

USING CHATGPT FOR SPEAKING PRACTICE IN EFL CLASSROOMS: A NARRATIVE REVIEW WITH PEDAGOGICAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FIRST-YEAR ENGLISH-MAJOR STUDENTS

Nguyen Hong Hanh ¹, Phan Minh Huyen ²

School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University, Thai Nguyen, Viet Nam

ABSTRACT

Speaking is commonly identified as the skill that EFL learners find most difficult to develop, and this is particularly true for first-year students in English-major programs, who are expected to perform in the target language from their very first weeks at university. ChatGPT has attracted considerable attention since its release in late 2022, yet most of the studies published so far have focused on writing rather than oral production. This paper reviews empirical research from 2022 to 2025 that addresses the use of ChatGPT in EFL speaking contexts, examining three areas: its effects on oral proficiency, its role in reducing speaking anxiety and building learner confidence, and its relationship with willingness to communicate. Based on these findings, the paper offers practical recommendations for teachers at schools of foreign languages working with first-year English-major students, and includes a sample speaking activity as an appendix. Overall, the findings suggest real promise - ChatGPT seems to offer a low-pressure practice space that many anxious learners find helpful - but also point to important limitations that make careful, teacher-supported implementation necessary.

Keyword: ChatGPT, EFL speaking practice, oral proficiency, speaking anxiety, willingness to communicate, generative AI, English-major students

1. INTRODUCTION

Speaking English fluently is a central goal for students enrolled in English-major programs, yet it is also one of the skills that proves most difficult to develop in an EFL setting. In countries where English is not a language of daily life outside the classroom, learners have very few chances to actually use it for real communication. This problem is not new, but it becomes especially visible among first-year students at schools of foreign languages, who arrive with mixed levels of proficiency and often a long history of grammar-focused instruction that gave little room for spoken practice. Many of them struggle not only with the language itself, but with the anxiety of having to perform in English in front of classmates and teachers - an anxiety that can silence students even when they know what they want to say (Trinh, 2025; Hang et al., 2023).

ChatGPT entered this picture in November 2022 and has attracted growing interest among language educators and researchers. The tool can hold extended conversations in English, respond

to learner input in real time, and adjust its language to the level of the person it is talking with. For EFL students who have no English-speaking partner outside class, this seems like a real opportunity. Whether it actually helps with speaking development, however, is still being worked out in the literature. Many studies published between 2023 and 2025 focus on writing and writing feedback, and speaking as a specific skill has received less direct attention (Du & Daniel, 2024; Lo et al., 2024).

This paper uses a narrative review approach to examine what the available evidence currently says about ChatGPT as a speaking practice tool in EFL contexts. The review focuses on oral production, speaking anxiety, and communicative willingness, and on what these findings might mean for teachers working with first-year English-major students where speaking courses form a core part of the weekly schedule. Three questions guide the review: what does the evidence say about ChatGPT's effects on speaking proficiency; how does using ChatGPT affect how learners feel

about speaking; and what practical steps can teachers take based on current findings.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Speaking Challenges in EFL Contexts

Among the four language skills, speaking is often described as the most anxiety-producing for EFL learners (Dewaele et al., 2025). Unlike reading or writing, spoken communication is immediate and public - there is no time to look up a word, no chance to revise before the listener hears it. Learners must process meaning, retrieve language, monitor their own output, and handle social pressure all at once. In EFL contexts where the target language is not used in daily life, this is made harder still by the fact that students get relatively little practice overall.

For first-year English-major students, these challenges are often more pronounced than for learners in other program types. Many come from secondary school settings where speaking was rarely assessed and where grammar accuracy, not fluency or communication, was the main focus. Moving to a university program where oral performance is expected in most classes every week can be quite difficult. Research from Vietnamese EFL settings - directly relevant to the school of foreign languages context addressed in this paper - has found that freshmen frequently report worrying about pronunciation, running out of words mid-sentence, and feeling embarrassed when they make mistakes in front of peers (Trinh, 2025; Hang et al., 2023). These are not isolated concerns; they appear consistently enough across different institutions to suggest they reflect something structural about how speaking is taught, or not taught, before university.

