificial intelligence in language learning. Conversational tools powered by AI are increasingly discussed as supplementary environments that allow learners to interact with responsive systems and rehearse spoken ideas at their own pace (Kristiawan et al., 2024; Patty, 2022). Rather than replacing teachers, these tools are often positioned as low-pressure practice spaces where students can repeat expressions, experiment with language, and prepare for classroom interaction (Mahazan & Ismail, 2025; Wiboolyasarin et al., 2025). Their value, however, depends on how they are integrated into existing pedagogical practices and on how learners engage with them within a broader learning process.

At Universitas Halu Oleo, first-semester students often arrive with varied levels of confidence in speaking English. Some hesitate to participate because they worry about making mistakes or being negatively evaluated by peers, while others require additional preparation time before speaking publicly (Okyar, 2023; Ölmezer Öztürk & Öztürk, 2021). Studies on foreign-language speaking anxiety suggest that limited exposure and uneven readiness can shape learners' participation during early classroom interactions (Malik et al., 2024). During this initial period of adjustment, students may observe discussions more than they contribute, not necessarily because of low motivation, but because they are still building confidence, becoming familiar with academic expectations, and finding their comfort level with English as a communicative tool.

These challenges are not limited to a single institution. In many EFL contexts, speaking activities still rely on teacher-led formats, such as structured dialogues or tightly guided tasks, that emphasise controlled practice (Bekhzod Bakhtiyarovich, 2025). While such approaches can support form-focused learning, they may provide limited opportunities for spontaneous expression or extended personal rehearsal, leaving some learners feeling underprepared when discussions begin. Within this broader pattern, conversational AI has begun to attract attention as a possible preparation space, allowing learners to practise repeatedly and refine responses before participating in real-time interaction (Mahazan & Ismail, 2025; Wiboolyasarin et al., 2025).

Recent studies have explored how AI-mediated interaction relates to speaking development. Empirical research reports that chatbot-based activities can support oral performance and encourage learners to communicate more actively, particularly by increasing opportunities for interaction and reducing anxiety during practice (Fathi et al., 2024; Zhang, 2026). At the same time, the literature presents a mixed picture. Some investigations emphasise learners' perceptions and attitudes rather than measured proficiency outcomes (Mudawy, 2025), while broader reviews note that many studies remain relatively short or focus on contexts that differ from those of early-stage university learners (Nguyen Huu, 2025). Research examining how AI-supported speaking practice fits into the early adjustment period of first-semester students, especially in regional Indonesian settings, remains limited.

This study examines the use of ChatGPT as a conversational partner to support speaking development among first-semester English Literature students at Universitas Halu Oleo. Framed within a blended learning perspective, the research focuses on how AI-mediated interaction relates to students' oral proficiency and willingness to communicate during their initial months of university study. Rather than presenting AI as a complete solution, the study considers how conversational tools may function alongside existing classroom practices within a specific regional learning context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Speaking Proficiency in EFL Higher Education

Studies of speaking in tertiary EFL contexts frequently describe academic interaction as a setting in which learners must respond spontaneously, present arguments, and sustain discussion in real time. Within this body of research, oral proficiency is no longer framed solely in terms of grammatical accuracy but increasingly linked to intelligibility and interactional effectiveness. Correia (2024) situates intelligibility as a central concern in multilingual communication, suggesting that successful speaking depends on whether meaning remains accessible to interlocutors rather than on conformity to native-like norms. Parallel discussions of communicative competence emphasize that spoken performance develops through purposeful interaction, in which learners negotiate meaning and manage discourse in response to authentic classroom demands (Elmahdi et al., 2025). These perspectives reposition speaking proficiency as a dynamic practice shaped by participation in academic communication rather than by structural mastery alone.

Empirical work across Asian higher education contexts shows that this shift in perspective does not automatically translate into confident oral performance. Research with first-year English majors indicates that many learners hesitate when required to connect ideas spontaneously or extend turns during discussion, even after years of formal instruction (Hanh, 2024). Similar observations in Indonesian EFL classrooms point to a persistent gap between receptive knowledge and active participation, often influenced by teacher-centered instruction and limited exposure to authentic communicative practice (Halim et al., 2025). Reviews of speaking scholarship further map a growing focus on communicative engagement, cognitive factors, and technology-mediated practice, reflecting broader attempts to address the challenges of real-time interaction in university settings (J. Wang et al., 2022). Rather than depicting speaking difficulties as individual deficiencies, these studies collectively highlight the complex conditions under which academic oral performance emerges.

