



Lower Evaluative Pressure but Context-Dependent Confidence: Indonesian EFL Students' Experiences of AI-Mediated Speaking Practice

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – This study explores how Indonesian EFL students experience evaluative conditions during AI-mediated speaking practice, utilize feedback and repeated practice opportunities, and perceive the transfer of comfort and confidence from AI interactions to communication with humans.

Methodology – This interpretive qualitative study involved 12 Indonesian EFL students who completed eight weeks of self-directed speaking practice using ChatGPT. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically. Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE) and the technology affordance perspective served as sensitizing concepts rather than predefined coding categories.

Findings – Four themes emerged: reduced evaluative pressure; feedback and repeated practice as learning affordances; context-dependent self-confidence and uneven transfer; and heterogeneity in learner responses. AI provides relatively lower interpersonal pressure, but learners differ in how they utilize its affordances, and confidence does not consistently transfer to human communication.

Novelty – The study distinguishes reduced evaluative pressure, affordance uptake, and cross-context confidence transfer as interrelated yet distinct processes.

Significance – AI is best positioned as a low-risk practice environment that complements rather than replaces human interaction. Pedagogical designs should explicitly bridge AI-mediated practice with communication among peers, instructors, and real audiences.

Keywords: AI-mediated speaking; EFL speaking; Fear of negative evaluation; Learner confidence; Technology affordance.

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1. Introduction

Speaking in a foreign language is an emotionally demanding activity because learners must produce language in real time while simultaneously demonstrating their linguistic abilities to others. Errors in grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, or fluency therefore not only have linguistic consequences but can also have social consequences when learners anticipate evaluation by instructors or peers. In foreign language anxiety, the fear of negative evaluation is a key dimension, as anxiety can stem from concerns about how others assess one's language performance (Horwitz et al., 1986; Patria et al., 2023). The interactional context in which speaking activities take place can also influence this experience. (Aldukhayel & Namaziandost, 2022; Fakhruddin et al., 2023; Rismayani et al., 2024), for example, found differences in anxiety levels between online and face-to-face presentations, while (Susoy, 2026) demonstrated that anxiety is negatively correlated with performance in human-facilitated speaking assessments, but this relationship was not observed when the assessment was AI-facilitated. These findings indicate that speaking anxiety is related not only to linguistic ability but also to the interactional context and evaluative conditions in which speaking performance takes place. Recent Indonesian evidence similarly shows that fear of negative evaluation remains salient in EFL speaking situations (Basith et al., 2025; Pravitasari et al., 2024).

Advances in conversational generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) have created a different speaking environment in which learners can practice, receive feedback, repeat utterances, and manage practice without the direct presence of a human interlocutor. Recent studies suggest that such environments may reduce perceived judgment and support psychological safety, repeated practice, and independent engagement (Abdelrady et al., 2026; Aldamen et al., 2026; Ding & Yusof, 2025; Noe et al., 2025; Qu & Chen, 2026; Yan et al., 2026). These findings suggest that the potential value of AI-mediated speaking lies not only in increasing opportunities to speak but also in altering the conditions under which learners experience errors, feedback, and practice.

Reviews of AI-supported language learning similarly identify flexible practice, immediate feedback, and reduced speaking anxiety as recurring benefits, alongside constraints such as speech-recognition problems, cognitive demands, and limited human interaction (Du & Daniel, 2024; L. Huang & Liu, 2025; Li et al., 2026; Wiboolyarsarin et al., 2025). These mixed findings caution against treating AI as a technology that uniformly produces affective benefits; learner experiences remain shaped by how technological possibilities are encountered and used in particular contexts (Y. Huang & Kakham, 2026; Zhang & Liu, 2025; Nurpratiwi, 2024).

The affordance perspective helps explain these variations. Learning opportunities are not automatically inherent in a technology's features but emerge through the interplay between the technology's characteristics, the learner, and the context of its use. Consequently, the same features may be perceived and utilized differently by different learners (Butler & Jiang, 2025; Zhong et al., 2025). This distinction is important in AI-mediated speaking because the availability of feedback, opportunities to repeat, and flexible access to practice do not in and of themselves mean that every learner will use them to make corrections, increase the frequency of practice, or build self-confidence. In other words, technological availability is not synonymous with affordance uptake or learner outcomes. Recent evidence likewise suggests that the effects of AI affordances on speaking depend on how learners engage with and act on the opportunities available to them (L. Huang & Liu, 2025; Wu & Liu, 2025).

