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The Use AI Chatbots in Speaking Learning at Tarbiyatul Banat Islamic Boarding School: Santri's Perception

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the perceptions of students at Tarbiyatul Banat Islamic Boarding School regarding the use of AI chatbots in English-speaking practice. Employing a descriptive-qualitative method with a phenomenological approach, data were gathered through observations, interviews, and documentation from purposively selected students experienced in AI-assisted speaking. Thematic analysis revealed that AI chatbots enhance speaking confidence, provide a comfortable and judgment-free practice environment, enrich vocabulary, and improve pronunciation through real time feedback. However, institutional restrictions on device and internet use limit consistent practice. The study concludes that AI chatbots can serve as an effective complement to traditional learning if integrated in ways that align with school policies and cultural values, such as embedding them into classroom activities, developing offline tools, or using institution-approved platforms

Keywords: AI Chatbot, English Speaking Skills, Student Perception, Islamic Boarding School, Language Learning

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INTRODUCTION

The development of information and communication technology has brought major changes in many areas of life, including education. One innovation that has been on the rise in recent years is Artificial Intelligence (AI) which offers various applications that support the learning process. One form of AI implementation in education is Cici Bot, an intelligent chatbot designed to help students and teachers in various aspects of learning.

Cici Bot is an AI chatbot designed to support the learning process by providing material explanations, answering student questions in real-time, as well as assisting teachers in providing fast and accurate feedback. With its ability to understand natural language, Cici Bot enhances student interaction and engagement in learning, while being customizable to meet individual needs to create a more adaptive and efficient learning experience. In addition, this chatbot is equipped with various advanced features, such as voice input for easy interaction, assistance in educational content creation, as well as AI personalization options that allow users to customize its functions as needed.

(Du & Daniel, 2024) research in Transforming language education shows that the use of AI chatbots for English learning can accelerate the learning process, improve language proficiency, as well as help reduce anxiety and increase student confidence. (Waziana et al., 2024) study revealed that EFL students widely utilize AI-based chatbots such as ChatGPT, Gemini, and Perplexity to

enhance their writing skills and language proficiency. The majority of students reported that using these chatbots had a significantly positive impact on their vocabulary and grammar skills in writing English as a foreign language. Meanwhil, (Muthmainnah et al., 2024) study, titled Improving Speaking Skills and Reducing Speaking Anxiety with AI-CiciBot: An Experimental Study on Indonesian EFL Students, found that the use of AI-CiciBot had a significantly positive impact on improving speaking skills and reducing speaking anxiety among Indonesian EFL students, as reflected in the significant increase in average scores between the pre-test and post-test.

(Harisha et al., 2024) study, titled Exploring the Effectiveness of Chatbots in English Language Learning: Perspectives of Undergraduate Students, found that chatbots have the ability to provide fast, personalized, and effective assistance in English language learning. However, the study also revealed some limitations of chatbots, such as potential errors and platform constraints. (Du & Daniel, 2024) also emphasized that the use of AI chatbots in English learning can accelerate the learning process, reduce speaking anxiety, and improve students' pronunciation, confidence, engagement, and motivation. Meanwhile, (Han, 2021) in his research revealed that EFL students in Korea who used AI chatbots experienced improved speaking and listening skills, changes in their motivation and attitude towards learning, and a reduction in anxiety. However, they also faced challenges regarding speech speed.

Recent studies have highlighted the potential of technology in enhancing English language learning. (Syahira et al., 2023) study found that the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the English language learning process has a significantly positive impact on improving students' English writing skills, achieved through rapid, accurate, and effective feedback. Additionally, (Pokhrel, 2024) research showed that AI voice chatbots can improve students' fluency by reducing pauses and hesitations, while also enhancing their interactive quality. (Pangestu & Suwartono, 2024) also discovered that AI makes a significant contribution to English language learning through personalization and automated evaluation. Furthermore, (Hasanah et al., 2025) revealed that the majority of students (54.94%) hold a positive perception towards the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in improving English speaking skills in boarding schools, resulting in enhanced speaking skills, confidence, and a more interactive and dynamic learning environment.

The study conducted by (Gurusinga et al., 2025) examined the implementation of interactive chatbots based on Artificial Intelligence (AI) in improving students' English-speaking skills at SMA Negeri 1 Deli Tua. Using a quantitative experimental design, students were divided into control and experimental groups. The results showed a significant improvement in the experimental group that practiced with the chatbot, particularly in terms of fluency, pronunciation, and self-confidence. The pre-test and post-test data indicated a greater increase in scores for the experimental group compared to the control group, supported by questionnaires revealing that the majority of students felt the chatbot provided more opportunities to practice and offered useful direct feedback. Nevertheless, the study also noted challenges such as limited internet access, the chatbot's restricted ability to understand context, and the reduced presence of non-verbal interaction. These findings affirm that AI-based chatbots are both innovative and effective learning media for supporting students' speaking skills, particularly in creating a more interactive and personalized learning environment.

