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THE IMPACT OF AI-POWERED SPEAKING TOOLS ON EFL STUDENTS AT NGUYEN TAT THANH UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT: This study aims to explore the perceptions of English majors on how AI-powered speaking tools such as ChatGPT, ELSA Speak, Duolingo, etc. positively impact learners' language learning journey. The research focused on learners' experiences, satisfaction and opinions about using AI-powered speaking tools. Fifty intermediate and upper intermediate students at Nguyen Tat Thanh University volunteered to complete a survey and participated in follow-up interviews.

The results show that most students valued the benefits of AI-powered speaking tools in facilitating their pronunciation, fluency, accuracy and confidence in speaking. They found immediate feedback by AI-powered speaking tools helpful for learners in identifying and correcting their mistakes. However, some concerns were also raised such as the cost of the premium version, occasional misunderstandings by the AI and robotic responses.

Overall, while learners viewed AI-powered speaking tools as useful for practice, most emphasized that real teachers still play a crucial role. In other words, learners work best when they combine these tools with guidance from teachers. These

insights point to the value of integrating AI into language learning in ways that support, rather than replace, human instruction. Besides, the findings offer suggestions for educators, institutions, and developers to combine AI-powered speaking tools in their curriculum, support learners and teachers and improve features of these tools to bring learners the best experiences.

KEYWORDS: *AI-powered speaking tools, AI tools, speaking performance, motivation*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, artificial intelligence (AI) has emerged as a transformative influence in the field of education, reshaping not only instructional practices but also how students engage with learning content. Nowhere is this transformation more visible than in the domain of language learning, particularly in speaking practice for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. AI-powered speaking tools—including platforms like ELSA Speak, ChatGPT, Duolingo, and Speechace—have introduced innovative opportunities that transcend the traditional classroom, offering flexible and personalized speaking practice that adapts to learners' needs and preferences (Zou et al., 2023; Alshumaimeri & Alshememry, 2023; Wang et al., 2023).

These AI-powered speaking tools typically incorporate features such as real-time pronunciation feedback, interactive conversation simulations, and customized speaking tasks tailored to individual learning profiles (Li & Hafner, 2023). As a result, they provide an accessible and engaging means of speaking practice that can complement and, in some cases, even partially replace conventional methods (Golonka et al., 2014; Lee, 2023). Scholars have noted that such tools may boost learners' motivation and confidence by enabling them to practice autonomously at their own pace (Zou et al., 2023; Godwin-Jones, 2019). In the Vietnamese EFL context, where speaking practice is often limited to classroom interactions due to large class sizes and a focus on grammar and reading, AI-powered speaking tools hold particular promise (Nguyen & Pham, 2022).

However, despite these promising developments, critical questions remain about the broader impact of AI-powered speaking tools on EFL students. While some studies

suggest that these tools can reduce speaking anxiety and foster a sense of learner autonomy (Mohammed Al-Othman, 2024; Wang & Vásquez, 2012), others highlight concerns about the limitations of AI-mediated interactions, particularly the perceived lack of authenticity and emotional nuance in AI-generated dialogues (Li et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2023). Students may find that while AI applications offer immediate corrective feedback, they do not always replicate the spontaneity, cultural context, and affective dynamics of human conversation (Heift & Vyatkina, 2017). This tension between the benefits and drawbacks of AI-powered speaking practice underscores the need for further research into how EFL learners perceive and experience these tools in real-world educational settings.

This study focuses on examining the impact of AI-powered speaking practice on English major students at Nguyen Tat Thanh University in Vietnam. Rather than concentrating solely on measurable performance outcomes, it adopts a learner-centered perspective to explore students' perceptions and lived experiences with AI speaking tools. Specifically, the study investigates how these tools influence students' motivation, self-efficacy, and speaking development, as well as what challenges and limitations they encounter in using them. By incorporating learners' voices and reflections, the study aims to provide nuanced insights into the pedagogical implications of AI integration in speaking practice. Such insights are critical for educators, curriculum designers, and technology developers who seek to harness the potential of AI in ways that are both effective and sensitive to learners' needs and expectations (Reinders & Benson, 2017). Finally, unlike previous studies at Nguyen Tat Thanh University that focused on the perceptions of students on the effectiveness of a single AI-powered speaking tool, this study highlights students' experiences with multiple AI speaking tools and compares their experiences based on usage frequency and time.

