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From Social Risk to Digital Sanctuary: EFL Learners' Perceptions of Emotionally Neutral AI in Oral Language Practice

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ABSTRACT

As generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) becomes increasingly integrated into second language (L2) education, its affective implications remain underexamined. This mixed-methods study investigates how 47 Iranian university-level English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners perceive AI-based speaking tools in relation to anxiety, communicative confidence, and emotional openness. Drawing on Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (AFH), the Willingness to Communicate (WTC) model, and the Computers Are Social Actors (CASA) framework, the study examines learner perceptions based on their ongoing, naturally occurring use of AI-mediated speaking tools. Descriptive quantitative findings indicate that participants perceive AI interaction as involving reduced evaluative pressure and increased willingness to experiment linguistically. Qualitative responses further indicate that learners view AI as a non-judgmental interlocutor that supports emotional openness and low-stakes self-disclosure. Rather than positioning AI as a replacement for human interaction, the findings suggest that learners view AI tools as preparatory rehearsal spaces that may support confidence development. This study extends existing research on affect, anxiety, and mediated communication in SLA by examining these constructs in AI-mediated speaking contexts.

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Oral proficiency is widely recognized as a central component of second language acquisition (SLA), yet speaking remains one of the most affectively demanding domains for learners of EFL. Despite sustained pedagogical efforts to promote oral participation, many learners experience heightened anxiety during speaking tasks, particularly in interactions involving teachers or peers (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). According to Krashen's (1982) AFH, emotional variables such as fear, embarrassment, and stress may inhibit language processing and production by raising an internal "filter" that constrains acquisition.

The idea that reduced social presence may facilitate participation predates contemporary AI technologies. Early research in computer-mediated communication suggested that environments with fewer nonverbal evaluative cues can reduce inhibition and increase participation (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986; Warschauer, 1997). Within computer-assisted language learning (CALL) research, mediated environments have long been associated with altered dynamics of social presence, risk-taking, and learner agency (Chapelle, 2001; Warschauer, 1997). The emergence of generative AI tools invites renewed examination of these affective affordances in voice-based, interactive contexts.

Even in student-centered classrooms, the perceived risk of negative evaluation may reduce learners' WTC, limit linguistic experimentation, and constrain spontaneous speech (MacIntyre et al., 1998; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). While instructors strive to foster supportive environments, the interpersonal dynamics of face-to-face interaction inevitably involve elements of social accountability and judgment.

AI-based speaking tools such as ChatGPT, Duolingo AI, and Google Gemini simulate conversational exchange while minimizing many visible markers of human evaluation (e.g., facial expressions, tone shifts, or immediate peer comparison). Some learners report experiencing these tools as low-pressure environments for rehearsal (Dennis, 2024; Fathi et al., 2024). In the present study, the term "digital sanctuary" refers specifically to a learner-perceived reduction in evaluative threat during AI-mediated speaking. The term does not imply the absence of emotional complexity; rather, it denotes a contextual lowering of perceived social consequences. It is used as an interpretive construct rather than a directly measured variable. In this paper, "AI-mediated speaking" is used as an umbrella term to refer to interactions with AI-based speaking tools.

The study title describes AI as “emotionally neutral,” a framing that warrants explicit clarification. Emotional neutrality is not treated here as an inherent property of AI systems. Instead, it is conceptualized as a learner-perceived affordance — an interpretive outcome of the absence of human moral judgment — rather than a technical characteristic of AI platforms. Drawing on the CASA framework (Reeves & Nass, 1996), users often attribute social presence and interpersonal qualities to interactive technologies. In this study, emotional neutrality is operationalized as the learner’s perceived absence of evaluative judgment, not the absence of affective expression per se. This distinction is important: AI systems may simulate affective language while still being interpreted by learners as non-evaluative interlocutors, and the title should be read accordingly.

Although research on AI in SLA has expanded rapidly (Han, 2024; Zou et al., 2023), empirical investigations of its affective dimensions remain limited. Existing work has primarily focused on performance outcomes or technological affordances, with comparatively less attention to how learners experience anxiety, comfort, and emotional expression in AI-mediated speaking contexts (Papneja & Yadav, 2025). Rather than positioning GenAI as a theoretical rupture, the present study situates AI-based speaking practice within established traditions of affective research, WTC theory, and mediated communication in SLA.

