

**EFL LEARNERS' EXPERIENCES IN PRACTICING ENGLISH CONVERSATION
THROUGH AI-GENERATED CHARACTERS ON CHATGPT**¹Anggia Nastya, ²Anne Ratna Suminar, ³Yustika Nur Fajriah^{1,2,3}Institut Pendidikan Indonesia Garute-mail: ¹anggianastya400@gmail.com, ²anners@institutpendidikan.ac.id,³yustikanurfajriah@institutpendidikan.ac.id

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ABSTRAK

Keterbatasan kesempatan praktik percakapan autentik di luar kelas dan tingginya kecemasan berbicara masih menjadi hambatan utama bagi pembelajar bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing (EFL). Meskipun pemanfaatan kecerdasan buatan (AI) berkembang pesat, kajian mendalam mengenai pengalaman nyata pembelajar saat berinteraksi dengan karakter berbasis AI masih terbatas. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi pengalaman pelajar EFL dalam berlatih percakapan bahasa Inggris melalui interaksi dengan *AI-generated characters* pada platform ChatGPT. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus, penelitian ini melibatkan tujuh pelajar EFL dari Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris di Institut Pendidikan Indonesia Garut yang dipilih melalui teknik *purposive sampling*. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur yang telah divalidasi ahli dan didukung oleh dokumentasi riwayat percakapan digital, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik model Braun dan Clarke. Hasil penelitian mengidentifikasi tiga tema utama: penggunaan praktis, manfaat, dan tantangan. Dari segi penggunaan praktis, partisipan menetapkan persona karakter secara aktif dan memvariasikan format percakapan, meskipun pemanfaatan fitur konfigurasi tingkat lanjut masih terbatas. Manfaat utama yang dirasakan meliputi penurunan kecemasan berbicara, peningkatan kepercayaan diri, perluasan kosakata, serta fleksibilitas akses latihan mandiri. Adapun tantangan yang dihadapi mencakup respons prematur sistem AI, kendala kosakata pada topik yang belum dikuasai, serta penurunan motivasi yang bersifat individual. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa interaksi dengan *AI-generated characters* efektif berfungsi sebagai media latihan percakapan awal yang aman dan bebas tekanan sosial bagi pembelajar EFL.

Kata Kunci: *AI-Generated Characters, ChatGPT, EFL Learners, English Conversation, Speaking Anxiety.*

ABSTRACT

Limited opportunities for authentic conversational practice outside the classroom and high speaking anxiety remain significant barriers for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Despite the rapid growth of conversational artificial intelligence (AI), empirical investigations into learners' lived experiences when interacting with customized virtual interlocutors remain scarce. This study explored EFL learners' experiences in practicing English conversation through interactions with AI-generated characters on ChatGPT. Employing a qualitative case study design, this research involved seven EFL undergraduate students from the English Education Program at Institut Pendidikan Indonesia Garut selected through purposive sampling. Data were accumulated through expert-validated semi-structured interviews and corroborated by digital chat history documentation, which were subsequently analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework. The findings identified three overarching themes: practical use, benefits, and challenges. In terms of practical use, participants purposefully

customized conversational personas and varied interaction formats, although engagement with advanced prompt settings remained minimal. The most prominent benefits were marked reductions in speaking anxiety, increased communicative confidence, vocabulary acquisition, and autonomous practice accessibility. Meanwhile, the observed challenges included premature AI turn-taking interruptions, vocabulary deficits on unfamiliar topics, and localized motivational decline. This study concludes that AI-generated characters serve as a meaningful low-pressure preparatory environment for authentic EFL speaking practice.

Keywords: *AI-Generated Characters, ChatGPT, EFL Learners, English Conversation, Speaking Anxiety.*

INTRODUCTION

Speaking is widely recognized as one of the most essential skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, as it serves as the primary medium through which learners communicate ideas, negotiate meaning, and participate in real-life interaction. Brown and Lee (2015) explain that effective speaking involves the simultaneous coordination of phonological, lexical, and pragmatic knowledge in real time, making it one of the most complex and cognitively demanding skills for EFL learners to develop. Despite its recognized importance, speaking remains the skill that many EFL learners struggle with most, particularly in contexts where English is used predominantly inside the classroom and authentic communication opportunities outside formal settings are scarce (Luoma, 2004). This instructional limitation frequently restricts learners from developing natural fluency and spontaneous interactional skills.

Among the dimensions of speaking, English conversation is particularly demanding for foreign language learners. Richards (2008) describes English conversation as a collaborative activity in which speakers must simultaneously process incoming speech and formulate responses, requiring both linguistic competence and interactional awareness. Corps et al. (2018) further explain that successful conversation involves managing turn-taking, initiating and closing exchanges, and responding appropriately to a partner's communicative intentions. For EFL learners, these demands are especially challenging because they must manage all of these interactional requirements in a foreign language, often under time pressure and without extended planning time. Consequently, conversational fluency requires continuous opportunities for interactive spoken engagement.

