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STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF AI-ASSISTED FEEDBACK IN SPEAKING PRACTICE OF HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS

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Abstract
The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in language education has transformed how students receive and engage with feedback, particularly in developing speaking proficiency. This study explores university students' perceptions of AI-assisted feedback in English-speaking practice within an Indonesian higher education context. Using a qualitative descriptive design, data were collected from semi-structured interviews and reflective journals of 15 EFL students who regularly used AI-based tools such as ELSA Speak, SpeechAce, and ChatGPT Voice during speaking exercises. Thematic analysis revealed three major findings: (1) students perceived AI feedback as immediate, consistent, and helpful for improving pronunciation and fluency; (2) AI-based interaction enhanced learner autonomy and speaking confidence by providing a safe, nonjudgmental practice space; and (3) participants expressed skepticism toward the accuracy and communicative depth of AI-generated feedback, noting that it often neglected discourse and pragmatic aspects of speaking. Overall, students viewed AI-assisted feedback as a complementary pedagogical aid rather than a substitute for teacher evaluation. The findings underscore the importance of human AI collaboration in language teaching, suggesting that AI tools are most effective when integrated with teacher mediation and reflective guidance. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on technology-enhanced speaking instruction and provides insights for educators seeking to implement AI tools responsibly and effectively in higher education contexts.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence (AI), AI-assisted feedback, higher education, learner perceptions, speaking practice

Introduction

In recent years, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become an integral part of higher education, reshaping the way teachers design, deliver, and assess language learning. The rapid development of AI-based applications such as ChatGPT, ELSA Speak, Speechify, and YouGlish has provided language learners with new opportunities for authentic communication, pronunciation training, and self-paced speaking practice (Butarbutar, 2024; Li et al., 2023). Within the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, particularly in higher education, speaking remains one of the most challenging skills for learners to develop due to limited exposure, anxiety, and insufficient feedback (Derakhshan et al., 2021). Therefore, integrating AI-based tools into speaking classes can serve as an innovative pedagogical strategy to overcome these challenges.

The potential of AI for improving speaking proficiency lies primarily in its ability to provide *instant feedback* and *adaptive interaction*. Unlike traditional instruction, where feedback is often delayed or generalized, AI-driven applications offer immediate, individualized comments

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on pronunciation, grammar, fluency, and lexical choices (Nishona, n.d.). Such features foster learner autonomy and self-regulation two crucial elements for effective language acquisition (Panggua et al., 2025). Additionally, AI-powered speaking assistants allow students to practice without fear of judgment, reducing communication apprehension and increasing oral confidence .

Moreover, studies have shown that the integration of AI in English speaking courses enhances engagement and motivation by creating more interactive and gamified learning environments (Rahmawati & Rachmawati, 2023). AI tools like ELSA or ChatGPT simulate human-like conversations that help students prepare for academic and professional communication contexts (Zou, 2023). In Indonesia, where EFL learners often lack real communicative exposure, such digital support could significantly complement classroom instruction, especially in higher education settings that aim to produce globally competent graduates (Panggua et al., 2025).

Despite these benefits, there are still concerns regarding the pedagogical effectiveness of AI-based tools. Some scholars argue that while AI systems can enhance surface-level fluency, they might fail to address deeper discourse-level competencies such as coherence, argumentation, and pragmatic appropriateness (Nishona, 2025; Butarbutar, 2024). Moreover, the human element in feedback such as emotional nuance, encouragement, and cultural awareness cannot be fully replicated by machines (Li, 2023). Therefore, qualitative exploration is needed to understand *how* and *to what extent* AI tools can meaningfully support EFL learners' speaking development in higher education contexts.

The purpose of this study is to explore university students' perceptions and experiences in using AI-based tools to enhance their English-speaking skills. It aims to identify how these tools contribute to improving learners' pronunciation, fluency, and confidence, as well as to uncover potential challenges in their use within EFL classrooms.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do university students perceive the use of AI-based tools in improving their English-speaking skills?
2. What benefits and challenges do students experience when using AI-based tools for speaking practice?

This research is expected to contribute to the growing body of literature on technology-enhanced language learning and to provide practical insights for educators on how AI-based tools can be integrated effectively to support speaking skill development in higher education.

Literature Review

The Role of AI-Assisted Feedback in Langauge Learning

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has rapidly transformed language education by enabling adaptive learning environments and providing learners with immediate, individualized feedback. AI-assisted feedback refers to the use of AI-driven systems that analyze learners' linguistic performance and generate automated responses to guide improvement (Li, 2023);Butarbutar, 2024)). In language learning, feedback plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between learners' current and desired performance levels. Traditionally, this process relied heavily on teachers; however, the emergence of AI tools has diversified feedback sources, making it more accessible and timely (Zou et al., 2023).