The central aim of this study is to explore university-level EFL learners' perceptions of AI tools as speaking partners. Specifically, it examines whether learners perceive AI-mediated interaction as (a) reducing speaking-related anxiety, (b) fostering communicative confidence, and (c) supporting emotionally expressive language use. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent do EFL learners perceive AI as a low-anxiety, judgment-free speaking partner in oral language practice?
RQ2: How do EFL learners describe their emotional and communicative experiences when practicing speaking with AI tools?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Artificial Intelligence (AI) in SLA

AI is increasingly reshaping aspects of SLA by offering interactive, adaptive, and personalized affordances. While traditional instruction often prioritized structured grammar drills, GenAI tools - such as ChatGPT, Google Gemini, and Duolingo's AI tutor - introduce dynamic, conversational, and learner-centered approaches (Han, 2024). By leveraging Natural Language Processing (NLP), these systems provide immediate feedback and individualized learning trajectories that align with communicative language teaching principles.

Despite these innovations, the pedagogical utility of GenAI is nuanced. While platforms can produce contextually appropriate responses, they may lack the pragmatic precision and cultural nuance required for advanced sociolinguistic competence. Furthermore, a critical concern remains regarding the "empathy gap" - AI's struggle with prosodic dimensions, emotional tone, and interpersonal sensitivity. Consequently, while AI enhances learner autonomy, it is increasingly viewed as a complement to, rather than a replacement for, human-mediated instruction (Zou et al., 2023).

Importantly, research on affect in SLA long predates the emergence of AI technologies. Foundational scholarship on foreign language anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991), social presence theory (Short et al., 1976), and CALL-mediated interaction (Chapelle, 2001; Warschauer, 1997) provides a critical interpretive lens for understanding AI-based speaking environments. Situating GenAI within these established theoretical traditions ensures that contemporary technological developments are examined as extensions of ongoing socio-affective inquiry rather than as isolated innovations.

2.2. Problematizing Emotional Neutrality: The CASA Framework

A central tension in AI-mediated SLA is the technical "emotional neutrality" of the machine versus the subjective experience of the learner. Technically, AI lacks moral agency, intentionality, and subjective affect. However, according to the CASA framework (Reeves & Nass, 1996), humans are evolutionarily predisposed to treat interactive media as social entities, subconsciously attributing human-like traits to these systems.

In the context of language learning, this neutrality is not a static technological property but a dynamic perceptual phenomenon. The observed reduction in learner anxiety is not merely a byproduct of the machine's lack of emotion, but rather the presence of a "safe" social interlocutor. As Dennis (2024) demonstrates, AI-powered speech recognition technology provides a unique rehearsal space where learners can practice pronunciation and oral skills without the fear of social judgment. This interlocutor fulfills the social requirements of a conversation partner without posing a threat to the learner's "face" or social standing. Consequently, AI-mediated interaction provides what can be termed a non-evaluative rehearsal space - a space where the machine's lack of genuine empathy is experienced by the learner as a liberation from "social risk," which learners describe as enabling greater attentional focus on linguistic experimentation (Fathi et al., 2024; Kohnke et al., 2023).

2.3. From the Affective Filter to WTC

Krashen's (1982) AFH posits that anxiety and low confidence obstruct the processing of language input. It is worth acknowledging that the AFH has attracted sustained theoretical criticism: critics have questioned the construct's falsifiability, the operationalization of the "filter" metaphor, and its limited engagement with the interactional dimensions of acquisition (Gregg, 1984; McLaughlin, 1987). Nonetheless, the AFH remains a widely used heuristic for understanding the role of affect in language learning. While AFH explains *why* anxiety is a barrier, more recent models like WTC explain how situational variables, perceived

competence, and communication context interact to shape production (MacIntyre et al., 1998). In human-to-human interaction, WTC is often inhibited by the "social risk" of negative evaluation (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

Rather than viewing AI solely as a mechanism for lowering a passive "filter," it is more analytically productive to conceptualize AI as a psychologically safe communicative context. In this reconfigured environment, learners report a perceived reduction in the fear of negative evaluation. By removing the social stakes and evaluative pressures of the classroom, learners describe shifting their focus - previously consumed by anxiety management - toward linguistic experimentation and fluency. As demonstrated by Fathi et al. (2024), this reduction in social risk directly enhances learners' WTC, providing a psychologically safe space that scaffolds the transition from silent apprehension to active oral production.

Taken together, these frameworks suggest that AI-mediated interaction may simultaneously reshape perceived social presence (CASA), reduce affective barriers (AFH), and enhance situational WTC, providing a multi-layered explanation for learner behavior.

2.4. Emotion and Intimacy in AI-Mediated Interaction

Recent SLA research conceptualizes emotion not as a static internal state, but as a dynamic, socially mediated "ecology" (Wang et al., 2024). Within this framework, AI-mediated speaking offers a distinct emotional affordance: the ability to engage in low-stakes self-disclosure. Individuals often feel more comfortable sharing personal or emotionally charged thoughts with AI than with human peers due to the structural absence of social consequences.