2.2 The Role of Technology in Speaking Development

Technology tools for language learning have been around for decades, but they have not always been useful for speaking practice specifically. Earlier chatbots worked from pre-set scripts that could handle only a narrow range of inputs; pronunciation apps gave feedback on isolated sounds but could not hold a conversation. ChatGPT is different in ways that matter for speaking practice. It is built on a large language model that allows it to generate contextually appropriate responses to almost anything a learner says, maintain coherence across a multi-

turn exchange, and adjust its vocabulary and sentence complexity to the interlocutor's apparent level (Lo et al., 2024). This makes it considerably closer to a real conversation partner than any previous AI tool available to EFL learners.

There are also several theoretical reasons to think this kind of interaction might support speaking development. Communicative Language Teaching holds that language is learned through meaningful interaction, not from studying rules alone, and that creating real or simulated communicative contexts is central to language instruction (Littlewood, 1981, as cited in Fathi et al., 2025). Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development is relevant here too: a good conversational partner, whether human or AI, can scaffold a learner's production by asking follow-up questions, supplying missing vocabulary, and encouraging the learner to say more than they might manage on their own. SLA research also consistently points to output - the act of producing language, not just receiving it - as a driver of language development (Swain, 1985, as cited in Fathi et al., 2025), and conversation with ChatGPT generates considerable output.

3. REVIEW OF THE EVIDENCE

3.1 ChatGPT and Oral Proficiency Development

A number of studies have examined whether regular ChatGPT practice leads to measurable improvements in speaking ability, and the results are generally positive, though not without some limitations. Chen et al. (2025) conducted a pre-test/post-test study with Chinese university students who took part in structured generative AI speaking sessions over a semester, and found improvements in fluency, grammatical range, and how coherently students organized their spoken ideas. Students also reported feeling more prepared in class when familiar topics came up, partly because they had already discussed similar content in English with ChatGPT. Wang (2025), focusing on ChatGPT-4, found statistically significant gains in speaking performance among students who used the tool regularly for extracurricular conversation practice, and noted that positive attitudes toward the tool were closely linked to how consistently students used it.

Task design appears to matter considerably. Syaripuddin (2024) found good results from using

ChatGPT for debate preparation: students who rehearsed their arguments with the tool before in-class debates showed clear improvement in how they structured and supported spoken arguments. This suggests the benefit may not come from simply chatting with an AI, but from using it in purposeful ways that are connected to real speaking demands.

However, some aspects of speaking proficiency seem harder to address through ChatGPT interaction. Pronunciation is the most obvious example. ChatGPT's text interface does not evaluate how a learner sounds, and even in voice mode the automatic speech recognition is not designed to give phonemic feedback. Nuñez et al. (2025) and Safar & Anggraheni (2024) both piloted ChatGPT voice chat for speaking practice and reported improvements in fluency and self-reported confidence, though their sample sizes were small and intervention periods short, making it difficult to draw conclusions about long-term effects or pronunciation development specifically.

3.2 Effects on Speaking Anxiety and Confidence

Among all areas reviewed, the evidence on speaking anxiety is the most consistent: interacting with ChatGPT tends to reduce it. This is significant because foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) is one of the strongest predictors of poor oral performance (Horwitz et al., 1986, as cited in Chen et al., 2025). Anxious learners avoid speaking, produce shorter and simpler utterances than their actual proficiency would allow, and can fall into a cycle where avoidance leads to less practice, which in turn keeps anxiety high.

The underlying mechanism appears to be social in nature. ChatGPT does not judge the learner as a person, does not remember previous mistakes, and does not show disappointment or impatience. Nugroho et al. (2025), in a study on the voice conversation feature of ChatGPT, identified three ways the tool helped build student confidence: it provided a space free from negative evaluation, it responded to errors in a neutral way rather than correcting them, and it allowed students to try the same thing repeatedly without any social cost. Fathi et al. (2025) found similar results in their six-week mixed-methods study, where anxiety scores fell and speaking frequency increased among participants using AI conversation bots for oral practice.

