

Investigating the effectiveness of practicing English conversation with ChatGPT in improving non-English majored students' English speaking skills at Nguyen Tat Thanh University

Pham Thi Truc Nhu

Foreign Languages Center, Nguyen Tat Thanh University
pntnphu@ntt.edu.vn

Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of practicing English conversations with ChatGPT to enhance speaking skills of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners at Nguyen Tat Thanh University, specifically focusing on four key criteria: conversational fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary use, and grammatical accuracy. In this study, 60 students were divided into six groups for a quasi-experimental design with a combination between non-equivalent groups design and pretest-posttest design. Four groups were trained with ChatGPT for eight weeks, while two control groups were not. Speaking abilities were measured through pretest, mid-test, and posttest assessments. The findings revealed significant improvements in conversational fluency, vocabulary, and grammar for the ChatGPT-trained groups, while pronunciation showed minimal progress. These results suggest that integrating ChatGPT into English teaching curricula could help non-English majored students at Nguyen Tat Thanh University enhance their English communication skills.

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Keywords

artificial intelligence (AI), ChatGPT, EFL learners, NTTU students, English speaking skills

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background to this Study

In today's world, English is widely recognized as a lingua franca, which means essential in numerous fields such as education and business. Being proficient in English allows access to global knowledge and job opportunities. However, many Vietnamese university students, especially non-English majors, struggle with speaking fluently due to limited practice environments. With the attempt to improve fluency, many students attend language courses, yet the cost from 3 to 5 million VND per month can be a financial burden. Fortunately, technological advancements like ChatGPT offer an affordable alternative. Released by OpenAI in 2022, ChatGPT is a conversational AI that provides both text

and voice chat features. This tool allows users to practice English in a simulated conversational environment, thereby helping them improve speaking skills.

1.2 Literature Review

In this study, ChatGPT is adopted to enhance English speaking skills of learners, as a substantial body of research indicates that this AI offers English learners valuable opportunities to practice as well as refine their language abilities.

1.1.1 Competency in English

Despite imperfections in phonetics, ChatGPT excels in vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension, even outperforming many Vietnamese students in English proficiency [1-3].

1.1.2 User friendliness

Voice-enabled ChatGPT is easily accessible to EFL learners on any smartphone with iOS or Android. Users can choose the free ChatGPT 3.5 version or upgrade to ChatGPT 4.0 for 475,000 VND, which offer unlimited access to the latest features. This upgrade is still significantly more affordable than enrolling in English language courses. Additionally, ChatGPT is user-friendly, with a simple, intuitive interface designed to provide a seamless experience, enhanced by user feedback [1, 4, 5].

1.1.4 Conversation Practice

ChatGPT provides Vietnamese EFL learners with a 24/7 English practice environment, thus fostering reflection and fluency through regular interactions [1, 4, 6-10]. It boosts learners' confidence by creating a low-pressure setting that reduces anxiety and encourages shy students to engage in more speaking practice [7, 11]. Additionally, students feel more comfortable receiving corrections and feedback from ChatGPT, helping them overcome the fear of making mistakes [7]. Learners are also motivated by the flexibility to select topics from daily life to academic subjects and freely express their opinions or ask questions [1]. When they struggle to understand concepts, ChatGPT offers detailed, bulleted explanations to enhance comprehension [1].

1.1.5 Vocabulary expansion

During conversations, ChatGPT can build up students' lexical resources. If students lack the vocabulary to express their ideas, they can provide Vietnamese words and ChatGPT will translate into English. ChatGPT can also offer examples to reinforce learners' word comprehension and its use. Meanwhile, more suitable words for speaking context can be suggested by ChatGPT to aid learners in expressing their ideas akin to native speakers [1, 2, 9, 10].

1.1.6 Grammar correction

One of ChatGPT's features that can benefit EFL learners is grammar correction. During interaction, ChatGPT can identify and correct grammatical errors in learners' speech [9, 10]. For further clarification, ChatGPT can also provide learners with explicit explanations and examples of the grammatical rules to enhance their understanding [9, 10, 12].