This phenomenon, observed in advanced conversational agents, suggests that AI can function as a form of perceived affective support (Papneja & Yadav, 2025). For the EFL learner, this "neutral" space provides a unique opportunity to practice not just vocabulary, but personal or emotionally meaningful expression without the paralyzing fear of judgment. However, the inherent lack of genuine empathy in AI raises critical questions regarding the transferability of this "sanctuary" confidence to the emotionally charged, unpredictable reality of human social interaction. While the machine provides a safe rehearsal space, the extent to which this psychological safety translates into sustained communicative competence remains an area for empirical investigation.

To address these theoretical tensions and investigate the practical impact of this low-stakes communicative environment on learner experience, this study employs a mixed-methods research design. By combining quantitative self-report measures with qualitative learner reflections, the following section outlines the methodological framework used to examine how emotionally neutral AI influences speaking anxiety and perceived intimacy in a cohort of EFL students.

2.5. Conceptual Framework

Building on the AFH, the WTC model, and the CASA framework, this study adopts a streamlined conceptual model to explain learners' perceptions of AI-mediated speaking. The model proposes that when learners interpret AI as a socially present yet non-evaluative interlocutor, perceived social risk is reduced. This reduction in evaluative threat is associated with greater emotional comfort and a higher willingness to engage in communicative behavior, including linguistic experimentation and self-expression.

In this sense, AI-mediated speaking can be understood as a process in which: perceived non-evaluative social presence → reduced affective barriers → increased situational WTC.

This framework guides both the design of the study and the interpretation of findings, positioning AI not as a causal agent of affective change, but as a context that learners interpret as facilitating communicative engagement.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a survey-based mixed-methods design incorporating quantitative Likert-scale items and qualitative open-ended responses to examine learners' perceptions of

AI-mediated speaking practice. The integration of numeric trends and narrative accounts enabled a complementary analysis of perceived anxiety, communicative confidence, and emotional openness within AI-based interaction.

The study adopted a descriptive, exploratory approach rather than an experimental or quasi-experimental design. Learners responded to the questionnaire based on their existing, naturally occurring experiences with AI tools, without any researcher-controlled speaking task. Because no standardized interaction was administered prior to the survey, the findings reflect participants' habitual engagement with AI rather than reactions to a specific primed episode.

Given the exploratory purpose and modest sample size (N = 47), statistical analysis focused on descriptive trends rather than hypothesis-testing procedures. Inferential testing was not conducted due to the modest sample size and non-probability sampling, which limit the validity of statistical generalization beyond the sample. Findings should therefore be interpreted as perceptual patterns rather than causal effects.

3.2. Participants and Sampling

The participant pool comprised 47 EFL learners (43 undergraduate; 4 graduate) from the University of Bojnord, Iran. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 34 years (M = 23.4). They were recruited via convenience sampling, a method frequently utilized in exploratory CALL research to access populations with specific technological engagement. However, to ensure the robustness of the data and mitigate the novelty effect - where initial excitement over a new tool temporarily masks actual anxiety or performance shifts - purposive criteria were strictly applied.

All participants were required to be regular users who had independently integrated GenAI tools (e.g., ChatGPT-4, Google Gemini, Duolingo AI) into their study routines for at least one academic semester. This criterion was intended to reduce short-term novelty effects and ensure that responses reflected sustained engagement rather than initial curiosity.

Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Informed consent was obtained electronically prior to survey completion. Although the researcher was affiliated with the participants' institution, participation was not connected to course evaluation or grading. Data were collected anonymously to minimize potential power asymmetry and social desirability bias.

Of 62 students initially invited, 51 initiated the survey (82.3% response rate). Four responses were excluded due to incomplete Likert sections, yielding a final sample of 47 complete responses (75.8% completion rate among invitees). This N = 47 constitutes the full analytic sample for quantitative analysis. For qualitative analysis, four additional participants (8.5%) did not provide substantive responses to the open-ended questions and were therefore excluded from thematic coding only, yielding a qualitative sub-sample of n = 43. The distinction between the two samples is maintained throughout: all descriptive statistics are based on N = 47, and all thematic frequency data are based on n = 43.

3.3. Contextualizing AI Interaction: The "Black-Box"

To address the black-box of participant–AI interaction — the often-opaque nature of how learners actually engage with Large Language Models (LLMs) outside supervised settings — it is essential to clarify the context of use. Participants reported using ChatGPT-4 (n = 31), Google Gemini 1.5 (n = 18), and Duolingo's AI tutor (n = 12) as part of their regular study routines. These figures sum to 61 for a sample of 47, indicating that a substantial proportion of participants used more than one platform concurrently; approximately 50% reported multi-platform engagement (see Section 4.1). This overlap is acknowledged as a design limitation: because platform-level data were not collected in a mutually exclusive format, disaggregation of findings by individual tool was not possible. Interaction modalities also varied considerably: some participants used advanced voice features, while others relied on text-0to-speech or speech-0to-text tools. For a study centrally concerned with speaking anxiety and oral practice, this modality variation is a meaningful limitation.