Pratiwi et al. (2024) tracked this effect over time with Indonesian EFL undergraduates, finding that students who were initially hesitant even in their ChatGPT interactions gradually became more willing to take linguistic risks - longer turns, more complex sentences, attempts at nuance - as they became more comfortable with the interaction. The authors explained this in terms of automaticity: low-stakes practice frees up cognitive resources that would otherwise be used to manage social anxiety, and those resources can then be directed toward actual language production.

One complication worth noting is that anxiety reduction is not always straightforward. El Shazly (2021, as cited in Chen et al., 2025) observed that when ChatGPT fails to understand a learner's spoken input - due to accent, pronunciation, or background noise - students may interpret this as evidence that their English is worse than it actually is. This kind of false negative feedback produces a different kind of frustration, and it is not something that resolves as students become more confident.

3.3 Willingness to Communicate

Willingness to communicate, or WTC, refers to the readiness a learner has to initiate or respond to communication in the target language at a given moment (MacIntyre et al., 1998). WTC is relevant to speaking development because learners who are more willing to communicate will seek out more practice and take more language risks, both of which support improvement.

The findings on ChatGPT and WTC are among the more interesting in the recent literature. Fathi et al. (2025), in their six-week study, found that students using AI conversation practice showed higher WTC scores at the end of the intervention and participated more actively in class discussions than the control group. Students reported feeling more ready to speak in class because they had already used similar language with ChatGPT and found they could manage it. Jeon (2024, as cited in Fathi et al., 2025) described this as a kind of confidence transfer from low-stakes to higher-stakes contexts - not a replacement of human interaction, but a form of preparation for it.

Van Horn (2024) provides a useful counterpoint. In his study with Korean university students, while most participants had positive overall perceptions of ChatGPT for language learning, not

all of them found the AI interaction helpful for building genuine communicative willingness. Some students found it hard to engage seriously with a conversation they knew was with a machine, which reduced how much effort they put in. Van Horn's view is that task design matters here: a task with a clear communicative purpose and a realistic scenario is more likely to build WTC than open-ended chatting without a specific goal.

4. LIMITATIONS OF THE CURRENT EVIDENCE

Before drawing out recommendations, it is worth acknowledging what the research does not yet tell us. One significant gap is time. Most of the studies reviewed here ran for four to twelve weeks, which is short relative to the timescale on which speaking development actually occurs. There is currently very little longitudinal data on whether gains from ChatGPT practice are maintained over months or years, or whether they hold up in high-stakes contexts such as oral examinations.

The geographical coverage of the research is also somewhat uneven. A large proportion of the empirical work comes from Chinese, Korean, and Middle Eastern university contexts. Southeast Asian EFL settings, including Vietnam, are represented - but less so than their actual share of the EFL learner population would justify. This is relevant because students from different educational systems and linguistic backgrounds may respond to AI-assisted practice in ways that do not map directly onto findings from other contexts.

There is also a measurement issue. Studies in this area use a wide range of outcome measures - standardized speaking tests in some cases, teacher ratings in others, and self-report questionnaires in many. This variation makes it difficult to compare findings across studies or draw conclusions about effect sizes.

Perhaps the most practically significant gap is the limited research on the teacher's role. Most studies give students access to ChatGPT and then measure outcomes, with little attention to how teacher guidance, task framing, or assessment design shapes the results. It seems quite likely that these factors matter considerably, but this area remains largely untested.

5. PEDAGOGICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Integrating ChatGPT as Pre-Class Preparation

One practical way to bring ChatGPT into a first-year speaking course is as preparation for in-class speaking, rather than as an activity that runs separately from classroom work. If students have a conversation with ChatGPT about a topic the night before a lesson, they arrive with vocabulary activated, ideas partially formed, and some experience of already having expressed those ideas in English. The in-class speaking task then feels less like starting from scratch, which may reduce the cognitive overload and anxiety that often silence students in early discussions. This can be structured as a simple homework task: talk with ChatGPT about the upcoming topic for ten minutes, and bring written notes about one or two things you found difficult to express.

5.2 Task Design as a Mediating Factor

Simply telling students to 'practice speaking with ChatGPT' is unlikely to produce much. Without a clear communicative goal, interactions tend to stay shallow - short answers, minimal effort, no real pressure to develop an idea. The evidence reviewed here, and Van Horn's (2024) findings on WTC in particular, suggests that the quality of engagement depends heavily on how the task is designed. Teachers should provide specific role-play prompts or communicative scenarios: a job interview, a debate on a social issue, a conversation with a visitor who needs help, or a negotiation between two people with differing views. These scenarios give the interaction a purpose and create the kind of communicative pressure that is more likely to produce real language learning.