1.1.7 Pronunciation guidance

Text-based ChatGPT can provide phonetic transcriptions and explanations of pronunciation rules. Moreover, it can pronounce words, entered in the chat box, demonstrating learners proper pronunciation. Another way to use ChatGPT for pronunciation practice is having it create and demonstrate sentences for learners to repeat [4,10].

1.1.8 Cultural context

Apart from language knowledge, ChatGPT also offers insights into cultural knowledge by giving information about idioms, customs and traditions of the target language. Understanding about English-speaking cultures facilitates communication in real-life situations and helps learners avoid taboos [9].

1.1.9 Personalized learning

ChatGPT designs personalized learning paths tailored to students' needs and interests, thus promoting learning autonomy [4, 7, 10]. It also creates dialogue materials that are suitable for various English proficiency levels, especially learners at the A2 level (IELTS 3.0-4.0) [4, 7, 10]. During practice, students can work at their own pace and receive immediate feedback, which helps them progress more quickly [4, 7, 10]. For test preparation, ChatGPT evaluates learners' performance based on specific exam criteria, providing approximate scores and explanations for tests like IELTS and TOEFL [13]. However, researchers have raised concerns that learners may become excessively dependent on ChatGPT, potentially weakening their critical and analytical skills [5, 14]. Additionally, as ChatGPT draws from a wide range of online sources, it can occasionally provide factually incorrect information, posing a risk of misinformation [10, 12].

Recognizing the advantages and disadvantages of ChatGPT, this study aims to compare the effectiveness of students' speaking skills before and after the implementation of ChatGPT. The effectiveness was evaluated based on four criteria: pronunciation, fluency, grammar, and vocabulary. As a result, the primary research question guiding this paper is: 'How effective is practicing English conversations with ChatGPT in improving speaking skills, measured in four criteria: fluency, pronunciation, use of vocabulary and grammar?'



2 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study used a quasi-experimental combination design that blends non-equivalent groups and pretest-posttest designs to evaluate whether improvements in English conversation skills were due to ChatGPT interactions or other factors.

The study compared test and control groups, involving 60 participants divided into six groups: N1-N4 (test groups) and N5-N6 (control groups). All participants took an initial speaking test to assess their skills. The test groups then engaged in an eight-week training session which involves practicing English conversations with ChatGPT for 30 minutes, 3-4 times, while the control groups did not. The participants of test group selected speaking topics, interacted with ChatGPT and received feedbacks after each response. Both groups completed identical speaking tests before, in the middle, and after the training period to track progress, and average scores were collected and analyzed. Participants were instructed to avoid other activities that could improve their speaking skills outside of the study to ensure any improvements were due to the intervention.

2.2 Participants

The study included 60 non-English majored students at NTTU with varying English-speaking skills, ranging from 1.0 to 9.0 on the IELTS scale. "Non-English majored students" refers to students whose primary field of study is not English. More importantly, participants with diverse English-speaking skills were selected to evaluate ChatGPT's effectiveness across different speaking abilities. Prior to the pre-test, participants provided personal and research-related information, and each was assigned a random ID number to protect privacy. The collected data was securely stored and only accessible to the researcher and NTTU who funded this study.

2.3 Research tools

2.3.1 Speaking test

The speaking tests in this study were based on IELTS Speaking Test part 1, which involves a 3 to 5-minute interview where the researchers acted as the interviewers and the participants acted as the interviewees. Participants answered several questions on a wide range of topics, from familiar subjects like jobs, studies, and hometowns, to more challenging ones such as astrology

and the solar system. Their speaking abilities were assessed using four criteria: fluency, pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. Each criterion was scored on a scale from 1.0 to 9.0, following the IELTS public band descriptors, published on British Council website [15]. While the official IELTS test only assigns whole band scores for each criterion, this study accepts quarter, half, and three-quarter bands to provide a more precise reflection of student progress. For instance, in the IELTS test, a student who does not fully meet the requirements for Band 6.0 would typically receive Band 5, even if their performance exceeds that of Band 5. In this study, the research could assign intermediate scores like 5.25, 5.5, or 5.75 to capture incremental improvements. The IELTS Speaking Test Part 1 format was chosen for its simulation of everyday conversations, which participants are likely to encounter in real life. Additionally, the well-defined IELTS rubric made assessing participants' performance easier, more consistent and accurate.