Whether a learner spoke aloud to an AI or typed and listened to synthesized speech likely constitutes a substantively different experience; because modality data were not collected systematically, findings cannot be disaggregated by interaction type. Future studies should control for or separately analyze interaction modality.

Unlike experimental studies where tasks are strictly controlled, the present study did not require participants to complete a specific AI-mediated speaking activity before responding to the survey. Instead, responses reflect learners' ongoing, self-directed use of AI tools in their everyday learning practices. As a result, the findings capture participants' perceptions of AI-mediated speaking as they naturally experience it, rather than as shaped by a researcher-designed prompt.

3.4. Instrumentation

Data were collected via an anonymous online survey hosted on Google Forms, comprising four sections designed to capture the interplay between technological affordance and psychological state. The survey began with an Introduction and Consent section, outlining the study's ethical scope and confirming the voluntary nature of participation. This was followed by a Background Information section, which gathered demographic data and specific usage patterns of GenAI tools (e.g., ChatGPT-4.0, Google Gemini, Duolingo), ensuring participants met the purposive criteria of established naturalistic use.

The 10-item Likert scale was developed as a purpose-built, exploratory instrument rather than a validated scale adaptation. Although item wording drew conceptually on established constructs in the foreign language anxiety and WTC literature (Krashen, 1982; MacIntyre et al., 1998), the instrument does not constitute a psychometric adaptation of any prior scale and should not be interpreted as such. Content validity was established through expert review by two applied linguistics researchers who assessed item alignment with the three theoretical dimensions (Anxiety Reduction, Communicative Confidence, Emotional Openness); items were revised based on their feedback prior to data collection. The scale demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's α = .91); however, this figure should be interpreted with caution. No factor analysis, test-retest reliability assessment, or comparative validation against established FL anxiety or WTC instruments was conducted, due to the limited sample size and the exploratory scope of the study. Expert content review is treated here as a starting point for instrument development rather than as a sufficient basis for strong psychometric claims. Accordingly, scale scores are used descriptively to identify perceptual trends, not to draw inferences about latent constructs.

The items were designed to reflect three theoretically informed dimensions: Anxiety Reduction, Communicative Confidence, and Emotional Openness. Item development was informed by constructs derived from the AFH (Krashen, 1982) and the WTC model (MacIntyre et al., 1998), with wording adapted to AI-mediated speaking contexts.

Sample items included statements such as "I feel less anxious speaking English with AI than with a teacher or peer" and "I feel comfortable discussing personal topics with AI." Items were adapted from established constructs in foreign language anxiety and WTC literature and reworded for AI-mediated contexts. Open-ended questions were included to provide qualitative elaboration of learners' comparative experiences with AI and human interlocutors. These responses enabled triangulation of quantitative trends with participant narratives.

In this study, emotional neutrality was operationalized indirectly through learner perceptions of judgment absence, comfort, and willingness to disclose, as captured in Likert-scale items and qualitative responses. The complete survey instrument, including background questions, Likert-scale items, and open-ended prompts, is provided in Appendix B.

3.5. Data Collection Procedure

Data collection occurred over a three-week period in Spring 2025. Participants were invited to complete an anonymous online questionnaire distributed via a shared survey link. Because the

study aimed to document learners' existing perceptions of AI-mediated speaking, no priming task, prompted recall activity, or structured AI-based speaking session was administered prior to the survey. Participants accessed the questionnaire at their convenience and responded based on their prior, naturally occurring experiences using AI tools for English speaking practice.

This approach enhances ecological validity by allowing learners to draw on their authentic engagement with AI rather than on a researcher-controlled interaction. However, it also means that participants' responses may vary depending on the recency and nature of their most recent AI use. The full Participant Information Sheet and Ethics Statement provided to learners prior to data collection is included in Appendix A.

3.6. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS (Version 28.0) and Microsoft Excel. Analysis focused on descriptive statistics, including means (M) and standard deviations (SD), to identify overall patterns in learner perceptions. Because the study was exploratory and not hypothesis-driven, inferential statistical testing was not conducted. The results therefore indicate central tendencies rather than statistically tested differences.