5.3 The Role of Reflective Practice in Post-Interaction Learning

ChatGPT conversations produce a written transcript that students can look back on after the session. Asking students to review a transcript and identify two or three moments where they struggled - where they repeated the same word, used a vague expression because they lacked more specific vocabulary, or avoided a topic altogether - engages what the SLA literature calls noticing: conscious attention to a gap between what was said and what was intended (Schmidt, 1990, as cited in Van Horn, 2024). A short reflective journal entry submitted to the teacher each week can provide a useful picture of where individual

students are struggling, which is more feasible than trying to observe every student speak in a large class.

5.4 Bridging AI-Assisted Practice and Classroom Interaction

ChatGPT conversation does not replicate human interaction in all the ways that matter for speaking development. A classmate reacts unpredictably, gets confused, changes the subject, gives genuine communicative feedback - things ChatGPT does not fully provide. A three-stage structure can help make the transfer from AI practice to human interaction more explicit: in the first stage, students practice individually with ChatGPT before class; in the second stage, they bring their ideas into a pair or small group discussion, with encouragement to say things differently rather than repeat what they told the chatbot; in the third stage, a short whole-class discussion allows selected ideas to be shared more broadly, with the teacher providing feedback on language use.

5.5 Developing Learner Awareness of Tool Affordances and Limitations

First-year students often arrive with strong but not always accurate ideas about AI tools. Taking a few minutes at the start of term to explain what the tool can and cannot do - what it is useful for, where it falls short, why pronunciation feedback from it is unreliable - is likely to lead to more thoughtful and sustainable use than simply assigning it without explanation. This kind of critical awareness around AI tools is also increasingly relevant as a professional skill. Students in English-major programs go on to work as translators, teachers, and business communication specialists, and AI tools are already part of those professional environments.

5.6 Differentiating Practice Approaches Across Learner Profiles

Some students will not find ChatGPT useful for speaking practice, and this should be acknowledged rather than dismissed. Xiao & Zhi (2023) found that certain learners valued the tool for generating ideas or checking grammar but did not feel it helped them develop the spontaneous quality of real conversation. A portfolio approach - where students document their speaking practice in whatever form works for them, whether ChatGPT conversation, podcast shadowing, recorded speaking tasks, or peer

conversation - allows more autonomy and is likely to suit a diverse group of first-year students better than a single required method.

6. CONCLUSION

The evidence reviewed in this paper does not support either dismissing ChatGPT as a gimmick or treating it as a solution to the challenges of EFL speaking development. What it does support is a more cautious position: ChatGPT is a useful supplementary tool for speaking practice, particularly for learners who struggle with anxiety and have few opportunities to use English outside the classroom, but it works best when teachers give it structure, connect it to real communicative tasks, and treat it as preparation for human interaction rather than a replacement for it.

For first-year English-major students at schools of foreign languages, the tool may be particularly relevant. These students are at a transition point where the gap between what they are expected to do in class and what they feel capable of doing is often quite large. More practice time in a lower-stakes environment can help to close that gap. ChatGPT does not replace the teacher or the classroom, but in a context where per-student speaking time is severely limited, it extends what is available.

Several directions for future research would help strengthen the evidence base. Longer studies that follow students across a full academic year, research focusing specifically on first-year or lower-proficiency EFL populations, and studies that examine the role of teacher guidance and task design in shaping outcomes - all of these would help move the field from its current early findings toward more actionable conclusions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

[Authors may include acknowledgements here if applicable.]

REFERENCES

Article / Research Paper

- [1] Y. Chen, N. Ke, L. Huang, and R. Luo, "The role of GenAI in EFL speaking: Effects on oral proficiency, anxiety and risk-taking," *Language Teaching Research*, 2025.
- [2] J. Du and B. K. Daniel, "Transforming language education: A systematic review of AI-powered

chatbots for EFL speaking practice,” *Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence*, vol. 6, p. 100230, 2024.