Ultimately, the goal of this research is to contribute to the growing body of literature on AI in language education and to offer practical guidance for implementing AI-powered speaking tools in EFL classrooms. By foregrounding learners' experiences and perceptions, the study hopes to inform strategies that maximize the benefits of

AI technology while addressing its challenges, ensuring that these innovative tools truly enhance speaking practice for EFL students in Vietnam and beyond.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How do students view the role of AI-powered speaking tools in enhancing their speaking skills, particularly in areas such as fluency, pronunciation, accuracy, response quality, confidence, and motivation?
2. What are the learners' perspectives on the shortcomings of AI-powered speaking tools when it comes to improving their speaking abilities?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditional English classrooms often see teachers dominating the talking time, which, though seemingly efficient, limits opportunities for learners to speak and practice. As Hitotuzi (2005) and Kostadinovska-Stojchevska & Popovikj (2019) suggest, maximizing learners' speaking time is crucial for language development, as more speaking opportunities translate to faster improvement.

In recent years, artificial intelligence (AI)-powered speaking tools have gained significant traction in language learning, offering learners new avenues for self-directed practice. Applications such as ChatGPT-based bots, ELSA Speak, and Speechace are designed to provide learners with authentic speaking opportunities outside the classroom, fostering greater engagement and autonomy (Nguyen & Pham, 2024). These tools provide real-time feedback, conversation simulations, and interactive exercises that support oral communication development in English.

However, despite their promise, some scholars question how effectively these AI-powered speaking tools align with second language acquisition (SLA) principles. This review thus considers how AI tutors connect to major SLA theories, including Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis, Swain's (1985) Output Hypothesis, and Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory, before exploring their impacts on specific speaking dimensions like pronunciation, fluency, accuracy, responsiveness, confidence, and motivation.

Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis highlights the importance of comprehensible input that challenges learners just beyond their current level (i+1). AI tutors, with adaptive features, can provide this tailored input by analyzing learners' responses and adjusting questions, vocabulary, and grammar complexity accordingly. Such personalized interaction supports the gradual expansion of language proficiency. Moreover, AI tutors can create a low-stress practice environment, encourage experimentation and reduce learners' anxiety—factors that Krashen (1985) identifies as crucial to language acquisition.

Swain (1985), meanwhile, argues that output is equally important: learners need to actively produce language to identify gaps in their knowledge. AI tutors address this by offering frequent opportunities for spoken practice and immediate feedback on vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. This real-time feedback loop helps learners notice their linguistic shortcomings and improve accuracy and fluency over time.

Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory emphasizes the role of interaction and scaffolding in language learning. While AI tutors cannot fully replicate human interaction, they simulate meaningful dialogue and provide immediate corrective feedback, functioning as digital scaffolding tools that guide learners toward greater language competence.

Numerous studies have demonstrated the value of AI-powered speaking tools in supporting different dimensions of oral proficiency.

Almutairi and Alghammas (2025) reported that the ELSA App significantly improved learners' pronunciation by offering immediate corrective feedback and targeted practice. Ningsih (2024) similarly found that Speechace's automated pronunciation feedback helps learners recognize and rectify their pronunciation errors. Yang and Chang (2024) further highlighted the effectiveness of real-time evaluation and interactive practice in enhancing learners' pronunciation accuracy. Qassrawi et al. (2024) observed that interactive AI applications such as Google Assistant enabled learners to engage in more fluid conversations, reducing pauses and hesitations. Likewise, Ningsih (2024) noted substantial improvements in fluency

and overall oral performance among learners using Speechace, as the tool provided instant corrective feedback that fostered more confident and coherent speech.