Qualitative data were analyzed using a deductive thematic approach informed by the theoretical constructs outlined in the literature review. Responses were coded line-by-line using a pre-defined codebook (see Appendix C) comprising six themes: Comfort/Confidence, Risk-Taking, Emotional Expression, Judgment Avoidance, Preference, and Practical Use. A second coder independently coded 25% of responses (n = 11). Inter-coder agreement reached 89%, with disagreements resolved through discussion. Cohen's kappa was .84, indicating strong reliability. Because the codebook was derived directly from the study's own theoretical framework, this qualitative strand should be understood explicitly as confirmatory triangulation rather than independent thematic discovery. Deductive coding using a pre-specified framework inevitably produces high category frequencies, as coders are directed toward what to look for; the high percentages reported in Table 2 (ranging from 51.2% to 88.4%) are consistent with this design and reflect alignment between participant responses and theoretical constructs rather than emergent or disconfirming patterns. No inductive pass was conducted to surface themes outside the framework; future research could supplement deductive coding with open thematic analysis to identify potentially disconfirming or unanticipated dimensions of the learner experience.

4. Results

4.1. Participant Profiles and AI Usage History

The final sample comprised 47 university-level EFL learners (ages 20–34; M = 23.4). The cohort was predominantly undergraduate (92.3%, n = 43), with the majority situated in the intermediate to advanced stages of their degree programs (Semester 6, n = 22). All participants met the inclusion criteria of having used GenAI tools for at least one academic semester. ChatGPT emerged as the primary platform, frequently used in conjunction with Google Gemini and Duolingo. Approximately 50% of the sample reported using multiple platforms simultaneously, indicating diversified engagement with GenAI tools. This sustained engagement suggests that the findings are grounded in a mature understanding of GenAI's affordances rather than a transitory novelty effect.

4.2. Quantitative Findings

Likert-scale responses indicated generally positive learner perceptions of AI as a speaking partner. The relatively higher standard deviations for confidence-related items suggest variability in how learners translate perceived safety into communicative self-efficacy. Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics, categorized by the core affective constructs.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of Learner Perceptions of AI as a Speaking Partner (N = 47)

Item	M	SD
Anxiety and Safety		
Less anxious speaking with AI than peers/teachers	4.00	1.10
Can make mistakes without stress	4.46	0.51
No sense of judgment or embarrassment	4.31	0.63
Willingness to Communicate and Risk-Taking		
More confident expressing self with AI	4.23	1.09
Freedom to try new vocabulary or grammar	4.31	0.46
AI increases motivation to speak English	4.31	0.46
Emotional Openness		
Comfort discussing personal or emotional topics	4.15	0.69
Preference for AI for specific tasks (e.g., reflection)	4.15	0.69
Pedagogical Utility		
AI helps improve speaking fluency	4.31	0.46
Would recommend AI speaking tools to peers	4.23	0.83

Note. Responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Higher mean scores indicate more positive learner perceptions of AI-mediated speaking practice. The pattern suggests that participants perceive AI-mediated speaking as involving lower evaluative pressure compared to human interaction.

4.3. Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of the open-ended responses identified six core themes reflecting participants' reported experiences with AI-mediated speaking. As shown in Table 2, these themes demonstrate substantial overlap. Notably, while the quantitative data showed high mean scores for anxiety reduction, the qualitative narratives suggest that learners differentiate between performance-oriented classroom speech and practice-oriented AI interaction.

Table 2
Frequency of Theoretically Derived Qualitative Themes (N = 43)

Theme	n	%
Comfort and confidence	38	88.4
Judgment avoidance	36	83.7
Risk-taking	34	79.1
Practical use (fluency/vocabulary)	31	72.1
Emotional expression	28	65.1
Contextual preferences	22	51.2

*Note***.** Frequencies indicate the number and percentage of participants whose responses were coded under each theme. Percentages are calculated as (number of participants coded for theme / 43) × 100. Participants could be coded for multiple themes; therefore, percentages exceed 100%. Four participants (8.5%) did not provide substantive responses to the open-ended questions and were excluded from qualitative analysis only. Quantitative analysis retained all 47 participants; therefore, qualitative findings reflect 43 responses.

The most prevalent theme was Comfort and Confidence (88.4%). Learners frequently reported reduced social pressure when speaking with AI, often contrasting this experience with classroom interaction. As one participant noted, "I didn't feel nervous like I do in class with other students."

Closely related was Judgment Avoidance (83.7%), with participants emphasizing the absence of perceived criticism or ridicule. Several learners described the AI as "a friend without any stress" that "doesn't laugh or get bored."

Risk-Taking (79.1%) was also prominent. Participants reported greater willingness to experiment with grammar and vocabulary when interacting with AI. One learner explained, "I could try new grammar without worrying about looking stupid." The theme of Practical Use (72.1%) reflected learners' descriptions of using AI to rehearse fluency and vocabulary in repetitive, low-pressure practice routines.

Emotional Expression (65.1%) captured learners' increased comfort discussing personal topics in English. For example, one participant stated, "It was easier to talk about sad things to the AI than to my teacher." Finally, Contextual Preferences (51.2%) indicated that learners distinguished between AI use for individual practice and human interaction for classroom communication.

