

# VIETNAMESE TRANSNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS, CHALLENGES, AND OPPORTUNITIES IN ADOPTING AI TO IMPROVE SPEAKING SKILLS

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**Abstract:** *This study aims to examine the students' perspectives on the challenges and opportunities of using artificial intelligence (AI) in improving speaking abilities in transnational higher education (TNE) programs in Vietnam. The participants consisted of thirty English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students who were enrolled in three Transnational Education (TNE) programs at a public institution in Vietnam. The study employed a qualitative case study research design, using diaries and semi-structured interviews, to achieve its objectives. Thematic analysis was adopted to discover the emerging themes in the written diaries. Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were conducted with chosen students based on the identified themes. The findings revealed that Vietnamese students in the TNE program displayed a preference for utilizing AI tools to enhance their speaking skills due to limited teacher feedback. They were generally satisfied with using these AI tools to practice their English. The results also indicated that students encountered certain constraints when utilizing AI aids, including a lack of applicable feedback and few model examples. Furthermore, the participants had the perception that artificial intelligence is incapable of replacing teachers. Finally, the findings indicated a need to improve the available resources in AI products to facilitate the enhancement of students' speaking abilities within the TNE context.*

**Keywords:** *TNE/transnational education, speaking skills, Artificial Intelligence, AI tools in education*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The globalized education market is experiencing significant growth in transnational higher education (TNE), defined as education provided to learners in a country different from that of the awarding institution (UNESCO/Council of Europe, 2001). Currently, Vietnam is participating in this trend by hosting numerous TNE programs offered by prominent universities and professional associations worldwide, indicating a growing interest in international education.

In TNE programs, English serves as the primary medium of instruction. Students engage in an English-speaking environment, where they are required to proficiently and adaptively use the English language for all learning activities and exercises. One of the crucial skills for competence in an international environment is speaking, as learners utilize English to communicate with lecturers and peers and to complete assignments and projects. Vietnamese university students generally encounter challenges in mastering speaking skills, attributed to inadequate proficiency, the classroom environment, and limited exposure to English (Hao, 2017; Quyen et al., 2018; Thao & Nguyet, 2019). Other difficulties include pronunciation and grammatical issues. To overcome these challenges, students can adopt different strategies to enhance their speaking skills by utilizing advanced technological tools. One of them is the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and voice recognition technologies, which are readily accessible through various online platforms. AI-powered tools not only provide real-time feedback on pronunciation, fluency, and intonation but also create personalized learning experiences tailored to individual needs. By incorporating AI-driven solutions, learners can systematically improve their speaking abilities in an interactive and adaptive manner, transforming traditional language practice into a more dynamic and effective process.

In the context of the TNE program, where proficiency in foreign languages is crucial for academic success, AI-powered speaking applications offer enormous potential for improving the design and delivery of English

for Academic Purposes (EAP) instruction. However, there is limited research on how AI-powered tools can address speaking challenges in TNE programs in Vietnam. This study aims to expand the current body of research by exploring Vietnamese TNE students' perspectives on the use of AI tools to improve their speaking skills at a public university in Vietnam. The study is expected to enhance the learning and teaching experience by offering practical classroom application options and introducing innovative concepts for future research.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Transnational Higher Education (TNE)

There are many definitions used to describe the term “transnational higher education.” According to the Australian Government, Australian transnational education is characterized as

*“Australian transnational education and training, also known as offshore or cross-border education and training, refers to the delivery and/or assessment of programs or courses by an accredited Australian provider in a country other than Australia, where delivery includes a face-to-face component. The education and/or training activity may lead to an Australian qualification or may be a non-award course, but in either case, an accredited/approved/recognized Australian provider is associated with the education/training activity”. (Nelson, 2005b, p. 6)*

Learning and training activities that do not require face-to-face interaction with instructors from the international program provider are excluded from this definition. However, technological advancements have enabled new forms of TNE beyond traditional distance learning, such as e-learning, which delivers courses to learners outside the awarding institution's location (Huang, 2006). Similarly, Knight (2002) states that terms like “transnational,” “borderless,” or “cross-border” education describe the “real or virtual movement of students, teachers, knowledge, and educational programs from one country to another” (p.

