

RESEARCH ARTICLE**The Role of AI-Powered Chatbots in Improving English Conversational Skills among EFL Learners: A Conceptual Review**

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Abstract:

The rapid development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has transformed the possibilities for language learning by providing learners with increasingly interactive and personalized digital environments. Among these technologies, AI-powered chatbots have attracted considerable attention in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education because they can simulate conversational interaction and provide learners with opportunities to practise English beyond the traditional classroom. This conceptual review examines the role of AI-powered chatbots in improving English conversational skills among EFL learners. The discussion focuses on conversational fluency, vocabulary development, grammatical accuracy, pronunciation, interactional competence, learner confidence, motivation, and learner autonomy. AI-powered chatbots can provide immediate responses, generate context-specific conversations, simulate real-life situations, offer repeated practice, and provide individualized feedback. These features may be particularly valuable for EFL learners who have limited opportunities to communicate in English outside the classroom. However, chatbot-assisted learning also involves challenges, including inaccurate responses, limited understanding of human emotions and cultural contexts, overdependence on technology, privacy concerns, digital inequality, and reduced opportunities for authentic human interaction. The review argues that AI-powered chatbots should function as complementary tools rather than replacements for teachers and human communication. A human-AI collaborative model is proposed in which learners use chatbots for preparation and repeated practice and then transfer their learning to peer interaction, classroom communication, and real-world contexts. The paper concludes that AI-powered chatbots have significant potential to improve English conversational skills when integrated into communicative, learner-centred, and ethically responsible language pedagogy.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, AI chatbots, EFL learners, English conversation, speaking skills, oral communication, conversational competence, learner autonomy

1. Introduction

Effective communication in English has become increasingly important in higher education, employment, international business, travel, science, technology, and social interaction. For learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), conversational competence is one of the most important yet challenging areas of language development. Knowing English vocabulary and grammar does not automatically mean that a learner can participate effectively in a conversation. Successful communication requires fluency, pronunciation, appropriate vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, listening comprehension, turn-taking, confidence, and the ability to respond appropriately to changing situations.

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In many EFL contexts, learners have limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom. Classroom time may be insufficient to provide every student with extensive individual speaking practice. Large classes, examination-oriented curricula, fear of making mistakes, and limited access to proficient English speakers can further restrict opportunities for authentic communication.

The emergence of AI-powered chatbots provides a potential solution to some of these limitations. Unlike traditional computer-based language-learning programs, modern AI chatbots can generate responses dynamically and engage learners in extended conversations. Learners can interact with chatbots about everyday topics, academic subjects, professional situations, and personal interests. Chatbots can also simulate different conversational roles. They can act as interviewers, teachers, customers, colleagues, tourists, friends, or discussion partners. This flexibility enables learners to practise communication in a wide variety of contexts.

The emergence of generative AI has further expanded the potential of chatbot-assisted language learning. Modern systems can generate contextually relevant responses, ask follow-up questions, explain vocabulary, correct grammar, and provide suggestions for more natural expressions. However, the effectiveness of AI chatbots should not be assumed simply because they can communicate fluently. The key question is whether interaction with chatbots actually contributes to learners' independent conversational competence.

This paper therefore examines the potential role of AI-powered chatbots in developing English conversational skills among EFL learners and discusses the pedagogical opportunities, challenges, and implications associated with their use.

2. AI-Powered Chatbots in Language Learning

AI-powered chatbots are software systems that use Artificial Intelligence and Natural Language Processing to interact with users through natural language.

In English language learning, chatbots can perform several functions:

- conversational practice;
- vocabulary assistance;
- grammar explanation;
- role-play;
- pronunciation support;
- question-and-answer activities;
- discussion practice;
- interview simulation;
- error identification;
- personalized learning.

Unlike fixed dialogue programs, generative AI chatbots can produce new responses based on learner input. This creates a more flexible conversational environment.

For EFL learners, the chatbot can function as an additional speaking partner who is available at any time.

3. Conversational Fluency

Fluency is a central component of effective speaking. EFL learners may understand English but hesitate when they need to produce spontaneous speech.

