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Exploring English Department Students' Perceptions of Character *AI* in Enhancing Speaking Fluency: A Case Study

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Abstract

In the era of rapid technological advancement, English-speaking fluency has become an essential skill for EFL learners. However, many students still face difficulties in developing speaking fluency due to limited opportunities for practice and psychological barriers such as anxiety and lack of confidence. This study explores English Department students' perceptions of the use of Character AI in enhancing speaking fluency. This research employed a qualitative case study design involving ten students from Universitas Negeri Semarang. Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews and were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that Character AI positively contributes to students' speaking development by improving fluency, enriching vocabulary, and increasing confidence through a low-anxiety learning environment. In addition, the AI functions as a scaffolding partner that supports students in maintaining conversations and provides flexible opportunities for independent practice. However, several challenges were identified, including technical issues, limited features, occasional inaccuracies, and a lack of emotional interaction. Overall, Character AI is considered a useful supplementary tool for improving speaking fluency. These findings suggest that Character AI can serve as an effective supplementary tool in EFL speaking instruction when integrated with human interaction.

1. Introduction

Technology has become an integral part of contemporary education, reshaping how language learning is facilitated and experienced. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), technological advancements have created new opportunities to support the development of speaking skills, which are widely recognized as essential for effective communication. Despite this, speaking remains one of the most challenging skills for EFL learners, as it requires the simultaneous coordination of vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and fluency in real-time interaction (Fathi et al., 2024).

In many EFL contexts, including Indonesia, learners encounter limited opportunities to engage in meaningful speaking practice. Classroom instruction is often teacher-centered, with speaking activities largely confined to controlled exercises rather than authentic communication (Syarifudin, 2019). As a result, students may develop adequate theoretical knowledge but struggle to use English spontaneously in communicative situations. Furthermore, psychological factors such as anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and low self-confidence play a crucial role in inhibiting students' participation in speaking activities (Juhana, 2012). These challenges create a cycle in which limited practice and high anxiety mutually reinforce each other, ultimately hindering the development of speaking fluency.

To address these issues, the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in language learning has emerged as a significant area of research. AI-based tools offer interactive and adaptive environments that enable learners to practice speaking beyond the limitations of the classroom, providing flexibility, accessibility, and opportunities for repeated language use (Bao, 2019). In addition, AI-mediated interaction has been associated with reduced speaking anxiety, as learners can practice without the pressure of being evaluated by peers or instructors (Saraswati et al., 2023). These features suggest that AI has the potential to create a more supportive and learner-centered environment for speaking development.

A growing body of research has reported positive outcomes of AI integration in language learning. Studies have shown that AI-mediated interaction can enhance speaking fluency, enrich vocabulary, and increase learners' confidence (Azzahra et al., 2024; Fathi et al., 2024). Despite these promising findings, existing research has largely focused on general AI chatbots and has tended to emphasize measurable performance outcomes. Consequently, there is still limited understanding of how learners subjectively experience AI interaction, particularly in relation to their perceptions, emotional responses, and engagement during speaking practice. Moreover, research examining AI use in Indonesian higher education contexts remains relatively scarce.

More recently, the emergence of persona-driven AI platforms, such as *Character AI*, has introduced a new dimension to AI-mediated interaction. Unlike conventional chatbots, *Character AI* allows users to engage in persona-based, contextually rich dialogues that simulate more dynamic and immersive

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communication (Napitupulu & Dalimunte, 2025). This type of interaction may not only support linguistic development but also influence learners' engagement and affective experiences, as it more closely resembles authentic conversational contexts. However, empirical studies specifically investigating the pedagogical potential of *Character AI* are still limited, particularly those employing qualitative approaches to capture learners' lived experiences (Napitupulu & Dalimunte, 2025).

From a theoretical perspective, the development of speaking skills is closely associated with communicative and interaction-based frameworks. Communicative competence emphasizes learners' ability to use language effectively and appropriately in real communication rather than merely mastering grammatical rules (Canale & Swain, 1980). In addition, the Interaction Hypothesis highlights the importance of meaningful interaction in facilitating language acquisition, as learners develop their language abilities through negotiation of meaning and active engagement in communication (Long, 1996). In this regard, AI-mediated interaction can function as a platform that supports both communicative practice and interactive language use, particularly in contexts where opportunities for real-life communication are limited.