4). GATE (1999) further clarifies that TNE can take various delivery forms, including branch campuses, franchising arrangements, Twinning programs, or distance learning, with twinning programs often preferred for their flexibility in splitting degree completion between host and provider countries.

### **Speaking Skill**

Speaking skill is a crucial component of the language teaching and learning process, holding a central role in academic, professional, and social contexts. For English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, mastering speaking is particularly critical, as it reflects their ability to articulate ideas fluently, accurately, and appropriately in real-world interactions (Nazara, 2011; Bestari et al., 2024). The evaluation of speaking proficiency typically focuses on key criteria such as fluency, pronunciation, grammatical accuracy, and lexical precision, which collectively demonstrate a learner's capacity to convey meaning effectively (Walker & White, 2013; Wang, 2014). However, achieving meaningful progress in speaking requires more than formal assessment. Khasawneh (2023) emphasizes that sustained improvement hinges on learners' active engagement in authentic communicative practices, such as conversational exchanges and context-rich language use. Such immersion not only reinforces linguistic competence but also cultivates the confidence and adaptability needed to navigate diverse communicative scenarios (Brown & Lee, 2015). Thus, fostering speaking skills demands a dual focus: rigorous evaluation to identify gaps and intentional pedagogical strategies to create immersive, practice-driven learning environments.

### **Types of speaking activities in TNE context**

The TNE program focuses on using English for Academic Purposes (EAP) to complete learning projects rather than focusing on specific language skills. Zou et al. (2020) list some typical speaking tasks, including:

- Academic presentations.
- Group discussions on a given topic
- Research and presentation on a project in the curriculum.

### **TNE students' challenges in Speaking Skills at the university level**

TNE programs require students to demonstrate the ability to articulate opinions, thoughts, and ideas with clarity and precision in academic and formal contexts. As highlighted by Singh (2013), participants in these programs are expected to actively engage in a variety of activities, such as presentations, group discussions, and collaborative research projects, to meet academic requirements. However, students often face significant challenges in developing proficient speaking skills. These challenges include limited vocabulary, fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence, low motivation, and insufficient exposure to authentic English-speaking environments, all of which can hinder their ability to communicate effectively in academic settings.

#### ***Insufficient vocabulary***

A limited vocabulary is identified as the primary challenge encountered by students when developing their speaking skills. Dewi and Jimmi (2018) describe a lack of vocabulary as a situation in which students struggle to construct sentences because of their limited vocabulary. Dewi and Jimmi highlighted that insufficient vocabulary can significantly affect students' psychology, leading to hesitation in interaction and diminished confidence.

#### ***Fear of making mistakes***

Juhana (2012) identifies psychological factors that influence students' psychology during English communication efforts. This study indicates that students frequently forget their intended statements due to fear of making mistakes, hesitation stemming from concerns about criticism from teachers, or the potential for laughter from peers. Ur (1999) noted that a significant challenge in students' speaking activities is the fear

of making mistakes, which results in reduced participation in learning activities.

### ***Lack of confidence and motivation***

Confidence and motivation are critical factors in language learning activities for students. Juhana (2012) identifies lack of confidence as a psychological factor experienced by learners when the listener fails to comprehend the intended message. Juhana (2012) observed that students frequently view their language skills as insufficient, which may impede their communication and engagement in academic discussions. Harmer (2007) posited that teachers' error correction activities may restrict learners' confidence in speaking English.

Jin (2014) highlighted the significance of motivation in the process of acquiring a new language. Hao (2017) and Quyen et al. (2018) examined the factors that restrict learners' speaking performance. The research indicated that insufficient exposure to authentic English communication contexts and limited opportunities for regular practice with native speakers prior to entering tertiary education programs negatively impacted students' motivation to engage in English communication.

