

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

English is widely recognized as a global lingua franca that facilitates international communication, academic achievement, and career advancement, (Agustina et al., 2024). As globalization continues to shape modern society, the ability to communicate effectively in English has become an essential skill for individuals across various disciplines and professions. Consequently, English language education particularly in contexts where it is taught as a foreign language (EFL) places a strong emphasis on developing learners speaking proficiency as a key component of communicative competence (Richards, 2015).

Speaking is one of the most complex and essential skills in language learning. It involves the active process of constructing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols in various contexts (Chaney, 1998). According to Brown (2001) speaking is an interactive process of building meaning that involves producing, receiving, and processing information. It requires learners to master several components such as pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension. However, developing speaking skills remains a significant challenge for EFL learners due to the need for real-time interaction, confidence, and linguistic competence (Nunan, 2018).

In many EFL classrooms, learners often face difficulties in achieving oral proficiency because of limited opportunities to practice speaking, lack of exposure to authentic communication, and anxiety related to making mistakes (El-Kayed Bahasht & Kadir, 2025). These barriers can hinder students from expressing themselves fluently and accurately in English. As a result, many learners become passive participants during speaking activities and fail to achieve meaningful oral communication outcomes.

To address these challenges, educators have sought innovative methods and tools to enhance speaking instruction. One promising approach is the integration of technology in language teaching, which offers interactive, student-centered, and flexible learning environments (Chapelle, 2010). Technology-assisted language learning tools such as mobile applications like Duolingo and ELSA Speak, speech recognition systems such as Google Speech-to-Text, virtual reality (VR) environments, and AI-powered pronunciation apps like Speechify have transformed traditional English learning into more engaging and self-paced experiences. These tools allow learners to practice speaking independently, receive instant feedback, and build their confidence in authentic communication contexts (Wang et al., 2025).

Among these digital innovations, AI chatbots particularly those powered by advanced models such as ChatGPT have emerged as one of the most promising tools for enhancing speaking skills. Unlike conventional applications that focus solely on drills or pronunciation accuracy, AI chatbots can simulate real-life

dialogues, respond contextually, and offer interactive conversations that resemble authentic human interaction (Rahmawati, 2024). This capability enables EFL learners to engage in spontaneous speaking practice anytime and anywhere, thus supporting fluency, accuracy, and vocabulary development in a more natural and personalized manner (Li & Wang, 2025).

Recent advancements in Artificial Intelligence (AI) have further transformed the landscape of language learning. AI-based applications, particularly AI chatbots, simulate real human conversation and create opportunities for learners to engage in interactive, real-time speaking practice (Liu & Wang, 2025). Chatbots like ChatGPT, which are powered by large language models, allow learners to converse naturally, receive instant feedback, and develop fluency in a stress free environment. Unlike traditional methods, AI chatbots provide a judgment free space where learners can practice speaking at their own pace and according to their individual needs (Young, 2024).

Empirical evidence supports the positive impact of AI chatbots on students' speaking development. For instance, Wang et al. (2025) revealed that chatbot interaction enhances learner engagement, reduces speaking anxiety, and improves oral performance among EFL students. Similarly, Zhou et al. (2025) found that AI-supported conversations fostered learner autonomy and increased willingness to communicate, especially in blended and mobile learning environments. These tools not only promote fluency and vocabulary growth but also encourage consistent speaking practice through personalized and adaptive feedback (Young, 2024).

Despite the increasing number of studies exploring the integration of AI chatbots in EFL speaking instruction, most existing research has predominantly employed quantitative methods such as pre-test and post-test designs to measure learners' performance improvements in fluency, accuracy, and vocabulary acquisition. For instance, H. Wang et al. (2025) conducted a quasi-experimental study across several universities in China and reported significant gains in students' oral fluency and vocabulary use after consistent interaction with ChatGPT-4. Similarly, Mingyan (2025) found that Chinese university students who practiced speaking through the AI-powered application *Liulishuo* achieved notable improvement in pronunciation and grammar accuracy compared to a control group. These findings, while valuable, largely focus on statistical outcomes and do not provide in-depth insight into learners' emotional, cognitive, or motivational engagement with the chatbot.