Within this literature, speaking proficiency at the tertiary level is increasingly portrayed as an integrated ability involving intelligibility, fluency, interactional responsiveness, and affective readiness. University learners are expected to manage meaning collaboratively, adjust language to interlocutors, and maintain coherence during extended discourse. However, several studies note that examination-oriented practices and strongly teacher-led classrooms may limit opportunities for sustained interaction, leaving learners with few spaces to rehearse ideas or experiment with language. As a result, recent scholarship tends to frame speaking development as participation in interactional practices that gradually build communicative confidence, rather than as the acquisition of isolated linguistic forms.

Speaking Anxiety and Affective Factors in EFL Speaking

Discussion of speaking anxiety in EFL classrooms rarely points to a single explanation. Accounts from recent reviews suggest that learners' hesitation often grows from repeated classroom experiences rather than from an inherent lack of ability. Paraguas (2025) describes how fear of making mistakes and doubts about fluency frequently emerge alongside external pressures such as peer comparison and teacher responses. What becomes visible in this literature is not merely a list of causes but a pattern of interaction in which anxiety is shaped through classroom dynamics. Students who appear linguistically prepared may still withdraw from speaking when participation feels publicly exposed (Meyer & Patty, 2024). In university contexts, where oral performance is closely linked to evaluation and emerging professional identity, these emotional pressures tend to become more pronounced.

Work on affective variables further indicates that speaking anxiety develops in relation to other emotional processes rather than operating as an isolated psychological state. Conceptual discussions of foreign language anxiety connect it with willingness to communicate, perseverance, and the ways learners regulate emotional pressure during interaction (M. Wang et al., 2022). When read together with studies on coping behaviour, a more complex picture emerges. Research on university students shows that many learners respond to anxiety by adjusting their preparation and participation, drawing on strategies such as rehearsal, peer collaboration, and self-regulation to maintain engagement during speaking tasks (Tee et al., 2020). These patterns suggest that anxiety does not always lead to avoidance.

For some learners, moments of tension prompt reflection and adaptation, shaping how they approach subsequent speaking opportunities.

Attention to classroom practice adds another layer to this discussion. Reviews of pedagogical strategies note that instructional choices, such as the timing of feedback, the organisation of interaction, and the availability of rehearsal opportunities, can influence how threatening a speaking task feels (Sotomayor Cantos et al., 2024). Classrooms that allow learners time to experiment with language before public evaluation tend to encourage participation, not because anxiety disappears, but because it becomes more manageable within supportive interaction. From this perspective, speaking anxiety emerges through everyday classroom routines, assessment practices, and social expectations rather than residing solely within the learner. The literature, therefore, presents anxiety as a shifting condition shaped by emotional regulation, social context, and pedagogical design in university EFL settings.

Blended Learning in EFL Speaking Development

Blended learning is often introduced in university EFL contexts as a response to a practical limitation: classroom time alone rarely provides sufficient space for sustained speaking practice. Rather than functioning as a simple technological addition, it is typically designed to extend interaction beyond scheduled meetings, allowing students to prepare, rehearse, and revisit language use in online environments. Research on blended task-based instruction shows that stages such as preparation, interaction, and reflection can be distributed across face-to-face and digital settings, enabling learning activities to continue outside the classroom (Gong et al., 2025). Similarly, work in higher education contexts suggests that hybrid structures may support learner autonomy and sustained engagement, particularly when students need additional time to regulate their participation before speaking in class (Nguyen, 2024). Within this perspective, blended learning is not positioned as a replacement for teaching but as a design choice that expands where and how communicative practice occurs.

At its core, blended learning combines face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated communication, allowing learners to move between synchronous interaction and asynchronous practice (Sheerah, 2020). This flexibility is especially relevant for speaking development because it offers spaces where learners can experiment with language, record and review their performance, and revisit materials without the pressure of real-time interaction. Evidence from blended public speaking courses illustrates how these principles are enacted in practice. Integrating online peer feedback and video-based tasks enables students to revise speeches, observe their own progress, and engage more actively with classmates outside scheduled sessions (Mortaji, 2022). Seen this way, blended learning does not introduce entirely new speaking objectives; instead, it reshapes the conditions under which students prepare, practice, and reflect on their oral performance.

