

Using Artificial Intelligence Tools for Developing Conversational Skills for English Majors

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Abstract. Despite the potential of Virtual Conversation Assistants as effective tools for conversing support in developing students' conversational skills, their presence in Vietnamese schools or universities remains limited, often due to cost constraints, quality of language interaction, and their unpopularity among Vietnamese students. Therefore, it is essential that English language educators seek alternative strategies to offer additional assistance for the enhancement of students' abilities to converse effectively. This experimental study pilots the implementation of Call Annie and Praktika, two artificial intelligence (AI) technologies in a local teacher education university in Vietnam, as an innovative approach to the fostering of students' conversational skills. The research discusses the utilization of two such virtual conversational assistant tools for a group of 14 English major freshmen as the experimental group, examining their impacts on the development of students' conversational proficiency compared to another 14 students in the control group. The study findings analyzed indicate that there was a remarkable improvement in the experimental group's conversational skills regarding their initiation of conversation, and their active listening through two AI tools. Moreover, there was also remarkable improvement in their verbal fluency and clarity; which contributed to their adaptability, flexibility, and conversational engagement. Moreover, it suggests further application of AI tools in educational contexts to facilitate the instruction and reinforcement of students' conversational skills, where human expertise seamlessly integrates with the power of AI tools to create a more effectively expanded language learning environment.

Keywords: Virtual Conversation Assistants, AI tools, conversational skills, Call Annie, Praktika

Introduction

One of the most crucial skills that English majors should acquire is communication, including clear writing and speaking, text analysis, critical discussion, and understanding diverse linguistic and cultural contexts, thereby equipping them with the versatility and adaptability necessary for success in a wide range of academic, professional, and personal pursuits. However, the ability to effectively communicate in social and professional settings can be affected by anxiety and apprehension. These emotions influence a person's goals and attitude toward participating in communication situations. Fear and a lack of confidence are supposed to be two factors that hinder language learners from speaking in the target language (Fung & Min, 2016). Various factors contribute to students feeling uneasy and lacking the motivation to speak in English. Initially, the emphasis on exams in the educational system in Vietnam led to a focus on exam-oriented learning among teachers and students (Christopher, 2016; Lee, 2016). Lee (2016) argues that the lack of creativity in the Vietnamese educational system results in students feeling demoralized and uninterested. Another reason lies in the environment for English communication beyond the classroom: students do not have much access to and contact with foreigners for their communication practice in such a non-native speaking environment. Therefore, meaningful and authentic communication in English seems to be neglected or underestimated.

English majors in the selected local teacher education university in the north of Vietnam are required not only to be advanced in English skills for basic communication but also proficient in the field of English language teaching. While a few demonstrate proficiency in foundational English communication, many struggle with limited vocabulary, grammar, and listening and speaking skills, which can hinder effective communication for conventional purposes and later for career-related intentions. Additionally, students often lack confidence in engaging with foreigners due to fears of making mistakes, leading to a reluctance to initiate or actively participate in conversations. Inadequate non-verbal communication skills and limited cultural understanding can further exacerbate issues in intercultural exchanges, potentially resulting in misunderstandings or unintentional rudeness. Moreover, students have limited opportunities for real-world practice due to the scarcity of interactions with foreigners and a lack of international tourists in the area. These limitations contribute to the student's difficulties in developing their conversational abilities in real-life situations.

AI has emerged and transformed the way we work in many fields, especially in education where revolutionary initiatives made possible by AI have been implemented. Recognizing the potential of AI in learning and research facilitated by easy access to AI information through the Internet and social networks, students in this mentioned university have attempted to use AI for some initial experiments in their English study. Despite this awareness, students' actual experience with AI is limited due to such factors as insufficient IT infrastructure and resources, lack of effective AI integration in curricula, and students' financial constraints in acquiring necessary equipment and software.

The main objective of this study was to investigate the impact of AI tools on the development of English majors' conversational skills in that mentioned institution by seeking to answer the following research questions: *(i) What is the current level of conversational skills of English majors? (ii) How do AI tools support conversational skills improvement for English majors? (iii) What is the attitude of English majors towards AI tools applied in conversational practice?*

Research Methods

The study utilized a quasi-experimental design to illustrate and evaluate the impact of AI tools on the process of improving and developing conversational skills among 28 first-year students specialized in English pedagogy at the aforementioned university. This investigation adopted a quasi-experimental framework, specifically a non-equivalent control group design, encompassing both a control and an experimental cohort. Nonetheless, participant selection was not randomized.