### **Advantages of using AI in Teaching and Learning Speaking Skills**

AI is the theory and development of a computer system that can handle tasks that normally require human intelligence. These tasks include speech recognition, visual information analysis, decision-making, and learning from experience. Sharing this view, Tang (2024) defines AI as computers or robots that can perform tasks that normally require human intelligence. In his research, Tang (2024) proposed that AI systems are designed to simulate human thinking processes, including learning, reasoning, problem-solving, and language use. For example, today's AI-powered learning tools can interact with learners in real time, simulate real-life situations, provide highly personalized comments, and thereby suggest learning options suitable for each learner. As a result, AI is considered an inevitable technological development of education,

especially English teaching, explaining the adoption of AI by schools and educational institutions

### ***Adaptive teaching and learning***

In this educational approach, computer algorithms as well as AI are used to build a learning system that can adjust the content, difficulty, and teaching methods to suit each individual. The ability to analyze data quickly and continuously helps AI to identify the strengths and weaknesses of students, thereby building a support system suitable for each student's conditions. Through the integration of AI in education, schools and educational institutions can use highly automated tools for tasks such as giving suggestions and advice to teachers and students, recommending learning materials, and adapting curricula to suit students' needs (Dhaniswara et al., 2023).

### ***Personalized Learning***

AI has the ability to support personalization of learning activities by providing tasks that are suitable for the learning style, interests, and needs of each student. This has positive effects in enhancing students' love, interest in learning, and learning outcomes. In education, the integration of AI has changed educators and learners' thinking and working methods to a significant extent, opening up new directions for highly personalized learning activities and meeting the special needs of learners (Rane et al., 2023).

### ***Virtual tutor***

AI can be used as a useful tool in supporting students' independent learning activities. AI-powered learning applications are capable of answering questions, explaining learning materials, and even suggesting appropriate exercises for students. Research by Chen et al. (2020) shows that students who practice with AI-powered learning aids and AI chatbots show improvements in vocabulary, grammar, and confidence in using English to communicate.

With the potential in the field of language teaching, AI promises to make English teaching and learning activities more interactive and more adaptive, making the teaching and learning experience more engaging, interesting, and effective. Therefore, teachers and lecturers are encouraged to learn and apply AI and teaching activities, as well as encourage students to learn and apply AI appropriately in their learning activities.

### **Challenges of using AI in Teaching and Learning Speaking Skills**

It is important to recognize that the use of AI also brings certain challenges.

One of the first difficulties to mention is the lack of human interaction, especially when we use AI as a tool to support language learning. Khanzode and Sarode (2020) pointed out that current AI-based language learning applications are mostly self-paced and do not involve direct human-to-human communication. If students are not confident and have difficulty communicating in real life, practicing on devices may not help improve students' performances.

Second, there are issues related to privacy. AI systems will collect personal information of users to continuously improve the system's database, including personal information, voice, ability data, and behavior. This raises a concern about the protection of students' personal information. Finding the balance between using AI to personalize learning programs and protecting privacy needs careful consideration, as mentioned by Butt et al. (2022) and Khosravi et al. (2022).

To gain deeper insights into students' perceptions regarding the advantages and challenges of AI-powered tools in speaking activities, participants were introduced to SmallTalk2.me, an AI-driven speaking application. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What opportunities does SmallTalk2.me offer for enhancing English speaking skills?
2. What potential challenges or limitations does SmallTalk2.me present in the development of English-speaking skills?



## METHODOLOGY

The qualitative case study research design was selected for this study due to its alignment with the exploratory and interpretive nature of the research objectives. As Furidha (2024) highlights, qualitative research is particularly effective in generating systematic and nuanced descriptions of complex phenomena, capturing the intricate relationships between variables, and providing rich, contextual insights into participants' experiences and perspectives. Given that this study seeks to explore students' perceptions, attitudes, and experiences regarding the use of AI-assisted speech training applications in TNE programs, a qualitative approach is well-suited to uncover the depth and diversity of their viewpoints. The purpose of this qualitative study is to show the different points of view of TNE students in order to get a full picture of the opportunities, challenges, and emotional responses associated with AI-powered speaking applications.