ChatGPT or Conversational AI for Language Learning

ChatGPT's release has led to a growing number of studies examining how conversational AI reshapes language learning practices in ESL and EFL contexts. Recent systematic reviews show that research has expanded rapidly since late 2022, although much of the early empirical work has focused on writing support rather than oral communication (Lo et al., 2024). Broader analyses of conversational AI tools in English language teaching also report positive outcomes across both cognitive and affective dimensions, including engagement, confidence, and language skill development (Lai & Lee, 2024). Rather than functioning solely as an automated feedback system, conversational AI is increasingly viewed as an interactive environment in which dialogue itself becomes part of the learning process. At the same time, the uneven distribution of research across language skills indicates that speaking focused applications remain relatively underexplored, leaving room for more targeted investigation.

Studies that focus specifically on speaking practice begin to clarify how AI chatbots operate as conversational partners in oral skill development. A systematic review of AI-powered chatbots for EFL speaking highlights their potential to create simulated conversational settings in which learners can rehearse pronunciation, improve fluency, and gradually reduce speaking anxiety (Du & Daniel, 2024). Instead of replacing classroom interaction, these tools tend to function as structured rehearsal spaces that allow repeated attempts without immediate social pressure. In parallel, research examining the

affective impact of AI integration reports increases in motivation and engagement alongside reductions in anxiety among EFL learners in higher education (AlTwijri & Alghizzi, 2024). Such outcomes are particularly relevant in contexts where students' reluctance to speak stems from fear of negative evaluation or limited opportunities for sustained practice.

Despite these promising developments, several studies emphasise the need for cautious implementation. While ChatGPT and related conversational agents offer personalised feedback and real-time interaction, concerns remain about overreliance on AI-generated responses, academic integrity, and the potential weakening of human-mediated interaction (Al-khresheh, 2024). Additional reviews highlight similar tensions, acknowledging both increased learner autonomy and ongoing ethical or pedagogical uncertainties (Balcı, 2024). Across these studies, conversational AI emerges as a developing resource whose pedagogical value continues to be negotiated. Its contribution to speaking development appears strongest when positioned as a supplementary practice environment that extends opportunities for interaction while remaining grounded in pedagogically guided instruction.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to explore how first-semester students experienced AI-based conversational tools during Basic Speaking practice. The design was intended to capture learners' perceptions, emotional responses, and observable participation patterns rather than to test causal relationships or statistical improvement. Numerical tables presented in the findings were derived from qualitative coding of observation notes and students' reflections. These figures illustrate recurring tendencies in speaking behaviour and classroom participation, not experimental measurements.

The study was situated within a blended learning approach in which ChatGPT functioned as a supplementary rehearsal space alongside regular Basic Speaking instruction. Students interacted with the AI tool to rehearse ideas, simulate conversational exchanges, and prepare for in-class speaking tasks. The methodological emphasis, therefore, focused on how learners experienced AI-assisted practice during their initial transition into university-level speaking activities.

Research Site and Participants

The study was conducted at the Faculty of Cultural Sciences (FIB), Universitas Halu Oleo, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia. Participants were 65 first-semester students enrolled in the English Literature program who were taking a Basic Speaking course during the semester of implementation. Because the research was embedded within an intact class, all students were involved in the learning activities, reflecting a total-sampling classroom context.

As the course followed a standard first-semester curriculum without placement grouping, students entered with varied educational backgrounds and differing levels of speaking confidence. Initial speaking readiness was informally mapped through early classroom interaction and students' self-reported experiences in order to contextualize participation patterns rather than to establish proficiency categories. Participation in reflective responses and follow-up conversations remained voluntary, and all excerpts included in the findings were anonymized to protect students' identities.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected across one academic semester through classroom observations, students' reflective responses, and informal follow-up interviews. Informal interviews were conducted as short conversations after speaking tasks, guided by open prompts that invited students to describe their confidence, perceived usefulness of AI rehearsal, and changes in participation. These conversations occurred naturally within classroom interaction and were documented through field notes.

Classroom observations focused on participation patterns during Basic Speaking sessions. Observation notes followed predetermined focus points, including hesitation length, initiation of speaking turns, response elaboration, and interactional engagement with peers. This structure allowed shifts in participation to be traced across meetings while preserving the natural flow of classroom

activity. In addition, students produced brief reflective responses describing how they used ChatGPT outside class and how such practice influenced their readiness to speak.

