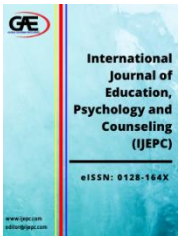
International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling
IJEPC
EISSN : 0128-164X
Volume 10 Issue 61 (December 2025) PP. 1244-1258
DOI 10.35631/IJEPC.1061086



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF EDUCATION, PSYCHOLOGY AND COUNSELLING (IJEPC)
www.ijepc.com

MALAYSIAN ESL LEARNERS' EXPERIENCES WITH AI-DRIVEN VOICE PRACTICE USING CHATGPT AND TRADITIONAL ROLE-PLAY

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Article Info:

Article history:
Received date: 23.10.2025
Revised date: 11.11.2025
Accepted date: 12.12.2025
Published date: 26.12.2025

To cite this document:

Tan, W. X., & Ismail, H. H. (2025). Malaysian ESL Learner's Experiences with Ai-Driven Voice Practice Using Chatgpt and Traditional Role-Play. *International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling, 10* (61), 1244-1258.

DOI: 10.35631/IJEPC.1061086

Abstract:

Artificial intelligence (AI) speaking tools are increasingly used in language education to provide ESL learners with flexible and low-pressure opportunities for oral practice, whereas peer-based activities such as role-play offer authentic communicative experiences that develop interactional and social skills. Despite these opportunities, many learners continue to face challenges in developing speaking proficiency due to limited practice, anxiety during interactions, and inconsistent feedback, which can hinder overall communicative competence. Therefore, this qualitative study explores ESL learners' experiences with ChatGPT voice conversations alongside peer role-play, focusing on engagement, emotional comfort, confidence, and challenges encountered during speaking practice. Six ESL learners from a Malaysian polytechnic participated through semi-structured interviews, prolonged observations, and reflective journals. The findings reveal that learners perceived ChatGPT as a safe and non-judgmental environment that reduced anxiety and encouraged more frequent speaking, while peer role-play, though sometimes intimidating, offered richer interaction through facial expressions, tone, and spontaneous communication. Additionally, practising with ChatGPT enhanced learners' confidence and prepared them for peer sessions, whereas peer interaction increased motivation through collaboration and shared support. Nonetheless, challenges such as accent recognition issues, repetitive responses, and occasional technical disruptions limited the effectiveness of AI-based practice. Overall, the study suggests that combining ChatGPT with peer-based activities provides a balanced approach for developing ESL speaking proficiency, leveraging both technological support and meaningful human interaction.

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Keywords:

ESL Speaking Proficiency, AI-Assisted Language Learning, ChatGPT, Peer Role-Play, Learner Experiences

Introduction

Speaking proficiency is a fundamental component of second language development, as it enables learners to communicate meaning, negotiate understanding, and participate actively in academic and social interactions (Derakhshan et al., 2016). In Malaysia, ESL learners continue to face challenges in developing oral skills due to limited classroom speaking opportunities, large class sizes, and anxiety during peer interactions (Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021). Traditional approaches, such as teacher-led instruction and peer role-play, provide essential practice but often fall short in addressing individual learners' pace, needs, and affective factors such as confidence and emotional comfort (Casingena, 2025). Consequently, many learners struggle to achieve communicative competence, which highlights the need for innovative strategies that supplement conventional speaking activities and support learner autonomy and engagement.

In response to these challenges, AI-based speaking tools have emerged as promising solutions that enhance oral practice. Platforms such as DeepSeek and Gemini offer structured exercises, personalised feedback, and interactive prompts that help learners practice vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and listening skills independently (Ali, Anwar, & Zahid, 2025; Nguyen, 2024). These tools provide learners with repeated, low-pressure speaking practice, which can reduce anxiety and increase motivation. Despite their potential, most studies on AI-assisted speaking focus on measurable outcomes, such as fluency or vocabulary acquisition, with limited attention to learners' emotional experiences, engagement, and perceived confidence compared with traditional peer-based interactions (Creely, 2024; Abusahyon et al., 2023). This gap creates uncertainty for educators regarding the ways in which AI tools can complement human-centred teaching practices effectively.