AI-assisted feedback operates through speech recognition, natural language processing (NLP), and machine learning algorithms that detect pronunciation, grammar, and fluency patterns (Nishona, 2025). By providing detailed corrective input, AI feedback helps students identify specific areas for improvement and track their progress over time. Butarbutar, 2024 notes that such real-time responsiveness fosters self-regulated learning and learner autonomy, as students can practice and correct themselves without waiting for teacher evaluation.

At the same time, research has highlighted both pedagogical advantages and limitations of AI-based feedback. Li et al. (2023) observed that learners who interacted with AI feedback in writing tasks demonstrated higher engagement and ownership of learning. However, they also

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pointed out that AI responses may lack contextual and affective understanding a limitation that equally applies to speaking feedback. Therefore, while AI can assist teachers by providing rapid, data-driven analysis, human mediation remains essential for deeper communicative competence.

AI-Assisted Feedback in Speaking Skill Development

Speaking is a dynamic and complex skill that requires fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, and pragmatic awareness. Among EFL learners, speaking anxiety and limited access to authentic communication are common barriers (Derakhshan et al., 2021). AI-assisted feedback tools such as ELSA Speak, ChatGPT voice mode, and YouGlish address these challenges by providing learners with instant, individualized feedback on pronunciation, intonation, fluency, and vocabulary use (Nishona, 2025); (Nishimura et al., n.d.).

Panggua et al. (2025) conducted a qualitative investigation of AI-assisted speaking practice among Indonesian university students and found that AI feedback increased confidence, motivation, and self-awareness of errors. Learners appreciated the objectivity of AI scoring systems and valued the opportunity to repeat and self-correct without embarrassment. Similarly, Pituxcoosuvarn et al. (2025) reported that learners who practiced speaking with AI partners demonstrated reduced anxiety levels and better retention of target vocabulary.

However, several studies caution that AI feedback often focuses on surface-level linguistic features such as pronunciation and grammatical accuracy while neglecting discourse-level aspects like coherence, tone, or communicative intent ((Butarbutar, 2024; (Nishona, 2025). In other words, while AI can effectively "train" articulation and fluency, it may not fully capture the sociolinguistic and pragmatic dimensions of oral communication. Consequently, researchers suggest that AI feedback should be viewed as a *complement* rather than a *replacement* for human feedback (Zou, 2023).

Students' Perceptions Toward AI-Assisted Feedback

Learners' perceptions and attitudes play a central role in determining the success of AI integration in language learning. Positive perceptions encourage engagement and sustained use of AI tools, whereas skepticism or discomfort can hinder their adoption (Rachmawati, 2023). Panggua et al., (2025) found that EFL university students perceived AI feedback as supportive and motivating, particularly because it provided an anxiety-free environment to practice speaking. Students also valued the autonomy gained through AI, as they could practice anytime and track measurable improvement through visual progress reports.

Nevertheless, some learners remain cautious. Rahmawati and Rachmawati (2023) reported that certain students doubted the accuracy and consistency of AI-generated pronunciation scores, noting occasional mismatches between their perceived performance and AI evaluations. Similarly, Nishona (2025)identified that while AI feedback was helpful for segmental pronunciation (e.g., individual sounds), it lacked sensitivity to suprasegmental features like stress and rhythm, which are vital for natural speech.

These mixed perceptions underscore the need to balance technological precision with pedagogical empathy. As Zou et al. (2023) argue, AI feedback systems should be integrated under teacher guidance to ensure learners interpret feedback meaningfully and apply it for communicative improvement. The effectiveness of AI feedback, therefore, depends not only on its technological sophistication but also on learners' attitudes, trust, and understanding of how to use it for their own learning benefit.

Pedagogical Implications

AI-assisted feedback offers both opportunities and challenges for EFL educators in higher education. From a pedagogical perspective, AI can alleviate teachers' workload by automating repetitive corrective feedback, allowing instructors to focus on higher-order communicative tasks. At the same time, it empowers students to take greater responsibility for their learning (Holec, 1981). Integrating AI feedback effectively requires teachers to design structured activities where students can reflect on and apply AI suggestions, such as through speaking journals, peer discussions, or teacher-guided reflections.

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Furthermore, institutions must ensure equitable access to AI technologies and provide training for both instructors and learners to interpret feedback critically . Without adequate digital literacy, learners may misinterpret AI suggestions or become overly reliant on automated correction. Thus, a balanced pedagogical approach combining human facilitation with AI-based feedback remains essential to ensure that technology serves learning rather than dictates it.