Despite growing evidence that AI-mediated speaking can provide a relatively non-judgmental environment, immediate feedback, repeated practice, and greater confidence, two issues remain insufficiently understood. First, previous research often reports reduced anxiety or increased

confidence as general affective outcomes without clearly distinguishing confidence experienced during AI interaction from confidence that transfers to human-mediated speaking contexts (Ballidağ & Aydin, 2026; Soriano-Gonzalez & Belda-Medina, 2026). Although emerging research has begun to examine mechanisms underlying effective GenAI-supported speaking practice (Wu & Liu, 2025), less is known about how individual learners take up specific affordances and how this uptake intersects with reduced evaluative pressure and cross-context confidence transfer (Butler & Jiang, 2025; Du & Daniel, 2024). As a result, it remains unclear how the reduction in evaluative pressure, the utilization of affordances, and the transfer of confidence across contexts are interrelated in learners' real-world experiences. This study addresses this gap by qualitatively tracing these processes in the same students after they underwent sustained AI-mediated speaking practice, while explicitly examining variations and edge cases, rather than assuming uniform benefits.

Accordingly, this study explores the experiences of Indonesian EFL students after eight weeks of AI-mediated independent speaking practice. Rather than assuming that AI directly reduces anxiety or boosts self-confidence, this study examines how learners experience evaluation and errors, respond to feedback, and take advantage of opportunities for repeated practice, as well as how they perceive the transfer of that sense of comfort or self-confidence into human-mediated communication. This study addresses the following research question: How do Indonesian EFL students experience AI-mediated speaking practice, and what features of that experience shape their perceptions of comfort and self-confidence?

2. Conceptual Framework

This study employed two complementary perspectives to understand students' experiences in AI-mediated speaking practice. The first perspective is used to understand why a shift in the interlocutor from a human to an AI can alter the evaluative experience during speaking, and the second perspective is used to explain how the possibilities for action provided by AI—such as receiving feedback, repeating utterances, and practicing flexibly—are perceived and utilized differently by learners. These two perspectives are not used to test causal relationships but rather as sensitizing concepts to interpret participants' experiences and the variations that emerge in the data.

2.1. Fear of Negative Evaluation and Evaluative Conditions in Speaking

Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE) refers to learners' concern that their language performance may be negatively evaluated by others, and this is particularly pronounced in speaking activities, where linguistic errors can be openly observed (Horwitz et al., 1986) (Horwitz et al., 1986; Zhong et al., 2025). Empirical research has linked FNE to anxiety and participation in oral communication, including in the context of speaking English as a foreign language (EFL) in Indonesia (Basith et al., 2025; Wardhani, 2019). Because evaluative pressure depends in part on who is present and how errors are socially interpreted, FNE provides a useful lens for examining why speaking with an AI might feel different from speaking with a human interlocutor.

This study does not assume that interacting with AI can eliminate anxiety. Rather, FNE is used to examine whether changes in the conversation partner influence perceptions of the interpersonal consequences of mistakes made. Learners may feel more comfortable during AI-mediated practice because direct human evaluation is reduced, but this comfort may not last when they return to speaking situations where social evaluation reemerges (Soriano-Gonzalez & Belda-Medina, 2026; Susoy, 2026). The analysis therefore focuses on four related issues: changes in evaluative conditions, perceived affordances, affordance uptake through learner action, and the extent to which perceived comfort or confidence transfers to communication with humans.

2.2. Technology Affordance and Affordance Uptake

The technology affordance perspective allows AI to be understood not merely based on its features, but based on the possibilities for action that arise from the relationship between technology, users, and the context of use. Butler & Jiang (2025) emphasize that affordance does not reside exclusively in technology or in individual perception, but emerges from the relationship between objects, actors, and the environment. Thus, the same technological characteristics can be perceived and utilized differently by different users. Zhong et al. (2025) expand on this relational view through a socio-ecological perspective by demonstrating that the use of generative AI in education produces both affordances and constraints that are shaped through the interaction between technological characteristics, users, and the educational environment.