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AI chatbots can provide repeated opportunities for conversational practice. Learners can engage in short or extended conversations without requiring a teacher or peer to be available.

For example, a chatbot can ask:

“What did you do during the weekend?”

After the learner responds, the chatbot can ask a follow-up question such as:

“What was the most interesting part of your weekend?”

This encourages learners to produce connected responses rather than isolated sentences.

Repeated conversational practice can help learners become more comfortable with spontaneous language production.

4. Vocabulary Development

Limited vocabulary can prevent EFL learners from expressing their ideas effectively.

AI chatbots can introduce vocabulary in meaningful conversational contexts. Instead of memorizing isolated words, learners can learn vocabulary through dialogue.

A learner can ask a chatbot to conduct a conversation about:

- travel;
- education;
- technology;
- employment;
- health;
- business;
- environmental issues;
- current affairs.

During the conversation, learners encounter new words and expressions in context.

Chatbots can also explain unfamiliar vocabulary, provide synonyms and antonyms, and create example sentences.

This contextual approach can strengthen the connection between vocabulary knowledge and actual communication.

5. Interactional Competence

Conversation involves more than vocabulary and grammar. Learners must know how to manage interaction.

Important conversational skills include:

- initiating a conversation;
- maintaining a topic;
- asking follow-up questions;
- expressing agreement;
- expressing disagreement politely;
- requesting clarification;
- interrupting appropriately;
- changing topics;
- ending conversations.

AI chatbots can be programmed or prompted to practise these functions.

For example, a chatbot can intentionally misunderstand the learner and ask for clarification. This gives learners an opportunity to practise repair strategies.

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Such activities can contribute to pragmatic competence and conversational awareness.

6. Learner Confidence

Speaking anxiety is a common problem among EFL learners.

Students may avoid speaking because they are afraid of grammatical mistakes, pronunciation errors, or negative reactions from classmates.

Chatbots can provide a relatively low-pressure environment for initial practice. Learners can experiment with language without the immediate social pressure associated with classroom communication.

Repeated practice may gradually increase confidence.

However, confidence developed through chatbot interaction must eventually transfer to real human communication. Students should therefore progress from AI-based practice to peer and real-world interaction.

7. Learner Motivation

AI chatbots can make language learning more interactive.

Instead of completing repetitive exercises, learners can engage in conversations about topics that interest them.

For example, students can practise English through conversations about:

- sports;
- films;
- music;
- technology;
- travel;
- careers;
- social media;
- science.

Personalized conversation can increase engagement because learners have greater control over the content.

The novelty of AI technology may also initially increase students' willingness to experiment with English. However, long-term motivation depends on meaningful learning goals rather than technology alone.

8. Learner Autonomy

One of the most significant benefits of AI chatbots is their potential to promote learner autonomy.

Learners can practise English independently without waiting for classroom instruction.

They can decide:

- when to practise;
- what topic to discuss;
- how long to practise;
- which errors to review;
- what level of difficulty to use.

This supports self-directed learning.

For example, a university student preparing for an interview can practice with an AI chatbot every evening and gradually increase the difficulty of questions. Such independent practice can extend language learning beyond the classroom.

9. Personalized Learning

Traditional classroom instruction often requires teachers to design activities for groups of students. Chatbots can potentially provide individualized interactions.

A beginner can have a simple conversation using basic vocabulary, while an advanced learner can engage in

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complex academic discussions.

Chatbots can also provide different types of feedback according to learner needs.

For example:

Beginner: Vocabulary and basic sentence formation

Intermediate: Fluency and grammatical accuracy

Advanced: Argumentation, academic vocabulary, and pragmatic competence

This personalization can make practice more efficient.

10. Role of Teachers

The teacher remains essential in chatbot-supported language learning.

Teachers can:

- select appropriate AI tools;
- establish learning objectives;
- design chatbot activities;
- monitor student progress;
- evaluate AI feedback;
- provide authentic communication opportunities;
- teach digital and AI literacy;
- address ethical issues.

Teachers can also create blended activities.

For example:

Step 1: Students practise a conversation with a chatbot.

Step 2: Students identify new vocabulary.

