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INDIVIDUAL VERSUS PAIRED INTERACTION MODES IN AI CHATBOT-MEDIATED SPEAKING PRACTICE: IMPLICATIONS FOR UNIVERSITY-LEVEL EFL INSTRUCTION

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Annotation: *This thesis examines whether university EFL learners should use AI chatbots individually or in pairs, arguing that the two modes serve complementary functions: individual practice builds fluency and confidence, while paired practice develops negotiation of meaning and collaborative skills. It recommends sequencing them according to instructional purpose and calls for further research with university-level learners.*

Keywords: *AI chatbots, EFL, individual interaction, paired interaction, negotiation of meaning, speaking practice, university education.*

As artificial-intelligence-based conversational agents become increasingly embedded in foreign language instruction, a practical question of considerable pedagogical importance remains insufficiently addressed: should learners interact with such tools individually, or should chatbot-mediated practice be organized around pairs or small groups of learners working together? This question is not merely logistical, since the two interaction modes engage fundamentally different mechanisms of second language development — individual practice maximizes personalized pacing and reduces social exposure, whereas paired practice introduces peer negotiation of meaning, a process long regarded as central to interactional approaches to second language acquisition.

Empirical evidence on this question, though still limited, is beginning to emerge. A study examining a generative AI chatbot built on a large language model with text-to-speech functionality compared individual and paired learner interactions among elementary-level EFL learners and found that both configurations contributed to speaking development, but through partly different pathways: individual interaction allowed for more extensive personal practice time

and repetition, while paired interaction generated additional opportunities for learners to negotiate meaning with one another in response to the chatbot's contributions, effectively layering peer interaction on top of human-AI interaction [1]. This finding suggests that the two modes are not simply interchangeable but may serve complementary developmental functions.

This complementarity can be productively interpreted through the lens of interactionist theory, according to which interaction provides learners with opportunities for output, input, and negotiated feedback that are essential for language development [2]. Individual chatbot interaction primarily supplies the output and input components of this framework, since the learner directly produces and receives language without the mediating influence of a peer, whereas paired chatbot interaction adds a negotiation-of-meaning dimension that is normally associated only with human-human interaction, effectively creating a three-way exchange among two learners and one artificial interlocutor. Broader reviews of chatbot use in university EFL settings likewise note that chatbots can support both individual practice outside class time and collaborative, peer-mediated activities within it, though they do not always specify which configuration is preferable for which learning objective [3].

For university-level EFL instruction, these findings imply that AI chatbot integration should not default uniformly to either individual or paired formats but should instead be deliberately sequenced according to instructional purpose. Individual chatbot sessions appear better suited to building basic fluency, confidence, and willingness to communicate in a low-risk, private setting, particularly for learners with elevated speaking anxiety, whereas paired chatbot sessions appear better suited to developing negotiation-of-meaning strategies, turn-taking skills, and collaborative communication competence that individual practice alone cannot provide.

In conclusion, the choice between individual and paired AI chatbot interaction modes should be treated as a deliberate pedagogical decision rather than a matter of technical convenience. Future research conducted specifically with university-level EFL learners is needed to determine the optimal sequencing and proportion of individual versus paired AI chatbot practice across a full course of instruction, extending findings currently available mainly from elementary-level learner populations.

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