In conclusion, while AI-assisted feedback in speaking practice has demonstrated promising results in enhancing learners' fluency, accuracy, and confidence, its success largely depends on learners' perceptions and experiences. More qualitative research is needed to capture students' authentic voices, explore their emotional responses, and identify pedagogical strategies that maximize the benefits of AI feedback in higher education.

Research Method

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive design to explore how higher education students perceive AI-assisted feedback in speaking practice. The descriptive qualitative approach was chosen because it allows a rich, detailed understanding of learners' experiences and meanings rather than numerical generalization (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The primary objective was to gain insights into how students interpret, evaluate, and respond to feedback generated by AI-based speaking applications that they used in their regular coursework.

The research was conducted within an English Education program at a private university in Indonesia during the 2025 academic semester. The participants were fifteen undergraduate students enrolled in *Listening and Speaking* and *IELTS Preparation* classes. These students were selected through purposive sampling because they had prior exposure to AI-assisted speaking tools, such as ELSA Speak, SpeechAce, and ChatGPT Voice, as part of their class activities. Purposive sampling was considered appropriate to ensure that all participants possessed relevant experiences to address the research focus (Palfreyman, n.d.)

Before the data collection began, ethical clearance was obtained from the institutional research ethics committee. All participants were informed of the purpose of the study and their rights to withdraw at any time. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were used throughout the research report.

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and reflective journals. The semi-structured interviews were conducted individually, either face-to-face or online, and lasted approximately 20–30 minutes. The interview questions centered on students' experiences with AI-assisted speaking tools, their perceptions of the usefulness and accuracy of AI feedback, and the perceived influence of such feedback on their speaking confidence and improvement. This format provided flexibility to probe participants' responses while maintaining consistency across interviews (Tisdell, 2016)

In addition to interviews, participants were asked to maintain short reflective journals over a three-week period while engaging with AI feedback. These journals offered insights into learners' evolving thoughts, emotions, and self-assessments throughout the practice sessions. The combination of interviews and journals served as a triangulation strategy to enhance the credibility and richness of the data.

All data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis**,** following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. The analysis began with repeated reading of the transcripts and journals to achieve familiarization, followed by the generation of initial codes related to perceptions, emotions, and behavioral changes. These codes were then organized into themes that reflected common patterns and variations across participants' experiences 9(Xiao, 2025). The emerging themes were reviewed, refined, and defined to produce coherent findings that addressed the research purpose.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, several validation strategies were employed in line with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework. Credibility was established through data triangulation (interviews and journals) and member checking, where participants reviewed and confirmed preliminary interpretations. Transferability was promoted by providing a thick description of the research setting and participants' backgrounds, while dependability was

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achieved through detailed documentation of the research procedures. Confirmability was maintained through reflexive journaling to minimize researcher bias and ensure that interpretations remained grounded in the data.

Overall, this methodological approach provided an in-depth and authentic exploration of how university students perceive AI-assisted feedback in their speaking development, revealing both the pedagogical potentials and the emotional dimensions of technology-enhanced learning.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of interview transcripts and reflective journals revealed that higher education students perceived AI-assisted feedback as both beneficial and limited in supporting their speaking development. Three major themes emerged from the data: (1) the usefulness of AI feedback for speaking improvement, (2) increased confidence and learner autonomy, and (3) skepticism toward the accuracy and contextual depth of AI-generated feedback. These themes illuminate how students experience, interpret, and evaluate AI as part of their speaking practice.

Most participants expressed that the use of AI-based tools such as *ELSA Speak*, *SpeechAce*, or *ChatGPT Voice* helped them gain immediate and specific feedback on pronunciation, fluency, and grammar. This instant correction was perceived as a key motivator for practice. As one student commented, *"When I spoke to the app, it showed which words I said incorrectly, and I could repeat right away. It made me aware of what I needed to fix"* (S4). This aligns with Panggua et al. (2025), who noted that the immediacy of AI-generated feedback fosters learner engagement and promotes self-correction habits.

Students valued the objectivity and consistency of AI evaluation compared to human feedback, which they sometimes perceived as subjective or delayed. The visual feedback interface through color-coded scores or accuracy bars was described as "encouraging" and "game-like," turning repetitive pronunciation drills into an engaging experience. Several participants also reported that AI provided a "safe space" for speaking practice, free from the fear of negative judgment. One participant explained, *"I can practice many times without being nervous because the AI doesn't judge me it just gives scores"* (S9). This finding supports Derakhshan et al. (2022), who highlighted the importance of psychological comfort in reducing speaking anxiety among EFL learners.

