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STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF AI AS A SPEAKING PARTNER IN AN EFL CLASSROOM IN PAPUA

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ABSTRACT

The accelerating growth of artificial intelligence (AI) has started to transform the landscape of language learning, opening up new possibilities for interactive and personalized educational support. In EFL settings, particularly in geographically isolated and resource-limited regions, students frequently encounter restricted access to authentic speaking partners and inadequate opportunities for oral practice. Although AI-powered tools hold considerable promise in addressing this gap by simulating conversational exchanges, empirical investigations into how students personally experience AI as a speaking partner within real classroom environments remain scarce, particularly in higher education settings across Eastern Indonesia. This study seeks to examine the experiences of university students who used AI as a conversational partner in an EFL speaking classroom in Papua, Indonesia. Employing a qualitative case study approach, the research was conducted with one intact class of undergraduate students enrolled in a speaking course. Data were gathered through classroom observations, students' reflective journals, and semi-structured interviews, and were subsequently analyzed thematically to uncover meaningful patterns and interpretations.The findings indicate that AI-assisted speaking activities strengthened learners' confidence, alleviated anxiety, and encouraged greater learner autonomy by enabling flexible and repeated practice opportunities. Students also viewed AI as a non-judgmental conversation partner that aided in vocabulary building and idea formulation. Nonetheless, challenges pertaining to technological access and over-dependence on AI were also identified. The study highlights the pedagogical significance of incorporating AI into speaking instruction and offers practical insights for technology-enhanced language teaching in similarly underserved contexts, with broader implications for fostering learners' communicative competence and digital readiness.

Keywords: *Artificial intelligence, EFL classroom, speaking, technology-enhanced language learning, university students*

ABSTRAK

Perkembangan kecerdasan buatan (AI) yang semakin pesat telah mulai mengubah lanskap pembelajaran bahasa, membuka peluang baru untuk dukungan pendidikan yang interaktif dan personal. Dalam konteks Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing (EFL) khususnya di daerah yang terpencil secara geografis dan minim sumber

daya, siswa seringkali menghadapi keterbatasan akses terhadap mitra bicara yang autentik serta kurangnya kesempatan untuk berlatih berbicara. Meskipun alat berbasis AI memiliki potensi besar dalam menjawab kesenjangan ini melalui simulasi percakapan, penelitian empiris yang mengkaji bagaimana siswa mengalami AI sebagai mitra berbicara dalam lingkungan kelas nyata masih sangat terbatas, terutama dalam konteks pendidikan tinggi di Indonesia bagian timur. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji pengalaman mahasiswa yang menggunakan AI sebagai mitra percakapan dalam kelas berbicara EFL di Papua, Indonesia. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif, penelitian ini dilakukan pada satu kelas utuh mahasiswa sarjana yang mengambil mata kuliah berbicara. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi kelas, jurnal reflektif mahasiswa, dan wawancara semi-terstruktur, yang kemudian dianalisis secara tematik untuk mengungkap pola dan makna yang signifikan. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kegiatan berbicara berbantuan AI meningkatkan kepercayaan diri peserta didik, mengurangi kecemasan, dan mendorong kemandirian belajar yang lebih besar melalui kesempatan latihan yang fleksibel dan berulang. Mahasiswa juga memandang AI sebagai mitra percakapan yang tidak menghakimi, yang membantu dalam pengembangan kosakata dan perumusan ide. Namun demikian, tantangan terkait akses teknologi dan ketergantungan berlebihan terhadap AI juga teridentifikasi. Penelitian ini menegaskan nilai pedagogis dari integrasi AI dalam pembelajaran berbicara dan menawarkan implikasi praktis bagi pengajaran bahasa berbasis teknologi di konteks yang serupa, dengan dampak yang lebih luas terhadap pengembangan kompetensi komunikatif dan kesiapan digital peserta didik

Kata Kunci: Kecerdasan buatan, kelas EFL, berbicara, pembelajaran bahasa berbasis teknologi, mahasiswa