In addition, Tai (2024) examined the use of generative AI chatbots with elementary EFL learners in Taiwan using a quantitative design, revealing measurable progress in speech fluency and pronunciation accuracy. However, the study did not investigate how learners personally perceived or emotionally responded to AI-mediated speaking activities. Similarly, in Indonesia, several studies such as Salsabil (2025) adopted quasi-experimental approaches to evaluate the effects of ChatGPT or other AI-based tools on university students' speaking performance. While these studies demonstrated measurable progress in speaking scores, they offered limited exploration of learners' personal experiences, challenges, and reflections during the learning process.

Therefore, there remains a significant research gap regarding how learners in the Indonesian EFL context perceive and experience AI chatbots as speaking partners. Understanding their affective responses, perceived benefits, and challenges is crucial to obtaining a more comprehensive view of the pedagogical value of AI-supported speaking practice. To address this gap, the present study adopts a qualitative descriptive design to explore how students of the English Education Department at Universitas Maritim Raja Ali Haji (UMRAH) engage with ChatGPT as an AI speaking partner. This approach seeks to reveal deeper insights into learners' perceptions, confidence, and communication development dimensions often overlooked in prior quantitative research.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate EFL learners' perceptions of their speaking proficiency development after using AI chatbots, particularly ChatGPT, as a speaking partner. By employing a qualitative descriptive research design, this study seeks to explore learners' views regarding how ChatGPT influences their speaking development, including aspects of fluency, vocabulary use, confidence, and overall communicative ability. Focusing on students of the English Education Department at Universitas Maritim Raja Ali Haji (UMRAH), this study emphasizes learners' personal experiences, reflections, and emotional responses during AI-mediated speaking practice. The findings are expected to provide deeper insights into learners' perceived speaking development and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the pedagogical potential of AI chatbots in supporting speaking instruction in EFL contexts.

1.2 Limitation of the Study

This study has several limitations that must be acknowledged in order to define the scope and boundaries of the research clearly.

To begin with, this research is confined to examining the use of AI chatbots specifically for developing speaking skills, and does not encompass other language competencies such as reading, writing, or listening. The primary emphasis lies in analyzing how simulated conversational interactions with AI chatbots influence learners' speaking performance, particularly in terms of fluency, vocabulary application, and self-confidence in speaking. As emphasized by Young (2024), although AI chatbots can support and enrich spoken communication, they are limited in fostering the development of grammatical structures and the appropriate use of language within extended and contextually rich discourse.

Secondly, this research adopts a qualitative case study approach involving a small, targeted group of participants. The study focuses on selected EFL students from the English Education Department, cohorts of 2023, at Universitas Maritim Raja Ali Haji. Participants are chosen through purposive sampling, based on their availability and willingness to participate in AI-based speaking practice. Consequently, the findings are context-specific and not intended to be generalized to the broader population of EFL learners. As noted by H. Wang et al. (2025), while qualitative studies in AI-assisted language learning provide meaningful insights into learner behavior and interaction patterns, their outcomes are inherently limited to the specific group under investigation.

Thirdly, this study exclusively employs ChatGPT, an AI-driven chatbot developed by OpenAI, as the primary technological tool. Although ChatGPT provides sophisticated conversational features, the outcomes of this research may not be applicable to other AI platforms or chatbot systems that utilize different language models, interface designs, or modes of interaction.

Lastly, this study is limited by both temporal and geographical factors. Data collection will be carried out over a two weeks period, with all research activities conducted at Universitas Maritim Raja Ali Haji in Indonesia. These limitations may influence the level of participant engagement, the availability of technological resources, and the consistency of chatbot use throughout the study. As emphasized by, Zhou et al. (2025), institutional contexts and infrastructure play a crucial role in shaping how AI technologies are implemented in language learning environments.

1.3 Research Question

This study is designed to explore the role of AI chatbots specifically ChatGPT as speaking partners for EFL in a university context. It aims to investigate learner experiences, perceptions, and perceived improvements in using AI-Chatbots for speaking proficiency. Based on the research objectives, the following research questions are formulated: How do learners perceive their speaking proficiency development after using ChatGPT?