Data analysis followed an inductive thematic process. Observation notes, interview records, and reflective entries were read repeatedly to identify recurring expressions and shared experiences. Initial open coding was used to capture patterns such as reduced anxiety, increased willingness to speak, and perceived limitations of AI interaction. These codes were then compared across data sources and gradually grouped into broader interpretive themes through iterative analysis. Coding decisions were revisited across multiple readings to ensure internal consistency before themes were finalized. The numerical representations in the findings reflect descriptive counts of coded tendencies rather than statistical testing.

To strengthen trustworthiness, peer checking was conducted by discussing coding decisions with a colleague experienced in qualitative research. An audit trail documenting analytic steps and revisions was maintained throughout the study, and triangulation across observations, reflections, and informal interviews supported the credibility of interpretations. As the researcher was also the course instructor, reflexive notes were kept to monitor potential bias during data interpretation. The analysis, therefore, prioritizes interpretive depth and classroom experience over outcome-based measurement.

FINDINGS

The findings presented here integrate classroom observations, informal interview responses, reflective entries, and coded distributions from 65 students. Rather than presenting improvement as a linear outcome, the analysis traces how learners navigated speaking practice through emotional adjustment, interactional change, and reflective positioning of AI within their learning process. Students' experiences unfolded across a layered speaking environment in which AI-supported rehearsal outside class intersected with face-to-face classroom interaction. Excerpts are used selectively to foreground students' voices where they illuminate shifts in perception or behaviour. Tables summarise recurring patterns but do not replace narrative interpretation. Each theme, therefore, unfolds differently, reflecting the uneven nature of students' experiences during Basic Speaking sessions.

From Fear of Judgement to Private Rehearsal

Students' early encounters with AI-assisted speaking were shaped less by performance goals than by a search for emotional safety. Several interview responses describe classroom speaking as an exposed activity, whereas AI interaction felt quieter and more controllable. One participant reflected, *"I felt more relaxed because no one was judging me."* Another explained, *"It was less stressful than speaking in front of the class."* These comments point to a shift in how students position rehearsal within their learning process. Instead of treating speaking practice as a public performance, many began to view it as preparation that could happen privately. In this blended arrangement, rehearsal did not replace classroom speaking; rather, it created an initial layer of emotional adjustment before face-to-face participation.

Reflective entries reinforce this interpretation by highlighting the role of autonomy during practice. Students often described repeating answers multiple times before feeling ready to speak in class. One response reads, *"I liked that I could practice alone."* Another states, *"I could repeat my answers until I felt confident."* The repetition in these excerpts suggests that rehearsal served to negotiate uncertainty rather than eliminate it. Coding patterns show that reduced embarrassment and independent practice were among the most frequently mentioned experiences. Emotional readiness, therefore, emerged through small adjustments rather than dramatic change.

Some students initially expressed hesitation toward AI practice before gradually reconsidering its usefulness. Interview responses reveal that emotional adjustment unfolded over time rather than instantly. One participant noted, *"At first I was not sure it would help, but after trying it, I found it useful."* Another reflected, *"I did not feel embarrassed when I made mistakes."* These excerpts show how learners began reframing errors as part of rehearsal rather than failure. Classroom observation notes confirm that hesitation did not entirely disappear; instead, students appeared more prepared while remaining

cautious. Emotional readiness thus remained an internal process that preceded observable behavioural change.

Over time, the atmosphere of classroom interaction shifted subtly as students entered discussions better prepared. Observation notes describe fewer prolonged silences, although speaking turns remained brief. The emotional patterns identified across interviews and reflections are summarised in Table 1. Rather than indicating improvement, these patterns show how students redefined the meaning of practice within a low-pressure environment.

Table 1. Observation-Based Coding of Emotional Experience

Observed Experience	Frequency Mentioned	Source of Coding	Interpretation
Felt more relaxed / less judged	29	Interview Responses	Emotional safety during rehearsal
Preferred practising alone	21	Reflective Responses	Private preparation
Initial uncertainty followed by usefulness	15	Interview Data	Emotional adaptation
Visible hesitation in early sessions	Repeated observation	Classroom Observation	Anxiety context

Speaking More Often, Not Always Speaking Better

Interactional change became visible only after emotional adjustment had stabilised. Observation data indicate that more students began initiating speech during structured activities, particularly when tasks resembled conversational exchanges they had rehearsed with AI. Students often described these shifts in classroom interaction as the continuation of rehearsal practices that began outside class rather than entirely new speaking behaviours. Participation increased gradually rather than dramatically, often appearing first as short responses.