A. Introduction

Over the past few years, the swift progress in artificial intelligence (AI) has sparked growing attention toward its capacity to reshape the ways in which language is taught and learned. (Fritzner et al., 2025; Kuddus, 2022; Rajak et al., 2024; Schmidt & Strasser, 2022). Conventional EFL classrooms frequently fall short in offering adequate chances for students to participate in purposeful spoken practice beyond restricted instructional time (Ambawani et al., 2025), ultimately hindering learners' growth in speaking fluency, self-assurance, and their ability to communicate effectively (Ramadhani, 2025). Moreover, many EFL learners experience high levels of speaking anxiety due to fear of judgment in face-to-face interactions (Alqarni, 2021; Bozkurt & Aydin, 2023; Yaniafari & Rihardini, 2021), further restricting their willingness to communicate in English (Huang et al., 2026).

A growing body of research indicates that technology-driven tools powered by AI including chatbots, speech recognition software, and

virtual conversation partners are capable of creating engaging, stress-free settings that encourage learners to practice speaking in a target language. For example, Ramadhani (2025) found that AI tools contributed to increased speaking fluency, reduced hesitation, and greater learner autonomy in EFL classrooms, accompanied by positive student perceptions of motivation and engagement. Similarly, a qualitative inquiry into learners' opinions about an AI-powered speaking tool revealed that chatbots were perceived as useful for enhancing vocabulary, pronunciation, and self-confidence while mitigating speaking anxiety (Civelek & Hocaoglu, 2025). These findings align with broader research showing that conversational AI can create supportive practice environments that extend learning opportunities beyond traditional teacher-led activities.

Although there is increasing evidence supporting the educational benefits of AI in language learning, current research still carries considerable gaps. The majority of existing studies have been carried out in secondary or pre-university settings (Dai et al., 2024; Isaee & Barjesteh, 2026; Wen et al., 2025; Wong & Fong, 2025) tend to involve learners from similar backgrounds, or have not thoroughly explored students' personal experiences through qualitative approaches. Research specifically exploring how university EFL students experience AI as a speaking partner in real classroom settings in geographically under-represented regions such as Papua, Indonesia, remains scarce. This contextual gap is significant because educational access, technological infrastructure, and learner attitudes in remote regions may differ substantially from urban or well-researched environments, potentially shaping unique interactions with AI-mediated speaking tasks.

Moreover, although certain studies examine learners' perceptions or track measurable performance results, relatively few take a comprehensive, qualitative case study approach that places students' own voices, interpretations, and personal meanings at the forefront of AI-assisted speaking practice. As learners increasingly take on active roles in shaping their own language growth, their individual experiences with AI tools including how they

perceive its usefulness, the emotions it evokes, and how they navigate communicative difficulties deserve thoughtful and context-aware examination. This kind of qualitative understanding is crucial for developing teaching approaches that are not only effective from a technological standpoint, but also meaningful within specific cultural and educational contexts.

In response to these gaps, the current study aims to explore university students' experiences of using AI as a speaking partner in an EFL classroom in Papua, Indonesia. Through the use of a qualitative case study framework, this study aims to explore the ways in which students interact with, reflect on, and derive meaning from AI-supported speaking activities, offering detailed, context-specific findings that add to the expanding field of research on technology-integrated language learning.

B. Method

Design

This research utilized a qualitative case study methodology to develop a thorough understanding of the role AI played as a conversational partner within an EFL classroom setting, as well as how students personally encountered its use throughout speaking tasks. A qualitative framework was deemed fitting given that the study's primary aim was not to quantify learning results, but instead to examine the perceptions, personal meanings, and day-to-day experiences of participants within their authentic learning context. The case study approach allows researchers to closely examine a defined setting and gather detailed, context-rich understandings of what takes place within classroom environments (Tisdell et al., 2025; Yin, 2018). In this study, the defined setting was a single speaking class at a state university in Papua, Indonesia, where AI-based tools were incorporated as interactive conversation partners to support students' speaking practice. The researcher additionally served as the class instructor, which facilitated sustained involvement and ongoing observation across the entire duration of the program

Participants

The research participants were undergraduate students taking a mandatory speaking course within the

English Education Department at Cenderawasih University, Papua, Indonesia. A single intact class of roughly 25 to 30 students was deliberately chosen through purposive sampling, as these students consistently carried out spoken communication tasks as a core component of their coursework.