Among available platforms, ChatGPT stands out as an accessible and versatile tool for conversational practice, which provides adaptive prompts, context-aware dialogue, and real-time corrective feedback (Mohamed, 2024). Unlike other AI systems that focus primarily on structured tasks, ChatGPT enables learners to engage in natural, interactive conversation, which simulates real-life speaking situations. Therefore, this study aims to explore Malaysian ESL learners' experiences with ChatGPT voice interactions alongside traditional peer role-play, with a focus on cognitive and affective dimensions. Specifically, it seeks to understand learners' comfort, engagement, confidence, and challenges in AI-based and peer-based speaking practice. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of ESL learners when engaging in ChatGPT voice conversations and peer role-play for speaking practice?
2. How do ESL learners perceive differences in emotional comfort, engagement, and speaking confidence between ChatGPT-based and peer-based speaking practices?
3. What challenges and limitations do ESL learners encounter when using ChatGPT voice conversations for speaking practice?

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Literature Review

Speaking Challenges among ESL Learners

Speaking challenges among ESL learners in Malaysia consist of difficulties that impede effective oral communication, encompassing linguistic, cognitive, and affective dimensions (Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021). Linguistic issues often involve limited vocabulary, inconsistent grammar, and pronunciation influenced by the first language, which reduce clarity and hinder comprehension (Levis, 2006; Ali & Ali, 2025). In addition, cognitive demands such as organising ideas, constructing coherent sentences, and maintaining fluency during spontaneous speaking tasks create further obstacles, particularly in classroom discussions and assessment situations (Masuram & Sripada, 2020). Learners also face affective challenges, including anxiety, low self-confidence, and fear of negative evaluation, which restrict participation and reduce opportunities for meaningful practice (Arifin, 2017). Moreover, interference from the first language frequently results in awkward phrasing and unnatural sentence structures that do not meet communicative expectations (Alisoy, 2024). The combination of these linguistic, cognitive, and emotional challenges limits learners' ability to develop speaking competence effectively. These persistent issues indicate the need for teaching strategies and supportive tools that enhance both skill acquisition and learner confidence in Malaysian ESL contexts.

AI-Based Tools for Speaking Practice

In recent years, various AI-based speaking tools have been developed to support ESL learners who require opportunities for oral practice beyond the classroom. For instance, platforms such as DeepSeek and Gemini provide structured exercises, context-aware prompts, and instant feedback on pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary, which allow learners to practise repeatedly and monitor progress independently (Ali, Anwar, & Zahid, 2025; Nguyen, 2024). As a result, these tools have been shown to enhance learner autonomy, engagement, and confidence, particularly among learners who have limited exposure to classroom speaking activities (Molina et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2025). Among these platforms, ChatGPT stands out due to its ability to generate adaptive, context-aware dialogue that closely resembles real-life conversation. It offers interactive, self-paced speaking practice with immediate corrective feedback, which creates a low-pressure environment that encourages language experimentation and reduces speaking anxiety (Ding & Yusof, 2025; Huang, 2025; Shi & Shakibaei, 2025). However, previous studies have also highlighted several limitations of ChatGPT. These include the absence of socio-pragmatic cues, cultural nuance, and human-like spontaneity, which may cause interactions to feel less authentic and socially engaging (Blunden & Brodsky, 2024; Zhai et al., 2024). Therefore, while AI-based tools such as ChatGPT provide valuable support for fluency development and confidence building, it remains necessary to examine how learners experience these tools in relation to human interaction to better understand their pedagogical value and associated challenges in speaking practice.

Role plays as a Communicative Technique

Role play is an instructional technique in which learners assume roles and act out scenarios that reflect real-life situations, which encourages the use of language in meaningful contexts (Sarifudin & Setyawan, 2025). In ESL classrooms, it is used to simulate authentic communication, such as ordering food, conducting interviews, giving presentations, or negotiating tasks, which allows learners to practise both linguistic and pragmatic skills in realistic contexts (Bi, 2021). This method emphasises interaction, turn-taking, and negotiation of meaning, which are essential for developing speaking fluency and communicative

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competence (Makhmudova, 2025). Role plays also provide structured scenarios and teacher feedback, which support learners in monitoring their progress, reflecting on performance, and improving pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammatical accuracy over time (Emilia & Emília, 2025). Despite these benefits, role plays may not fully replicate the spontaneity, diversity, and complexity of real-world interactions, which are critical for authentic communication (Withanarachchi Samaranayake, 2021; Makhmudova, 2025). Learners who are introverted or less confident may also participate less actively, which can limit the effectiveness of the practice. Therefore, while role plays contribute significantly to developing speaking skills and communicative competence, they cannot entirely replace authentic interactions with varied interlocutors.