In AI-mediated speaking, this perspective is important because technological features do not automatically lead to learning actions or outcomes. A review by (Du & Daniel, 2024) shows that chatbots can provide opportunities for interaction, speaking practice, and feedback, but the reported forms of use and outcomes vary depending on the design and learning context. Similarly, Wiboolyasarin (2025) identified immediate feedback and practice opportunities as benefits of AI chatbots, but also found constraints such as speech recognition issues and limited human interaction. AI-mediated speaking is therefore best understood as a configuration of affordances and constraints, rather than a set of features that uniformly produce benefits.

The distinction between the availability of technology and its utilization becomes important at the learner level. AI's ability to provide feedback, for example, only gains pedagogical significance when learners recognize that feedback as something they can use and act upon through noticing, repair, or retry. Similarly, flexible access opens up possibilities for additional practice but does not guarantee that every learner will take advantage of it. Abdelrady et al. (2026) show that participants value immediate feedback and the opportunity to retry, while some participants also extend their practice beyond the minimum required duration. Therefore, this study analytically distinguishes between affordance perception—the possibilities for action recognized by learners—and affordance uptake—how those possibilities are realized in action. This distinction allows the analysis to avoid conflating technological availability, learner uptake, and learner outcomes (Butler & Jiang, 2025; Zhong et al., 2025).

2.3. Integrating FNE and Affordance Perspectives

FNE and the affordance perspective highlight complementary dimensions in AI-mediated speaking activities. FNE explains how the speaking experience is influenced by the possibility of negative evaluation, while the affordance perspective explains how learners perceive and respond to opportunities such as feedback, chances to try again, and flexible practice (Butler & Jiang, 2025; Horwitz et al., 1986; Zhong et al., 2025). This integration allows AI-mediated conversations to be examined not merely as a less judgmental environment, but as an interactional context in which shifting evaluative conditions can influence how learners engage with available learning opportunities. This integration is used as an interpretive framework, not as a causal model.

This framework further distinguishes proximal affective experiences from cross-context transfer. Learners may feel more comfortable or confident during AI-mediated practice because interpersonal evaluation is reduced, but this experience may not persist when they return to human-mediated speaking contexts where social evaluation reemerges (Soriano-Gonzalez & Belda-Medina, 2026; Susoy, 2026). Therefore, this analysis focuses on changes in evaluative conditions, perceived affordances, the utilization of affordances through learners' actions, and the extent to which the sense of comfort or self-confidence they experience can be transferred to communication with other people.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design and Context

This study employed an interpretive qualitative design to explore EFL students' experiences during AI-mediated autonomous speaking practice, focusing on evaluative pressure, the use of feedback and repeated practice, and changes in their perceived comfort and self-confidence. This approach was chosen because the study does not aim to measure the magnitude of the intervention's effects, but rather to understand how participants interpret their experiences speaking with AI and why these experiences may vary across individuals.

The study was conducted among students in the English Language and Literature program at a university in Indonesia and constitutes the qualitative component of a broader study on AI-mediated speaking practice. This article specifically analyzed participants' experiences based on interview data, while the quantitative results of the broader study fall outside the analytical scope of this article.

3.2. Participants

The interview participants consisted of 12 students from the experimental group who had participated in the AI-mediated speaking practice program. They were purposively selected to represent a range of posttest speaking anxiety levels—high (4), moderate (4), and low (4)—so that the analysis could capture diverse experiences following the intervention. All identities were anonymized and reported using the codes Informant 1–Informant 12.

Participation was voluntary. Prior to data collection, the students were informed about the research objectives and procedures, as well as the use of data for research purposes. Informed consent was obtained from the participants, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout data processing and reporting.

3.3. AI-Mediated Autonomous Speaking Practice

Participants used ChatGPT as a conversational AI to practice speaking English on their own. ChatGPT was chosen because it is already familiar to students and allows for flexible conversational interaction and individual practice. The program ran for two months (eight weeks) with a minimum of three sessions per week, each lasting approximately 15–30 minutes. Thus, each participant was expected to complete at least 24 sessions during the intervention period. In each session, students interacted with ChatGPT in English to practice speaking and could use the responses or feedback provided to improve their speech and try again. A minimum number of sessions was set to ensure consistent exposure, but students were allowed to do additional practice outside of the scheduled sessions.