Purposive sampling was used to ensure that all participants had direct experience interacting with AI-supported speaking activities during the semester. The students came from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, reflecting the multicultural context of Papua. Such diversity provided a meaningful setting for examining how learners with varied English proficiency levels and learning experiences responded to AI-mediated speaking practice.

Participation in the study was voluntary. Prior to data collection, students were informed about the research objectives and procedures, and written consent was obtained. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in all transcripts and reports.

Instrument and Data collection

A variety of data sources were utilized to strengthen both the richness and credibility of the findings by means of methodological triangulation. The data collection process took place across one full academic semester, embedded within routine classroom sessions where AI tools were used as conversational partners for speaking activities.

First, observational data were gathered continuously across the entire implementation period. The researcher recorded students' behaviors, patterns of participation, and their interactions with AI during various activities, including simulated dialogues, role-playing exercises, structured conversation drills, and impromptu speaking tasks. The field notes placed particular emphasis on signs of engagement, self-assurance, hesitation, and peer collaboration.

Second, reflective journals submitted by students were collected at regular intervals. Following each AI-assisted speaking session, students were prompted to write short reflections capturing their emotional responses, difficulties faced, perceived advantages, and general impressions of using AI as a speaking tool. These written reflections offered

a window into learners' inner experiences that observational data alone might not have been able to reveal.

Third, semi-structured interviews were carried out with a selected group of students chosen to reflect varying proficiency levels and participation tendencies. The interviews delved into students' views on AI as a conversational partner, its effect on their confidence and speaking anxiety, their sense of progress in oral skills, and any obstacles they encountered during use. Each interview ran for approximately 20 to 30 minutes and was audio-recorded with the informed consent of the participants

Furthermore, a range of instructional materials including lesson plans, speaking activity sheets, and samples of AI-generated conversational exchanges were gathered to offer background information on the manner in which the technology was embedded into everyday classroom instruction.

Procedure

The research was implemented across a series of structured phases. In the opening stage, students were introduced to a selection of AI tools and provided with guidance on how to use them responsibly within an academic setting. Demonstration sessions and hands-on practice were organized to help students become comfortable with the AI's conversational features, covering both text-based and voice-based interaction modes.

During the implementation phase, AI tools were woven regularly into various speaking activities. Students engaged with AI as a practice partner for role-plays, scenario-based simulations, and dialogue rehearsals prior to performing in front of their classmates. These activities provided learners with repeated opportunities to practice speaking in a relaxed, low-pressure setting.

Throughout the course of the semester, observational records, student reflections, and interview data were collected concurrently to capture the dynamic and evolving nature of students' experiences over time. This sustained period of engagement allowed the researcher to generate comprehensive and genuine data that authentically reflected the participants' learning journey.

Data Analysis

The data gathered in this study were analyzed through thematic analysis, following the procedural framework outlined by Braun & Clarke, (2006). All interview recordings were transcribed word for word, while reflective journals and observational field notes were compiled into unified textual datasets for systematic review.

The analytical process began with a familiarization stage, during which the researcher engaged in repeated readings of the entire dataset to develop a broad understanding of its content. From there, initial codes were assigned to label meaningful segments of data pertaining to students' experiences with AI-assisted speaking activities. Related codes were subsequently grouped into broader categories, which were then further refined into overarching themes that captured consistent patterns emerging across the participants.

To strengthen the credibility of the findings, triangulation across multiple data sources — namely observations, reflective journals, and interview transcripts — was applied to cross-verify the consistency of results. Member checking was also carried out by presenting interpretive summaries to selected participants, allowing them to confirm the accuracy of the researcher's understanding. In addition, peer debriefing sessions with fellow researchers were conducted to ensure that the identified themes were firmly rooted in the data itself, rather than shaped by the researcher's personal assumptions or biases