Comparison between AI-based and Peer Speaking-Based Practice

The comparison between AI-based and peer-based speaking practice is a key focus in ESL education, as each offers unique benefits and limitations. Peer-based speaking activities, such as role-play and group discussion, have long been recognised for promoting interactional competence, social presence, and pragmatic awareness, which support authentic communication and collaborative learning (Nhan, 2024). Through peer interaction, learners are exposed to real-time negotiation of meaning, turn-taking, and non-verbal cues, which contribute to communicative competence and sociocultural awareness (Makhmudova, 2025). However, research also indicates that peer-based speaking practice may increase anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and unequal participation, particularly among learners with lower confidence or proficiency levels (Ayiz & Tauchid, 2025). In contrast, AI-based speaking tools provide a low-pressure environment that allows learners to practise speaking at their own pace, receive immediate feedback, and repeat tasks without social judgment, which can enhance fluency and emotional comfort (Abusahyon et al., 2023; Ding & Yusof, 2025). Nevertheless, studies caution that AI-mediated interaction lacks social authenticity, socio-pragmatic depth, and spontaneous human response, which may limit learners' development of real-world communicative skills (Creely, 2024; Blunden & Brodsky, 2024). Despite growing interest in both approaches, existing research tends to examine AI-based or peer-based speaking practice in isolation, with limited attention to learners' experiences and emotional responses when engaging with both methods. This gap highlights the need for a comparative qualitative investigation that examines how ESL learners experience ChatGPT voice conversations alongside peer role-play, particularly in relation to comfort, engagement, confidence, and perceived challenges in speaking practice.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore ESL learners' experiences with AI-driven voice practice via ChatGPT and traditional peer role-play for speaking fluency. Unlike quantitative approaches, which prioritize numerical data and generalizable outcomes, qualitative research emphasizes understanding the meanings learners ascribe to their experiences, which focus on their perceptions, attitudes, and personal contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This allows for a deeper understanding of the processes behind their engagement with different speaking modalities. Additionally, the approach is particularly suitable for investigating AI-assisted and peer-based practice because it captures both the cognitive and socio-emotional dimensions of language learning, which are critical in assessing how learners interact with technology and peers, build confidence, and develop communicative competence

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(Nguyen et al., 2025). Qualitative research also enables the examination of learners' interpretations and reflections in context, which provides insight into how AI-based practice and role-play influence speaking engagement, motivation, and self-perceived improvement (Lim, 2025).

Sampling Design

A total of six ESL learners were selected through purposive sampling for this study. Participants were chosen based on three criteria: (1) they were currently enrolled in English proficiency courses at the selected polytechnic, (2) they had prior experience with or a willingness to use an AI tool for language learning, and (3) they voluntarily agreed to participate by providing informed consent. This sampling method was employed to ensure that participants could offer meaningful insights related to AI-assisted and peer-based speaking practices. The study was conducted at a Malaysian polytechnic that offers diploma-level English courses. The institution is known for its diverse student population and its active use of digital tools to support English instruction. English is a compulsory subject across all programmes, making this context suitable for exploring innovative approaches to enhancing speaking fluency. The sample size was considered sufficient in line with qualitative research principles that prioritise depth over breadth, with data collection continuing until no new themes emerged (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Collection Method

A series of face-to-face semi-structured interviews, prolonged observation, and reflective journals were employed to collect comprehensive data on ESL learners' experiences with ChatGPT voice conversations and traditional role-play for improving speaking fluency. These methods provided both verbal and behavioural insights into learners' engagement, emotions, and progress.

Semi-structured Interview

The semi-structured interviews, designed around participants' background, experiences, and their perceptions of engagement, comfort, confidence, and challenges, allowed learners to share reflections in their own words. The interview guide, which contained a core set of approximately 10 open-ended questions, was reviewed by two English lecturers to ensure clarity and alignment with the research questions of this study. Example questions included: "*Can you describe how you felt emotionally when speaking with ChatGPT compared to speaking with a classmate*?" and "*What part of the traditional role-play activity did you find most helpful for your speaking fluency?*" The interviews were conducted in a quiet polytechnic meeting room, each lasting 30 to 45 minutes, with participants briefed on anonymity and voluntary participation. All interviews were audio-recorded using a digital voice recorder with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Prolonged Observation

Over two weeks, learners engaged in both AI- and traditional-role-play sessions while the researcher conducted prolonged observations. An observation protocol was developed to systematically capture behaviours relevant to learners' experiences with AI-driven voice practice using ChatGPT and traditional peer role-play, as summarized in Table 1. Guided by principles of multimodal classroom discourse analysis (Zou, 2025), the protocol directed real-time field notes to document both verbal and non-verbal cues, as well as contextual details, complementing interview data. In line with Zou's emphasis on ecological and multimodal

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observation, the protocol focused on learners' engagement, interaction dynamics, comfort, and modality-specific behaviours, allowing a comprehensive understanding of how learners respond and adapt to different speaking modalities.

