

Chapter 26

From Silent Learners to Confident Speakers: Practical AI-Supported Solutions for EFL Speaking Classrooms

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A. THE CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGE

Speaking is an essential part of learning in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, but gaining students' participation through speaking can be challenging. Students may hear, or at least respond to, instructions, but they may not actively participate in communication. Learning to communicate with others includes more than vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and fluency. MacIntyre et al. (1998) identified willingness to communicate (WTC) as the ability to communicate with specific people in specific situations. Learning English does not always guarantee use of the language. Silence in EFL classrooms may reflect fluctuations in WTC, anxiety, low confidence, fear of negative evaluation, and concerns about speaking (Maher & King, 2022; Sato, 2024). Limited proficiency, fear of failure, peer reactions, and teacher expectations may also contribute to learners' reluctance to participate.

In speaking classrooms, students need not only to answer teachers' questions but also to initiate conversations, express and negotiate meaning, listen actively, and sustain interaction. Maher and King (2022) found that classroom silence does not automatically indicate speaking anxiety; learners may fear judgment, doubt their proficiency, and withdraw. Silence should not simply be viewed as laziness because it may have communicative, emotional, linguistic, and contextual meanings (Sato, 2024). Nevertheless, persistent avoidance reduces opportunities for spontaneous practice. Recent literature identifies low self-confidence, fear of mistakes, limited proficiency, and fear of negative evaluation as factors associated with EFL speaking anxiety, while repeated practice and technology-assisted learning may provide support (Maher & King, 2022; Sato, 2024; Du & Daniel, 2024).

Artificial intelligence (AI) offers new possibilities for addressing this challenge. AI chatbots, conversational agents, speech-recognition tools, and generative AI can provide low-pressure opportunities for students to practice speaking, develop ideas, and receive feedback. Du and Daniel (2024) found that AI-powered chatbots can support speaking practice, confidence, motivation, pronunciation, and aspects of speaking anxiety. Similarly, AI-mediated interaction can improve speaking performance and WTC (Fathi et al., 2024). However, AI should complement rather than replace human communication. Crompton et al. (2024) highlight both the affordances and limitations of AI, while Wang et al. (2024) show that different AI environments may produce different effects on WTC. Therefore, the key challenge is to use AI to move learners from silence and teacher-dependent responses toward confidence, learner-initiated speaking, peer interaction, and authentic communication.

B. THE PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS

Learning to support silent or reluctant EFL learners requires more than asking them to speak English. Learners need opportunities to practice communication, build confidence, and initiate interaction. AI technologies can provide rehearsal, language support, and low-pressure speaking practice. Research indicates that AI-supported

speaking activities can improve speaking performance and willingness to communicate while reducing aspects of foreign language anxiety (Fathi et al., 2024; Du & Daniel, 2024). However, AI should complement, not replace, classroom interaction (Fajaria et al., 2026). Teachers should use AI to scaffold preparation before peer communication. The following four solutions provide a pathway from silent participation to confident, self-initiated, and meaningful speaking.

Creating a Low-Pressure Speaking Space Through AI

First, offer them a low-pressure environment for speaking practice. For students who are afraid to speak in front of classmates, being asked to answer a question within seconds and in front of the entire class is not an easy task. Some may be worried about spelling mistakes, pronunciation problems, limited vocabulary, or being judged negatively by others (Islamiah & Hasbi, 2024). Maher and King (2022) suggest that silence and speaking anxiety can coexist, where anxiety about how they will be judged contributes to doubt and reduced participation.

Conversational tools with AI can offer a comfortable space in between thinking quietly and speaking publicly. Students can use an AI chatbot or voice-based AI application first to answer a question about a topic they are familiar with. Before talking about “The most important skill for university students,” students could ask AI to provide three questions, useful expressions, or words related to the topic. They could then practice answering the questions orally before speaking to their classmates.

The sequence can be deliberately simple:

AI Prompt → Individual Rehearsal → Oral Response → Feedback → Revision

AI should not have a solution that fits perfectly for the student. Rather, students should be encouraged to use AI to come up with their own ideas and practice speaking them. To sum it up, research has found that AI chatbots offer opportunities for speaking practice, may increase confidence, engagement, pronunciation, and reduce speaking

anxiety, but the field is still evolving and needing intentional design (Du & Daniel, 2024). AI can function as a safe first audience for a student who may not wish to speak in front of twenty or thirty classmates.

Moving from AI Practice to Pair Interaction

Another strategy is to follow up AI-supported practice with peer conversations. After a quick AI practice, students can put their devices away and discuss the same topic with another partner. For example, the student might practice answering the AI question “What is one change you would like to make at your university?” Students could then do some practice answering the question, “What is one thing you would like to change about your university.” After practicing, Student A asks the question to Student B. Student B responds, and Student A asks a second question. The students change roles.

The progression becomes:

*AI Interaction → Pair Interaction → Partner Exchange →
Group Discussion*

Learners with low willingness to communicate (WTC) can benefit from AI-mediated speaking, which has been shown to improve EFL students’ speaking and WTC (Fathi et al., 2024). AI chatbots and intelligent tutoring systems may also support reluctant learners’ communication (Zhang, D., et al., 2024). However, teachers should explicitly guide students from AI interaction to human communication. AI conversations should not be treated as the final task but as preparation for real-world interaction. Students can use AI to practice, develop responses, and build confidence before communicating with others. Thus, a useful classroom principle is: AI should help learners prepare; people should help them communicate with one another.