2.3.2 Voice-chat GPT

Participants used the voice-chat function of ChatGPT model 4.0 on their mobiles to practice.

2.3.3 Keep-track files

During the training session, keep-track files recorded students' learning journeys. Participants noted their practice duration, topics, perceptions, and challenges faced while interacting with ChatGPT. The researcher used these files to monitor participation and provide immediate support as needed.

2.3.4 Microsoft Excel software

This software was used to record the participants' speaking results after tests and calculated for further analysis and discussion

2.4 Procedure of data collection

Participants were first briefed on the study's procedures, with a demonstration of the speaking assessment provided to ensure their understanding, and any questions or concerns were clarified. Then, they completed three tests: one before the eight-week training period, another after four weeks, and the final test at the end of the eight weeks. Their performances were recorded and assessed using the IELTS scale from 1.0 to 9.0.

2.5 Data Analysis

The researcher entered the pretest, mid-test, and posttest scores into Excel and calculated the mean

speaking scores for each group (N1 to N6) at each testing point. Then, a comparison was made between the average scores of the test groups (N1 to N4) and the control groups (N5 to N6) to evaluate the intervention's effectiveness. The results were visually represented in a bar chart, which displayed the mean scores for both groups across the three testing points, highlighting differences in improvement over time.

3 Results

3.1 Fluency

The average fluency scores for each group (Table 1) were calculated by averaging individual participants' scores. The mean fluency scores for the test and control groups (Table 2) were then computed by averaging the scores of groups N1 to N4 for the test group and N5 to N6 for the control group. A bar chart (Figure 1) the differences between the test and control groups after the intervention.

Table 1 The average fluency scores of each group

Tests	Test groups				Control groups	
	N1	N2	N3	N4	N5	N6
Pre-test	4.30	4.20	3.80	3.80	3.90	3.90
Mid-test	4.63	4.53	4.15	4.15	3.90	3.90
Post-test	4.93	4.85	4.50	4.45	3.90	3.90

Table 2 The mean fluency scores of test groups and control groups

Tests	Test groups	Control groups
Pre-test	4.03	3.90
Mid-test	4.36	3.90
Post-test	4.68	3.90

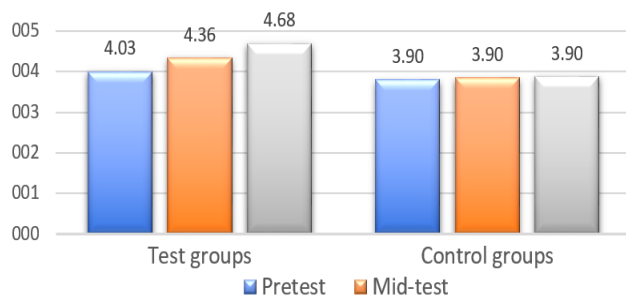


Figure 1 Participants' mean fluency scores of test groups and control groups in three tests.

Overall, the findings reveal that the test groups who underwent ChatGPT training, demonstrated consistent and substantial improvements in fluency.

Before training, the mean fluency scores of the test and control groups were similar, at 3.90 and 4.03, indicating comparable speaking proficiency. After four weeks of ChatGPT practice, the test groups' scores rose to 4.36 (an 8 % improvement), while the control groups remained at 4.03, showing no progress. After eight weeks, the gap was widened further, with the test groups' mean scores increasing to 4.68 (a 16 % total improvement), while the control groups stayed unchanged. This suggests that the more time participants spent training with ChatGPT, the greater their fluency improvement compared to the control groups.

The test groups' mean fluency score increased by 8 % after just four weeks, highlighting the immediate benefits of ChatGPT training. After eight weeks, their scores rose by a total of 16 %, indicating that the gains were both immediate and cumulative, as extended exposure allowed participants to refine their fluency further.

3.2 Pronunciation

The average pronunciation scores for each group (Table 3) were determined by calculating the mean of the individual participants' scores. The overall fluency scores for the test and control groups (Table 4) were then derived by averaging the scores from groups N1-N4 for the test group and N5-N6 for the control group. A bar chart (Figure 2) clearly illustrates the differences between the test and control groups following the intervention.