Table 1: Observation Protocol for Speaking Practice Sessions

Focus Area	Behavioural Indicators for AI Sessions	Behavioural Indicators for Peer Role-Play Sessions
Engagement & Affect	• Sustained attention to the interface • Visible signs of frustration or ease	• Active listening posture • Shared laughter or expressions of enjoyment
Interaction Dynamics	• Length and flow of speaking turns • Repetition or rephrasing directed at AI	• Turn-taking balance • Use of gestures and supportive verbal feedback
Comfort & Anxiety	• Relaxed or tense posture while speaking • Frequency of long pauses	• Open/closed body language • Nervous habits (e.g., fidgeting, avoiding gaze)
Modality-Specific Behaviours	• Responses to AI misunderstandings• Use of features (e.g., asking to repeat)	• Peer encouragement • Collaborative problem-solving during dialogue

Reflective Journals

Reflective journals captured participants' evolving feelings, motivation, and insights throughout the practice period. After each session, participants responded to the prompt, for example, Participant 1 wrote: "*Please reflect on today's speaking practice. You may write about how you felt, what you found easy or challenging, and what you noticed about your own speaking.*" This allowed for personal reflection on their experiences across both practice modalities. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached to ensure the credibility and completeness of the findings. All audio recordings, journal entries, and field notes were stored securely and anonymised prior to analysis.

Data Analysis Method

This study employs thematic analysis to examine data obtained from semi-structured interviews, prolonged observation, and reflective journals. Thematic analysis is a systematic qualitative method that identifies, organises, and interprets recurring patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach is suitable for analysing learners' spoken and written reflections, classroom behaviours, and emotional responses as it provides flexibility in uncovering both explicit and implicit meanings in their experiences with AI-based and peer-based speaking practices. The analysis begins with the transcription of all interview recordings and the careful review of observation notes and reflective journal entries to achieve familiarisation with the data. The researcher then repeatedly reads the data to identify initial codes that represent meaningful units related to engagement, confidence, hesitation, and motivation. These codes are later grouped into broader categories that form emerging themes, which are refined and reviewed to ensure consistency across data sources. The process integrates insights from all three instruments, which allows triangulation that strengthens the validity of the findings (Meydan & Akkas, 2024). Additionally, manual coding is used alongside QDA Miner Lite to enhance analytical rigour and transparency that aid efficient code organisation and frequency tracking. Finally, themes are presented with supporting excerpts

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from interviews, observation notes, and reflective journals to demonstrate how learners' experiences differ across AI-driven and peer role-play speaking contexts. Member checking is also employed to verify the accuracy of interpretations and ensure that the final analysis truthfully reflects participants' perspectives and experiences.

Results & Discussion

This section presents two tables that support the findings of the study. Table 2 outlines the participants' background information, which provides a concise profile of each learner involved. Table 3 summarises the emergent codes, categories, and themes that were derived from the interview data, which show the main insights that participants expressed under each identified theme.

Table 2: Participant Profiles

Participant	English Proficiency	Race / Gender	Prior AI experience
P1	Intermediate	Malay / Female	Moderate (used AI chatbots before)
P2	High Intermediate	Chinese / Female	Moderate (used voice assistants like Siri)
P3	Intermediate	Chinese / Male	Minimal (first time with ChatGPT)
P4	High Intermediate	Indian / Male	Frequent (uses AI tools regularly for writing)
P5	High Intermediate	Malay / Female	Moderate (used AI chatbots before)
P6	Intermediate	Malay / Male	None (no prior AI use)

Table 2 provides an overview of the six ESL learners who participated in this study and highlights their English proficiency levels, demographic backgrounds, and prior experience with AI tools. The group represents a diverse mix of Malay, Chinese, and Indian learners, with an equal distribution of male and female participants. Their English proficiency ranges from intermediate to high intermediate, which reflects a balanced sample of learners that possess sufficient language ability to participate in speaking tasks while still demonstrating areas that require improvement. The participants also vary in their familiarity with AI; some have moderate experience with chatbots or voice assistants, others frequently rely on AI tools for academic tasks, and a few report minimal or no prior exposure.