### Settings and Participants

The sample consisted of thirty Vietnamese EFL students enrolled in three TNE programs at a public university in Vietnam. The university organized an intensive four-month English learning program for each student, aiming for a minimum band score of 5.5 on either IELTS or level 4 of VSTEP, a national English proficiency test by the Ministry of Education and Training. For speaking skills, these students, aside from IELTS speaking practice, were specifically required to perform certain speaking tasks, namely presentations, group discussions, and group projects in English.

In the three TNE programs, the students were introduced to an AI-powered application called SmallTalk2.me. They were assigned to engage in practice using this program as part of their independent learning. The application was chosen as it provided students with a diverse range of activities that were comparable to the speaking assignments in the IELTS exam as well as activities that simulate real-life conversations.

The participants for this study were selected randomly, with 10 students from each program being invited. By selecting 10 students from each program, the study ensures it captures a diverse range of perspectives, experiences, and learning contexts. A total of 30 participants can provide a manageable sample size yet generate meaningful and generalizable insights into the use of AI tools in TNE programs. For ethical issues, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the process of implementation, and the assurance of confidentiality of personal information. Consent forms were administered to all participants to confirm their willingness to participate in the study. Participants provided written consent after being informed of confidentiality measures

### **Data collection instruments**

In order to investigate the students' perspectives on the use of AI technology in developing speaking skills, diaries and semi-structured interviews were employed. First, diaries help gather insights into learners' behaviors, activities, and experiences, as learning diaries have been described as an important research tool in language studies (Nunan, 1992), as they can offer access to the thoughts and voices of participants (Bailey and Nunan, 1996). In addition, the data collected from the diary writing activity would provide the basis for designing the subsequent semi-structured interview activity. To ensure consistency and depth, a structured diary design was implemented, where the students were asked to record their practice with AI-integrated speaking applications. The diary prompts were designed to focus on specific aspects, such as: The frequency and duration of using AI tools, Specific speaking tasks completed. The diary prompts also focused on perceived improvements in accuracy, fluency, and confidence, challenges encountered, and overall satisfaction and attitudes toward the AI tools.

To further explore the students' perspectives on using AI-integrated speaking practice applications, semi-structured interviews were

designed using the non-directive framework introduced by Cohen et al. (2007). The semi-structured interview activity consisted of seven guided questions arranged thematically, focusing on the practice process, improvements in speaking accuracy and fluency, and other perceptions of the students. This sequential design — where diary data informed the interview questions — enhanced the depth and relevance of the interview process, allowing for a more targeted exploration of emerging themes.

The use of both diaries and semi-structured interviews can help the researcher gain a better understanding of the collected data, making the data more reliable to prevent any possible misinterpretation of the information in the diary. Johnson and Christensen (2016) emphasized that the use of multiple data collection methods (triangulation) helps mitigate potential biases and misinterpretations, ensuring a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

### **Data analysis**

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed to systematically analyze the data, enabling the identification, interpretation, and organization of patterns and themes that emerged from participants' accounts. This approach aligns with the study's exploratory objectives, as it prioritizes uncovering nuanced insights into complex phenomena — in this case, students' experiences with an AI-driven tool for enhancing English-speaking skills (Boyatzis, 1998; Elliott, 2018). By adopting this methodology, the study sought to illuminate both the challenges and opportunities inherent in integrating AI tools into language learning contexts, with a specific focus on improving speaking proficiency in TNE settings.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Findings

Four major themes were identified across the example, including the use of AI tools, improvement of language skills, limitations of AI tools, and students' feelings.

#### The use of AI tool (SmallTalk2.me)

When asked about the time spent using the speaking practice app to practice independently at home, participants provided information that they used the app whenever they had free time; the average practice time on the app was about 10-20 minutes; however, the practice frequency varied. Participant 1 (P1) and Participant 3 (P3) shared that:

*"I practice with the app every day and only choose short practice content; no more than 10 minutes to practice." (P1)*

*"I practice speaking on SmallTalk2.me three times a week, on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday. I want to practice IELTS speaking exercises, so I spend about 20-25 minutes for each practice session." (P3)*

#### Advantages of SmallTalk2.me

When asked about their opinions on the advantages of using AI-based speaking applications as a part of their independent practice, students provided the following information.