A group of 28 students were asked to complete a speaking test called pre-test, following which they were classified into two groups based on the degree of their participation in conversational practice with AI tools. Fourteen students partook in the experimental intervention, utilizing AI tools aimed at augmenting conversational competencies. Conversely, the remaining 14 students constituted the control cohort, abstaining from AI tool utilization. Following the 8-week intervention, a post-test was administered to both groups to assess the extent of improvement in their conversational competencies. Subsequently, the experimental group was invited to complete a questionnaire gauging their attitudes towards the utilization of AI tools for English conversation practice.

The format of the pre-test and post-test remained the same in which students were required to develop a conversation with a foreigner based on a given topic. Students' performances were assessed using a speaking rubric developed from the Oral Assessment Scale of ESOL Examination (the University of Cambridge, 2009), the Communication Rubric (Lake Washington Institute of Technology, 2013), and the Communication Skills Assessment Rubric (Ramachandiran et al., 2016). The participants' scores were classified into five levels:

Outstanding, Good, Fairly good, Average, and Weak, according to the Regulation on Evaluation and Ranking of Students of the Ministry of Education and Training. The corresponding score ranges for each level are shown in the table below.

Table 1: The categorization of conversing abilities of students

No	Classifications	Score ranges
1	Outstanding	8.5 - 10
2	Good	7.0 - 8.4
3	Fairly good	5.5 - 6.9
4	Average	4.0 - 5.4
5	Weak	Below 4.0

Findings

Students' initial level of conversational skills reflected in pre-test scores are presented in the following table.

Table 2: The classification of students' scores on the pre-test

No	Classifications	Score ranges	Experimental group		Control group	
			Frequency	Proportion	Frequency	Proportion
1	Outstanding	8.5 - 10	1	7.1%	1	7.1%
2	Good	7.0 - 8.4	5	35.7%	6	42.8%
3	Fairly good	5.5 - 6.9	4	28.7%	4	28.7%
4	Average	4.0 - 5.4	3	21.4%	3	21.4%
5	Weak	Below 4.0	1	7.1%	0	0%
Total			14	100%	14	100%

According to the table, there were no big differences in conversational skills of the control and experimental groups before applying AI tools (Call Annie and Praktika). The highest percentage was recorded in the "Good" classification, as shown by 5 (35.7%) and 6 (42.8%) out of 14 students in the experimental and control groups, respectively. Moreover, the two groups shared the same proportion of 28.7% for the category "Fairly good." The identical figures were also witnessed in the percentage of students assessed as "Average," with 21.4% for this classification in both groups. Meanwhile, in both groups of students, very few of them were classified as "Outstanding," with 1 student (7.1%) in the experimental group and the equivalent in the control group. Based on these proportions, although the difference was small, it suggested that the control group may have performed slightly better on average.

Table 3: The classification of students' scores on post-test

No	Classifications	Score ranges	Experimental group		Control group	
			Frequency	Proportion	Frequency	Proportion
1	Outstanding	8.5 - 10	3	21.4%	1	7.2%
2	Good	7.0 - 8.4	6	42.8%	4	21.4%
3	Fairly good	5.5 - 6.9	3	14.4%	5	42.8%
4	Average	4.0 - 5.4	2	21.4%	4	21.4%
5	Weak	Below 4.0	0	0%		7.2%
Total			14	100%	14	100%

As can be seen from Table 3, there were significant differences in the average scores between the two groups. It was clear that the experimental group had an improved rate

compared to the control group. As regards the experimental group, 9 students, equivalent to 64.2%, were classified as “Outstanding” or “Good,” with “Good” being the majority, almost half of the total participants. Also, there was no one student classified as “Weak”; 21.4% of students were labeled “Fairly good,” and 14.4% were classified as “Average” in the experimental group. Meanwhile, in the control group, only one student, equivalent to 7.1%, was classified as “Outstanding,” and the same percentage was in the experimental group, where no one was registered as “Weak.” In addition, the highest frequency was 5 (35.7%) out of 14 students recorded in the “Fairly good” category, along with 4 (28.6%) students in the “Average” and “Good” categories, accounting for a little more than half of the total number of students who did not participate in the treatment.