4.4. Synthesis: Answers to Research Questions

RQ1: To what extent do EFL learners perceive AI as a low-anxiety, judgment-free speaking partner?

Findings indicate that learners overwhelmingly perceive AI as a psychologically safe interlocutor. The robust quantitative scores for anxiety-related items (M = 4.00–4.46) and the high prevalence of the qualitative theme Judgment Avoidance (83.7%) suggest that participants experience AI-mediated interaction as involving reduced fear of negative evaluation. This aligns with the concept of the digital sanctuary, where the absence of a human listener allows learners to bypass the social risks that typically inhibit speech in traditional classrooms. As confirmed by Fathi et al. (2024), this perceived reduction in evaluative pressure is associated with increased self-reported WTC in AI-mediated environments. By functioning as a neutral entity that "doesn't laugh or get bored," AI is perceived as lowering affective barriers and shifting learners' experience from high-stakes performance toward low-stakes exploration. These patterns collectively support the characterization of AI-mediated interaction as a perceived digital sanctuary - a context in which learners experience reduced evaluative threat and greater emotional safety for oral language practice.

RQ2: How do EFL learners describe their emotional and communicative experiences with AI?

Findings suggest that the emotional neutrality of AI is not a limitation but a pedagogical affordance characterized by high WTC and frequent instances of self-disclosure. Applying the CASA framework (Reeves & Nass, 1996) helps explain why learners project a supportive social presence onto an "emotionally neutral" tool - a phenomenon reflected in the 65.1% of participants who cited Emotional Expression as a key benefit. Learners valued AI's "infinite patience" and immediate feedback, which empowered them to engage in spontaneous, expressive discourse they might otherwise avoid with human peers. These accounts suggest that learners interpret AI's emotional neutrality as pedagogically supportive; it provides a non-threatening interactional context that encourages experimentation with language use without the social risk of being misunderstood or judged by a human interlocutor.

Notably, qualitative accounts help explain the high quantitative ratings by revealing that learners frame AI interaction as practice rather than performance, a distinction not directly captured in the Likert-scale items.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that participants generally perceive AI-mediated speaking as involving reduced evaluative pressure and increased communicative comfort. Although most quantitative items demonstrated relatively low variability (SD < 0.70), items related to comparative anxiety and confidence showed greater dispersion (SD ≈ 1.10), suggesting meaningful individual differences in perceived benefit. These patterns should be interpreted as perceptual trends rather than demonstrated psychological effects. Nonetheless, the convergence of quantitative and qualitative evidence suggests that many learners experience AI-mediated speaking as affectively distinct from classroom interaction.

Rather than implying that AI eliminates the social risks inherent in human-to-human

communication, the data indicate that participants interpret AI interaction as involving fewer immediate interpersonal consequences. Within established affective frameworks in SLA, these perceptions align with long-standing discussions of anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and situational WTC (Krashen, 1982; MacIntyre et al., 1998). The findings therefore highlight that affective perceptions, rather than technological affordances alone, play a central role in shaping how AI tools are integrated into language-learning practice.

5.1. The Digital Sanctuary and WTC

The high mean score for the item "AI allows me to make more mistakes without stress" (M = 4.46) suggests that participants perceive AI-mediated interaction as a relatively low-stakes environment. This perception is reinforced by the qualitative theme of Judgment Avoidance (83.7%), in which learners emphasized the absence of ridicule, embarrassment, or visible evaluation.

From the perspective of the AFH (Krashen, 1982), these descriptions are consistent with learners' perceptions of reduced anxiety during AI-mediated interaction. Because affect was not measured physiologically or experimentally, these findings should be understood as self-reported impressions rather than objective reductions in anxiety. Still, the consistency across data sources suggests that learners experience AI as a context in which affective barriers feel less salient.

In relation to WTC (MacIntyre et al., 1998), participants frequently described feeling freer to experiment linguistically. Strong ratings for "Freedom to try new vocabulary or grammar" (M = 4.31), combined with the qualitative theme of Risk-Taking (79.1%), indicate that perceived safety is linked to learners' willingness to engage in exploratory language use. Again, this reflects learners' interpretations of their experience rather than experimentally verified increases in production.

Taken together, the concept of a digital sanctuary is best understood as a perceived reduction in evaluative threat that learners associate with greater communicative ease and willingness to participate.

5.2. Problematizing Neutrality: The CASA Effect

A central contribution of this study lies in examining how learners interpret AI's emotional neutrality. Although AI systems lack subjective affect, many participants described the tool using relational or interpersonal language (e.g., "a friend without stress," "doesn't laugh or get bored"). This aligns with the CASA framework (Reeves & Nass, 1996), which proposes that users attribute social characteristics to interactive technologies.