Table 3: Emerged Codes, Categories and Themes

Research Question (RQ)	Codes	Category (Subtheme)	Theme (Main Theme)
RQ1: What are the experiences of ESL learners when engaging in ChatGPT voice conversations and peer role-play for	• Safe space with ChatGPT • Nervous in peer role-play • More willing to speak without peer judgment	Perceived Judgment	Experiences in ChatGPT and Peer-Based Speaking Practice

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Research Question (RQ)	Codes	Category (Subtheme)	Theme (Main Theme)
speaking practice?			
	• ChatGPT feels robotic • Peer interaction feels more real • Misses facial expressions and tone in ChatGPT • Peer sessions create stronger connection	Interaction Quality	
	• ChatGPT lacks emotional response • Feels supported but detached in AI conversations	Social-Emotional Experience	
RQ2: How do learners perceive differences in engagement, comfort, and confidence between AI-based and peer-based speaking practices?	• Comfortable using ChatGPT • Shy with peers ChatGPT reduces pressure to perform	Emotional Comfort	Perceived Engagement, Comfort, and Confidence
	• More confident after using ChatGPT • ChatGPT helps prepare before peer sessions • Peer interaction increases spontaneity	Speaking Confidence	

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Research Question (RQ)	Codes	Category (Subtheme)	Theme (Main Theme)
	• Peer support boosts motivation • More engaged when talking to peers • Feels encouraged by shared learning experience	Learning Motivation	
RQ3: What challenges do learners encounter when using ChatGPT voice conversations for speaking practice?	• Accent not recognized • Flat or repetitive responses • Technical disruption (e.g., freezing)	Technological Barriers	Challenges in ChatGPT-Based Speaking Practice
	• Misunderstood prompts • Lack of correction in feedback • Limited conversation depth	Communication Limitations	

Table 3 summarises the finalised themes based on the merged categories and identified codes from interviews, classroom observations, and reflective journals on learners' experiences with ChatGPT and peer role-play for speaking practice. The first theme, *Experiences in ChatGPT and Peer-Based Speaking Practice*, shows learners' perceived experience using ChatGPT as a safe, non-judgmental space that reduces anxiety, whereas peer role-play can induce nervousness. ChatGPT interactions were seen as less spontaneous and lacking non-verbal cues, while peer interactions felt more natural and socially connected. Despite supporting consistent practice, ChatGPT was experienced as emotionally detached. The second theme, *Perceived Engagement, Comfort, and Confidence*, indicates that learners felt more comfortable using ChatGPT, gained confidence through AI practice before peer sessions, and found peer interaction more motivating due to shared learning and support. The third theme, *Challenges in ChatGPT-Based Speaking Practice*, highlights technological barriers such as accent recognition issues, repetitive responses, and technical disruptions, alongside communication limitations including misunderstood prompts, limited feedback, and shallow conversational depth.

The next section provides a detailed discussion of each main theme and its subthemes. For each category, selected excerpts from interviews, observation notes and reflective journals are presented to illustrate key insights, followed by interpretive discussion grounded in relevant research literature. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of how learners

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experienced both AI-assisted and peer-based speaking practice, and how these experiences relate to broader patterns in ESL speaking development. Due to the length and richness of the data, only the most representative and impactful quotes from each participant are included in the main discussion.

Experiences in ChatGPT and Peer-Based Speaking Practice

The first theme captures learners' perceptions and emotional responses in situations that involve AI-assisted and peer-based speaking activities. It reflects how learners navigated both the interactive and emotional aspects of practice with ChatGPT and peers, which highlights the differences in comfort, communication, and social connection. Three categories emerged under this theme: perceived judgment, interaction quality, and social-emotional experience.