Despite these promising developments, research focusing specifically on *Character AI* remains limited, particularly in the Indonesian higher education context. Most previous studies have primarily examined general AI tools or emphasized measurable learning outcomes, rather than exploring learners' subjective experiences. As a result, there remains a lack of in-depth understanding of how persona-driven AI platforms such as *Character AI* are perceived by university students, particularly in terms of their engagement, emotional responses, and speaking development.

Therefore, this study aims to explore English Department students' perceptions of using *Character AI* in enhancing speaking fluency. By focusing on learners' experiences in an Indonesian EFL context, this study provides deeper insights into how persona-driven AI supports speaking development and identifies the benefits and challenges associated with its use. This study differs from previous research by emphasizing a qualitative, perception-based analysis of *Character AI* interaction rather than focusing solely on general AI tools or quantitative performance outcomes. In doing so, it contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how emerging AI technologies can be effectively integrated into language learning.

Specifically, this study addresses the following research questions:

(1) What are the perceived benefits of using *Character AI* in enhancing speaking fluency?
(2) What challenges do students experience when using *Character AI* in speaking practice?

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore students' perceptions of using *Character AI* in enhancing speaking fluency. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it allows for an in-depth understanding of learners' experiences, perspectives, and interactions in a natural context (Creswell, 2014). Rather than focusing on numerical measurement, this study emphasizes how students perceive and experience the use of AI as a tool for speaking practice.

The study involved ten students from the English Department at Universitas Negeri Semarang, selected through purposive sampling based on their prior experience using *Character AI*. The participants consisted of six female and four male students, enrolled in the third to fifth semesters. Their speaking proficiency levels ranged from low to high, as indicated by their classroom performance and lecturer evaluation. This variation allowed the study to capture diverse perspectives regarding the use of AI in speaking practice.

The study was conducted during speaking activities over three sessions between December 2025 and January 2026. During the implementation, students interacted with *Character AI* using voice mode to simulate a real-time conversation. Each session lasted approximately 15–20 minutes per group.

Participants were divided into small groups to ensure more focused interaction. They were instructed to engage in conversational tasks with the AI, such as responding to prompts, initiating dialogue, and maintaining conversation flow. The tasks were designed to encourage spontaneous language production and continuous interaction, rather than scripted responses.

Classroom observations were conducted to examine how students interacted with *Character AI* during speaking activities. The observation focused on several aspects, including students' participation, fluency development, response length, interaction patterns, and engagement levels. The researcher acted as a non-participant observer to minimize interference with the natural interaction process. Field notes were taken systematically using an observation checklist to ensure consistency across sessions.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain deeper insights into students' perceptions and experiences. Each interview lasted approximately 8–10 minutes and consisted of around 15–20 guiding questions. Sample questions included: *"How does using Character AI affect your confidence in speaking English?"* and *"What challenges do you experience when interacting with the AI?"* The interviews allowed flexibility for follow-up questions to explore participants' responses in greater depth. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

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The data obtained from both observations and interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the framework proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006). An inductive coding approach was employed, allowing themes to emerge from the data rather than being predetermined. The analysis involved several stages: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, categorizing similar codes, and developing broader themes.

For example, initial codes such as *"speaking more smoothly," "less hesitation,"* and *"longer responses"* were grouped into the theme of *speaking fluency improvement*. This systematic process ensured that the themes accurately represented participants' experiences.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, triangulation was conducted by comparing data from observations and interviews. Member checking was also applied, allowing participants to review and confirm the accuracy of the interpretations.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the study. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation. Their involvement was voluntary, and they were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. To ensure confidentiality, participants' identities were anonymized using pseudonyms in all data records and reporting.