3.4. Data Collection

Data were collected primarily through semi-structured interviews conducted after the program. A total of 15 questions were organized into five chronological areas covering speaking experiences prior to using AI, experiences interacting with AI, perceived changes, learning practices during the program, and participants' reflections on those experiences. The semi-structured format allowed for follow-up questions to be used to clarify and explore experiences relevant to the research focus in greater depth.

The interviews were conducted by research assistants who were not involved in the participants' instruction or academic evaluation. This procedure was adopted because the principal investigator had an academic relationship with the students, and his involvement as an interviewer could potentially influence the openness of their responses. The use of research assistants was intended to reduce power asymmetry, the potential for social desirability, and researcher influence, as well as to provide space for participants to express positive, negative, or ambivalent experiences regarding the practice of conversing with AI. The research assistants used the same interview guide

for all participants and could ask follow-up questions when necessary to clarify or explore responses further.

The interviews were conducted in Indonesian and lasted approximately 20–30 minutes, allowing participants to articulate their experiences and affective responses more freely. With the participants' consent, the interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed. Eleven interview sessions yielded data from 12 informants, as two participants were interviewed simultaneously due to scheduling constraints. All identities were anonymized using the codes Informant 1–Informant 12. For reporting in this English-language manuscript, selected quotes were translated using DeepL and then cross-checked by the researcher against the original statements to ensure equivalence of meaning.

3.5. Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

The data were analyzed thematically through an iterative process informed by (Braun & Clarke, 2006), including repeated readings of the transcripts, initial coding, focused coding, cross-case comparison, and the development and refinement of themes. Coding began with the complete transcripts of each participant and was guided by the research questions (RQs), but themes were not predetermined based on a conceptual framework. FNE and the affordance perspective were used as sensitizing concepts during the interpretation phase, rather than as coding categories imposed on the data. Thus, theme formation remained rooted in the participants' experiences, while these two perspectives were used to help explain the patterns identified.

After initial coding, the relevant codes were consolidated through focused coding and examined using a cross-case thematic matrix across all 12 participants. Each candidate theme was examined across cases for supporting, contradictory, and absent evidence. This procedure yielded four final themes and allowed deviant or boundary cases to be retained as part of the analysis, rather than excluded for not conforming to dominant patterns. Representative quotes were then selected to illustrate both the main patterns and the variations that qualify the interpretation of each theme.

The credibility of the analysis was strengthened through re-reading the transcripts, examining the connections between raw data, codes, and themes, conducting systematic cross-participant comparisons, and actively seeking disconfirming evidence. Research assistants who had no role in teaching or evaluating the participants were also used as interviewers to reduce the potential influence of the instructor–student relationship on the openness of the responses. The analytical trail was maintained from raw quotes through initial codes, focused codes, and final themes so that interpretive claims can be traced back to the data.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis generated four interrelated themes: (1) a reduction in evaluative pressure when speaking with AI; (2) feedback and repeated practice as learning affordances; (3) context-dependent confidence and transfer that has not yet fully occurred; and (4) heterogeneity in learner responses and the boundary conditions of AI use. Overall, the data do not indicate that AI automatically eliminates speaking anxiety. Rather, AI primarily alters the interactional conditions in which practice takes place: mistakes can be made with relatively lower interpersonal consequences, feedback can be obtained immediately, and students can try again without waiting for the next classroom interaction. However, these affordances are not utilized in the same way by all informants, and the self-confidence developed during interactions with AI does not always fully transfer to communication situations with humans.

4.1. Theme 1. Reduced Evaluative Pressure in Conversations with AI

The most prominent affective pattern relates to a reduced sense of being evaluated when students interact with AI. Before the program, several informants linked their difficulty speaking not only to

grammar, vocabulary, or pronunciation, but also to the possibility of receiving negative evaluations from instructors and peers. Informant 2, for example, explicitly distinguished between the pressure of speaking in front of peers and the pressure felt when their performance could be evaluated by instructors. Informant 6 also expressed concern that peers might judge their grammar and vocabulary, as well as the possibility of receiving criticism from instructors. This pattern suggests that linguistic errors take on a social dimension when made in front of others.