Trustworthiness

Several measures were taken to safeguard the overall quality and rigor of this research. The credibility of the study was built upon prolonged time spent in the field, the use of triangulation across data sources, and member checking with participants. To address dependability, the researcher kept meticulous records of all procedural steps and the rationale behind decisions made throughout the study. Confirmability was ensured through ongoing reflective notes and a well-documented audit trail that allowed the research process to remain transparent and traceable. Furthermore, rich and detailed descriptions of the research context were deliberately included to allow readers to judge the extent to which

the findings might apply to other similar educational settings

C. Results and Discussion

Results

The incorporation of AI as a conversational partner brought about meaningful changes not only in the ways students approached speaking practice, but also in how they came to see themselves as users of the English language. Drawing from classroom observations, reflective journals, and interview data, students' experiences pointed to a gradual transformation moving from reluctance toward active participation, from reliance on instructor guidance toward greater independent learning, and from uncertainty about their linguistic abilities (Holmes et al., 2019) toward a stronger sense of communicative readiness. Through thematic analysis, four interconnected themes emerged: (1) emotional growth through reduced speaking anxiety and growing self-confidence, (2) broader access to self-directed and repetitive speaking practice, (3) AI as a tool for both linguistic support and cognitive scaffolding, and (4) contextual and pedagogical obstacles encountered during implementation. Rather than functioning as isolated outcomes, these themes worked together in a dynamic and mutually reinforcing way, collectively shaping the trajectory of students' speaking development.

Theme 1: Affective transformation — from anxiety to confidence

At the beginning of the semester, many students demonstrated reluctance to speak English during classroom activities. Observation notes indicated frequent avoidance behaviors, such as minimal responses, switching to Indonesian, or relying heavily on written notes before speaking. These behaviors reflected common symptoms of speaking anxiety, including fear of making grammatical mistakes and fear of negative peer evaluation.

However, once AI tools were introduced as conversational partners, noticeable changes occurred. Students appeared more relaxed when practicing with their devices compared to performing directly in front of classmates. They were willing to rehearse multiple times, self-correct pronunciation, and experiment with

new vocabulary without embarrassment.

This affective shift was repeatedly mentioned in interviews:

"*When I speak with AI, I don't feel judged. It feels like practicing with a friend, not taking a test*." (Student B)

"*I can repeat many times. If I make mistakes, nobody laughs. So I feel braver when speaking later in class*." (Student H)

These accounts suggest that AI-mediated interaction lowered students' affective filters and created a psychologically safe learning environment. As their confidence grew during private AI interactions, students began transferring this confidence into public classroom speaking tasks. By mid-semester, previously quiet students increasingly volunteered to participate in discussions and role-plays.

Theme 2: Extended and autonomous speaking practice

A further notable finding related to the volume and adaptability of speaking opportunities available to students. In traditional classroom settings, oral practice is frequently restricted by time limitations, the availability of conversation partners, and fixed class schedules — leaving students with practice opportunities confined largely to designated class hours.

The presence of AI tools brought a considerable expansion to these opportunities. Since AI was accessible through students' personal smartphones and laptops, learners were able to practice speaking on their own terms, well beyond the boundaries of the classroom. Entries from students' reflective journals revealed that many took advantage of this flexibility by engaging in additional speaking sessions in their dormitory rooms, at home, or during periods of free time throughout the day.

"*Before, I only practiced speaking once a week in class. Now I can practice every day with AI*." (Student L)

"*I try conversations at night before sleeping. It helps me remember expressions*." (Student P)

From observational data, it was also evident that students made use of AI to rehearse their dialogues in preparation for upcoming presentations. This practice proved beneficial, as it led to more fluent delivery and a noticeable reduction in hesitations during actual performance. These emerging patterns suggest that

AI played a meaningful role in fostering self-regulated learning, encouraging students to take personal initiative in improving their speaking abilities rather than depending entirely on direction from their instructor.

Theme 3: AI as linguistic and cognitive scaffolding

In addition to the emotional and behavioral advantages observed, students also described AI as a source of on-the-spot linguistic support. Whenever they encountered difficulty in articulating their thoughts, they turned to AI to obtain example sentences, gain clarity on vocabulary usage, or observe how conversational structures were naturally formed.