The theme of Emotional Expression (65.1%) and the mean score for comfort discussing personal topics (M = 4.15) suggest that some learners experience AI interaction as conducive to low-stakes self-disclosure. Rather than implying genuine interpersonal intimacy, these responses indicate that learners interpret AI's consistency and lack of visible judgment as affectively supportive. This reflects a paradox of perceived neutrality: the absence of human evaluative cues is interpreted not as emotional emptiness but as psychological safety.

However, it is important to avoid overstating this effect. Learners' projections of social presence reflect interpretive processes, not inherent technological qualities. AI's perceived neutrality is therefore best understood as a learner-constructed affordance, rather than a built-in emotional property of the system.

5.3. Pedagogical Limits and the "Empathy Gap"

Despite generally positive perceptions, participants did not position AI as a replacement for human interaction. The theme of Contextual Preferences (51.2%) indicates that learners differentiate between AI use for rehearsal and human interaction for authentic communication. This distinction aligns with concerns about the empathy gap in AI-mediated communication. While AI may be perceived as supportive due to its non-evaluative nature, it does not replicate the dynamic emotional reciprocity characteristic of human interaction.

Participants appeared aware of this limitation, describing AI primarily as preparatory rather than substitutive. Thus, AI-mediated speaking may function as a complementary rehearsal environment within a broader communicative ecology. Its value lies less in replacing interpersonal exchange and more in providing a context in which learners feel comfortable experimenting before engaging in socially evaluative settings.

6. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

This study examined how university-level EFL learners perceive emotionally neutral AI tools in relation to speaking anxiety, communicative confidence, and emotional openness. Across both quantitative and qualitative data, participants generally described AI-mediated speaking as involving reduced evaluative pressure and increased willingness to experiment linguistically. Rather than demonstrating that AI lowers anxiety in a causal sense, the findings indicate that learners interpret AI interaction as less socially risky than classroom speaking. Within established SLA frameworks, this perception aligns with longstanding theories of affective filtering and situational WTC (Krashen, 1982; MacIntyre et al., 1998). By situating AI-mediated speaking within these traditions, the study contributes to ongoing discussions of affect, mediation, and communicative risk in language learning.

AI's pedagogical value appears to lie in its perceived neutrality and consistency. For some learners, this creates a psychologically comfortable rehearsal space. However, such comfort should not be conflated with full communicative competence in socially complex environments. The term digital sanctuary is therefore used as an interpretive lens for understanding learners' experiences rather than as a psychometrically validated construct.

6.1. Pedagogical Recommendations

To integrate AI responsibly within EFL instruction, teachers may adopt a staged and pedagogically grounded approach that supports both linguistic development and affective readiness. A staged integration model can help learners transition from low-pressure AI interaction to more demanding communicative contexts. In the first stage, AI-mediated practice provides a low-stakes environment where students can rehearse vocabulary, experiment with structures, and build fluency without the interpersonal pressure associated with peer or teacher evaluation. In the second stage, learners move into peer interaction, where small-group discussions gradually reintroduce social accountability and interpersonal dynamics. In the final stage, students apply their rehearsed language in public or evaluated speaking tasks, such as presentations or graded performances.

Within this progression, AI serves as a pre-communicative rehearsal tool, offering short preparatory speaking sessions that help learners feel more organized and linguistically ready before high-stakes tasks. When framed explicitly as preparation rather than replacement, AI-based rehearsal can reduce perceived anxiety while still supporting the development of communicative competence.

Teachers may also cultivate critical affective awareness by encouraging students to reflect on the differences between the comfort of AI-mediated communication and the complexity of real-world interaction. Explicit discussion of AI's strengths and limitations can help learners develop a balanced, informed, and strategic orientation toward AI-supported speaking practice, ensuring that the technology enhances rather than replaces authentic communicative engagement.

6.2. Limitations and Future Directions

This study is subject to several limitations. First, the small sample size (N = 47) and use of convenience sampling limit the generalizability of the findings beyond the specific institutional and cultural context in which the data were collected. Second, as a descriptive, cross-sectional study, it does not permit causal inferences regarding the relationship between AI use and affective variables. Third, the study relies on self-report measures, which may introduce perceptual bias; participants' responses

reflect subjective interpretations of their experiences rather than directly observed communicative behavior.

Because no standardized AI-mediated speaking task was administered prior to the survey, participants' responses were based on their naturally occurring engagement with AI tools. While this enhances ecological validity, it also introduces variability in the types and recency of AI interactions that informed participants' perceptions.

A further pedagogical limitation concerns the potential trade-off between reduced evaluative pressure and exposure to corrective feedback. While learners may experience increased comfort in AI-mediated environments, such contexts may provide fewer opportunities for socially embedded feedback that supports language development.