That situation changed when the interlocutor was an AI. Informant 6 provided the clearest example. At the beginning of the program, she wasn't very interested in the exercises and described her participation as something she felt relatively forced to do. Around the fourth or fifth week, she recalled the AI responding to a grammatical error: "It's okay... what matters is that you tried." Such responses did not make the errors disappear, but they changed how those errors were experienced: corrections were no longer directly associated with feelings of embarrassment or the threat of social judgment. Informant 7 also linked the reduction in anxiety to the experience of receiving corrections without feeling judged, while Informant 5 found practicing with the AI more comfortable because no one was directly judging their performance.

These findings suggest that a key affordance of AI is not merely its ability to provide feedback, but its ability to provide feedback in an interpersonal context that differs from that of a classroom setting. Errors are still identified and corrected, but this is not always accompanied by feelings of embarrassment, loss of face, or concern about others' judgments. In other words, AI appears to reduce the interpersonal cost of error. This distinction is important because a learner may respond differently to the same linguistic error depending on the context of the correction. Private corrections by AI and corrections in the presence of an instructor or classmates may convey similar linguistic information, but they do not always carry the same affective consequences.

These findings are consistent with recent research showing that speaking with the aid of AI can reduce perceived social evaluative pressure and provide a psychologically safer environment for speaking practice (Bhar, 2026; Ding & Yusof, 2025; Qu & Chen, 2026; Rizal, 2025). The current findings refine this interpretation by suggesting that the affective benefits do not lie in the elimination of speaking difficulties, but rather in the reduction of interpersonal costs associated with making and correcting errors.

However, the data from this study do not support the term "anxiety-free environment." Some participants still experienced linguistic issues, uncertainty, or even technical difficulties. What is clearer is the reduction in perceived interpersonal evaluation during practice with AI. More importantly, the data indicate why this comfort may arise: AI changes the social conditions under which errors are produced and corrected. Students can try, fail, accept corrections, and try again without simultaneously having to manage interpersonal reactions from a human audience.

4.2. Theme 2. Feedback and Repeated Practice as Learning Affordances

The reduction in evaluative pressure does not stand alone as a source of positive experiences for participants. The second theme indicates that this condition becomes significant when combined with opportunities to receive feedback and engage in repeated practice. The majority of informants identified feedback or corrections—particularly regarding grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and word choice—as one of the most helpful aspects of AI, while some informants placed greater emphasis on increasing the frequency and consistency of practice.

Informant 1 provided one of the clearest examples of behavioral change. Before the program, she described her study habits by saying, "I never practiced, you know—I never practiced." After participating in the program and beginning to feel its benefits, she practiced outside of the scheduled times and even practiced every day during her days off for a certain period because she began to

“feel the impact.” Informant 9 also held additional sessions to explore other topics, while Informants 4 and 11 used AI outside of the scheduled practice sessions when they needed extra practice.

Informant 8 demonstrated a more active use of feedback. After the AI corrected the grammar, he did not simply accept the correction but opened the grammar book again to check the correct form. In this case, the AI’s feedback served as a trigger for noticing, self-checking, and self-repair, rather than merely corrective information received passively. When viewed at the micro level, the data reveal a recursive process: students speak, receive feedback, recognize their mistakes, make corrections, and then try again. The next attempt may then generate new feedback, causing the process to repeat itself. Thus, feedback is not merely an assessment of whether a statement is right or wrong, but rather a part of a feedback–practice cycle. On a broader level, this cycle appears to occur under specific affective conditions. When interpersonal evaluative pressure is lower, students can receive feedback without simultaneously having to manage the same concerns about human judgment. Feedback can then be immediately followed by an opportunity to try again, and the repetition of this process enables the development of more sustained practice. The relationship between these micro-processes and broader conditions is illustrated in Figure 1.