[3] T. H. Duong and S. Suppasetsee, “EFL university students’ perceptions of ChatGPT as a speaking assistant,” *TESOL Journal*, vol. 15, no. 1, p. e12547, 2024.

[4] J. Fathi, M. Rahimi, and E. Naseri, “Investigating the role of AI-powered conversation bots in enhancing L2 speaking skills and reducing speaking anxiety,” *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 2025.

[5] N. T. T. Hang, P. T. M. Uyen, and H. T. L. Uyen, “Some difficulties in learning speaking of English majored freshmen at Tay Do University, in Vietnam,” *International Journal of Social Science and Education Research Studies*, vol. 3, no. 3, pp. 430–436, 2023.

[6] C. K. Lo et al., “Exploring the application of ChatGPT in ESL/EFL education: A systematic review,” *Smart Learning Environments*, vol. 11, Article 50, 2024.

[7] A. S. Nugroho et al., “The role of ChatGPT’s voice conversation feature in enhancing EFL students’ speaking confidence,” *ELTIN Journal*, 2025.

[8] J. Nuñez, S. Castillo, and L. Peña, “Enhancing speaking skills with AI voice chat: A Latin American university experience,” *CALICO Journal*, vol. 42, no. 1, pp. 22–40, 2025.

[9] Y. Ork, P. Chin, B. Thach, and E. Sereyath, “Factors causing students’ challenges in learning English speaking skills: A review,” *Cambodian Journal of Educational and Social Sciences*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2024.

[10] K. Phisutthangkoon, “Thai EFL university students’ beliefs in English-speaking fluency,” *rEFLections*, vol. 31, no. 2, pp. 478–500, 2024.

[11] S. Pratiwi, A. Hidayati, and R. Anindita, “From fear to fluency: Exploring the use of AI in reducing

EFL students’ speaking anxiety,” *Indonesian Journal of English Language Teaching*, vol. 19, no. 1, pp. 55–72, 2024.

[12] H. Safar and N. Anggraheni, “Evaluating ChatGPT’s effectiveness in promoting EFL speaking performance,” *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, vol. 62, p. 101256, 2024.

[13] R. Syaripuddin, “Enhancing EFL students’ oral proficiency: The ChatGPT-assisted debate clinic method,” *JELITA*, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 627–639, 2024.

[14] N. H. Trinh, “A study on the speaking problems of English-majored freshmen at HUIT,” *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature*, vol. 13, no. 12, pp. 1–10, 2025.

[15] K. R. Van Horn, “ChatGPT in English language learning: Exploring perceptions and promoting autonomy in a university EFL context,” *TESL-EJ*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2024.

[16] Y. Wang, “A study on the efficacy of ChatGPT-4 in enhancing students’ English communication skills,” *SAGE Open*, 2025.

[17] Y. Xiao and Y. Zhi, “An exploratory study of EFL learners’ use of ChatGPT for language learning tasks,” *Languages*, vol. 8, no. 3, p. 212, 2023.

APPENDIX

Sample Activity and Student Guidelines for ChatGPT-Assisted Speaking Practice

(For First-Year English-Major Students - Speaking Practice Course)

Activity Overview

This activity is called “The Interview Practice Cycle.” It is designed for a first-year speaking course at a school of foreign languages. The example topic is describing your hometown, which is common in early-semester speaking units. The structure can be adapted to any topic in the curriculum.

Activity name	The Interview Practice Cycle
Target learners	First-year English-major students (A2–B1 level)
Skills focus	Speaking: fluency, vocabulary, sustaining a conversation
Sample topic	Describing your hometown (Unit 1: “Where I Come From”)

Time required	15 min at home (night before) + 20 min in class
Tools needed	ChatGPT (free account), phone or computer, notebook

Stage 1 - At Home (15 minutes, the night before class)

Students open ChatGPT and start a role-play conversation using the prompt below. Voice mode should be used where possible - actually speaking rather than typing gives more authentic practice. The goal at this stage is practice, not performance.

