

AI - CHATBOTS AS CONVERSATIONAL PARTNERS: A CONFIDENCE BOOSTER TO EMPOWER SPEAKING PRACTICE

CHATBOTS DE IA COMO COMPAÑEROS DE CONVERSACIÓN: UN IMPULSO A LA CONFIANZA PARA POTENCIAR LA PRÁCTICA ORAL

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Josceline Michell Pereira Loor

Asistente de la Empresa Pública de Producción y Desarrollo Estratégico de la
Universidad Estatal de Milagro
Milagro - Ecuador

Master en Enseñanza de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera
Universidad Estatal de Milagro

jpereiral@unemi.edu.ec

<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-5423-0307>

Justin Ariel Urbina Villon

Estudiante de la Universidad Estatal de Milagro
Milagro - Ecuador

jurbinav@unemi.edu.ec

<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-1081-8459>

Nicole Stephani Olea Coloma

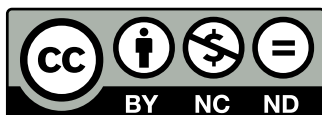
Estudiante de la Universidad Estatal de Milagro
Milagro - Ecuador

noleac2@unemi.edu.ec

<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-9331-6272>

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Resumen

La falta de confianza en el proceso de aprendizaje fue identificada como una barrera significativa que dificulta el desarrollo de la producción del idioma inglés, especialmente porque los estudiantes presentaron dificultades en la interacción con sus pares, la toma de riesgos y la autoestima. Este estudio tuvo como objeto examinar cómo la integración de un chatbot innovador e interactivo relacionado con la inteligencia artificial contribuyó a fomentar la interacción y la práctica individual para fortalecer la confianza oral de los aprendices. Se empleó un diseño de investigación cualitativo, que incluyó el análisis de datos obtenidos tanto de una revisión de literatura como de la implementación empírica con estudiantes reales. La intervención incorporó el uso de chatbots como herramientas para practicar inglés en escenarios comunicativos auténticos, mientras que se aplicaron entrevistas para recopilar las percepciones de los estudiantes sobre el proceso. Los hallazgos revelaron que los estudiantes demostraron una mayor independencia en su práctica oral, lo que resultó en una mejora notable en su confianza al utilizar el idioma. Además, los datos sugirieron que los chatbots proporcionaron un entorno seguro y de apoyo en el cual los aprendices pudieron experimentar con el uso del lenguaje sin temor a la evaluación negativa, lo que facilitó una práctica más constante. En general, el estudio concluyó que el uso de chatbots de IA representó una estrategia pedagógica efectiva para empoderar a los aprendices y potenciar su seguridad y competencia en la comunicación oral en inglés.

Palabras clave: inteligencia artificial, chatbots, habilidades comunicativas, confianza.

Abstract

Lacking confidence in the learning process was identified as a significant barrier that hinders the development of English language production particularly because learners struggle with peer interaction, risk-taking, and self-esteem. This study aimed to examine how the integration of an innovative and interactive AI-related chatbot contributed to fostering interaction and individual practice in order to strengthen learners' speaking confidence. A qualitative research design was employed, which involved the analysis of data obtained from both a literature review and empirical implementation with real students. The intervention included the use of chatbots as tools for practicing English in authentic communicative scenarios, while interviews were applied to gather learners' perceptions of the process. The findings revealed that students demonstrated greater independence in their speaking practice, which resulted in a noticeable improvement in their confidence when using the language. Additionally, the data suggested that chatbots provided a safe and supportive environment in which learners could experiment with language use without the fear of negative evaluation, which facilitated more consistent practice. Overall, the study concluded that the use of AI chatbots represented an effective pedagogical strategy for empowering learners to feel more secure and capable in English oral communication, highlighting the potential of technology to transform traditional approaches to language learning and address key affective barriers.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, chatbots, speaking skills, confidence.

Introduction

Learning a language is inherently tied to communication, which makes speaking skills one of the most essential abilities to develop when learning English as a Foreign Language. However, speaking is where most learners tend to struggle due to the lack of instant feedback, anxiety, and opportunities to practice (Vy & Pham, 2024). Moreover, anxiety is nowadays also recognized as one emotional component that influences the language learning process, especially when communicating orally with others. (Azad Nayyef & Zeravan Ayoub, 2023).

Previous research has shown that anxiety is a key emotional factor that influences self-confidence, which, according to Ananda & Hastini (2023), plays an essential role in the speaking process. Therefore, it is necessary to empower language production by harnessing tools that would enable learners to produce the language without feeling nervous or self-conscious about their skills. This challenge motivated the present research, as it seeks to explore alternatives that combine technological innovation with pedagogical effectiveness.