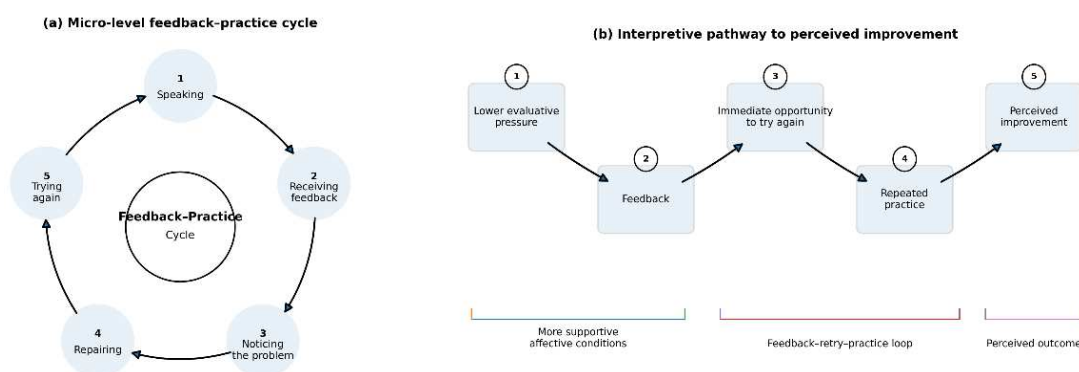


Figure 1. Feedback, Repeated Practice, and Perceived Improvement in AI-Mediated Speaking

Note: Panel (a) represents the recursive feedback-practice process; panel (b) represents a data-grounded interpretive pathway, not a tested causal model

Panel (a) illustrates the recursive feedback–practice cycle at the micro level, whereas Panel (b) situates this cycle within a broader interpretive pathway linking lower evaluative pressure, feedback, repeated practice, and perceived improvement. This interpretation is consistent with (2024), who identified conversational partnership, language coaching, speaking practice, and support for self-regulation as some of the affordances of AI in English language learning. Al-khresheh & Alruwaili (2026); Rizal (2025) also similarly show that immediate feedback can support error identification, correction, and more independent practice. Bhar (2026) identifies immediacy, repeatability, and consistency as important characteristics of feedback in AI-mediated speaking, although AI’s capabilities are more consistent in aspects that are relatively easy to identify computationally than in more complex aspects of communication.

However, the availability of feedback and the opportunity to retry do not mean that all students utilize them in the same way. Butler & Jiang (2025) emphasize that affordance is not merely a property of technology, but emerges through the relationship between technology, users, and context; the same feature can therefore be perceived and used differently by different users. Zhong et al. (2025) also define affordance as the relationship between the characteristics of technology and the characteristics of the actor that enables specific forms of action. The data from this study concretely illustrate these differences. All informants had access to a relatively similar AI-mediated

speaking program, but not all of them participated in additional sessions, utilized feedback for self-repair, or demonstrated the same level of engagement. Therefore, technological availability is not synonymous with affordance uptake.

These findings complement previous research on AI-supported feedback by demonstrating that its pedagogical value depends on the level of engagement by learners. Recent studies also indicate that conversational AI can support speaking engagement through feedback, repeated production, and learner-controlled practice (Al-Khresheh & Alruwaili, 2026; L. Huang & Liu, 2025; Wu & Liu, 2025), but current data suggest that these opportunities only become meaningful when learners follow up on them through noticing, repair, retry, or additional practice.

4.3. Theme 3. Context-Dependent Confidence and Uneven Transfer

The third theme indicates that increases in self-confidence do not follow the same pattern among all students. Informant 11 explicitly stated that they felt more confident speaking with an AI than with other people because interactions with the AI felt more relaxed and casual. Informant 5 showed a similar pattern: they became more comfortable and gradually more confident when speaking with the AI, but still felt hesitant in class due to concerns about grammatical errors. Informant 1 and Informant 2 showed partial changes. They reported that their nervousness had decreased and that AI practice made speaking more comfortable, but the pressure when giving presentations or speaking in front of the class had not completely disappeared. Informant 4 also felt an increase in confidence but still experienced presentation anxiety to a certain extent. On the other hand, some informants showed signs that the changes were beginning to extend to human communication. Informant 6 reported becoming bolder in responding in class and being able to improvise more during presentations. Informant 8, who had previously been very reluctant to speak, also began to respond more boldly to the instructor and classmates during classroom interactions. This cross-case analysis reveals at least four main trajectories of experience, as illustrated in the following table:

Table 1. Perceived Confidence Transfer across Speaking Contexts

Trajectory	Description	Representative informants
AI-bounded confidence	Confidence primarily evident during interaction with AI	Informant 5, Informant 11
Limited transfer	Some perceived improvement beyond AI-mediated interaction, but evaluative concerns remained	Informant 1, Informant 2, Informant 4
Stronger perceived transfer	Greater confidence reported in classroom or human interaction	Informant 6, Informant 8
Minimal perceived change	Little perceived change across contexts	Informant 12