Dandu et al. (2024) emphasized how Rosetta Stone's grammar-focused feedback improved learners' grammatical accuracy and vocabulary use. Wang et al. (2024) also found that AI-enabled one-on-one training significantly bolstered learners' ability to produce more grammatically accurate language in spontaneous speech.

Guo and Li (2024) demonstrated the benefits of ChatGPT-based AI characters, which improved Chinese ESL students' response speed and quality by providing a low-pressure environment for spontaneous dialogue. Similarly, interactive systems like the Conversational Intelligent Tutoring System have been shown to enhance learners' response strategies through simulated role-play scenarios and engaging dialogues (Yang & Chang, 2024).

AI tutors can also foster learners' confidence in speaking. Halim (2024) noted that Yoodli AI's low-stress practice environment reduces speaking anxiety and helps learners become more self-assured. Qassrawi et al. (2024) further observed that learners felt more comfortable experimenting with language when practicing with AI tutors, boosting their motivation and willingness to communicate in English.

Despite these advantages, several studies point to limitations and challenges associated with AI tutors. Qassrawi et al. (2024) noted that accessibility issues—such as requiring reliable internet connections and compatible devices—can limit the effectiveness of AI applications, especially in under-resourced contexts. Fathi et al. (2024) highlighted concerns that AI tools lack emotional expressiveness, potentially limiting the development of nuanced conversational skills and social interaction competencies. Levy (2009) warned that overreliance on AI tools may reduce opportunities for authentic human interaction, an essential aspect of language acquisition.

Moreover, Nguyen (2024) underscored the need for longitudinal studies to evaluate whether improvements in speaking skills achieved through AI-powered practice are sustainable over the long term. This suggests that while AI-powered speaking tools

can effectively complement traditional speaking instruction, they are not yet a complete substitute for human-mediated conversation.

Overall, the literature reveals that AI-powered speaking tools can be valuable allies in fostering EFL learners' speaking proficiency, particularly by offering personalized input, rich interaction opportunities, and immediate feedback. However, they are best understood as complementary resources within broader, human-centered pedagogical frameworks, rather than replacements for real-life conversation practice.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed the mixed-methods design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to explore the perceptions of English majors on the impact of AI-powered teachers on speaking skill improvement and the challenges they face when using these AI speaking tools on their own. To ensure consistency of the findings, both general attitudes and individual stories were collected through the survey and the semi-structured interviews with 15 volunteer students.

Participants

While the author had previously taught many participants in past semesters, she has no instructional role during the time of the study. All steps were taken to ensure that participation was voluntary and free from any influence.

After obtaining official approval from the university, the researcher formally invited students from the 2021 and 2022 cohorts to participate in the study. The students were clearly informed about the research goals, how data would be used, and their rights. Fifty English-major students from the Faculty of Foreign languages at Nguyen Tat Thanh University volunteered to take part in the research. All participants had an intermediate level of English proficiency and above and were familiar with using AI tools in their learning.

To ensure a diversity of perspectives, participants were chosen from two cohorts (classes 22DTA1B and 21DTA1D) consisting of third- and four-year students.

Participation was voluntary, which may have influenced the generalizability of findings.

Instruments

To collect data, two instruments were used: an online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews.

Questionnaire:

The survey included 24 closed-ended items using a 5-point Likert scale and three optional open-ended questions. Items were grouped into categories such as perceived skill improvement (e.g., pronunciation, fluency), confidence and motivation, accessibility, limitations, and overall satisfaction. The questionnaire was delivered in Vietnamese to ensure clarity and ease of response. A pilot test with 10 students was conducted to refine wording and structure. The final version showed good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.768).

Interviews:

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 volunteer participants. Each interview lasted approximately 15–20 minutes and was carried out in Vietnamese to allow students to express themselves freely. Questions focused on their daily use of AI tools, perceived benefits and drawbacks, and suggestions for improving the learning experience. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and later transcribed for analysis.