Practicing English conversation in EFL contexts is frequently hindered by several cognitive and contextual factors. Speaking anxiety is consistently identified as one of the most significant barriers, preventing learners from expressing themselves freely and reducing their willingness to engage in spoken interaction (Boudreau et al., 2018; Khafidhoh et al., 2023). Beyond anxiety, many EFL classrooms provide limited opportunities for authentic conversation practice, with instruction tending to prioritize grammar and written tasks over communicative speaking activities (Ratnasari, 2020). These conditions collectively highlight the need for alternative speaking environments that can support learners in practicing English conversation with greater frequency, flexibility, and reduced social pressure. Without supportive conversational spaces, learners often remain apprehensive about engaging in spoken communication.

The emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has introduced new possibilities for addressing these pedagogical challenges. AI-powered tools allow learners to engage in interactive spoken exchanges independently, at any time, and without the evaluative pressure associated with human interaction (Fitria, 2023). Research has confirmed that AI tools can

increase learners' motivation to engage in oral practice, reduce speaking anxiety, and provide accessible practice opportunities that extend beyond the constraints of formal classroom instruction (Fathi et al., 2024). These findings suggest that AI has the potential to serve not merely as a supplement to classroom instruction but as a meaningful alternative speaking environment for EFL learners. Through low-stakes practice, learners can build communicative confidence at their own pace.

One specific affordance of AI tools that has gained increasing attention is the ability to create AI-generated characters, which are virtual personas that simulate human-like dialogue and allow learners to engage in contextually rich conversational practice. Pataranutaporn et al. (2021) describe AI-generated characters as virtual entities capable of emotional expression, adaptive responses, and personalized dialogue, making them particularly suitable for immersive language practice. Research has shown that practicing with AI-generated characters tends to reduce speaking anxiety and increase learners' confidence and motivation compared to practicing with human partners (Napitupulu & Dalimunte, 2025; Sayed et al., 2024). These findings position AI-generated characters as a promising medium for EFL learners seeking more frequent and low-pressure English conversation practice. By interacting with a personalized persona, learners can simulate diverse social scenarios safely.

One platform that has made this kind of interaction widely accessible is ChatGPT, an AI-powered conversational application developed by OpenAI. Through its custom instructions feature, ChatGPT can be directed to take on a specific persona or character, allowing learners to simulate real-world conversational scenarios with a virtual interlocutor. Its Voice Mode feature further enables real-time spoken interaction, making it possible for learners to engage in authentic spoken dialogue with the AI character they have created (Kohnke et al., 2023). These characteristics position ChatGPT as a particularly relevant and accessible tool for EFL learners who wish to practice English conversation in a flexible and low-pressure environment. The integration of speech recognition and generative language modeling provides immediate conversational affordances for autonomous practice.

Despite the growing use of ChatGPT among language learners, research specifically exploring EFL learners' experiences of practicing English conversation through AI-generated characters on ChatGPT remains limited. Most existing studies focus on general speaking ability or measurable outcomes such as fluency scores and test performance, without capturing the nuanced and lived experiences of individual learners during their interaction with AI. Moreover, few studies have examined how learners actually engage with AI-generated characters in practice, including how they set up the tool, what interaction formats they use, what benefits they perceive, and what challenges they encounter. This study addresses that gap by investigating EFL learners' experiences of practicing English conversation through AI-generated characters on ChatGPT. The primary objective is to provide an in-depth qualitative account of how learners engage with this technology and what it means for their autonomous English conversation development.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design, which was selected because it allowed for an in-depth and contextualized exploration of individual learners' experiences within a specific bounded setting (Yin, 2017). A qualitative approach was appropriate because this study aimed to understand participants' subjective experiences, reflections, and perceptions rather than measure variables numerically (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The case study design enabled the researcher to examine EFL learners' experiences with AI-generated characters as a

contextualized phenomenon within one educational setting, prioritizing depth of interpretation and descriptive richness over statistical generalizability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Seven EFL learners from the English Education Program at Institut Pendidikan Indonesia Garut were selected as participants through purposive sampling. Purposive sampling was applied because this study required participants who possessed direct and relevant experience with the phenomenon under investigation (Etikan, 2016). The selection criteria were: (1) an active undergraduate student of the English Education Program at Institut Pendidikan Indonesia Garut; (2) had used ChatGPT's AI-generated character feature for English conversation practice; and (3) was willing and available to participate in all stages of data collection. This sample size is consistent with qualitative case study traditions, wherein small cohorts allow for sustained and in-depth inquiry into complex experiential processes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Data were collected from two primary sources. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with all seven participants using an interview guide developed by the researchers, which covered learners' practical interaction, conversational engagement, perceived benefits, and operational challenges. To ensure content validity and credibility, the interview protocol was subjected to expert judgment by two senior lecturers in English Language Teaching before field administration. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and was conducted face-to-face with participant consent for audio recording. Second, participants' ChatGPT conversation history was collected as documentary evidence. These conversation logs served as supporting documentation to triangulate and contextualize participants' self-reported interview accounts (Bowen, 2009).