Table 4: The comparison of Pre-Test and Post-Test

	Pre-test		Post-test	
	Mean score	Classification	Mean score	Classification
Experimental group	6.13	Fairly good	7.07	Good
Control group	6.50	Fairly good	6.60	Fairly good

The table above displayed that the average scores of participants in both groups were classified as “Fairly good” before using AI tools (Call Annie and Praktika), with scores of 6.13 and 6.50 for the experimental group and control group, respectively. The average scores of both groups were relatively similar, with the experimental group's mean score being 0.37 lower than that of the control group. After using AI tools (Call Annie and Praktika), significant disparities were observed in the pre-test and post-test mean scores of the experimental group and the post-test scores of the control group. The experimental group has an average score of 7.07, almost 1.07 times higher than the control group, whose mean score was just 6.60. Therefore, the experimental group's conversational skills were classified as “Good”, higher than those of the control group, which remained unchanged after the experiment. This means that the conversational abilities of the experimental group were superior to those of the control group after using AI tools (Call Annie and Praktika) to improve and develop conversational skills. Additionally, participants' conversational skills significantly advanced after undergoing treatment. In other words, students benefit greatly from AI tools (Call Annie and Praktika) in terms of learning and improving conversation. This development was shown by the disparity of 0.94 between the experimental group's pre-test and post-test mean scores. Meanwhile, the control group also showed progress while not involved in the experiment, as evidenced by the fact that the average post-test score of this group was about 0.1 points slightly higher than its average pre-test score. This means that students may still develop their conversation skills through conventional lessons or not; however, pupils' advancement was not as sharp as that of the experimental group.

The following table presented the findings from the post-questionnaire seeking participants' attitudes toward AI tools applied in conversational skills improvement and development.

Table 5: Students' attitude toward AI tools

Statements	Mean	Level of agreement
Using AI in practicing English conversation helped me to be more confident	4.63	Strongly agree
Using AI in practicing English conversation helped me say long sentences	3.64	Agree

Using AI in practicing English conversation helped me immediately respond during the conversation.	3.42	Agree
Using AI in practicing English conversation helped me to decrease mistakes during the conversation.	3.36	Neutral/ Nor agree
Using AI in practicing English conversation helped me to speak more fluently	4.85	Strongly agree
Using AI in practicing English conversation helped me to be more flexible in different types of conversation	3.64	Agree
Using AI in practicing English conversation helped me to start English conversations easily	4.24	Strongly agree
Using AI in practicing English conversation helped me decrease anxiety when having English conversations	3.50	Agree
Using AI in practicing English conversation helped me to be more confident when expressing a problem in English	4.19	Agree
Using AI in practicing English conversation helped me to fully understand the information during the conversations	4.57	Strongly agree

The table above illustrates students' attitudes towards AI tools in terms of feeling and assessment of their effectiveness in and beyond improving and developing conversational skills. As shown in the table, overall, the participants gave positive feedback about AI tools (Call Annie and Praktika). To begin with participants' feelings about AI tools (Call Annie and Praktika), nearly all respondents strongly agreed that they were more confident in using AI tools (Call Annie and Praktika) to practice their English conversing process, with a mean score of 4.63 for the statement "Using AI in practicing English conversation helped me to be more confident." The second statement, "Using AI in practicing English conversation helped me to start English conversations easily," received an average rating of 4.24, indicating students' complete agreement. However, this score was near the level of agreement. It seems that while participants found AI tools helpful, some of them might have faced some challenges in applying them and practicing to fully master them. The mean score of the statement "Using AI in practicing English conversation helped me to be more confident when expressing a problem in English" was 4.19, indicating that respondents felt more confident expressing problems in English, highlighting AI's role in building adaptability.

Regarding the effectiveness of AI tools (Call Annie and Praktika) in improving conversational abilities, the majority of participants acknowledged the effectiveness of AI tools (Call Annie and Praktika) in enhancing their flexibility, with a mean score of 3.64 for the statement "Using AI in practicing English conversation helped me to be more flexible in different types of conversation," indicating agreement among the participants. Moreover, the participants also reported an improvement in their sentences after using AI tools (Call Annie and Praktika), with a mean score of 3.64 for the statement "Using AI in practicing English conversation helped me say long sentences."

With respect to participants' evaluation of the effectiveness of AI tools (Call Annie and Praktika), they claimed that these tools also enhanced their fluency. The mean score of the question "Using AI in practicing English conversation helped me to speak more fluently" was 4.85, indicating strong agreement among the participants that AI tools (Call Annie and Praktika) were a feasible method for developing conversational skills. In the question "Using AI in practicing English conversation helped me to fully understand the information during the conversations," the mean score was 4.57, implying that AI practice enhanced their comprehension in conversations, which was crucial for meaningful interactions. Furthermore, participants commonly expressed their agreement with the mean score of 3.50 for the question "Using AI in practicing English conversation helped me decrease anxiety when having English

conversations," which showed AI tools (Call Annie and Praktika) role in creating a comfortable learning environment.