Data Collection Procedure

Participants were required to use one of various AI-powered speaking tools—such as ChatGPT, ELSA Speak, Duolingo or others over a period of six weeks. They were encouraged to practice speaking for at least 10 minutes a day, depending on their schedules. Participants self-reported their daily usage of AI-powered speaking tools via a Google Form, which recorded their name, date, the start and end times of each session. At the end of the study period, participants completed the online questionnaire. The interviews were conducted within one week after the survey to follow up on the themes that emerged from the data.

Data Analysis

Quantitative responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean scores, percentages) to identify common patterns in learner perceptions. Descriptive analysis is appropriate and sufficient because the primary objective of the study is not to test causal relationships or compare experimental groups. No inferential statistics were used, as the goal was to describe rather than compare or test significance. The data were processed using Excel and grouped by categories.

Qualitative data from interviews were analyzed thematically. The researcher reviewed transcripts, grouped recurring responses, and identified major themes such as perceived effectiveness, common frustrations, motivation, and the role of teachers versus AI. This analysis helped enrich and contextualize the survey results.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the key findings from the questionnaire and follow-up interviews, focusing on students' perceptions of AI-powered speaking tools. The results highlight perceived improvements in speaking skills including pronunciation, fluency, accuracy, learners' confidence and motivation. Limitations such as misrecognition, robotic tone and cost barriers are also discussed, along with students' preferences regarding AI versus human instruction.

1. Perceived Improvement in Speaking Skills

Most participants felt that using AI speaking tools helped them improve in several areas. When asked to rate the usefulness of these tools, 80% of students gave high ratings (4 or 5 on the Likert scale), suggesting a strong overall belief in their effectiveness. Pronunciation and fluency were the most frequently mentioned areas of improvement. For example, 66% of students reported better pronunciation, while 58% noticed increased fluency in daily conversations.

In the interviews, students described how features like real-time feedback and repeated practice helped them become more aware of their mistakes. One student explained, *"I used to hesitate a lot, but after practicing with ELSA, I speak more naturally now—even when I make mistakes."*

The relation between frequency and perceived usefulness was displayed in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Frequency of AI use and Mean Usefulness Rating (1 – 5)

Frequency	**Mean Usefulness**	**Min**	**Max**
2-3 times/week	4	2	5
4-5 times/week	4.8	4	5
Every day	4.1	2	5

The data in Table 1 suggest that learners who use AI-powered speaking tools frequently tend to report higher perceived usefulness. Notably, learners who practiced 4–5 times per week reported the highest mean usefulness score (M = 4.8), compared to those who practiced every day (M = 4.1) or 2–3 times per week (M = 4.0). This finding suggests that while consistent interaction with AI tools is beneficial, overuse may lead to diminished perceived effectiveness. The decrease in perceived usefulness may suggest a link between repetitive exposure and cognitive fatigue or decreased motivation, as suggested in prior research on digital tool overuse (Zou et al., 2023; Alshumaimeri & Alshememry, 2023). However, further research is needed to examine the effects of frequent AI tool usage on learners' motivation and engagement in diverse learning environments.

Moreover, the duration of each session also impacted learners' perceptions. Those who engaged with AI tutors for 10–20 minutes reported the highest perceived usefulness (M = 4.3), suggesting that this timeframe strikes a balance between effectiveness and cognitive load. Interestingly, learners who practiced for 20–30 minutes per session reported slightly lower usefulness (M = 4.2), but demonstrated the highest perceived improvements in specific speaking areas: fluency (M = 4.3), pronunciation (M = 4.2), and vocabulary (M = 4.3), as shown in Table 2. These results support the notion that extended engagement, although potentially less "useful" in subjective perception, may be more beneficial for tangible skill development (Al-Othman, 2024).