Rather than simply reproducing AI-generated responses verbatim, the majority of students treated them as reference points to help shape and refine their own speech. This process was directly observable during classroom sessions, where students could be seen comparing AI-produced sentences with their own written drafts and thoughtfully adjusting their word choices as a result

"*Sometimes I know the idea but not the English words. AI gives me examples, then I change them to my own sentences*." (Student N)

"*It helps me organize what I want to say. I feel my speaking becomes more fluent*." (Student S)

This indicates that AI effectively served as a cognitive scaffold, providing support for students in organizing their thoughts and constructing language more effectively. By lowering the linguistic obstacles that often hinder expression, students were able to direct a greater portion of their mental effort toward conveying meaning and engaging in genuine communication.

Theme 4: Contextual and pedagogical challenges

While students' overall experiences with AI were largely favorable, the integration of AI as a conversational partner was not entirely free from difficulties. A number of contextual and pedagogical challenges surfaced throughout the study, suggesting that the incorporation of AI into EFL classrooms demands thoughtful and measured consideration rather than wholesale adoption without reflection. The challenges that emerged were primarily centered around limited technological access, disparities in

students' digital literacy levels, the potential risk of becoming overly dependent on AI, and questions surrounding the authenticity of AI-mediated communication.

From a contextual standpoint, technical difficulties were among the most commonly reported challenges by students. Unstable internet connections periodically disrupted speaking practice sessions, particularly for those residing in areas with limited network infrastructure. During several observed activities, certain students experienced delays in receiving AI responses or were momentarily disconnected from the platform, both of which interfered with the natural flow of their conversation practice. In such situations, students would often pause their ongoing tasks or fall back on conventional face-to-face interaction with their peers as an alternative.

Reflective journals also indicated that inconsistent connectivity affected students' motivation. One participant wrote:

"*Sometimes the signal is slow, and the AI does not respond quickly. It makes me frustrated and I stop practicing*." (Student E)

Another explained:

"*If the internet is bad, I cannot use the tool. So I still depend on classroom time only*." (Student J)

These findings suggest that the effectiveness of AI-assisted learning is closely tied to technological infrastructure. In geographically remote contexts such as Papua, where access to stable internet may not be evenly distributed, the benefits of AI cannot be assumed to be universally experienced. Thus, technological readiness becomes a prerequisite for successful implementation.

Beyond connectivity-related problems, noticeable differences in students' digital literacy levels were also observed throughout the study. While some students were able to navigate AI tools with relative ease and confidence, others required repeated assistance in learning how to construct effective prompts, make sense of AI-generated responses, or operate voice interaction features properly. Students who were less confident in their digital abilities tended to lean on their peers for help, which in turn reduced the degree to which they engaged independently with the tool. This highlights the fact that successfully integrating AI into the

classroom demands attention not only to students' language development, but equally to the cultivation of their digital competencies.

A further issue highlighted by participants centered on the tendency toward excessive dependence on AI-generated language. Although AI proved helpful in supplying vocabulary suggestions and sentence models, a number of students acknowledged that they occasionally reproduced AI responses directly without actively engaging with or processing the language themselves. This pattern was particularly noticeable during preparation for role-play activities, where a handful of students were observed reading out AI-generated scripts word for word rather than internalizing and expressing ideas in their own words.

As one participant reflected:

"*If I always depend on AI, maybe I will forget how to create sentences by myself*." (Student T)

Similarly, another student commented:

"*Sometimes I just use the answer from AI. It is faster, but I feel like it is not really my own speaking*." (Student Q)

These observations point to an underlying tension between receiving support and developing dependency. While AI has clear potential to scaffold the learning process, excessive reliance on it may deprive students of the productive cognitive struggle that is often essential to meaningful language acquisition. Without thoughtful pedagogical guidance, there is a real risk that students may gradually shift into passive consumers of automated suggestions, rather than remaining active and intentional builders of their own communicative competence.

In addition, a number of participants raised questions about the genuineness of interactions mediated by AI. Although AI was capable of simulating conversation, some students pointed out that it did not fully capture the unpredictable nature and emotional depth that characterize real human communication. They expressed the view that practicing with actual peers remained an important and irreplaceable component of developing the ability to respond spontaneously and build meaningful interpersonal connections.