Given the rapid evolution of AI research, several cited studies represent emerging scholarship that has not yet undergone extensive replication. More cumulative evidence, particularly through meta-analyses and longitudinal research, is needed to establish stable empirical patterns.

Declaration

The author confirms that this manuscript is original, has not been published previously, and is not under consideration for publication elsewhere.

AI Disclosure Statement

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used generative AI tools for limited language editing and clarity improvements. All content was critically reviewed, revised, and approved by the author, who assumes full responsibility for the final version of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that there are no competing interests or conflicts of interest related to this study.

Ethical Statement

This study complied with institutional guidelines for research involving human participants. According to institutional policy, anonymous minimal-risk survey research involving adult participants did not require formal ethics committee review. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to participation.

Data Availability Statement

Due to ethical and institutional restrictions related to participant confidentiality, the dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is not publicly available.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Participant Information Sheet and Ethics Statement

Title: Student Perceptions of AI as an English-Speaking Partner

1. **Purpose of the Study:** This research aims to explore how university-level learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) perceive emotionally neutral AI-based speaking tools in relation to their speaking confidence, language anxiety, and communicative comfort.
2. **Participant Eligibility and Recruitment:** Participants will consist of adult EFL students (18 years and older) enrolled in university-level English. Participation is entirely voluntary.
3. **Method of Data Collection:** Data will be gathered through an anonymous online questionnaire comprising both Likert-scale items and open-ended questions. The survey is designed to capture both quantitative and qualitative perspectives.
4. **Potential Risks:** There are no anticipated risks associated with participation. Respondents may withdraw at any point during the survey or choose to skip any question without penalty.
5. **Potential Benefits:** Participants may gain personal insights into their language learning preferences and experiences. Broader findings from the study may contribute to the improvement of AI-integrated pedagogical practices in EFL contexts.
6. **Confidentiality and Data Protection:** All responses will remain confidential and anonymous. No personally identifiable information will be collected. Data will be securely stored and used exclusively for research and academic dissemination.
7. **Informed Consent:** By voluntarily completing and submitting the online survey, participants indicate their informed consent to take part in the study. No physical signature is required.

Appendix B. AI Speaking Practice Survey

Section 1: Introduction and Consent

Thank you for participating in this research study. This short survey explores your experience using AI tools (like ChatGPT, Duolingo AI, or Google Gemini) to practice English speaking. Your answers will help us understand how learners feel about using AI for oral language development. The survey is anonymous and takes 7–10 minutes. You may skip any question. Participation is completely voluntary and will not affect your grades or coursework in any way. By continuing, you give your consent to participate in this study.

Section 2: Background Information

1. Age:
2. Academic Level:
   - Undergraduate
   - Graduate (Master's)
3. Semester of Study:

Example: "2nd semester" or "Semester 5"

4. Have you practiced speaking English with an AI tool (e.g., ChatGPT, Google Gemini, Duolingo)?
   - Yes
   - No
5. If yes, which tool(s) did you use?

Section 3: Likert-Scale Statements

Instruction: For each statement, choose how much you agree or disagree.

Scale:

1 – Strongly Disagree
2 – Disagree
3 – Neutral
4 – Agree
5 – Strongly Agree

Statements:

1. I feel less anxious speaking English with AI than with a teacher or peer.
2. I feel more confident expressing myself with AI than with a person.
3. AI allows me to make more mistakes without stress.
4. I do not feel judged or embarrassed when speaking with AI.
5. I feel free to try new vocabulary or grammar with AI.
6. I feel comfortable talking about personal or emotional topics with AI.
7. Practicing with AI helps improve my speaking fluency.
8. I feel more motivated to speak English when using AI.
9. I would recommend AI speaking tools to other learners.
10. I prefer using AI for certain tasks (like presentations or personal reflections).

Section 4: Open-Ended Questions

1. What was your experience like when speaking English with an AI tool?
2. Do you feel more or less confident speaking English with AI than with humans? Why?

3. What kinds of topics do you prefer to speak about with AI? Why?
4. Would you like to use AI more often for speaking practice in class? Why or why not?

Appendix C. Codebook for Qualitative Thematic Analysis

Theme	Definition	Example Response
Comfort/Confidence	Feeling safe or relaxed when speaking with AI	I didn't feel nervous like I do in class.
Risk-taking	Willingness to try new words, expressions, or topics	I could try new grammar without worrying.
Emotional Expression	Willingness to talk about feelings or personal issues	It was easier to talk about sad things.
Judgment/Avoidance	AI perceived as non-critical or non-judgmental	I knew the AI wouldn't laugh at my mistakes.
Preference	Favoring AI over human partners (or vice versa)	I prefer AI because I can speak more freely.
Practical Use	Perceived usefulness of AI for speaking practice	It's good for practicing before a presentation.