Interview responses show that students associated AI rehearsal with faster entry into conversation. One participant remarked, "*I respond faster than before*." However, these changes did not extend evenly across all speaking tasks. During discussions requiring interpretation or argumentation, students often returned to shorter contributions. Reflective entries suggest that learners distinguished between starting a conversation and sustaining one. The comment "*It helped for simple topics, but not complex discussions*" illustrates this distinction without overstating improvement.

Observation notes further reveal that increased willingness to speak did not necessarily alter interactional depth. Students entered discussions more readily but hesitated when exchanges became unpredictable. Rather than interpreting this pattern as a limitation, participants often described it as part of a gradual learning process. One student reflected, "*There is some improvement*." Another noted, "*I do not overthink grammar anymore*." These excerpts appear only at key moments to illustrate contrast, rather than as routine evidence. The coded distribution summarised in Table 2 captures how confidence gains coexisted with limited changes in fluency.

Task design also influenced participation patterns. Structured dialogues led to more balanced interaction, whereas spontaneous debates revealed ongoing hesitation. Interview responses suggest that rehearsal prepared students for predictable exchanges but not for improvisation. This layered interaction between rehearsal and classroom dialogue reflects the structural logic of blended speaking practice rather than isolated improvement in one environment.

Table 2. Distribution of Student Perceptions of Confidence and Fluency

Perception Category	Number of Students	Interpretation
Confidence increased significantly	32	Greater initiation of speech
Confidence increased slightly	13	Gradual participation shift
No noticeable confidence change	20	Mixed experience
Fluency improved noticeably	25	Self-reported progress
Little or no fluency change	26	Limited depth of change

AI as Practice Space, not a Replacement

While earlier themes focused on experience and behaviour, this section shifts toward how students interpreted the role of AI within their learning. Reflective responses frequently positioned AI as preparation rather than performance. Statements such as *"I can practice anytime"* and *"It helps me practice independently"* suggest that students understood rehearsal as an extension of classroom learning rather than a substitute for it. Many participants described their routine as moving between independent AI practice and in-class interaction, indicating that speaking development occurred across interconnected spaces.

Interview responses also reveal a strong awareness of AI's limits. One student stated, *"We still need real conversations with people."* Another explained, *"No, it cannot replace real classroom interaction."* These reflections introduce a critical dimension that reframes AI as supplementary. Observation notes reinforce this view by showing continued reliance on peer dialogue during complex tasks.

Students also addressed limitations related to emotional realism and conversational depth. The remarks *"The conversation feels less natural"* and *"It lacks emotions"* reflect a cautious stance toward AI interaction. Coding patterns summarised in Table 3 show that benefits and limitations frequently co-occurred rather than appearing separately. In this sense, students' experiences illustrate a blended speaking ecology in which technology extended practice opportunities without redefining the central role of classroom dialogue.

Rather than functioning as a replacement, AI became embedded within students' preparation routines. Reflective entries describe using AI before participating in speaking tasks, while interviews highlight the continuing importance of authentic communication. Observation data confirm that classroom interaction remained central even as rehearsal moved outside the classroom. The findings, therefore, position AI as a rehearsal infrastructure within an integrated learning environment.

Table 3. Reported Benefits and Limitations of AI-Assisted Speaking Practice

Reported Experience	Number of Students	Interpretation
Flexibility of practice	34	Independent rehearsal
Ability to repeat conversations	18	Reduced pressure
Development of independent learning habits	13	Learner autonomy
Lack of emotional or natural responses	34	Interaction limitation
Repetitive conversation patterns	17	Reduced authenticity
Limited support for deep discussions	14	Complexity constraint

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that AI-supported rehearsal influenced how students approached speaking activities rather than how precisely they produced language. Several learners began to treat speaking as a process they could prepare for privately before joining classroom interaction. This tendency resonates with research on speaking anxiety, which shows that hesitation is often linked to social pressure, fear of negative evaluation, and reduced self-confidence, not solely to linguistic limitations (Malik et al., 2024; Paraguas, 2025). Practising with ChatGPT appeared to provide a space where students could organise ideas and test expressions quietly. Although moments of hesitation remained, students tended to enter discussions with clearer intentions and a calmer presence.