These findings are consistent with recent studies that emphasize the importance of optimal frequency and duration in digital language learning environments. For

instance, Zou et al. (2023) found that moderate use of AI speech tools enhances speaking skills while preventing burnout. Similarly, Al-Othman (2024) highlighted that structured, timed practice sessions significantly improve learners' metacognitive awareness and speaking outcomes when using AI feedback systems.

Table 2: Duration of AI use and perceived speaking improvements

Length of engaging time	**Mean scores**			
	Usefulness	**Fluency**	**Pronunciation**	**Vocabulary**
Below 10 minutes/session	3.9	3.6	3.7	3.6
10-20 minutes/session	4.3	4.1	4.1	4
20-30 minutes/session	4.2	4.2	4.3	4.3

2. Confidence and Motivation

AI tools also seemed to have a positive effect on learners' confidence. According to survey results, 96% of respondents said they felt at least somewhat more confident speaking English after using AI-powered speaking tools. Many appreciated the chance to practice without fear of judgment. Several students mentioned that the tools allowed them to speak freely and correct errors in private, which made them more willing to try. The increase in learner output reflects Swain's Output Hypothesis.

The findings suggest that psychological factors play an important role in language learning. Learners admitted that their self-confidence increased because AI-powered tools gave them a useful low-pressure and non-anxiety environment by allowing them to make mistakes. This finding is similar to Krashen's hypothesis where low-anxiety environments foster better language acquisition. This suggests that learning with an AI-powered tool may be beneficial for introverted individuals.

Motivation increased for some students as well. A few said that using AI apps felt more "interactive" and "less boring" than traditional speaking drills. However, others admitted that their enthusiasm dropped if the app's responses became too repetitive or lacked emotional connection. The findings suggested a disadvantage of AI-powered tools in creating human-like emotions in conversations to maintain learners' long-term attention and motivation.

3. Challenges and Limitations

Despite the benefits, students identified several issues. About 30% of learners said that AI tutors didn't always understand their pronunciation, which made conversations frustrating. In interviews, participants said they sometimes had to repeat themselves multiple times before getting a meaningful response. The frustration caused by speech recognition errors suggests that current AI systems may not yet be adequately trained on diverse accents or non-native speech patterns, which aligns with earlier concerns raised by Fathi et al. (2024) regarding emotional responsiveness.

Another concern was the "robotic" nature of AI-generated speech. Several students mentioned that responses often felt scripted, overly formal, or lacked the natural flow of real human conversation. This made some learners feel less engaged over time. These concerns underscore a key limitation of current AI technologies in replicating human communication. This limitation could reduce the effectiveness of speaking performance in authentic communication contexts.

Cost was also mentioned as a barrier. Although most students were interested in using these tools more regularly, not all could afford the premium versions. One student shared, *"I could only use the free version, and after a few days, it limited the features I really needed.". Apparently,* financial barriers can be a factor that reinforces inequalities among students. Only a portion of students can afford the premium version of AI tutors and get benefit from them.

4. Role of AI Tutors vs. Human Teachers

When asked whether AI tutors could replace human teachers, the majority disagreed. While students appreciated the flexibility and support from AI tools, 78% said that teachers were still necessary. Many emphasized the importance of personal feedback, emotional encouragement, and cultural explanations they felt AI couldn't provide.

Students generally saw AI as a useful supplement rather than a substitute. One interviewee put it this way: *"AI helps me practice, but I still need a teacher to explain why something is wrong or how to say it more naturally."*

These findings align well with theories of blended learning, where technology is used to enhance—not replace—the role of the teacher. The undeniable benefits of AI tutors do not eliminate the essential role of human educators in foreign language teaching and learning. Social and emotional interaction fosters a sense of connection that helps learners sustain long-term motivation. This suggests that AI tutors can serve as valuable companions in the learning process, but they cannot fully replace human presence in the classroom.

Implications, Limitations, and Suggestions for Future Research

Implications

The findings from this study offer several practical implications for language teachers, institutions, and developers. First, education professionals should consider integrating AI technology into their teaching practices and view it as a supportive tool. Assigning daily tasks through AI applications provides students with regular and active exposure to the target language.