Table 3 The average pronunciation scores of each group

Tests	Test groups				Control groups	
	N1	N2	N3	N4	N5	N6
Pre-test	4.00	4.30	3.60	3.40	3.60	3.80
Mid-test	4.15	4.35	3.65	3.55	3.60	4.85
Post-test	4.15	4.35	3.65	3.60	3.60	3.80

Table 4 The mean pronunciation scores of test groups and control groups

Tests	Test groups	Control groups
Pre-test	3.83	3.70
Mid-test	3.93	3.73
Post-test	3.94	3.70

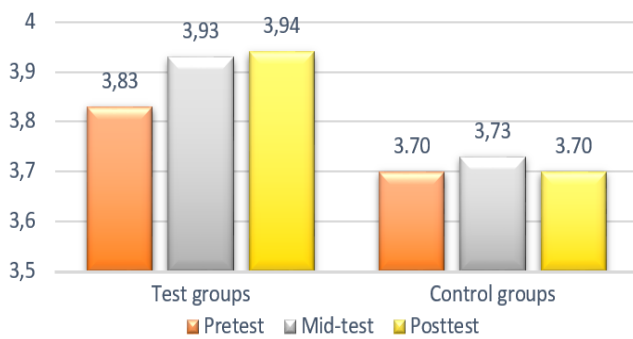


Figure 2 Participants’ mean pronunciation scores of test groups and control groups in three tests.

Overall, having English conversations with ChatGPT led to slight improvements for participants. At the pretest stage, the test and control groups had similar pronunciation scores, with the test groups slightly ahead by 0.13 points. After four weeks of ChatGPT training, the test groups' mean score rose to 3.93, a 2.6 % improvement, while the control groups saw a minor increase to 3.73 (0.08 %). Although both groups improved, the test groups showed greater progress, gaining 0.1 points compared to the control groups' 0.03-point gain. By the posttest, the test groups had improved by 0.11 points overall, while the control groups returned to their pretest scores, indicating no sustained progress. The test groups consistently showed modest improvement, highlighting the effectiveness of ChatGPT training in fostering gradual improvements in speaking skills, whereas the control groups saw minimal or no change without intervention. In terms of pronunciation improvement, the test groups' mean score rose from 3.83 at the pretest to 3.93 after four weeks (a 2.6 % improvement), and to 3.94 by the posttest, totaling a 2.9 % improvement. While the initial gains were sustained, the rate of improvement slowed, suggesting that extended practice with ChatGPT did not guarantee continuous progress in pronunciation.

3.3. Use of vocabulary

The average vocabulary scores for each group (Table 5) were calculated by averaging the individual participants' scores. The mean vocabulary scores for the test and control groups (Table 6) were then computed by averaging the scores of groups N1 to N4 for the test group and N5 to N6 for the control group. A bar chart (Figure 3) highlights the differences between the test and control groups after the ChatGPT training.

Table 5 The average vocabulary scores of each group

Tests	Test groups				Control groups	
	N1	N2	N3	N4	N5	N6
Pre-test	4.43	4.20	3.90	3.80	3.60	3.80
Mid-test	4.53	4.53	4.28	4.15	3.60	3.85
Post-test	4.80	4.85	4.60	4.50	3.75	4.00

Table 6 The mean vocabulary scores of test groups and control groups

Tests	Test groups	Control groups
Pre-test	4.00	3.80
Mid-test	4.34	3.85
Post-test	4.69	3.88

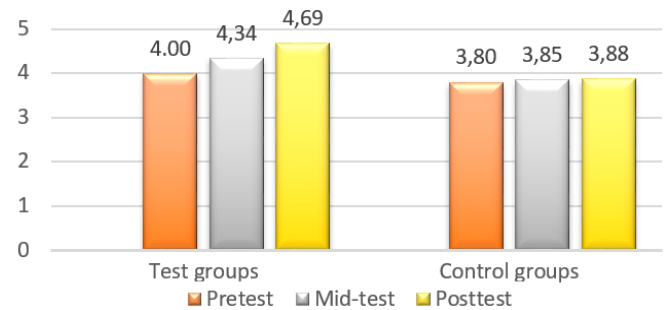


Figure 3 Participants’ mean vocabulary scores of test groups and control groups in three tests.