Students expressed contentment with a diverse range of instructional formats. Participant 3 (P3) and 11 (P11) reported:

*"The types of exercises are quite diverse, from IELTS speaking practice to vocabulary supplement, watching videos, and answering questions." (P3)*

*"The exercises are designed quite flexibly in terms of duration, so you can choose activities that suit your free time." (P11)*

In addition, students expressed satisfaction with comprehensive comments about vocabulary, grammar, and speaking speed, as well as their strengths and faults. Participant 6 (P6), 9 (P9), and 10 (P10) reported:

*“The AI reports are quite detailed; it has a suggestion section called How a native speaker would say the same. It lists the sentences I used and suggests how native speakers would say it. The report also suggests synonyms that can be used to avoid repetition.” (P6)*

*“The feedback tells me which grammar mistakes I often make and suggests grammar corrections for each sentence; this website also tells me which parts I did well. These comments are much more detailed than when learning in class.” (P9)*

*“One thing I like about this practice tool is that it can provide information about my speaking speed, comparing it to a native speaker. The feedback also suggests that I use fewer time fillers to make my speaking more fluent.” (P10)*

Students also shared that AI-powered vocabulary learning activities help them remember words better since learners can practice the same material many times until they master the vocabulary of certain topics. Participant 8 (P8) and 12 (P12) stated:

*“I like practicing with the vocabulary tasks; words that I didn’t remember were repeated so many times.” (P8)*

*“Within the same topic, there are many different types of exercises; I can practice using the words I have learned in many different situations.” (P12)*

### **Limitations of SmallTalk2.me**

Regarding the limitations of AI-powered speaking tools, Participant 5 (P5) said that practicing on a free subscription means the number of lessons that can be accessed is quite limited.

*“This app is great, but many of the exercises require a subscription.” (P5)*

Some students commented that the vocabulary and grammar assessments were accurate, but factors such as delivery and content are not mentioned. Participants 2 (P2) and 7 (P7) said:

*“I want to know if the content I speak meets the requirements of the IELTS test and how I need to develop more ideas.” (P2)*

*“I want to know how successful I am in delivering during speaking. But there is no such feature yet.” (P7)*

Participant 1 also shared:

*“I hope that this tool will develop a more interactive AI chatbot so that the practice experience can better simulate real-life situations. The reason is that I still feel unconfident when communicating in person or presenting projects.”*

### **Students’ Feelings toward SmallTalk2.me**

When asked about their feelings and opinions about using the AI-powered speaking tool, students responded that they experience enhanced comfort when practicing with AI, free from the stress of practicing with a teacher. Participants 7 (P7) and 12 (P12) reported:

*“Without a teacher constantly commenting and correcting my mistakes, I feel more confident and comfortable when speaking. After all, if I make a mistake, I can correct it myself after reading the report.” (P7)*

*“I am quite a perfectionist, so I want to practice speaking many times, but when speaking with a teacher, I don’t have that opportunity due to time constraints, so I feel a lot of pressure.” (P12)*

However, the students also held the belief that artificial intelligence was incapable of substituting for in-person instruction. They believed that face-to-face interactions enabled teachers to make more precise assessments of the delivered information and employ appropriate lan-

guage tones. They added that receiving feedback and individualized comments from teachers during in-person encounters improves their learning experience and comprehension. Participant 9 (P9) shared:

*“Even though I practice with AI regularly, I still want to be guided by the teacher in certain aspects. For example, about how the speaking content can be developed or what body language should be, these are things that machines cannot accurately judge.” (P9)*

In addition, the students believe that engaging in direct conversation with those who have better oral language skills accelerates their learning and advancement.

## DISCUSSION

The data collected show that the students have a fairly positive view of using AI in speaking practice. They strongly agreed that AI helps them overcome some common obstacles in speaking skills, such as lack of vocabulary and fear of making mistakes. The findings align with Chen et al. (2020), who found that learners improve their vocabulary, grammar usage, and confidence when practicing with AI.

The students also feel that the practice process was easier and more effective thanks to the detailed and highly personalized feedback provided by AI. These comments highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the students and provide appropriate suggestions for them. These data further emphasize the view of Rane et al. (2023) that AI opens up new opportunities for personalized learning, meeting the individual needs of each student.