Changing Students from Answerers into Questioners

A third solution would be changing the current format of conversation from teacher-question/ student-answer to student-initiated communication.

In many speaking classrooms, the interaction may be this:

Teacher asks → Student answers → Teacher evaluates → Next student is asked.

Although the pattern gives students opportunities to produce English, it can make them reliant on teacher prompts (MacIntyre et al., 1998; Sato, 2024). The teacher is the person who initiates almost every interaction. For silent learners, this may reinforce the expectation that they only need to speak when the teacher calls on them.

An alternative that is more communicative is:

Student prepares → Student answers → Student asks → Partner responds → Student follows up.

AI can help the transition. Before the speaking activity, students can ask the AI tool to generate five questions about a topic. They do not need to copy the questions. They could choose, modify, and personalise two or three of these questions and then use these questions with their classmates.

Here is an example of a question:

Topic: Social Media and University Students.

Those systems may include: *How often do you use social media? What are the advantages of social media? Can social media affect student's academic performance?*

They then answer these in more personal questions: *'How does social media affect the way you study?' 'Have you ever used social media to improve your English?' 'What would happen if you stopped using social media for one week?'*

The activity therefore moves beyond answering prepared questions to engaging in and maintaining conversations.

Willingness to communicate (WTC) involves not only responding but also initiating communication. AI-supported speaking research highlights the importance of addressing speaking anxiety and perceived competence while encouraging learner-initiated interaction. Teachers should gradually shift learners from teacher-provided question stems toward independent communication. Ultimately, students should progress from guided practice to initiating conversations without technological support.

Building Confidence through Storytelling and Meaningful Tasks

The fourth solution is to encourage students to move beyond short responses. Use story-telling and other communication tasks to get them to talk more. For example, a silent learner may respond with only one or two sentences. To ask them to give a 5-minute presentation may bring back the anxiety that caused them to keep silent. Using AI, we can find story ideas, images, scenarios, vocabulary, and follow-up questions. A teacher could ask students to use an AI tool to create a scenario such as “You arrive at an unfamiliar airport, but your luggage does not arrive.” Students make up their own story. AI may assist them in brainstorming vocabulary or with pronunciation, but the story should be created by the learner orally.

The activity then proceeds in a Tell–Ask–Reply cycle:

Tell the Story → Listener Asks Questions → Speaker Responds → Follow-up Interaction.

Memorized presentations alone may not provide sufficient opportunities for spontaneous communication. Silent learners need opportunities to listen, think, respond, and maintain interaction through unexpected questions. AI can provide differentiated support: vocabulary and sentence starters for beginners, visual prompts for intermediate learners, and abstract problem-solving situations for advanced learners. This enables progressive speaking challenges while reducing unnecessary barriers.

Recent research on AI-assisted speaking found that AI can help individuals to improve confidence, engagement, pronunciation, and anxiety when speaking, while conversations using AI have shown

effects on WTC and perceptions about participants' communication skills (Du & Daniel, 2024; Fathi et al., 2024). The pedagogical challenge is therefore to convert these benefits into increasingly independent human communication. The underlying principle is straightforward: AI can help learners find their voice, but human interaction helps them become communicators.

C. THE FUTURE DIRECTION

EFL speaking instruction will increasingly incorporate artificial intelligence (AI), but human communication should remain the ultimate goal. Teachers should use AI to prepare learners for communication. Research indicates that AI-supported environments can promote willingness to communicate (WTC). AI-supported speaking may also influence learners' enjoyment and speaking anxiety (Zhang, C., et al., 2024). A 2026 systematic review of 24 empirical studies published between 2015 and 2025 found that AI-supported environments can support WTC through affective, cognitive, and social processes (Cao et al., 2026). A broader 2026 systematic review of 73 empirical studies published between 2015 and February 2026 similarly identified AI-related effects on WTC and its antecedents, while calling for more theoretically grounded and teacher-guided research (Zhang et al., 2026).

The English teacher should design communication environments that promote independent language use. AI provides valuable support but also involves technological limitations, fear, and language standardization (Crompton et al., 2024). AI can mediate rather than replace human interaction, enhancing teacher immediacy, relationships, and learners' willingness to communicate (Guan et al., 2025). Future instruction should adopt a "human interaction after AI" model, using AI for practice, rehearsal, feedback, and confidence-building. AI literacy should also teach students when and how to use AI, evaluate its output, and recognize when to stop using it. Miao and Holmes (2023) emphasize inclusion, equity, human rights, and linguistic diversity. Students in EFL speaking classrooms should learn how to move away from AI-supported performance to their own voice. A useful future-oriented model is therefore:

AI Support → Rehearsal → Peer Interaction → Learner Initiation → Spontaneous Communication → Independent Speaking

Future EFL speaking instruction should focus on whether AI-supported rehearsal transfers to spontaneous human communication. Crompton et al. (2024) highlight gaps in understanding whether language production remains improved when technology is removed. For silent learners, progress involves moving from AI rehearsal through peer interaction and learner-initiated questioning toward spontaneous communication. The goal is therefore not simply AI-supported speaking, but independent communicators who can initiate, sustain, negotiate, and reflect on interaction: AI prepares learners; human interaction develops communicators.

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