When it mentioned participants' expectations for AI tools (Call Annie and Praktika), it supported their ability to respond quickly in conversations, an important aspect of conversational skills based on their feedback for the question "Using AI in practicing English conversation helped me immediately respond during the conversation" with an average score of 3.42. Finally, there was some uncertainty about AI tools' effectiveness in reducing mistakes during conversations, with respondents neither strongly agreeing nor disagreeing with the idea, resulting in a neutral mean score of 3.36.

Discussion

The following discussion is based on the test results and questionnaires about conversation abilities and the application of AI tools in improving and developing conversational skills.

It can be assumed from the pre-test results that the conversational skills of the English majors at the local teacher education university are adequate at this point in time. Nevertheless, in 3 years' time, that they will be required to be proficient in English at the C1 level could be a challenge to them if they do not have regular practice and do not have frequent access to an English-speaking environment. Difficulties in vocabulary and grammar use and struggles with pronunciation, intonation, and fluency will definitely create obstacles to students' conversation proficiency either in immediate needs or in professional pursuits. Therefore, it is essential to improve and enhance conversational skills, which can contribute to overall language development.

The gain scores in the post-test indicated that incorporating AI tools (Call Annie and Praktika) in conversation activities improved students' conversational skills critically. This corroborates with the outcomes of the experimental study implemented by Kim and Kim's study (2021) on AI Chatbots, which showed that the results were positive, demonstrating that their communication abilities were enhanced. Furthermore, the progress of the learners' conversational skills also confirmed the findings of Fathi, Rahim, and Derakhshan (2024), who acknowledged that engaging in speaking tasks facilitated by AI proved to be more beneficial for enhancing speaking abilities and willingness to communicate with English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students.

Moreover, the post-questionnaire revealed that the utilization of Call Annie and Praktika as AI tools could raise confidence in conversation and increase students' motivation for the conversation practice thanks to AI tools' interactive nature, visual appeal, customization options, immediate feedback, and accessibility. Such findings were in parallel with the research conducted by Madhavi et.al. (2023), in which the authors discovered that ESL students have significant improvements in their communication skills with the use of technology and AI technologies for learning languages. Similarly, the present study's discoveries on participants' positive feedback of AI tools (Call Annie and Praktika) resonate with Kim's (2016) research, which found the positive impacts of voice chat on enhancing EFL speaking skills. Particularly in her experimental study, she found that voice chat with chatbots can lead to speaking ability improvement for Korean EFL students across proficiency levels.

The analysis of conversational skills test results and questionnaire responses reveals important implications for language instruction, and there should be various factors to consider when implementing AI tools into speaking lessons in order to maximize the benefits of the techniques for students' conversational abilities.

There are many types of AI tools introduced on social media platforms, of which some do not correspond to tasks for English majors. Therefore, providing clear instructions for conversation activities is needed to enhance student comprehension and engagement. Students

should have a clear understanding of the purpose and objectives of using AI tools, which will optimize their learning experience.

Furthermore, it is recommended that teachers carefully select AI tools that are relevant to the curriculum. This ensures that the AI tools are meaningful and applicable to students' learning. Moreover, it is necessary for educators to present the advantages, disadvantages, and detailed information of AI tools, thereby allowing students to proactively choose the appropriate option to use, creating motivation and excitement for them. Even though students today are becoming more accustomed to digital resources, guidelines for practicing AI tools (Call Annie and Praktika) should be delivered to students to ensure a thorough understanding of what is expected for completion.

Conclusions

The present study emphasizes the importance and the benefits of incorporating AI tools such as Call Annie and Praktika in language instruction to improve students' English conversational skills. It is evident that the use of AI tools can boost students' engagement and motivation in language learning, as they offer interactive and immersive experiences. Thanks to the enhancement of the participants' conversational competence and their positive feedback on the impacts of such tools on their conversation practice, implications for English language educators and teachers should be taken into consideration.

First and foremost, teachers should clearly communicate the benefits of these AI tools to encourage students and provide explicit instructions on how to use them for effective practice. Clear instructions for using AI tools and providing feedback on performance are essential for improvement. Additionally, educators should address challenges such as students' limited knowledge of vocabulary and short sentences by providing resources like glossaries for different topics and introducing difficult vocabulary to learners. Besides, teachers are advised to create a supportive environment and choose topics suited to students' language levels and interests. This assistance helps students feel more confident and motivated to express their opinions and improves their overall communication abilities.

Moreover, students should be encouraged to use these tools both in the classroom and at home, practicing various topics and repeating exercises to improve fluency, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Pairing AI tools with other technologies, such as video recording for self-analysis, can boost their effectiveness. Integrating AI tools into the curriculum can reinforce learning and build conversational skills over time. It is advisable that future research explore the long-term impact of AI tools on conversational skills and examine other AI tools' effectiveness for different populations.

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Appendix