Artificial Intelligence (AI), recognized as one of the most influential technologies of the current era, offers new possibilities to support language learning. In particular, AI chatbots can simulate conversational partners, offering learners instant feedback, meaningful interaction, and a low-pressure environment in which to practice. Therefore, this study aimed to analyze how the use of AI chatbots as conversational tools could enhance learners' autonomy, increase their confidence, and ultimately improve their speaking skills in English.

Materials and Methods

This study adopted a qualitative exploratory case study design in order to examine how AI chatbots could contribute to reducing students' anxiety and strengthening their confidence in oral communication (Yin, 2018). The research was motivated by the recurrent observation that learners often avoid speaking practices or fail to actively engage in peer interaction due to fear of making mistakes, nervousness, or low self-esteem (Höl & Kasimi, 2022).

Participants and Context

The participants consisted of 70 high school students from 10th grade, between the ages of 13 and 14 who had demonstrated nervousness and insecurity when speaking in English.

According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) their proficiency level ranged from Pre A1 to A2. The sample was selected through convenience sampling, as these learners had consistent access to the internet and technological devices such as smartphones, tablets or computers. The study was conducted in a high school in Milagro, Guayas, where the participants engaged with the AI chatbots both inside the classroom and at home over a period of twelve weeks during the pre-professional practice program. This dual environment allowed for the observation of their performance in formal and informal learning settings.

Instruments and Procedures

The intervention relied on the integration of AI-powered chatbots, which have been acknowledged as efficient conversational tools capable of simulating human-like interaction through text or voice (Labadze et al., 2023). In this study, learners interacted with the chatbot to practice speaking in

authentic communicative scenarios, receiving instant feedback and corrective suggestions (Hoang et al., 2023; Omidvar & Meihami, 2025).

The data collection was organized in three sequential phases:

1. **Pre-intervention observations**, where students' confidence levels and oral proficiency were assessed through an observation checklist adapted from communication apprehension scales (McCroskey, 1984)
2. **Observations during the intervention**, where student-chatbot interactions were monitored to analyze independence, frequency of practice, and anxiety levels.
3. **Semi-structured interviews** after the intervention, designed to capture learners' perceptions, emotions, and reflections on the use of AI chatbots as conversational partners.

Data Collection and Analysis

The qualitative data collected from students' interactions with AI chatbots, as well as from interviews and reflective notes, were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework. This approach allowed for a systematic examination of patterns, experiences, and perceptions regarding learners' confidence and speaking practices.

The analysis began with familiarization with the data, during which all interviews and observation notes were transcribed and repeatedly read to capture overall impressions and recurring ideas. In the second phase, initial codes were generated to label relevant features of the data, focusing on aspects such as anxiety reduction, autonomy, motivation, and language use. During the third phase, codes were organized into potential themes, grouping similar patterns to identify overarching concepts that reflected students' experiences with the chatbots. These preliminary themes were then reviewed and refined in the fourth phase, ensuring they accurately represented the data across 70 participants from two 10th-grade classes. The fifth phase involved defining and naming the themes, creating clear descriptions of each theme and how it related to the research aim. Finally, the sixth phase, producing the report, involved integrating representative quotes and detailed explanations to convey the richness of learners' experiences and provide insights into the effectiveness of AI chatbots in fostering speaking confidence.

This thematic analysis provided a comprehensive understanding of students' perceptions and experiences, highlighting not only changes in confidence and engagement but also the contextual and emotional factors influencing their language learning process. By focusing solely on qualitative patterns, the study ensures depth, credibility, and a detailed exploration of the impact of AI chatbots on oral language development.

For empirical data collection, this investigation implemented two types of AI chatbots (ChatGPT and Praktica) in English-speaking practice. During each session, the students' progress was analyzed and registered in a journal in order to store the information collected.

Besides, interviews were conducted where the students had to speak with the teacher in order to supervise their progress and gather information. This was performed to test the effectiveness that AI chatbots offer in boosting the learners' confidence in using the language. During these sessions, the students dialogued with the teacher about topics that they had practiced using the AI chatbots and answered some questions to gather information about their experience.

Materials and Technologies

The study utilized an AI-based chatbot adaptable for learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), accessible via both desktop and mobile devices. This tool allowed learners to practice casual and academic conversations while receiving immediate corrective feedback. Previous studies have highlighted the role of AI in education as a transformative technology that improves learner motivation and engagement (Moybeka et al., 2023)

Ethical Considerations

Parental consent and student assent were obtained prior data collection. Anonymity was preserved by assigning pseudonyms, and participation was voluntary with the option to withdraw at any time.

Results and discussion

Considering the importance of implementing AI chatbots as conversational partners, this study applied ChatGPT and Praktica to a sample of students who were mostly self-conscious and not confident when speaking in English. For this, the results have been divided into three main parts.

Observations prior to the application of AI chatbots

Before applying ChatGPT and Praktica, it could be observed that all participants felt nervous and insecure when they were speaking in English. Additionally, the students' speaking skills were tested in order to know about their needs and areas of improvement. However, it was identified that it was mostly a matter of self-confidence and lack of practice rather than just language proficiency.