3. Result

This study explored English Department students' perceptions of using *Character AI* to enhance speaking fluency in an Indonesian EFL context. The findings demonstrate that *Character AI* contributed positively to students' speaking development by supporting fluency improvement, vocabulary enrichment, confidence enhancement, conversational scaffolding, and autonomous learning. At the same time, the findings reveal several limitations in technical reliability, conversational accuracy, and emotional interaction.

One of the most significant findings concerns the improvement of students' speaking fluency. Observation and interview data showed that most participants gradually became more capable of maintaining conversations, producing longer responses, and reducing hesitation during AI-mediated interaction. This improvement appears to stem from the repetitive and low-pressure nature of the interaction, which encouraged students to engage in more continuous language production. Unlike conventional classroom interaction, where students may experience fear of negative evaluation, *Character AI* provided an environment that allowed learners to practice speaking more freely and repeatedly.

This finding aligns with the Output Hypothesis proposed by Swain and Lapkin (1995), which emphasizes the importance of language production in second language learning. Through repeated opportunities to produce spoken language, learners become more aware of their linguistic limitations and gradually improve their communicative performance. The findings also support previous studies showing that AI-mediated interaction can enhance speaking fluency and

willingness to communicate among EFL learners (Fathi et al., 2024). However, this study extends previous findings by focusing specifically on persona-driven AI interaction within the Indonesian higher education context. The conversational continuity and contextual responses generated by *Character AI* appeared to create a more immersive speaking experience compared to conventional AI chatbots.

Another important finding concerns students' vocabulary enrichment during AI-mediated interaction. This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that AI-based conversational tools can facilitate vocabulary acquisition through meaningful interaction and authentic language exposure (Fathi et al., 2024). The findings also highlight the role of interaction in supporting lexical development, as students not only received language input but also actively reused vocabulary during communication. This indicates that AI-mediated interaction can support both receptive and productive dimensions of vocabulary learning.

The findings further demonstrate that *Character AI* contributed to increased confidence and reduced speaking anxiety among participants. Most students reported feeling more comfortable speaking with the AI because the interaction lacked direct social judgment. This non-threatening environment appeared to reduce students' fear of making mistakes and encouraged greater participation during speaking activities.

This result strongly supports Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982), which argues that emotional variables such as anxiety and self-confidence significantly influence language acquisition. When learners experience lower anxiety, they become more willing to participate and process language input more effectively. In this study, *Character AI* appeared to lower students' affective filter by providing a psychologically safe space for communication practice. This finding is also consistent with previous studies reporting that AI chatbots can reduce speaking anxiety and increase learners' willingness to communicate (Saraswati et al., 2023).

Another significant finding concerns the role of *Character AI* as a scaffolding partner during speaking practice. The AI supported students through prompts, follow-up questions, and contextual responses that helped maintain conversational flow. Initially, several participants depended heavily on the AI to sustain interaction. However, over time, students gradually became more independent and started elaborating on their responses without relying entirely on AI guidance.

This interactional pattern reflects the concept of scaffolding within Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), particularly the idea of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). *Character AI* functioned as a mediational tool that temporarily supported students' language production while gradually encouraging more autonomous communication. The findings suggest that AI-mediated interaction may facilitate the transition from dependent performance toward greater self-regulation in speaking activities. This finding also extends previous research by showing how persona-driven AI can support conversational continuity

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and interactional confidence in qualitative speaking contexts.

The findings additionally indicate that *Character AI* supported learning flexibility and autonomous practice. Students appreciated the ability to practice speaking independently beyond classroom settings and without relying on the availability of peers or instructors. Several participants reported using the AI during their free time, suggesting that speaking practice became more accessible and self-directed.

This finding can be interpreted through the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989), which explains that users are more likely to adopt technologies they perceive as useful and easy to use. The flexibility offered by *Character AI* appeared to increase students' willingness to engage in repeated speaking practice outside formal learning environments. From an Activity Theory perspective (Engeström, 1987), *Character AI* also functioned as a mediating artifact that reshaped how students engaged with speaking activities by enabling more flexible and autonomous interaction.