1.4 Objectives of the Studies

Based on the research question above, the objective of this study is to explore learners' perceived development in speaking proficiency after using ChatGPT as a speaking partner.

1.5 Significance of the Studies

1. Theoretical

This study is expected to contribute to the theoretical understanding of how AI-based conversational tools, particularly ChatGPT, support speaking proficiency development in EFL contexts. While many existing studies focus on quantitative outcomes such as fluency scores or vocabulary gains, this research adds a qualitative perspective by exploring learners' personal experiences, perceptions, and reflective insights.

The findings may enrich current theories of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) and AI-mediated communication by illustrating how learners interpret their own progress, challenges, and motivation during chatbot-based speaking practice. Additionally, the study may extend theoretical discussions related to learner autonomy, affective factors, and the role of simulated interaction in developing oral proficiency.

In short, this research contributes to the broader theoretical framework of AI integration in language education by offering an in-depth understanding of learner-centered, experience-based engagement with AI chatbots.

2. Pratical

a. For Students

This study provides practical insights into how ChatGPT can be used as a supportive speaking partner to improve learners' confidence, fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary use, and overall speaking performance. The results may help students recognize effective strategies for autonomous speaking practice, overcome speaking anxiety, and build consistent speaking habits outside the classroom.

b. For Lecturers / Teachers

The findings may guide EFL educators in integrating AI chatbots into speaking instruction more effectively. Teachers can use the results to design speaking activities, role-play sessions, and self-directed learning tasks that incorporate ChatGPT as a supplementary learning tool. This research may also help teachers understand common challenges students encounter when using AI tools, allowing them to provide better pedagogical support.

c. For Future Researchers

This study provides a foundation for future qualitative and quantitative research on AI chatbots in language education. The detailed findings on student experiences, perceptions, and perceived improvements

can be used to develop future instruments, frameworks, or experimental studies. The study also highlights research gaps that future scholars can explore, such as long-term effects of AI-assisted speaking or comparative studies across different chatbot platforms.

1.6 Definition of Key Terms

To ensure clarity and consistency throughout the study, the following key terms are defined operationally based on their use in the context of this research:

1. AI Chatbot

In the context of this study, the term AI chatbot specifically refers to ChatGPT, an artificial intelligence-driven conversational system developed by OpenAI. Designed to replicate human-like dialogue through text or speech interaction, ChatGPT will function as an interactive speaking partner for participants throughout the research period, supporting their English-speaking practice.

2. Speaking Partner

A speaking partner is defined as an interlocutor that engages learners in real time, two-way interaction. In this study, the speaking partner is a non-human entity specifically ChatGPT which functions as a substitute for human partners to support the development of learners' spoken language skills.

3. Speaking Proficiency

Speaking proficiency in this study refers to learners' overall ability to communicate orally in English with clarity, accuracy, and confidence. It encompasses several key components, including fluency, vocabulary use, pronunciation, grammar accuracy, and comprehension. Fluency involves the smooth delivery of speech with minimal hesitation, while vocabulary use reflects the learners' ability to select appropriate words to express meaning effectively. Pronunciation refers to the production of understandable sounds, stress, and intonation patterns, and grammar accuracy focuses on the correct use of linguistic structures during communication. Comprehension involves the ability to understand and respond appropriately to conversational input, ensuring meaningful interaction. In this research, speaking proficiency is not measured numerically but explored through learners' experiences, reflections, and perceptions after practicing with ChatGPT as a speaking partner. Therefore, speaking proficiency is viewed as a dynamic, multifaceted skill shaped by learners' interaction with the AI chatbot and their self-reported development throughout the study.

4. EFL Learners

EFL learners in this study refer to undergraduate students majoring in English Education from the 2023 cohort at Universitas Maritim Raja Ali Haji. These learners study English as a foreign language in a formal academic setting in Indonesia.

5. AI-Supported Speaking Practice

This term refers to the deliberate integration of ChatGPT as a tool for practicing English speaking beyond the traditional classroom setting. It involves consistent engagement with the chatbot for approximately 15 minutes per session over two weeks, utilizing either guided prompts or open-ended conversations.