Perceived Judgment

Learners described ChatGPT as a safe space that allowed them to express themselves without fear of judgment or embarrassment. One participant stated, "*I can talk to ChatGPT without feeling nervous. It does not judge me or laugh when I say something wrong*" (P3), while another explained, "*Using ChatGPT first makes me more willing to speak because I do not have to worry about being judged by classmates*" (P1). In contrast, peer role-play sometimes causes nervousness and anxiety in situations that require learners to respond in front of others. A participant noted, "*I feel nervous during peer sessions because I do not want to say something wrong in front of friends*" (P4). These experiences suggest that AI-supported learning environments can reduce performance anxiety and provide learners with opportunities to practice without social pressure, while peer-based interactions may heighten evaluative concerns (Li et al., 2025).

Interaction Quality

Participants reflected on the differences in interaction quality between ChatGPT and peers, which revealed distinct strengths and limitations. ChatGPT offered consistent, prompt responses, but learners reported that it sometimes felt robotic and lacked variation, which made conversations less natural. One participant observed, "*ChatGPT answers quickly, but sometimes it sounds robotic and does not understand jokes*" (P1), while another added, "*I can't see facial expressions and tone when talking to ChatGPT*" (P5). Peer interactions, on the other hand, were described as livelier and more authentic. This provides opportunities for spontaneous responses and richer communication that enhances learners' engagement. A participant explained, "*Talking with friends feels more real because we respond to each other's expressions and reactions*" (P4). These reflections highlight that while AI can support fluency through structured practice, human interaction provides natural variation in communication that is essential for authentic conversational skill development. (Molina et al., 2024; Tenis, 2024).

Social-Emotional Experience

Learners' emotional engagement showed notable variation between AI-based and peer-based practice, which reflects how different interaction modes influenced their comfort, motivation, and sense of connection during speaking tasks. ChatGPT was perceived as supportive but emotionally detached; a space that allowed practice without interpersonal connection. One participant noted, "*I feel supported when talking to ChatGPT, but it lacks emotional response*" (P2) while another said, "*AI conversations feel helpful, but a bit detached compared to real human interaction*" (P6). Peer sessions, in contrast, created stronger social bonds and

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enjoyment that enhanced learners' emotional experience. A participant shared, "*When I speak with my friends, I feel happier and more connected because we share feelings*" (P4). These experiences indicate that while AI can facilitate practice and reduce anxiety, social-emotional connection remains a critical component of communicative competence and engagement in language learning (Shi & Shakibaei, 2025).

Perceived Engagement, Comfort, and Confidence

The second theme captures learners' experiences of emotional comfort, confidence in speaking, and motivation to engage in language practice. It illustrates how AI-assisted and peer-based activities influenced learners' willingness to participate, take risks, and maintain focus over time, which reveals the complementary roles of individual practice and social interaction. Three categories emerged under this theme: emotional comfort, speaking confidence, and learning motivation.

Emotional Comfort

Learners described ChatGPT as providing a non-threatening and low-pressure environment, which allowed them to practise speaking without worrying about mistakes or negative evaluation. One participant explained, "*I feel relaxed using ChatGPT. I do not worry about making mistakes*" (P2), while another shared, "*It is comforting to know that ChatGPT will not judge me or interrupt me when I speak*" (P5). Peer interactions, although sometimes accompanied by shyness, offered comfort through supportive social engagement and mutual encouragement, which made learners feel more at ease when speaking. A participant noted, "*I feel shy with peers at first, but when we talk, they encourage me, and it feels easier to express my ideas*" (P4). These experiences are consistent with previous studies indicating that AI-supported practice can reduce performance anxiety and provide a safe environment in which learners can experiment with language, while peer support enhances emotional engagement during real-life interactions (Huang, 2025; Shi & Shakibaei, 2025).

Speaking Confidence

Learners reported that confidence in speaking can be developed through both AI-assisted and peer-based activities, with each providing unique forms of reinforcement. ChatGPT allowed learners to try new sentences and speak aloud in a way that did not expose them to judgment, which helped them feel more self-assured. One participant stated, "*I feel more confident after using ChatGPT because I can try speaking without worrying that I will be laughed at*" (P1), while another shared, "*It helps me practise new sentences before talking to peers, so I feel braver during real conversations*" (P3). Similarly, peer interactions offered opportunities for authentic communication that encouraged learners to respond spontaneously, despite being slightly more intimidating. A participant described, "*Talking with friends makes me more confident because we can respond naturally to each other and try new phrases, which helps me learn in a real context*" (P6). These observations reveal that confidence is strengthened both in supportive, judgment-free practice and in interactive peer-based environments that allow learners to experiment and receive constructive feedback (Ding & Yusof, 2025; Huang, 2025).