The study conducted by (Suciati et al., 2023) highlighted students' perceptions of the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) applications in speaking learning. Using a descriptive qualitative method through questionnaires, interviews, observations, and documentation, the research found that the majority of students gave positive responses: 30.8% strongly agreed and 38.5% agreed

that AI plays an important role in supporting speaking skills. The main findings indicated that AI applications are beneficial in improving pronunciation, providing quick evaluation, and offering additional practice opportunities outside of class hours. However, the study also identified several challenges, such as limited social interaction, dependence on technology, lack of accurate feedback, limited learning materials, and the absence of emotional aspects in interactions. Alternatives proposed by the students included developing materials aligned with the Semester Learning Plan (RPS) or providing a speaking book integrated with AI applications. Thus, this study emphasizes that although AI has great potential to support speaking learning, its use needs to be synergized with other learning resources to achieve more optimal results.

The study conducted by (Inggris, 2025) discussed the impact of using Artificial Intelligence (AI) on elementary school students' speaking skills in English subjects through a literature study method. The findings indicated that AI can make a positive contribution to improving speaking ability, particularly through personalized feedback and flexible practice opportunities. Several AI-based applications such as Duolingo, ELSA, ELAi App, Lyra Virtual Assistant, Google Assistant, and Lingokids were proven to significantly support the development of students' speaking skills. However, the study also emphasized the potential negative impacts, including a decline in social emotional skills, dependency on technology, and a tendency for students to become passive learners. Therefore, the active role of teachers and parents is needed to provide guidance and supervision so that the use of AI can be optimized and does not cause harmful effects.

Santri's have diverse perceptions of AI utilization, shaped not only by their exposure to technology but also by the cultural and religious values that characterize the pesantren environment. Previous studies (Gurusinga et al., 2025; Suciati et al., 2023; Hartati et al., 2025) have consistently shown that AI chatbots and applications can contribute significantly to improving speaking skills through increased practice opportunities, real-time feedback, and enhanced confidence. At the same time, these studies also highlight notable challenges, including limited social interaction, dependency on technology, and contextual restrictions in certain learning environments. Building on this scholarly foundation, the present study seeks to explore how santri at Tarbiyatul Banat Islamic Boarding School perceive the use of AI chatbots in speaking lessons and to identify the factors that shape their views. The findings are expected to offer insights into how AI can be effectively integrated into pesantren-based learning while respecting institutional traditions, thereby fostering innovative teaching methods that may serve as models for other educational institutions.

METHOD

This research uses a descriptive-qualitative approach as explained by (Ruhansih, 2017). Descriptive qualitative research methods aim to provide a clear and detailed description of the phenomena observed using language that is straightforward and easy to understand. In the context of this study, the approach was used to explore santri perceptions of the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in speaking skills at Tarbiyatul Banat Islamic Boarding School.

To gain a deeper understanding, this research uses thematic analysis with a phenomenological approach. Thematic analysis is used to provide an overview of content analysis and thematic analysis in qualitative research (Sitasari, 2022). Meanwhile, phenomenology aims to understand the subjective experience of students towards the use of AI in learning to speak English. With this approach, the research can illustrate the extent to which AI contributes to the development of students' speaking skills as well as the challenges they face.

The population in this study were students of Pondok Pesantren Tarbiyatul Banat who actively participated in the English learning program. The sample was selected purposively, namely students who have used AI technology such as chatbots or AI-based applications in their speaking practice. The purposive sampling technique allows researchers to select participants

who are most relevant to the research objectives (Palinkas et al., 2015). According to (Lenaini, 2021), this study found that purposive sampling is an effective sampling technique in qualitative research, because it can help researchers ascertain the respondents they want to use in the study.

Data was collected through three main methods: observation, interviews, and documentation.