Changes in participation unfolded gradually across the activities. More students began to initiate responses during structured tasks, although longer turns and deeper interaction were not consistently sustained. Earlier studies on AI-mediated speaking practice have also noted shifts in learners' willingness to communicate and confidence when conversational tools are introduced, rather than uniform gains in all aspects of speaking performance (Fathi et al., 2024; Zhang, 2026). Classroom observations in this study suggest that rehearsal supported quicker entry into conversations, especially when tasks resembled familiar practice scenarios. When discussions required interpretation or argumentation, however, many learners returned to shorter contributions. These patterns indicate that speaking

development moved unevenly, shaped as much by emotional readiness and task familiarity as by changes in linguistic ability alone.

The contrast between rehearsed exchanges and spontaneous interaction also deserves closer attention. AI practice appeared to support students when topics were predictable, yet it did not fully prepare them for the uncertainty of peer dialogue. Recent studies on AI-mediated speaking have reported strong learner engagement and positive perceptions, while also highlighting limitations in feedback quality, contextual understanding, and the development of higher-level discourse skills (Mudawy, 2025; Nguyen Huu, 2025). The present findings reflect a similar tension. Students seemed more confident when initiating conversations, but they often struggled to find words once the interaction became less structured. Rather than viewing this as a deficit, it may suggest that rehearsal and improvisation represent distinct phases of learning, particularly for first-semester learners still adjusting to the demands of academic communication.

Students themselves described AI as a preparation tool rather than a substitute for classroom interaction. Many moved between practising independently and speaking with peers, suggesting that learning unfolded across connected environments. This perspective aligns with studies that emphasise the pedagogical integration of conversational AI, where technology supports learner autonomy and rehearsal while remaining embedded within teacher-guided instruction (Al-khresheh, 2024; Balcı, 2024). Within blended learning contexts, digital tools can extend opportunities for preparation, yet classroom dialogue continues to play a central role in negotiating meaning and sustaining collaborative engagement (Gong et al., 2025; Nguyen, 2024). Rather than displacing the classroom, AI practice appeared to shift its function, turning face-to-face interaction into a space where ideas shaped during rehearsal were tested, challenged, and refined through real communication.

From a teaching perspective, the findings suggest that AI-supported speaking activities may offer early-semester students a space to prepare before participating publicly. Tasks that link private rehearsal with collaborative discussion appeared to encourage learners to move beyond predictable exchanges toward more sustained interaction. At the same time, the data indicate that technology alone did not substantially deepen communicative performance. Interactional development continued to rely on peer engagement and carefully structured classroom work, reflecting research that frames speaking proficiency as emerging through meaningful participation and negotiated interaction rather than through technological support in isolation (Elmahdi et al., 2025).

This study also has several limitations. The qualitative descriptive design focused on classroom experience and did not measure changes in proficiency through experimental comparison. The data came from a single intact class, and students' reflections shaped much of the interpretation. The one-semester time frame may also be too short to observe changes in discourse complexity. Future research could follow learners across longer periods and examine how AI rehearsal interacts with different speaking tasks and proficiency levels.

The discussion shows that conversational AI functioned mainly as a rehearsal space that helped students reorganise their approach to speaking during the early stage of university study. By easing the emotional pressure of participation while keeping peer interaction at the centre of learning, AI became part of a blended speaking environment rather than a replacement for instruction. These findings contribute to current conversations about AI in EFL by showing how small shifts in preparation practices can influence students' readiness to communicate within real classroom settings.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that using ChatGPT as a conversational partner shaped how first-semester EFL students approached speaking practice during their early transition to university learning. Rather than producing immediate linguistic gains, AI-supported rehearsal helped students prepare privately, reduce fear of judgment, and enter classroom discussions with greater readiness. Speaking development appeared to be a gradual process in which emotional adjustment preceded noticeable changes in interactional performance. The findings highlight that increased participation does not always mean deeper fluency, especially when learners are still adapting to academic communication. Within this

blended learning context, AI primarily served as a preparatory space that fostered confidence-building, while classroom interaction remained central to communicative growth.

The study also suggests that conversational AI can expand opportunities for rehearsal when integrated thoughtfully into existing pedagogical practices. Students recognised the value of practising independently, yet they continued to rely on peer dialogue and teacher guidance to sustain meaningful interaction. These observations point to the importance of designing speaking activities that connect private rehearsal with collaborative classroom engagement. At the same time, the qualitative scope of the research and its focus on a single cohort limit the extent to which broader claims can be made. Even so, the study offers a contextual perspective on how AI-mediated speaking practice operates in an Indonesian EFL setting, showing that its main role is to support students' readiness to communicate rather than replace human interaction.

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