Learning Motivation

Motivation to engage in speaking practice was influenced by the combination of AI and peer experiences. ChatGPT encouraged learners to practise independently in a way that allowed them to maintain consistent engagement at their own pace. One participant explained, "*I want to keep using ChatGPT because I can practise anytime, and it feels less stressful than speaking*

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in front of others" (P3). Meanwhile, peer interactions provided additional motivation through social connection and shared experiences, which made learners more attentive and committed to the activity. One participant stated, "*Learning together with friends makes practising more enjoyable and encourages me to stay focused during our sessions*" (P5). These findings correspond with prior research indicating that both autonomous AI practice and collaborative peer interaction contribute to sustained motivation and engagement in language learning (Wei, 2023; Suciati et al., 2024).

Challenges in ChatGPT-Based Speaking Practice

The third theme reflects the difficulties learners experienced while using ChatGPT for speaking practice. Despite its benefits, participants identified challenges related to technology, communication, and learning. Two categories emerged under this theme: technological barriers and communication limitations.

Technological Barriers

Several learners encountered technical issues that disrupted the flow of their practice sessions. Some explained that ChatGPT occasionally failed to recognise their accents or misunderstood certain words, which caused frustration and hindered their confidence in continuing to speak. One participant explained, "*Sometimes I speak, but ChatGPT does not understand me because of my accent*" (P2). Others reported slow response times or tool freezing, which interrupted practice and broke their concentration, as one learner stated, "*The AI sometimes freezes, and I lose my train of thought*" (P5). These observations highlight that speech recognition limitations and system instability can affect learner engagement in AI-assisted language learning (Nguyen, 2024).

Communication Limitations

A number of learners described constraints in the quality and depth of AI communication. Some reported that ChatGPT's responses were repetitive or lacked variation, which reduced the sense of natural conversation. One participant shared, "*The answers are always similar, and it feels like I am not having a real conversation*" (P1). Others mentioned that the AI sometimes misunderstood prompts or did not provide corrective feedback, which left learners uncertain about their improvement. For example, a participant said, "*I make mistakes, but ChatGPT does not correct me, so I am not sure if I am improving*" (P4). Limited conversation depth also made the practice less engaging, as one participant described it: "*I cannot have long or meaningful discussions; it only responds with short sentences*" (P3). Similar challenges have been noted in research on AI-supported language learning, where interaction can lack the adaptive responses and corrective guidance that learners need for advanced language development (Creely, 2024).

Conclusion

This study explored the experiences of six polytechnic students in situations that involved ChatGPT-assisted and peer-based speaking practice through a qualitative approach. Their experiences revealed recurring patterns in emotional and interactive engagement, including perceived judgment, interaction quality, and social-emotional responses in contexts that required speaking practice. Despite occasional challenges such as anxiety in peer role-play, technical limitations of AI, and limited conversational depth, the participants demonstrated adaptive strategies, such as using ChatGPT in sessions that allowed rehearsal before peer practice, relying on peer support that increased motivation, and utilising both tools in ways that

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DOI 10.35631/IJEPC.1061086

enhanced confidence and engagement. Their interview data also reflected a strong sense of agency, where language learning was approached as a deliberate process that involved both individual effort and collaborative interaction.

While this study offers detailed insights into learners' experiences with AI- and peer-based speaking practice, it is limited by its small sample size and specific research setting. The perspectives were drawn from only six students in one polytechnic, which restricts broader generalisation. The depth of qualitative inquiry offers valuable understanding, yet future research would benefit from capturing more diverse student voices across different institutions and proficiency levels. Additionally, some participant reflections may have been influenced by social desirability or hesitation in contexts that required disclosure of negative experiences with AI or peers.

It is recommended that future studies explore mixed-methods or longitudinal designs to further examine how learners' confidence, engagement, and emotional responses develop in environments that involve AI-assisted and peer-based speaking practice. Educators and instructional designers should consider integrating AI tools such as ChatGPT as complementary resources alongside peer interaction in ways that ensure technology enhances fluency while emotional and social aspects of learning are preserved.

Acknowledgements
I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Hanita Hanim Ismail, for her continuous guidance, valuable insights, and encouragement throughout the course of this research. I am also thankful to my coursemates and close friends for their consistent support and motivation, especially during demanding periods of the study. Their presence and encouragement contributed significantly to the completion of this work. No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling
IJEPC
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