1. Observation: The researcher observed the students' speaking practice sessions using AI to identify how this technology is utilized in learning. The observations also recorded the reactions of the students and the difficulties they faced when interacting with AI in speaking practice.
2. Interview: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with students and English teachers to explore their perceptions of the effectiveness of AI in improving speaking skills. The interviews also covered the students' experiences in using AI as well as the challenges they perceived.
3. Documentation: Additional data was collected through recordings of AI speaking practice sessions and transcripts of conversations. Ethical approval was obtained from the participants before recording these sessions for research purposes.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis as described by (Dwi Kristanto & Sri Padmi, 2020). This analysis process involved coding the data to identify key themes that emerged in the interviews and observations. The themes identified included santri's perceptions of the benefits of AI, challenges in its use, as well as its impact on improving their speaking skills.
In addition, a phenomenological approach was used to understand the individual experiences of students in using AI as a speaking learning tool. This analysis helps in uncovering factors that influence the effectiveness of AI in English language learning, such as students' motivation, accessibility of technology, and interaction with AI in the learning context.
Through this descriptive-qualitative approach, the research is expected to provide in-depth insights into the role of AI in the students' speaking skills at Pondok Pesantren Tarbiyatul Banat as well as offer recommendations for the development of technology-based learning methods in the pesantren environment.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study are presented narratively, drawing on in-depth interviews with several students from Tarbiyatul Banat Islamic Boarding School concerning their experiences with AI chatbots in English speaking practice. The interviews provide a detailed portrayal of the perceived benefits, skill improvements, and challenges faced by the students within the unique context of a boarding school learning environment. The findings capture both the potential advantages and the practical constraints of integrating AI technology into language learning in such settings.

Enhancement of Speaking Confidence

One of the most prominent findings of this study relates to the significant role that AI chatbots play in fostering students' confidence when speaking English. Before the introduction of AI assisted practice, many students reported experiencing considerable hesitation and heightened anxiety when required to speak in front of teachers or peers. This reluctance was frequently attributed to a fear of making mistakes, the discomfort of receiving corrections in a public setting, and the potential embarrassment that might follow such errors. These emotional and psychological barriers often hindered their willingness to engage actively in speaking activities, thereby limiting opportunities for oral language development.

The introduction of AI chatbots mitigated these issues by providing a neutral, non-judgmental conversational partner. Students reported feeling more comfortable experimenting with sentence construction and expressing ideas without the risk of negative social consequences. As one student remarked: When I practice with AI, I feel braver. I'm not afraid of making mistakes because AI doesn't laugh at me. Over time, this increased confidence extended beyond AI interactions, encouraging greater participation in classroom discussions and oral presentations.

A Comfortable and Judgment-Free Practice Environment

The students consistently characterized their interactions with AI chatbots as more relaxed, comfortable, and free from the pressures typically associated with face to face communication. Unlike conversations with peers or teachers, these interactions were not accompanied by the perceived risk of negative judgment, allowing learners to focus entirely on expressing their ideas, experimenting with unfamiliar vocabulary, and exploring varied grammatical structures. For students who were naturally shy or introverted, this judgment free environment held particular value, as it reduced communication anxiety and created a sense of psychological safety. Consequently, they were more inclined to participate in speaking practice on a regular basis, thereby supporting consistent oral language development.

One student noted: When I talk to AI, I feel relaxed and not nervous, so I can focus more on expressing what I want to say. Several students also mentioned that this stress-free learning atmosphere made English speaking practice more enjoyable, thereby enhancing intrinsic motivation. The combination of comfort, enjoyment, and reduced anxiety appeared to foster sustained engagement with the learning process.

Vocabulary Enrichment

In addition to fostering greater confidence in speaking, the use of AI chatbots was found to make a substantial contribution to students' vocabulary development. Every interaction with the chatbot created opportunities for learners to encounter and acquire new words or expressions, whether these arose naturally within the chatbot's responses or were introduced through direct corrective feedback. Students particularly appreciated the immediacy with which they could seek clarification upon encountering unfamiliar terms, enabling them to resolve misunderstandings in real time. This prompt and accessible form of feedback supported a process of active, intentional, and contextually relevant vocabulary acquisition, enhancing both retention and the ability to apply newly learned language in subsequent speaking tasks.

One participant explained: If there's a word I don't know, I ask AI. So, I've been able to remember more new words. Over time, students reported that they could recall and apply newly acquired vocabulary in other contexts, indicating meaningful and durable learning. Importantly, the adaptive nature of AI responses—tailored to the user's proficiency level ensured that vocabulary input was appropriately challenging without being overwhelming.

Pronunciation Improvement

Pronunciation emerged as another critical skill area that was positively impacted by the use of AI chatbots. Several platforms employed in this context were equipped with advanced features such as speech recognition technology and phonetic transcription tools, enabling the provision of real-time, precise feedback on pronunciation accuracy. This immediate and targeted corrective input allowed students to detect and address pronunciation errors promptly, thereby reducing the likelihood of reinforcing incorrect articulatory habits. By enabling repeated practice of problematic sounds and words, AI chatbots offered learners a structured and supportive environment in which to refine their pronunciation skills, ultimately contributing to greater speech clarity and intelligibility in subsequent communicative interactions.