"*AI is helpful for practice, but talking with real people is still different. Real conversation is more challenging*." (Student M)

This observation highlights that AI should not replace human interaction but rather complement it. Speaking competence involves not only grammatical accuracy but also negotiation of meaning, turn-taking, and social cues, which may be limited in AI exchanges.

Pedagogically, these challenges underscore the continuing importance of the teacher's role. The findings indicate that AI cannot function effectively as a stand-alone solution; instead, it requires structured integration, clear instructions, and reflective guidance. Throughout the semester, when the instructor provided explicit tasks, modeling, and feedback, students appeared to use AI more critically and purposefully. Conversely, unguided use sometimes resulted in superficial engagement.

Considered collectively, these challenges make clear that AI is not a one-size-fits-all solution, but rather a context-sensitive resource whose effectiveness depends heavily on the availability of supporting infrastructure, the readiness of learners to engage with it, and the quality of the pedagogical framework within which it is embedded. Instead of treating AI as a replacement for conventional speaking practice, it should be understood as a supplementary tool that enhances and supports, but does not stand in for, genuine human interaction and the independent production of language.

Discussion

The present study provides nuanced insights into how artificial intelligence (AI) can function as a speaking partner in an EFL classroom, particularly within a higher education context in Papua, Indonesia. Rather than merely demonstrating the effectiveness of AI as a technological tool, the findings highlight how its integration reshapes learners' affective conditions, learning behaviors, and linguistic development in complex and context-dependent ways. The discussion that follows interprets these findings in relation to existing theories and empirical studies in language learning and educational technology.

Among the most prominent findings to emerge from this study is a discernible transformation in students' emotional states, most notably a decline in speaking-related anxiety alongside a meaningful growth in their

overall sense of confidence. This finding strongly aligns with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, which posits that emotional variables such as anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence play a crucial role in second language acquisition (Krashen, 1992). When learners experience lower anxiety and higher confidence, they are more receptive to language input and more willing to engage in communication (Q. Zhang et al., 2025). In the context of this study, interactions facilitated through AI seemed to reduce students' affective barriers by offering a private and non-threatening space in which they could practice without fear of judgment. In contrast to conventional classroom environments, where the anxiety of being negatively evaluated by others frequently discourages active participation, AI fostered a setting in which learners felt free to experiment with language and take communicative risks without hesitation (C. Zhang et al., 2024). This finding is consistent with previous research on chatbot-assisted language learning, which reports that learners tend to feel less anxious and more motivated when interacting with AI-based conversational agents (Chua & Annamalai, 2025; Liu et al., 2025; Lyu et al., 2025).

In addition to its affective impact, the study reveals that AI significantly expanded opportunities for autonomous and repeated speaking practice. This supports the broader literature on learner autonomy, which emphasizes the importance of providing learners with control over their learning processes (Gorbunova et al., 2024; Khartha et al., 2025). The flexibility of AI tools allowed students to engage in speaking practice beyond classroom constraints, fostering self-regulated learning behaviors. This finding resonates with Naing et al., (2025) who argues that technology can facilitate autonomy by enabling learners to practice independently and at their own pace. Furthermore, the ability to rehearse repeatedly aligns with Swain's Output Hypothesis (Canale & Swain, 1980), which highlights the importance of language production in developing linguistic competence. Through repeated interaction with AI, students were able to refine their output, notice gaps in their language use, and improve fluency over time (Fathi et al., 2024).

Another important dimension of the findings is the role of AI as a form

of linguistic and cognitive scaffolding. From a sociocultural perspective, learning is mediated by tools that support learners in performing tasks beyond their current level of competence (Vygotsky, 1978). In this study, AI provided immediate assistance in the form of vocabulary suggestions, sentence structures, and conversational models, which helped students articulate their ideas more effectively. This aligns with the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where learners benefit from guided support that enables them to accomplish tasks they would not be able to perform independently. Similar findings have been reported in recent studies on AI in language learning, which suggest that AI can function as a scaffold that enhances both linguistic accuracy and communicative ability (Kukulska-Hulme, 2009; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019).