This pattern suggests that confidence is situated or context-dependent. Practice with AI may enhance students' perceived readiness, but its interactional conditions differ from those of human communication. Audience visibility, instructor evaluation, peer comparison, and real-time interpersonal consequences—largely reduced during AI interaction—reemerge when students return to the classroom. Bhar (2026) similarly reports consistent affective benefits across AI-mediated speaking studies while noting more variable evidence for higher-order communicative development. In the present data, this distinction was reflected in the uneven transfer of confidence from AI-mediated practice to human interaction. Recent evidence similarly cautions against assuming that affective benefits associated with AI-mediated speaking generalize uniformly across learners or speaking contexts (Y. Huang & Kakham, 2026).

These trajectories point to an important distinction between proximal affective benefit and cross-context transfer. The former refers to the comfort and confidence that arise within or near the AI practice environment. The latter requires that these changes persist when students return to human communication situations with higher social demands.

4.4. Theme 4. Heterogeneity of Learner Responses and Boundary Conditions

The final theme suggests that relatively similar technological affordances do not result in the same experiences. Some informants reported significant changes in confidence, vocabulary, fluency, and practice habits, while others reported only partial or minimal changes.

Informant 12 is the most obvious outlier in the data. The participant stated that AI “doesn’t really help much... it just covers some vocabulary I already know.” Unlike many other informants, this participant also reported no substantial change in practice patterns beyond the required activities. Rather than contradicting the broader pattern, this case defines an important boundary condition: access to a relatively nonjudgmental environment and rapid feedback did not necessarily result in sustained engagement or perceived affective change. This boundary case is consistent with evidence that positive responses to ChatGPT are not uniform across learners and speaking-anxiety profiles (Yasar-Karagucuk & Karagucuk, 2026).

Other participants faced different constraints. Informant 5 reported that the AI sometimes interrupted the conversation and steered it in a different direction, making the interaction feel less connected. Informant 1 also initially felt that interacting with the AI could be more difficult than interacting with a human because intentions had to be explained more explicitly. Informant 9 and Informant 8 described the early stages of interaction as awkward or not entirely easy to navigate. These experiences align with research showing that AI-mediated interaction may be constrained by technological and speech-recognition limitations (Crompton et al., 2024; Jeon et al., 2024).

Zhong et al. (2025) provide a sound conceptual framework for explaining these patterns. Affordances and constraints emerge through the relationship between users, technology, and the educational environment, rather than solely from the characteristics of the technology itself. Butler & Jiang (2025) further demonstrate that users may perceive the affordances and limitations of ChatGPT differently, reinforcing the relational nature of technology affordance. The same AI can serve as (1) a safe speaking partner for one student, (2) a catalyst for intensive practice for another student, (3) a source of feedback for a subsequent participant, or simply (4) a limited additional source of vocabulary for yet another participant. Thus, exposure to AI alone is not a mechanism for change. What is more relevant is how learners perceive and actualize the possibilities for action that the technology provides.

4.5. Cross-Thematic Synthesis

Together, these four themes indicate that the affective benefits of AI-mediated speaking practice arise from the interaction between social conditions, technological affordances, and learner actions. When speaking with humans, some participants face the possibility of evaluation by instructors, peer judgment, embarrassment, or anxiety about making mistakes. AI mitigates some of these interpersonal conditions. Mistakes can then be made at a lower social cost. Feedback allows students to identify areas for improvement, while the opportunity to try again transforms feedback into repeated practice. For some participants, this practice led to perceived improvement and increased confidence. However, when students returned to human-mediated speaking situations, some of the evaluative pressure resurfaced. As a result, confidence followed varying trajectories.