Prompt to give ChatGPT (copy this exactly):

“You are a friendly international student who has never visited Vietnam before. You are curious about different places in Vietnam and want to learn more. Please interview me about my hometown. Ask about things like what the place is known for, what the food is like, what daily life is like there, and what I personally like or dislike about living there. Please ask one question at a time, wait for my answer, and if my answer is very short, ask me to say more. Let’s start!”

During the conversation, students should:

- Answer in complete sentences rather than single words or phrases
- Ask ChatGPT “How do I say...?” if they get stuck on a word, instead of switching to Vietnamese
- Keep going even after making a grammar mistake - do not stop and restart
- Aim to keep the conversation going for at least ten minutes

After the conversation, students fill in this reflection sheet to bring to class:

My Reflection Notes (to bring to class)

1. One thing I found difficult to say in English (a word, phrase, or idea):

→

2. One word or expression I learned or noticed during the conversation:

→

3. One thing I want to be able to say better next time:

→

Stage 2 - In Class (20 minutes)

This stage takes place at the beginning of the following class session and has three parts.

Part A - Partner talking (8 minutes)

Students work in pairs. Partner A has three minutes to describe their hometown to Partner B, who asks at least two follow-up questions. Then they swap roles. Students draw on vocabulary and ideas from their ChatGPT conversation but are encouraged to phrase things differently rather than repeat sentences word for word.

Part B - Sharing what was difficult (5 minutes)

Still in pairs, students share one item from their reflection notes: what was hard to say, and how did they handle it? The teacher circulates and listens without interrupting, noting common vocabulary gaps or structural problems to address in Part C.

Part C - Brief whole-class feedback (7 minutes)

Two or three students share something interesting about their hometown with the class - the point is sharing, not performing. The teacher then briefly addresses two or three of the most common language issues observed during Part A, providing model sentences or alternative expressions.

Teacher Notes

- When introducing this activity for the first time, explain briefly why students are doing Stage 1. The ChatGPT conversation is not graded, mistakes are expected, and the goal is simply to get more speaking time in English before class.
- Some students may type rather than speak during Stage 1. This is acceptable for very

anxious learners, but voice mode should be encouraged where possible.

- Collect reflection sheets at the end of class. These give the teacher a low-effort window into individual struggles without needing to observe every student speaking.
- The activity can run each week with a new topic. Over time, Stage 1 typically becomes faster and the quality of Stage 2 discussions improves noticeably.
- If a student cannot access ChatGPT due to internet or platform issues, they can complete Stage 1 by voice-messaging a classmate using the same questions.

Student Guidelines: How to Use ChatGPT for Speaking Practice

Before you start

1. Go to chatgpt.com or open the ChatGPT app. A free account is enough.
2. If possible, use the voice mode (microphone icon in the app). Speaking out loud is better practice than typing.
3. Copy the prompt your teacher gave you and paste it into the chat to set up the role-play.

During the conversation

1. Answer in full sentences. Instead of just saying “Ha Noi,” try “I am from Ha Noi, which is the capital of Vietnam.”
2. If you do not know a word, do not switch to Vietnamese. Ask ChatGPT: “How do I say [describe what you mean]?”
3. Do not stop and restart every time you make a mistake. Keep going and review the transcript afterwards.
4. Try asking a question back sometimes: “Have you heard of this city before?” It makes the conversation feel more natural.
5. Aim for at least ten minutes. If it ends too quickly, ask ChatGPT to ask harder or more detailed questions.

After the conversation

1. Scroll back through the transcript. Find one place where you said something unclearly.
2. Ask ChatGPT: “In this part of our conversation I said [your sentence]. How could I say this better?”

3. Fill in your reflection sheet and bring it to class.

What ChatGPT is useful for

1. Giving you more speaking time in English than class alone can provide
2. Helping you find words and phrases for topics before you need them in class
3. Responding patiently - it will not react negatively to your mistakes
4. Being available any time, including the night before class

What ChatGPT is not reliable for

1. Pronunciation feedback - it cannot tell you whether your sounds are correct
2. Replacing real conversation with a person, which is more unpredictable and realistic
3. Always giving correct grammar - ChatGPT makes mistakes too

A final note: ChatGPT is a practice partner, not a teacher. The aim is not to impress it. The aim is to use English as much as possible before class, so that class feels a little easier and you feel a little more ready to speak.