Generally, the data clearly indicates that the intervention was effective for the vocabulary, leading to consistently significant improvements compared to the control groups.

Regarding the differences between groups training ChatGPT and those who did not, the test groups' scores increased consistently from the pretest (4.00) to the mid-test (4.34), and further to the posttest (4.69). In contrast, the control groups saw only slight gains, from 3.80 at the pretest to 3.88 by the posttest. The test groups showed a 17 % improvement overall, compared to the minimal 0.08-point increase in the control groups, indicating the intervention's effectiveness.

Regarding vocabulary progress, the test groups saw a 9 % improvement after the first phase and 17 % by the end of the training, demonstrating that ChatGPT training promoted vocabulary development throughout the study.

3.4 Use of Grammar

The average grammar scores for each group (Table 7) were calculated by taking the mean of individual participants' scores. The overall grammar scores for the



test and control groups (Table 8) were then determined by averaging the scores of groups N1 to N4 for the test group and N5 to N6 for the control group. A bar chart (Figure 4) visually emphasizes the differences between the test and control groups following the ChatGPT training.

Table 7 The average grammar scores of each group

Tests	Test groups				Control groups	
	N1	N2	N3	N4	N5	N6
Pre-test	4.00	4.40	3.90	3.80	3.60	4.00
Mid-test	4.33	4.70	4.28	4.15	3.60	4.10
Post-test	4.70	5.00	4.60	4.50	3.75	4.00

Table 8 The mean grammar scores of test groups and control groups

Tests	Test groups	Control groups
Pre-test	4.03	3.80
Mid-test	4.36	3.85
Post-test	4.70	3.88

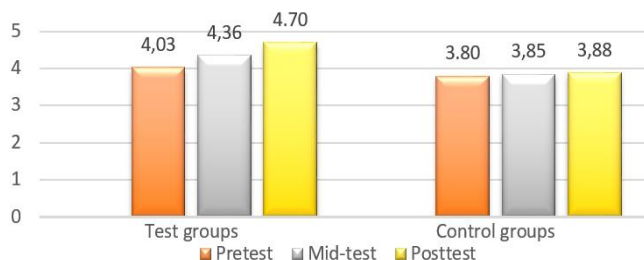


Figure 4 Participants' mean grammar scores of test groups and control groups in three tests.

Overall, the data suggests that practicing with ChatGPT benefited participants' grammatical use, leading to significant improvements in their performance.

Regarding the differences between groups training ChatGPT and those who did not, the scores of the former improved from 4.03 at the pre-test to 4.36 at the mid-test and reached 4.70 at the post-test, rising 17 % while the scores in the latter started at 3.80 at the pre-test, showed a slight increase to 3.85 at the mid-test, and slightly improved again to 3.88 at the post-test, rising marginally 2 %. The total improvement of the test groups highlights the substantial impact of the intervention over the entire course of the study. However, without the intervention, the control groups saw only a slight natural improvement.

Examining participants' progress of grammatical range and accuracy, the continued improvement from the mid-test to the posttest indicates that the participants

sustained and even slightly accelerated their progress as they continued with the intervention. This suggests that the benefits of the intervention were not only maintained, but also potentially deepened over time.

4 Discussion

The results from the three tests indicate that ChatGPT has a significantly positive impact on participants' speaking abilities, particularly in fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar.

For fluency, practicing English conversation with ChatGPT enhances participants' fluency, especially with sustained use over time, leading to a 16% increase in mean fluency scores. This aligns with the idea that ChatGPT facilitates authentic language interactions, fostering communicative competence and fluency [3, 4, 8, 10, 16].

Regarding pronunciation, while improvements were noted after training with ChatGPT, they were not substantial or sustainable over time, consistent with findings that ChatGPT can bolster pronunciation [16].

In terms of vocabulary, the test groups showed consistent and significant improvements compared to the control groups, demonstrating the intervention's effectiveness in enhancing vocabulary use. This gradual progress suggests that training had both immediate and ongoing impacts on vocabulary development, supporting the belief that ChatGPT elevates students' vocabulary skills [1, 2, 4, 9, 10, 16].