Observations during the application of AI chatbots

After the diagnosis process, students were introduced to the two AI chatbots and their features, implementing some demonstrations to engage and motivate learners to use them wisely. They were also provided a practice schedule for in-class and home practice. As a result of this, all observations made in class and the videos they recorded at home interacting with ChatGPT or Praktica show that their fluency and use of English was more efficient and fluent when using a Chatbot, because when their performance was compared with how they used to speak in front of their classmates, a big difference could be identified, which demonstrates that using AI conversational partners is useful to lower students' pressure and anxiety, proving that self-confidence is a key factor in speaking (Jiang, 2022)

Furthermore, to deep more into the results obtained using the AI chatbots implemented, they were analyzed individually to know their impact on boosting the students' confidence and empowering their speaking practice

Table 1
ChatGPT and Praktica Results as AI Chatbots

AI Chatbot	Objective	Results
ChatGPT	To engage in real-based conversations using the voice chat to develop fluency and spontaneity in practical contexts and students' level of proficiency.	Less fear at the moment to speak and share ideas about different topics. Fosters independence in speaking practice. Learners show more confidence Lowers the pressure and boosts students' performance. Instant feedback for improvement.
Praktica	To provide a set of topics to manage different vocabulary through interactive conversations with instant feedback.	Interaction during the sessions and chances to talk. More interaction and knowledge about specific topics. Management of useful and meaningful vocabulary according to the level. Increases self-confidence.

Interview results

Through the application of interviews, learners could share their experience on how effective and useful they consider ChatGPT and Praktica were for speaking development, considering confidence as a primary factor of influence. For this, some of their answers were:

Table 2
Opinion of Participants Regarding the Use of AI Chatbots

Students	Experience
Student 1	"Using these tools was helpful because they do not make me feel nervous, because I know they will not judge me."
Student 2	"These tools allowed me not just to practice my speaking but also made me feel like I can talk about anything with someone."
Student 3	"I loved the voice chat in ChatGPT, because it is like talking with a real person, but the best part is that it doesn't make me feel nervous because it is just a bot."
Student 4	"I liked using Praktica because I can go at my own pace and practice with an AI-generated avatar as a tutor, which is fun and surprisingly makes me feel confident."

Students	Experience
Student 5	"I loved Praktica, because I could set my goal to adjust lessons to my level, and talking with a tutor bot was an experience that helped me improve my speaking a little more."

According to the gathered data and information through observations and interviews, it is necessary to mention that confidence is essential in the speaking process, because it influences how students share their ideas and feel when interacting with others. (Safitri et al., 2024). Therefore, AI chatbots are useful tools that help learners interact, practice, and develop their communicative skills at their own pace and talk about something that they like with an AI-generated conversational partner that makes them feel confident and safe. Thus, these tools play a crucial role in lowering the anxiety, fear of being judged at the moment to participate and express their ideas or thoughts in another language, promoting an interactive learning environment. (Alexandara, 2023)

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study revealed that a lack of self-confidence and anxiety are significant barriers that influence EFL learners, obstructing their speaking performance. The findings demonstrated that AI chatbots, such as ChatGPT and Praktica, functioned effectively as conversational partners, enabling students to practice oral communication in a low-pressure environment. The thematic analysis highlighted that learners experienced increased autonomy, reduced fear or negative evaluation, and enhanced motivation to participate in speaking activities. Additionally, students appreciated the opportunity to engage in conversations tailored to their interests and proficiency levels, which allowed for individualized learning and self-paced practice. These outcomes confirm that integrating AI chatbots into EFL instruction can empower learners to overcome affective barriers, strengthen their communicative skills, and build greater confidence when speaking in front of teachers or peers. Overall, the study emphasizes the pedagogical potential of AI-based conversational tools in fostering meaningful language learning experiences and suggests that their inclusion can transform traditional speaking activities by providing consistent, interactive, and supportive practice opportunities.

Recommendations

Implementing AI chatbots improved the teaching and learning process and boosted the students' confidence, empowering their speaking practice without anxiety and fear of making mistakes. Besides, these tools transform education and foster motivation, participation, collaboration, and interaction among the students, providing engaging experiences. Thus, AI in education offers opportunities for growth and innovation in an environment where the learners enjoy the process.

For that reason, it is recommended to:

- Foster the use of AI tools to empower students to practice their speaking skills using technological resources that increase their motivation and confidence.
- Motivate and capacitate teachers on how to integrate AI technology into the teaching and learning process.
- Capacitate students on how to use AI tools responsibly.
- Keep researching how the integration of AI chatbots can be beneficial for a wider sample of students.
- Make further research on how AI chatbots can be used not only for speaking skills but also to develop writing competencies.

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