One student noted: The AI tells me if my pronunciation is wrong, so I can fix it right away and try again until it sounds correct. Students observed that repeated pronunciation practice with AI improved the clarity and comprehensibility of their speech, which in turn boosted their speaking confidence. The ability to repeat words or phrases multiple times, without concern for exhausting a human listener's patience, was identified as a key advantage.

Limited Access Due to Boarding School Regulations

Despite the considerable benefits identified, students also encountered notable challenges, particularly with regard to restricted access to AI chatbot technology. Institutional regulations within the boarding school setting impose strict limitations on the use of mobile devices and internet connectivity, effectively confining AI-assisted speaking activities to predetermined time slots or teacher supervised sessions. These restrictions, while consistent with the school's cultural values and disciplinary framework, significantly reduced the frequency and continuity of practice

opportunities. As a consequence, students were unable to establish consistent engagement patterns, which are essential for reinforcing newly acquired language skills and sustaining long-term progress in speaking proficiency.

One student noted: At the boarding school, we can't use our phones anytime we want, so practice is limited. These restrictions hindered the establishment of a regular practice routine, with some students reporting slower progress or difficulty retaining newly learned vocabulary due to infrequent engagement.

This constraint underscores the need for implementation strategies that harmonize with the school's policies and cultural values, ensuring that AI integration complements rather than conflicts with institutional norms.

DISCUSSION

The collective findings of this study underscore that AI chatbots possess substantial and multifaceted potential to enhance English-speaking skills in the unique educational and cultural environment of Islamic boarding schools. These technological tools offer a supportive and adaptive platform that directly addresses some of the most common challenges in language acquisition—namely, lack of confidence, anxiety about making mistakes, and limited opportunities for meaningful practice. By providing an interactive environment where students can converse freely, AI chatbots enable learners to practice language in a judgment-free space. This in turn fosters risk-taking in language use, allowing students to experiment with sentence structures, pronunciation, and vocabulary without the fear of ridicule or embarrassment. Such psychological safety is essential in contexts where public errors might otherwise inhibit participation. Nevertheless, the magnitude of these benefits is closely tied to the regularity and quality of practice, both of which are currently constrained by institutional regulations regarding technology use.

Given these constraints, optimizing the role of AI chatbots within boarding school environments necessitates a carefully balanced approach. This balance must harmonize the potential of technological innovation with the regulatory and cultural frameworks that define the boarding school's identity. The integration process should not merely focus on making technology available but should instead ensure that its use is systematically embedded within the learning process. Possible strategies include the incorporation of chatbot-based speaking activities into scheduled classroom sessions, where usage can be supervised by teachers and aligned with curricular objectives. Additionally, the development of offline or locally hosted AI speaking applications could provide consistent practice opportunities without requiring unrestricted internet access, thereby meeting both pedagogical and policy requirements.

The perspectives shared by students in this study affirm that, when implemented thoughtfully, AI chatbots can function as an effective complement to traditional language instruction rather than as a replacement. Their value lies in their ability to create a safe, responsive, and personalized practice environment, thereby addressing persistent barriers to speaking proficiency. Many students reported that such environments helped reduce hesitation and anxiety, encouraged more frequent speaking attempts, and facilitated targeted improvement in pronunciation and vocabulary. Over time, these benefits could be amplified and sustained through deliberate integration into structured learning experiences. Such integration should also include mechanisms for reflection and feedback, allowing learners to consciously evaluate their progress and identify areas for further development.

From the author's perspective, these findings should not be interpreted solely as proof of technological advantage but as an invitation to rethink and reconfigure language learning strategies to better align with the realities of the boarding school context. The inherent limitations such as restricted device use, supervised internet access, and the necessity of aligning learning activities with religious and cultural norms are not insurmountable obstacles. Instead, they should be seen as design parameters that can inspire creative instructional solutions. For example,

designing chatbot activities that draw upon culturally relevant themes or integrating AI-based language practice into religious and academic subjects could enhance both acceptance and effectiveness. Such approaches preserve the cultural and moral integrity of the institution while enabling students to benefit from technological advancements.

A key challenge lies in bridging the gap between the possibilities offered by modern learning tools and the traditions and norms that form the foundation of boarding school education. This requires not only technological adaptation but also a shift in instructional design philosophy. Technology should be embedded within a pedagogical framework that reflects the institution's values, prioritizes learner autonomy, and emphasizes consistent engagement. This may involve revising lesson plans to incorporate AI-based activities in a manner that complements, rather than disrupts, existing routines. It may also entail developing teacher training programs to equip educators with the skills necessary to facilitate AI-assisted learning effectively.