Lastly, the ChatGPT-based training significantly improved participants' grammatical use, with consistent progress across all phases and accelerated gains in later stages. This underscores the value of incorporating ChatGPT into language learning programs, as it provides personalized, interactive practice that leads to substantial improvements in grammatical accuracy and range. This aligns with the suggestion that ChatGPT can help learners by identifying and correcting errors, explaining grammar rules, and providing examples for better understanding [4, 10, 16].

5 Conclusion

This study, involving 60 non-English majored students at Nguyen Tat Thanh University, aimed to discover the potential of English conversation with ChatGPT in improving English speaking skills, in terms of fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. Three speaking tests were employed to explore participants' progress

related to these criteria. According to the statistical findings, there is a stark difference in progress between students adopting training and those who did not, thus underscoring the significant impact of the intervention. The quantitative data demonstrated that despite a short training, lasting only eight weeks, participants engaging in English conversation with Chat GPT, exhibited a clear improvement in their speaking skills in terms of fluency, vocabulary and grammar. However, the results also identified limited enhancement of pronunciation. Generally, after eight-week training, fluency, vocabulary and grammar scores increased gradually by about 15 %, or 0.5 IELTS score each while pronunciation recorded a growth of only 3 %.

The results of this study can serve as references for various stakeholders of Nguyen Tat Thanh University. These findings strongly advocate for integrating Chat GPT into English teaching curricula to give students more opportunities to practice speaking skills as this AI tool can address challenges such as limited classroom time and large class sizes by creating a more immersive English-speaking environment. Curricula can consider incorporating ChatGPT as a part of students' self-learning activities under teachers' instructions.

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Nghiên cứu hiệu quả của việc luyện tập hội thoại tiếng Anh với ChatGPT trong việc cải thiện kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh của sinh viên không chuyên tại Trường Đại học Nguyễn Tất Thành

Phạm Thị Trúc Như

Trung tâm Ngoại ngữ Trường Đại học Nguyễn Tất Thành

pttnhu@ntt.edu.vn

Tóm tắt Thiếu môi trường thực hành tiếng Anh đã gây cản trở đáng kể cho sinh viên Việt Nam trong việc giao tiếp tiếng Anh trôi chảy. Tuy nhiên, gần đây, ChatGPT với chức năng trò chuyện bằng giọng nói đã được sử dụng để giải quyết vấn đề này. Nghiên cứu này nhằm đánh giá hiệu quả của việc đối thoại tiếng Anh với ChatGPT trong việc cải thiện kỹ năng nói của sinh viên không chuyên ở Trường Đại học Nguyễn Tất Thành. Cụ thể, bốn khía cạnh của kỹ năng nói, bao gồm sự lưu loát trong giao tiếp, phát âm, từ vựng và khả năng sử dụng ngữ pháp, sẽ được xem xét. 60 sinh viên được chia thành sáu nhóm trong một thiết kế bán thực nghiệm, kết hợp giữa nghiên cứu nhóm không tương đương và bài kiểm tra trước - sau. Bốn nhóm can thiệp được đào tạo với ChatGPT trong vòng tám tuần, trong khi hai nhóm đối chứng thì không. Khả năng nói của các sinh viên được đánh giá qua ba lần kiểm tra: trước khi bắt đầu can thiệp, sau bốn tuần can thiệp và sau tám tuần can thiệp. Kết quả cho thấy sự cải thiện đáng kể về độ lưu loát trong giao tiếp, vốn từ vựng và ngữ pháp ở các nhóm được đào tạo với ChatGPT, trong khi phát âm chỉ cải thiện ở mức độ tối thiểu. Những kết quả này cho thấy việc tích hợp ChatGPT vào chương trình giảng dạy tiếng Anh có thể giúp sinh viên không chuyên tại Trường Đại học Nguyễn Tất Thành nâng cao kỹ năng giao tiếp tiếng Anh.

Từ khóa Trí tuệ nhân tạo (AI), Chat GPT, người học tiếng Anh như ngoại ngữ nước ngoài (EFL), sinh viên NTTU, kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh.