Alongside perceived usefulness, students emphasized how AI-assisted feedback promoted greater autonomy and confidence. Many participants indicated that AI tools encouraged them to practice independently outside class time. *"Before using AI, I only practiced when we had class activities,"* one student admitted. *"Now I practice by myself because I can get feedback anytime"* (S2). This self-directed behavior reflects Holec's (1981) concept of learner autonomy, where learners actively regulate and monitor their own progress. As a result, participants developed a stronger sense of ownership of their learning. The reflective journals further showed that consistent AI practice enhanced students' confidence in speaking tasks: *"After two weeks, I felt more ready to speak in class. I already knew which sounds to fix, so I was less nervous"* (S11). This aligns with Rahmawati and Rachmawati (2023), who found that AI-based gamified feedback environments enhance motivation and self-efficacy in oral communication.

Despite these positive perceptions, participants also articulated critical views and reservations about AI's reliability. Several questioned the accuracy and fairness of pronunciation scoring, especially for non-native accents. *"Sometimes it said my pronunciation was wrong, but my lecturer said it was okay,"* one participant noted (S7). This concern echoes Nishona's (2025) observation that AI pronunciation engines are often less tolerant of accent variation and may misjudge prosodic features such as stress or rhythm. Other students felt that AI feedback was mechanical and linguistically narrow, focusing mainly on pronunciation and grammar without addressing communicative aspects such as coherence, tone, or discourse organization. *"The AI never told me about how natural my speaking was it only checked pronunciation and grammar,"* remarked another participant (S5).

These responses indicate that while AI feedback effectively supports linguistic accuracy, it remains insufficient for holistic communicative competence. This dual perception corresponds with Li et al. (2023), who describe a "pedagogical paradox" in AI-assisted learning: AI delivers

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precise linguistic data but lacks the interpretive and affective sensitivity of human feedback. In the context of speaking practice, students seemed to appreciate AI as a complementary aid, not a replacement for teacher feedback. They recognized its utility for targeted pronunciation and fluency training but still valued teacher input for discourse-level guidance and nuanced performance evaluation.

From a pedagogical standpoint, these findings highlight that AI-assisted feedback contributes most effectively when integrated with human mediation. As Zou et al. (2023) argue, teachers play an essential role in helping learners interpret and apply automated feedback critically. Instructors can scaffold students' reflection on AI-generated suggestions, encourage comparison between AI and human evaluations, and promote discussions on how to improve beyond surface-level accuracy.

Overall, the results suggest that AI-assisted feedback in speaking practice offers significant benefits for awareness, confidence, and autonomous learning, yet its pedagogical potential depends on students' critical understanding and guided use. This aligns with Butarbutar's (2024) claim that sustainable AI integration requires balance leveraging automation for efficiency while preserving the human dimension of empathy and contextual judgment. Hence, while AI can effectively enhance the micro-skills of pronunciation and fluency, the human teacher remains vital in fostering communicative depth, sociolinguistic sensitivity, and reflective learning in EFL speaking development.

Conclusion

This study explored university students' perceptions of AI-assisted feedback in speaking practice within an EFL higher education context. The findings revealed that students generally perceived AI tools as beneficial for improving their pronunciation accuracy, fluency, and self-awareness. AI-assisted feedback provided immediacy, objectivity, and motivation that traditional classroom feedback often lacks. Students also valued the flexibility and privacy AI tools offered, which reduced speaking anxiety and encouraged autonomous practice beyond classroom boundaries.

However, participants also expressed reservations regarding the accuracy and contextual sensitivity of AI-generated feedback. They noted that while AI effectively identifies surface-level linguistic errors, it lacks the ability to assess communicative appropriateness, coherence, or pragmatic tone dimensions essential for authentic spoken interaction. This ambivalence suggests that AI should not be viewed as a replacement for teacher feedback but rather as a complementary pedagogical aid that supports individualized, data-driven learning.

Pedagogically, these findings highlight the need for human AI collaboration in language learning. Instructors can leverage AI tools to provide consistent pronunciation and fluency feedback, while focusing classroom time on higher-order speaking skills, such as discourse management and interactional competence. Teachers should also guide students in interpreting AI feedback critically, encouraging reflection and discernment when applying automated suggestions. Such integration promotes both learner autonomy and digital literacy skills increasingly vital in modern education.

From a research perspective, this study contributes to the growing understanding of how AI technologies reshape the feedback landscape in EFL contexts. Future studies could extend this work by examining longitudinal effects of AI-assisted speaking practice on communicative competence, or by comparing teacher AI hybrid feedback models. Moreover, exploring how learners with different proficiency levels or cultural backgrounds respond to AI-mediated interaction could further enrich insights into equitable and effective AI integration.

In conclusion, AI-assisted feedback holds considerable promise in enhancing speaking practice in higher education. Yet, its full pedagogical potential can only be realized when technology is thoughtfully integrated with human expertise. Sustainable language learning requires not only intelligent systems but also reflective learners and empathetic teachers who together construct meaningful communication.

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