In the author's view, successful integration of AI chatbots must be approached as a collaborative process involving educators, administrators, and students. Merely introducing the technology is insufficient; it must be coupled with clear guidelines for usage, appropriate training for teachers, and active involvement of students in shaping how the technology is applied. When teachers assume the role of facilitators, they can guide students toward making the most of chatbot interactions, ensuring that every exchange contributes meaningfully to linguistic development. Simultaneously, administrative support is essential to provide the necessary infrastructure and policy flexibility to accommodate technological use without compromising institutional discipline and values.

Ultimately, the true measure of success in implementing AI chatbot technology for language learning will depend less on the sophistication of the tool itself and more on the willingness of the educational community to adapt, innovate, and engage with it in a constructive manner. If these conditions are met through thoughtful planning, context-sensitive adaptation, and sustained collaboration AI chatbots can evolve from being supplementary tools into integral components of a transformative language learning experience. In this way, they have the potential not only to enhance English-speaking proficiency but also to cultivate learner confidence, autonomy, and adaptability, ensuring that students are better equipped to navigate both academic and real-world communication challenges.

This perspective is supported by (Sun, 2023), who found that technology-mediated language learning, especially with AI and speech recognition tools, provides learners with safe opportunities for repeated practice, fosters greater learner autonomy, and enhances pronunciation accuracy. Similarly, according to(Menteri Kesehatan, 2024), mobile and AI-based language learning tools can create highly personalized and engaging experiences that boost motivation and performance, especially when integrated into structured learning environments. These expert insights reinforce the view that AI chatbots, when implemented thoughtfully, can serve as a powerful complement to traditional speaking instruction, even in settings with strict institute onal guidelines.

Furthermore, findings from (Robiatul Adawiyah & Budik Kusworo, 2025) on the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in English language learning at MA Raudlatul Ulum Putri also support this perspective. The study highlights that flexibility in curriculum design, coupled with active teacher-student collaboration, significantly boosts creativity, engagement, and self-confidence among learners in a pesantren-based school. This aligns with the current study's emphasis on creating a safe, student-centered environment for language practice. By integrating project-based activities, contextual materials, and interactive methods, the Independent Curriculum fosters a learning atmosphere that not only enhances linguistic skills but also nurtures learner autonomy an essential foundation for successfully adopting AI chatbot technology in English speaking instruction.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study clearly demonstrate that AI chatbots hold significant and multifaceted potential to enhance English-speaking skills among students at Tarbiyatul Banat Islamic Boarding School. They do more than simply offer an alternative learning tool; they create a psychologically safe and adaptive practice environment that nurtures self-confidence, reduces speaking anxiety, expands vocabulary repertoire, and refines pronunciation accuracy through real-time, individualized feedback. Students benefit from the opportunity to experiment with language freely, correct mistakes without the social pressure of peer judgment, and engage in repeated practice that matches their personal pace and proficiency level. These outcomes are particularly valuable in the boarding school setting, where traditional classroom speaking opportunities can be limited by time, resources, and learner hesitation.

However, the study also reveals that these advantages cannot be fully realized without addressing the institutional and regulatory constraints that currently limit consistent practice most notably, restrictions on mobile device and internet access. These constraints highlight the necessity for integration models that align technological innovation with the cultural and moral values of the boarding school while respecting its established discipline. The success of such models depends not on the sophistication of the technology alone, but on the collective readiness of teachers, administrators, and students to adapt, innovate, and collaborate in reshaping the language learning process.

In the broader perspective, this research underscores the importance of a holistic approach that combines pedagogical innovation, stakeholder engagement, and technological adaptation. Future initiatives should not only focus on creating controlled-access or offline AI platforms but also on developing culturally relevant content and teacher-led integration strategies that ensure AI chatbots complement, rather than disrupt, the school's traditions. When these elements are harmonized, AI chatbots have the potential to serve as a transformative bridge between modern digital learning resources and time honored educational values producing not only linguistically competent students but also confident, autonomous, and adaptive lifelong learners.Moreover, the implications of this study extend beyond the context of Tarbiyatul Banat Islamic Boarding School, offering valuable insights for other educational institutions particularly those in culturally and religiously grounded environments. By adopting a context-sensitive approach, schools can leverage AI chatbots as a catalyst for innovation that enhances student engagement, promotes independent learning, and nurtures communicative competence. Ultimately, the successful integration of AI into language learning should be viewed not merely as a technological upgrade, but as part of a broader educational transformation that prepares students to thrive in a globalized, digitally connected world without compromising their cultural identity and institutional values.

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