Step 3: Students repeat the conversation with a partner.

Step 4: Students perform the situation in class.

Step 5: The teacher provides feedback.

This transforms AI practice into authentic communication.

11. Human-AI Collaborative Model

A useful model for chatbot-supported EFL learning can involve five stages.

Stage 1: Preparation

The teacher introduces the target language and communication situation.

Stage 2: AI Interaction

Students practise the target language with an AI chatbot.

Stage 3: Reflection

Students identify vocabulary, grammatical patterns, and communication strategies learned through the conversation.

Stage 4: Human Interaction

Students practise the same task with classmates or teachers.

Stage 5: Real-World Application

Students apply the skills in authentic communication situations.

This model ensures that AI supports rather than replaces human interaction.

12. Pedagogical Implications

AI chatbots have several implications for EFL teaching.

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First, they can increase opportunities for speaking practice outside classroom hours.

Second, they can support differentiated instruction by providing individualized conversations.

Third, they can help teachers create realistic role-play scenarios.

Fourth, chatbot practice can prepare students for classroom activities such as discussions, interviews, debates, and presentations.

Fifth, teachers can use chatbot transcripts as learning materials. Students can analyse conversations and identify appropriate and inappropriate language.

Finally, chatbot use provides opportunities to develop AI literacy. Students should learn how to construct effective prompts, evaluate responses, verify information, and use AI ethically.

13. Recommendations**For EFL Learners**

Learners should:

- use chatbots regularly for additional practice;
- practise both fluency and accuracy;
- verify AI-generated information;
- combine AI practice with human interaction;
- avoid excessive dependence on AI;
- reflect on their speaking progress.

For Teachers

Teachers should:

- integrate chatbots into communicative tasks;
- provide clear instructions;
- monitor AI use;
- combine chatbot activities with peer communication;
- provide human feedback;
- teach responsible AI use.

For Institutions

Institutions should:

- provide teacher training;
- establish AI-use guidelines;
- address privacy and data protection;
- promote equitable access to technology;
- encourage research on AI-assisted language learning.

14. Future Research

Further empirical research is needed to determine the long-term effectiveness of AI-powered chatbots.

Future studies could examine:

- speaking fluency;
- pronunciation;
- vocabulary development;
- grammatical accuracy;
- willingness to communicate;

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- speaking anxiety;
- learner confidence;
- learner autonomy;
- interactional competence.

Researchers should also compare chatbot-assisted learning with conventional speaking instruction.

Longitudinal research is particularly important because short-term enthusiasm for technology may not necessarily result in long-term improvement in independent communication skills.

Research should also examine the experiences of learners with different proficiency levels and linguistic backgrounds.

15. Conclusion

AI-powered chatbots represent an important development in English language education. Their ability to simulate conversations, provide immediate responses, generate role-play situations, support vocabulary and grammar learning, and offer repeated practice creates valuable opportunities for EFL learners.

The major strength of chatbots is accessibility. Learners can practise English whenever and wherever they have access to the technology. This is especially valuable for students who have limited opportunities to communicate in English outside the classroom.

Chatbots can support conversational fluency, vocabulary development, grammatical accuracy, pronunciation, interactional competence, confidence, motivation, and learner autonomy. They can also provide personalized learning experiences and simulate situations relevant to academic and professional communication.

Nevertheless, AI chatbots have limitations. They cannot fully reproduce human emotions, cultural understanding, interpersonal relationships, or the unpredictable nature of real communication. AI-generated feedback may also be inaccurate, and excessive dependence can reduce learners' opportunities for independent communication.

Therefore, chatbots should be used as **complementary learning tools rather than replacements for teachers and human interaction**. The most effective approach is a human-AI collaborative model in which learners use chatbots for preparation, practice, feedback, and reflection, followed by interaction with teachers, peers, and real-world communication partners.

Ultimately, the success of AI-powered chatbot use depends not on the sophistication of the technology alone but on the quality of its pedagogical integration. When supported by teacher guidance, critical thinking, ethical awareness, and authentic communication, AI chatbots can become valuable tools for developing confident, fluent, and effective English communicators.

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