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase procedure proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The researcher read all interview transcripts repeatedly to gain a thorough understanding of participants' experiences while examining conversation history records as contextual artifacts. Initial codes were generated from meaningful segments of the data and subsequently grouped into broader themes based on conceptual relationships. Themes were iteratively reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and alignment with the research questions before receiving final definitions. The resulting themes are presented through rich narrative descriptions supported by verbatim interview excerpts.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The thematic analysis of semi-structured interview data from the seven participants identified three overarching themes: practical use, benefits, and challenges of practicing English conversation through AI-generated characters on ChatGPT.

1. Practical Use

The first theme captured how participants practically engaged with ChatGPT's AI-generated character feature, categorized into three sub-themes: character personalization, conversation format, and practice frequency. All seven participants actively assigned specific personas to ChatGPT before beginning each session through custom prompts at the start of their interactions. Some maintained a consistent character throughout their practice, while others altered the AI's role depending on their immediate practice goals. P2, for instance, consistently established a formal instructor persona:

"Tolong bantu aku dalam belajar bahasa inggris, bisakah kamu menjadi guru bahasa inggris aku?" (P2)

By establishing this clear role, P2 framed each session as a structured learning activity rather than a casual exchange. Conversely, P1 adopted a more flexible approach, alternating roles based on communicative needs:

"Biasanya saya menyuruh AI menjadi teman saya... ataupun menjadi seorang dosen yang bertanya mengenai suatu topik." (P1)

This variability demonstrated that participants utilized persona setup to diversify communicative contexts. Role-play and question-and-answer exchanges were the most prevalent interaction formats adopted. P6 described integrating situational role-play with thematic inquiry:

"Biasanya interaksi saya itu berbentuk tanya jawab dan kadang role play. Misalnya saya berpura-pura berada di situasi tertentu seperti daily conversation, atau membahas tentang traveling." (P6)

Practice frequency ranged from two sessions per week to daily practice, with session durations spanning between 10 and 60 minutes. P2 demonstrated the most sustained engagement, having practiced consistently for over five months:

"Mungkin lebih dari 5 bulan ya, soalnya emang tahun ini lagi sering pake AI buat latihan speaking juga." (P2)

2. Benefits

The second theme captured the advantages experienced by participants, encompassing reduced anxiety and increased confidence, linguistic gains, and accessibility of practice. A reduction in speaking anxiety and an increase in self-confidence were reported by all seven participants. The non-judgmental nature of the AI interlocutor created a psychologically secure space where participants felt safe making linguistic errors. P7 articulated this comparison clearly:

"Saya sangat merasa nyaman latihan dengan GPT karena tidak ada tekanan ketika berbicara... Berbeda dengan latihan dengan orang yang mungkin selalu ada rasa tertekan atau malu ketika saya mengalami kesulitan berbicara bahasa Inggris." (P7)

P3 noted that while AI provided a comfortable environment, it served a preparatory role rather than replacing authentic human interactions. Linguistic gains, particularly vocabulary acquisition and syntactic organization, were also consistently highlighted. P4 described how requesting contextual synonyms enriched his lexical repertoire:

"Setiap hari berlatih itu apalagi ketika saya meminta vocab baru dan langsung digunakan secara tidak sadar akan menambah vocab baru." (P4)

Furthermore, P2 observed that immediate corrective feedback structured her oral production across multiple practice sessions:

"Selain bikin speaking aku yang masih kemana-mana jadi lebih tertata, pengaruh feedback yang dikasih bisa jadi bahan buat belajar ke depannya." (P2)

In terms of accessibility, participants emphasized the convenience of practicing autonomously without scheduling constraints. P1 and P3 noted that ChatGPT served as an accessible speaking partner when human peers were unavailable:

"Saya bisa berlatih kapan saja dan dimana saja, tanpa bergantung ke orang lain." (P1)

"Jika tidak memiliki teman untuk berlatih bahasa Inggris atau bahasa asing lainnya, maka ChatGPT dapat menjadi alternatif teman berdiskusi yang cukup membantu." (P3)

3. Challenges

The third theme outlined the obstacles encountered during practice, comprising AI technical limitations, linguistic difficulties, and motivational fluctuations. Technical constraints represented the most frequent challenge, notably premature system responses, cross-session memory loss, and speech recognition errors caused by ambient noise or unstable internet. P4 illustrated how rapid turn-taking interrupted his thought process:

"Terkadang ketika saya sedang jeda, AI tiba-tiba merespons sehingga topik atau konteks sebelumnya itu tidak terjawab." (P4)

P3 also described having to repeat utterances due to the AI's short silence threshold:

"Terkadang terjadi pengulangan kalimat karena waktu jeda ChatGPT cukup singkat." (P3)

Similarly, P7 experienced connectivity disruptions during live spoken sessions:

"Kendalanya ketika jaringan internet buruk, terkadang responnya sedikit lama jadi saya harus mengulang apa yang saya bicarakan lagi." (P7)

Linguistic limitations, particularly limited vocabulary on unfamiliar subjects, disrupted conversational momentum. P1 explained how vocabulary gaps triggered communicative breakdowns:

"Iya, saya sering mengalami kesulitan dalam memilih kosakata dan menyusun kalimat, terutama untuk topik yang belum familiar. Hal ini membuat saya jadi lebih lambat berbicara dan kadang kehilangan ide di tengah percakapan." (P1)

P4 added that lacking background knowledge in specific domains impeded spontaneous dialogue:

"Ketika saya ingin berdiskusi atau mempelajari suatu topik misal tentang keuangan ketika saya tidak punya prior knowledge tentang keuangan biasanya saya lebih susah ngeresponnya." (P4)

Finally, motivational decline was observed in one participant (P1), who noted that fixed personas generated repetitive conversation patterns over time:

"Kadang merasa bosan kalau topiknya kurang menarik, karena salah satu kekurangan character AI itu mereka kurang bisa explore lebih banyak topik ketika diminta menjadi character yang sama." (P1)

Discussion

The findings indicate that participants' deliberate customization of AI personas aligns with Kolb's (1984) conceptualization of concrete experience within experiential learning theory. By actively defining interlocutor identities and conversational scenarios, learners exerted personal agency to create meaningful practice environments. This active engagement corroborated Kong's (2021) argument that experiential tasks cultivate personal ownership and heighten student involvement in learning. However, the consistent absence of advanced prompt engineering across all participants reflects what Fathi et al. (2024) described as limited digital tool literacy. This observation extends the perspective of Kohnke et al. (2023), proving that even regular and motivated users tend to utilize conversational AI at a surface level unless provided with explicit pedagogical scaffolding on advanced prompt structuring.

The universal alleviation of speaking anxiety aligns with Sayed et al. (2024), who characterized AI-generated characters as low-anxiety speaking partners that foster psychological safety. Removing evaluative peer judgment unlocked oral participation for anxious learners who traditionally avoid speaking in formal classrooms (Boudreau et al., 2018; Khafidhoh et al., 2023). Crucially, participants viewed the AI not as a permanent substitute for human interlocutors, but as a preparatory rehearsal space for authentic social encounters (Napitupulu & Dalimunte, 2025; Tai, 2024). Linguistic gains and communicative improvements were further supported by Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis, as iterative conversational exchanges allowed learners to negotiate meaning and expand lexical resources.

Furthermore, on-demand accessibility resolved the severe shortage of communicative speaking opportunities outside formal classrooms in Indonesia (Ratnasari, 2020).

Conversely, technical constraints highlighted notable limitations in conversational AI. Premature system interruptions directly violated the normative rules of turn-taking described in conversation analysis (Richards, 2008; Sacks et al., 1974), disrupting conversational rhythm and increasing cognitive load. These communicative breakdowns echoed the warnings of Annamalai et al. (2023) and Cakmak (2022) regarding technical instability in AI-mediated language tasks. Furthermore, vocabulary deficits corroborated Derwing and Munro (2009) and Schegloff et al. (1977), indicating that without an adequate baseline vocabulary, conversational breakdowns occur frequently, requiring structured linguistic scaffolding. Lastly, P1's motivational decline aligned with Ericsson and Johansson's (2023) observation that predictable conversational loops can diminish engagement over prolonged periods.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that AI-generated characters on ChatGPT function as an effective, flexible, and low-pressure preparatory medium for EFL learners' English conversation practice. The conversational persona feature successfully mitigates speaking anxiety, builds communicative confidence, expands contextual vocabulary, and provides continuous practice accessibility outside formal classroom boundaries. Nevertheless, the pedagogical efficacy of the tool is constrained by premature turn-taking interruptions, contextual memory loss across sessions, and learners' limited prompt literacy, which confines practice to basic conversational exchanges.

These findings imply that educators should not simply encourage autonomous AI use, but actively provide explicit training on prompt engineering, vocabulary scaffolding, and advanced parameter configurations. Language teachers must position conversational AI as a complementary rehearsal environment that prepares learners for authentic human-to-human interaction rather than replacing it. Future research should examine the longitudinal impact of AI character interaction on standardized oral proficiency gains across broader proficiency levels, and investigate structured pedagogical frameworks that guide learners toward higher levels of AI tool literacy.

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