Second, universities and educational institutions should provide learners with equal opportunities to access AI tutors. In this study, students expressed strong interest in using AI tutor applications to support their learning at home. However, due to financial constraints, most could only access the free versions, which offer limited features. Apparently, financial limitations in accessing AI tutors emerged as a common challenge, and all participants expressed a desire to receive institutional support. To help learners optimize the use of AI tools for autonomous speaking practice, universities and educational institutions should consider allocating part of their budget to purchase premium applications and provide free access accounts to all students in need.

For software developers, it is essential that technical teams take user feedback into account to continue improving AI systems and applications. Enhancing the naturalness of conversations between AI and learners can help users feel as though they are interacting with a real tutor, rather than a mechanical and impersonal system. Adding more realistic conversation flows and context-aware interactions

could make learners feel more engaged, supported, and connected during practice sessions.

Limitations

Like any study, this one has a few limitations. First, the number of participants was small—only fifty English majors from one university. Because of that, the results might not apply to students in other schools or learning situations, especially those with different levels of English or different learning backgrounds.

Another limitation is that this study only looked at students' opinions at one point in time. It didn't follow how their views or speaking skills changed over a longer period. While the feedback was useful, it only gives us a short-term view and doesn't show what might happen if students keep using AI tools for a longer time.

One more limitation is that the study relied on what students said about their own experiences. Even though the interviews gave useful and detailed information, the answers might have been affected by what they expected, what they had just experienced, or what they thought the interviewer wanted to hear. Also, since there was no direct observation or data from the apps, and the engagement was recorded via a Google Form, it's hard to control the contents learned in each session, how often or how seriously students actually used the AI tools during the study.

These limitations don't take away from the value of the findings. Instead, they show that future research should include a wider range of students and look at changes over time. It would also be helpful to include more objective data, like actual performance results, to support what students say.

Suggestions for Future Research

While this study focused on a specific group of English majors, more research is needed to better understand how AI speaking tools work in different learning contexts. Future studies could look at how students with different English levels—like beginners, advanced learners, or students from other majors—use and benefit from these tools. It would also be useful to include learners from various regions or

schools to see how different learning environments affect their experience with AI tools in language learning.

Long-term studies could help us better understand how students' attitudes and habits change when they use AI speaking tools over time. For example, by following learners through a full semester or school year, researchers could see whether early improvements in speaking skills and motivation continue or fade. These studies might also show changes in how motivated students feel, especially as they use the tools more regularly. It would also be helpful to track how students actually use the apps—how often they practice, what features they use most, and what problems they run into.

Another area worth exploring is the role of teachers. Future studies might examine how teachers view AI integration and how blended approaches—where AI supports but doesn't replace teacher guidance—impact learner progress and classroom dynamics. These kinds of studies could help shape more effective, balanced approaches to using AI in language education.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how English major students at Nguyen Tat Thanh University perceive the use of AI-powered speaking tutors in their self-directed learning. Rather than focusing on test scores, the research centered on learner experiences—what they found helpful, what challenges they faced, and how they felt about using AI tools like ChatGPT, ELSA Speak, Duolingo and Speechace.

The results show that most students viewed these tools as supportive, particularly for improving pronunciation, fluency, and vocabulary. Many also said they felt more confident speaking English after regular practice with AI, thanks to the privacy, flexibility, and quick feedback these tools offer. However, learners also pointed out important limitations. Some found the AI responses too formal or repetitive, while others struggled with the lack of emotional interaction and occasional misunderstandings due to pronunciation issues. Cost was another concern, especially for those unable to access premium features.

One key takeaway from the study is that students don't see AI tutors as replacements for human teachers. While they value the chance to practice more independently, they still rely on teachers for deeper guidance, feedback, and emotional support. This suggests that the most effective approach may be a blended one—combining AI-powered tools with teacher-led instruction to give learners the best of both worlds.

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