Despite these positive findings, several challenges were identified. Technical issues, including unstable internet connections and delayed responses, occasionally disrupted conversational continuity and reduced the natural flow of interaction. These disruptions suggest that the effectiveness of AI-mediated speaking practice remains closely dependent on technological infrastructure and system reliability.

Another limitation involved inaccuracies in AI-generated responses. Some participants reported that the AI occasionally misunderstood their input or produced irrelevant responses, which interrupted conversational coherence. This limitation reflects broader challenges in Natural Language Processing (NLP) systems, particularly in interpreting contextual meaning during spontaneous communication. Although *Character AI* was generally able to maintain interaction, occasional inconsistencies reduced the authenticity of the conversational experience.

The lack of emotional interaction also emerged as an important limitation. Participants noted that *Character AI* could not fully replicate emotional responses, non-verbal cues, or interpersonal engagement typically found in human communication. This finding highlights the inherently social nature of language learning, where emotional connection and authentic interpersonal interaction play essential roles in communication development. Although AI can support language practice, it cannot completely replace human interaction in speaking activities.

These findings carry several pedagogical implications for EFL instruction. First, *Character AI* can be integrated as a supplementary speaking tool that provides students with additional opportunities for low-anxiety practice outside classroom settings. Second, teachers may combine AI-mediated interaction with collaborative speaking activities to balance technological support with authentic human communication. Finally, educators should guide students in using AI critically and strategically, particularly when dealing with inaccurate or

contextually inconsistent responses.

Overall, this study demonstrates that *Character AI* has strong potential to support speaking fluency development in EFL contexts, particularly by encouraging repeated interaction, reducing anxiety, and promoting autonomous learning. However, the findings also emphasize that AI should function as a complementary learning resource rather than a substitute for authentic human communication.

4. Conclusion

This study explored students' perceptions of using *Character AI* in enhancing speaking fluency among English Department students at Universitas Negeri Semarang. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that *Character AI* provides meaningful support for speaking development, particularly in improving fluency, enriching vocabulary, increasing confidence, and offering flexible learning opportunities.

The results indicate that continuous interaction with *Character AI* encourages students to produce language more actively, which contributes to smoother and more sustained communication. In addition, the AI creates a low-anxiety environment that allows students to practice speaking without fear of making mistakes, thereby increasing their confidence and willingness to communicate. The flexibility of accessing the AI anytime also supports more frequent and autonomous learning.

However, despite these benefits, several limitations were identified. Technical issues, such as unstable internet connections and delayed responses, occasionally disrupted the interaction process. The system's limited features also restricted extended speaking practice. In addition, inaccuracies in AI responses and the lack of emotional interaction reduced the naturalness of communication compared to real human interaction.

Therefore, while *Character AI* demonstrates strong potential as a supportive tool for speaking practice, it should be used as a supplementary resource rather than a replacement for human interaction. This study has several limitations. First, the duration of the study was relatively short, consisting of only three observation sessions, which may not fully capture long-term development in speaking fluency. Second, the study did not include objective measurements such as pre-test and post-test scores, relying instead on qualitative data and participants' perceptions. Third, the findings are based on a small number of participants within a specific context, which may limit the generalizability of the results.

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be proposed for future research and educational practice. First, future studies are encouraged to involve a larger number of participants and different educational contexts in order to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Comparative studies between different AI tools may also provide deeper insights into the

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effectiveness of various platforms in supporting speaking development.

Second, further research may explore the long-term impact of using *Character AI* on students' speaking proficiency, including aspects such as pronunciation accuracy, grammatical development, and communicative competence. Longitudinal studies would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how AI influences language learning over time.

Third, future studies could investigate the integration of AI tools with classroom-based interaction to create a more balanced learning environment. Combining AI-mediated practice with real human communication may help overcome the limitations identified in this study, particularly in terms of emotional interaction and communicative authenticity.

Finally, it is recommended that developers of AI-based language learning tools continue to improve system accuracy, expand features, and enhance the quality of interaction to better support learners' needs. By addressing these limitations, AI has the potential to become a more effective and reliable tool in language education.

Overall, this study highlights that *Character AI* can effectively support speaking development when used appropriately alongside human interaction.

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