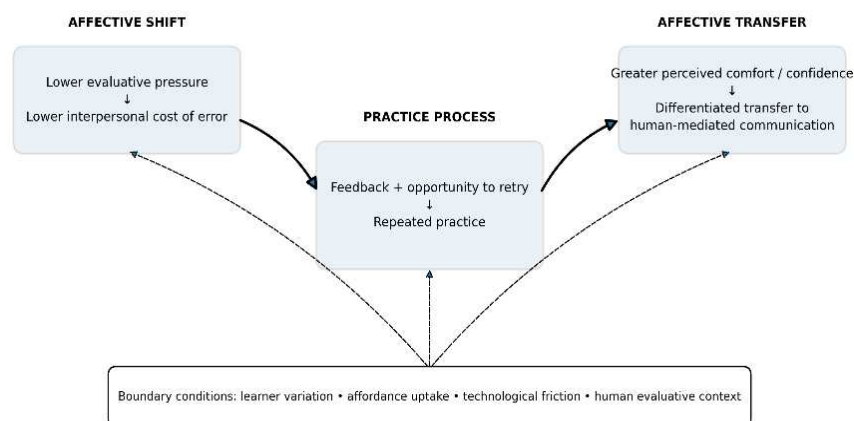


Figure 2. Cross-Theme Interpretation of AI-Mediated Speaking Experience

Note: The figure presents a data-grounded interpretive pathway rather than a tested causal model.

Previous research has consistently identified speaking opportunities, immediate feedback, relatively nonjudgmental interaction, and support for confidence and self-directed practice as potential benefits of AI-mediated language learning (Bhar, 2026; Crompton et al., 2024; Rizal, 2025). Affordance literature has also shown that technology does not produce outcomes directly, as different users may perceive and actualize the technology's possibilities differently (Butler & Jiang, 2025; Zhong et al., 2025). This study connects these two bodies of literature by highlighting a more specific process in the context of speaking: AI-mediated speaking can provide proximal affective support by reducing evaluative pressure and enabling a feedback–retry–practice cycle; however, the actualization of affordances and the transfer of confidence to human-mediated speaking remain learner- and context-dependent.

This study contributes to previous research in three ways. First, it does not merely describe AI-mediated speaking activities as a judgment-free environment, but rather demonstrates how reduced evaluative pressure can transform the interpersonal experience of making and correcting errors. Second, this study distinguishes between the availability of AI affordances and their actual utilization, showing that feedback and opportunities to repeat become pedagogically meaningful only when learners act on them through a process of awareness, correction, retrying, or additional practice. Third, this study shows that the self-confidence developed during AI-mediated interactions depends on the context and may follow different trajectories when learners return to human-mediated speaking situations. Overall, these findings shift the explanation of AI-mediated speaking benefits from what the technology provides to how evaluative conditions, affordance uptake, and interactional context jointly shape learners' experiences. This process-oriented interpretation extends recent mechanism- and affordance-oriented research by showing that learner uptake is embedded within evaluative conditions and should be distinguished from the subsequent transfer of confidence to human-mediated speaking (L. Huang & Liu, 2025; Wu & Liu, 2025).

5. Conclusions

This study explores the experiences of Indonesian EFL students in AI-mediated speaking practice, as well as the aspects of those experiences that shape their comfort and confidence. The findings indicate that ChatGPT primarily provides a practice environment with lower interpersonal evaluative pressure, allowing students to make mistakes, receive feedback, revise their responses, and try again without the same concerns about human judgment. However, these benefits do not manifest

uniformly. Students differ in how they recognize and utilize feedback and opportunities for repeated practice, and the comfort or confidence developed when interacting with AI does not always fully transfer to situations involving human conversation partners. By integrating the perspectives of fear of negative evaluation and technology affordance, this study demonstrates that reduced evaluative pressure, affordance uptake, and cross-context confidence transfer are interrelated but distinct processes.

From a pedagogical perspective, ChatGPT is therefore best positioned as a low-risk practice environment that complements—rather than replaces—human interaction. Practicing with AI can provide an initial stage for making mistakes, receiving feedback, and practicing repeatedly before students gradually move toward interactions with peers, instructors, and real audiences. However, since this study is based on the experiences of 12 students within a single higher education context and uses interview data to understand perceived changes, the findings are not intended to indicate causal relationships or be broadly generalized. Future research should involve more diverse contexts and participants and combine interviews with behavioral data or interaction logs to examine how patterns of AI use and the design of the AI-to-human speaking practice transition influence the transfer of comfort and confidence to communication with humans.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that they have no conflict of interest related to the conduct, authorship, or publication of this study.

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