

Empowering EFL Learners through AI— Opportunities, Challenges, and the Human Element

Education at all levels has undergone radical changes in recent years, largely due to the rise of artificial intelligence (AI). Within Taiwanese colleges, collectivism and conformity often outweigh individuality and diversity. The information overload of the AI era, coupled with a cultural tendency toward conformity, has further complicated efforts to enhance English as a foreign language (EFL) students' critical thinking and speaking proficiency. This nine-month mixed-methods study involved 40 first-year university students in Taiwan. Data were collected through surveys, reflections, teacher and TA observations, and speaking tasks. Qualitative data were analyzed using theme-based content analysis; speaking performance was evaluated with descriptive statistics. Preliminary findings reveal three trends. First, given time, students expressed their ideas more confidently, but struggled to critically analyze complex issues from diverse perspectives. Second, AI-generated critical-thinking questions provided an effective "learning path" for students, promoting a shared learning experience where individual voices were acknowledged. Third, technology-supported platforms optimized class time through non-linear sharing, efficient content delivery, and collaborative group work. AI advancements offer EFL teaching and learning a wide array of opportunities. With clear guidance, authentic materials addressing social and global issues, and AI-generated critical-thinking prompts, first-year university students' speaking proficiency can be meaningfully strengthened. These benefits are most evident when learners have sufficient time to discuss, reflect, and articulate ideas. AI can quickly adapt content to match learners' levels and interests. However, effective implementation requires ongoing instructor guidance to ensure that the fundamental human elements—reasoning, reflection, and discussion—remain central to the learning process.

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