The participants also mentioned that practicing with AI helps them overcome the fear of making mistakes and practice more. The data obtained showed that practicing with SmallTalk2.me made students more willing to practice because it did not have real-time feedback and correction from teachers, which helped reduce learning pressure for students, contributing to solving the difficulties mentioned by Juhana (2012) and providing further insights into factors related to students’

confidence and attitudes. They also gave various reasons why they felt less pressured practicing with AI compared to when learning with teachers, including the fact that they didn't have to face real-time criticism and had time to process their mistakes. These reasons were not considered in detail in the literature on the application of AI tools in improving students' speaking skills.

Concerning AI limitations, the most obvious is the lack of direct human-to-human interaction, as mentioned by Khanzode and Sarode (2020). The students expressed that direct interaction with teachers and classmates helped them get useful advice on developing content suitable for different contexts.

However, there are some areas where research findings do not have enough information to provide an in-depth understanding.

First, the study could not explore adaptive teaching and learning — such as dynamically recommending learning paths, materials, or activities aligned with individual progress — due to SmallTalk2.me's limited features. While the Literature Review mentions AI's potential for adaptive learning (Dhaniswara et al., 2023), SmallTalk2.me is not yet able to suggest flexible learning programs or other adjustments based on students' progress. With SmallTalk2.me, students receive feedback on predefined tasks but do not experience a learning path tailored to their strengths and weaknesses. For instance, Participant 2 (P2) noted: "I want to know if the content I speak meets the requirements of the IELTS test and how I need to develop more ideas." This underscores a critical limitation: without adaptive functionalities, AI tools may fail to fully address individualized learning needs in TNE contexts. This misalignment between theoretical AI potential (Dhaniswara et al., 2023) and practical implementation highlights a critical limitation in current AI tools for TNE contexts. To bridge this gap, future studies should prioritize AI tools with machine learning algorithms capable of analyzing learner performance over time and generating tailored content (e.g., automated difficulty scaling, topic prioritization).



Second, when discussing the potential risks associated with AI, Butt et al. (2022) and Khosravi et al. (2022) brought up the issue of privacy and recommended cautious handling of personal information. Notably, participants did not raise privacy concerns, despite theoretical risks flagged by Butt et al. (2022) and Khosravi et al. (2022). This discrepancy may reflect two factors:

1. **Tool Design:** The free version of the app collects a limited amount of personal information, thereby reducing perceived risks. The app mainly collects data related to performance metrics and does not collect detailed information about the user. Learners can create an anonymous email and practice on the free version of the app.
2. **Awareness Gaps:** Learners' limited awareness of data practices — common in AI tool usage (Khosravi et al., 2022) — may stem from insufficient transparency about data collection processes in SmallTalk2.me's interface. Future research should directly address issues related to personal information and user privacy when using AI-powered speaking practice applications, which would clarify whether learners are aware of these issues.

## CONCLUSION

This study has examined the perspectives of students regarding the utilization of artificial intelligence (AI) for language acquisition, specifically focusing on speaking skills within the transnational education (TNE) setting. The results suggest that, in general, the participants expressed favorable opinions of the AI technology for enhancing speaking skills and its use in their daily practice, although there were some limitations. The utilization of these AI tools for English practice was met with overall student satisfaction. However, the findings also revealed that students faced specific limitations when using AI tools, such as a lack of relevant feedback and a limited number of models. Moreover, the participants held the belief that artificial

intelligence was unable to replace face-to-face teaching. Some topics, such as the capacity to develop adaptive teaching and learning programs and privacy concerns, are still lacking in-depth understanding within the scope of this study. Therefore, further investigation is essential to advance these domains.

This study represents an initial step in the exploration of techniques for the effective use of AI-powered tools to improve speaking abilities in TNE programs. Furthermore, the collection of student perspectives on certain language learning abilities has the capacity to guide teacher education programs in applying appropriate technology into EAP instruction and learning, thereby enhancing teaching and learning experiences.

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