However, the findings also reveal important challenges that complicate the integration of AI in EFL classrooms. Issues related to technological access highlight the persistent digital divide, particularly in geographically remote regions such as Papua. This aligns with (Warschauer & Liaw, 2011) argued that access to technology is not only about physical availability but also about the quality and consistency of access. Without stable internet connectivity, the potential benefits of AI cannot be fully realized. This suggests that technological infrastructure remains a critical factor in determining the success of digital learning innovations.

Moreover, the concern about overreliance on AI raises important pedagogical questions. While AI can provide valuable support, excessive dependence may reduce opportunities for cognitive engagement and independent language production (Feng, 2025; Zhai et al., 2024). This echoes concerns raised in recent discussions on AI in education, where scholars caution against passive use of technology that may undermine critical thinking and learner agency (Holmes et al., 2019). In the context of language learning, meaningful development requires active processing, experimentation, and negotiation of meaning, which cannot be fully replaced by automated responses (Dolata & Crowston, 2023).

A further significant finding relates to students' sense that AI-

mediated interactions lacked a degree of genuine authenticity. While AI is capable of replicating the structure of conversation, it falls short of fully reproducing the dynamic, spontaneous, and emotionally layered qualities that characterize real human exchange. This observation aligns closely with the principles of communicative language teaching, which place considerable emphasis on the role of authentic interaction as a foundation for developing true communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980). Therefore, while AI can serve as a valuable supplementary tool, it should not replace peer interaction and real-life communication practices.

Viewed as a whole, these findings point to the importance of positioning AI not as a replacement for conventional teaching practices, but rather as a complementary resource that works alongside and enriches existing pedagogical approaches. Its overall effectiveness is largely determined by the manner in which it is woven into the broader instructional design of a course. In this regard, teachers hold a vital role in mediating students' engagement with AI, offering the necessary guidance to ensure that it is used in a thoughtful, critical, and productive manner. This aligns with the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework, which emphasizes the importance of integrating technology in ways that are pedagogically meaningful and contextually appropriate (Koehler & Mishra, 2009).

Finally, this study contributes to the growing body of research on technology-enhanced language learning by providing context-specific insights from Papua, an underrepresented region in the literature. By focusing on students' lived experiences, the study highlights the importance of considering local conditions, including technological access, cultural context, and learner characteristics, when implementing AI in education. Such context-sensitive understanding is essential for ensuring that technological innovations are both effective and equitable.

D. Conclusion

This study set out to explore university students' experiences of using artificial intelligence (AI) as a speaking partner in an EFL classroom in Papua, Indonesia. The findings

demonstrate that AI has considerable potential to support speaking development by creating a low-anxiety environment, expanding opportunities for autonomous practice, and providing immediate linguistic scaffolding. Through interaction with AI, students became more confident, more willing to engage in speaking activities, and more capable of organizing their ideas in English.

Beyond these pedagogical benefits, the study highlights that the value of AI lies not merely in its technological features, but in how it is meaningfully integrated into classroom practice. AI functioned most effectively when it was used as a complementary tool that supported, rather than replaced, human interaction and teacher guidance. At the same time, the study draws attention to important challenges, including unequal access to technology, varying levels of digital literacy, and the risk of overreliance on AI-generated language. These issues suggest that successful implementation requires careful instructional design and critical use of technology.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings contribute to ongoing discussions in technology-enhanced language learning by demonstrating how AI can mediate affective, cognitive, and behavioral aspects of speaking development. The study also reinforces the relevance of frameworks such as learner autonomy, sociocultural theory, and TPACK in understanding the role of emerging technologies in language education.

Practically, this study offers implications for educators, particularly in underrepresented and geographically remote contexts. Teachers are encouraged to integrate AI tools in ways that promote active learning, critical engagement, and balanced interaction between digital and human communication. Institutions should also consider improving technological infrastructure and supporting students' digital literacy to maximize the benefits of AI-assisted learning.

Finally, as a qualitative case study conducted within a single classroom context, this research provides in-depth but context-specific insights. Future studies are recommended to explore AI integration across different educational levels, learning

environments, and technological conditions, as well as to examine its long-term impact on students' communicative competence. Despite its contextual scope, this study underscores the growing importance of AI as a transformative, yet carefully mediated, resource in EFL speaking instruction.

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