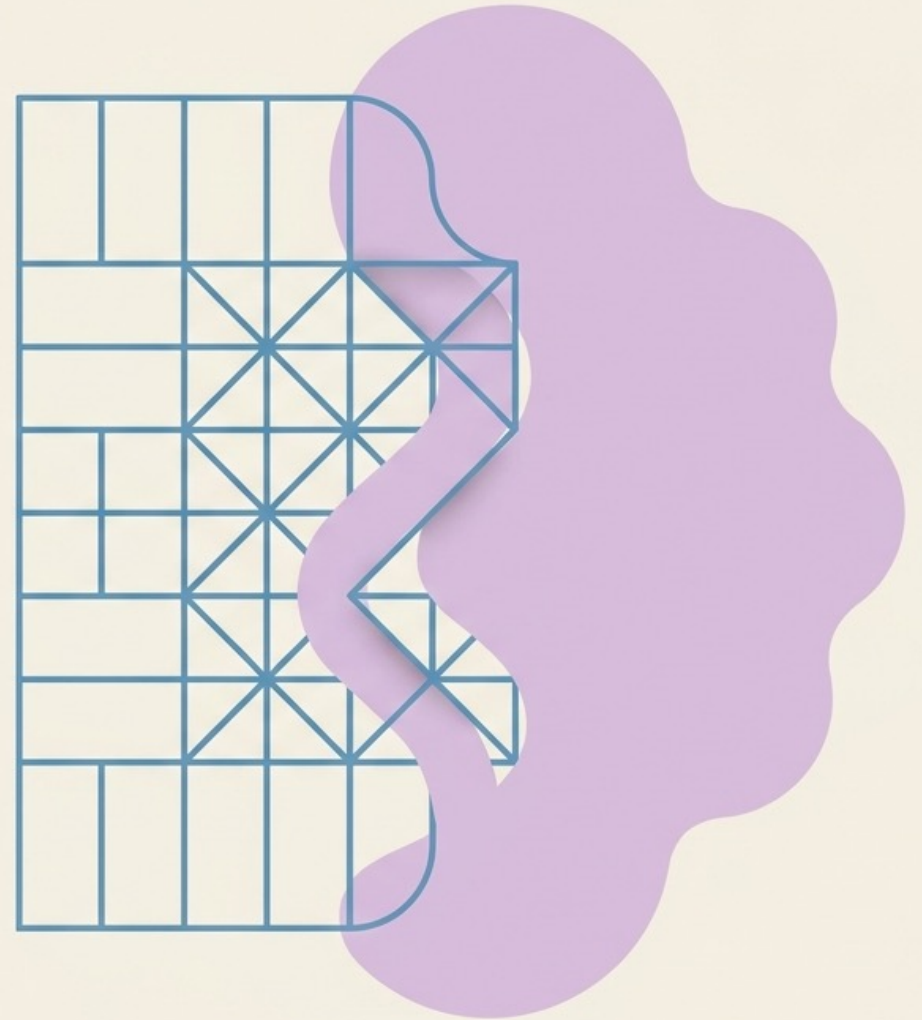


# AI as a 'Face-Neutral' Space

Reducing Anxiety & Boosting  
Willingness to Communicate in  
Vietnam's EFL-to-ESL Transition

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Hanoi National University of Education | INTESOL 2026



# The Cultural Paradox in Language Acquisition

## The ESL Demand

### Spontaneity

Shift from **EFL (Grammar-focused, written)** to **ESL (Unscripted, natural conversation)**.



## The Cultural Barrier

### Protection

**'Saving Face'** (mất mặt / giữ thể diện) leads to silence, self-censorship, and avoidance of linguistic risk.



**The Irony:** Cultural values that ensure social harmony become barriers to language acquisition.

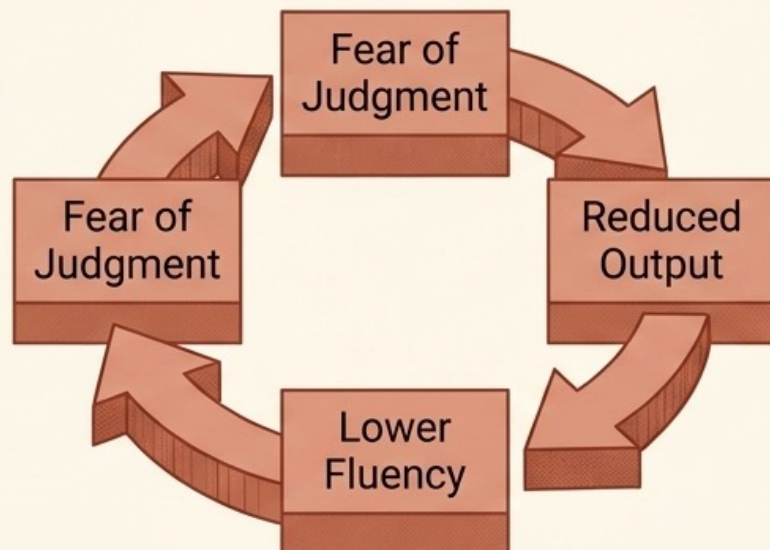


# The Anxiety Gap & The Solution Space

## The Self-Defeating Loop

**Speaking Anxiety:**  
3.63/5 (High)

**Native Speaker  
Confidence:** 2.53/5  
(Critically Low)



## The Insight & Intervention



“

**84%** of learners: “I would speak more English if I knew I wouldn’t be judged for my mistakes.”

**The Hypothesis:** Generative AI voice chatbots act as a judgment-free, “face-neutral” environment.

# Core Objectives & Research Questions

## Quantitative Impacts

RQ1 (Anxiety): Can AI reduce Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA)?

## Quantitative Impacts

RQ2 (Willingness): Can AI increase Willingness to Communicate (WTC)?

**AI Face-Neutral Space**

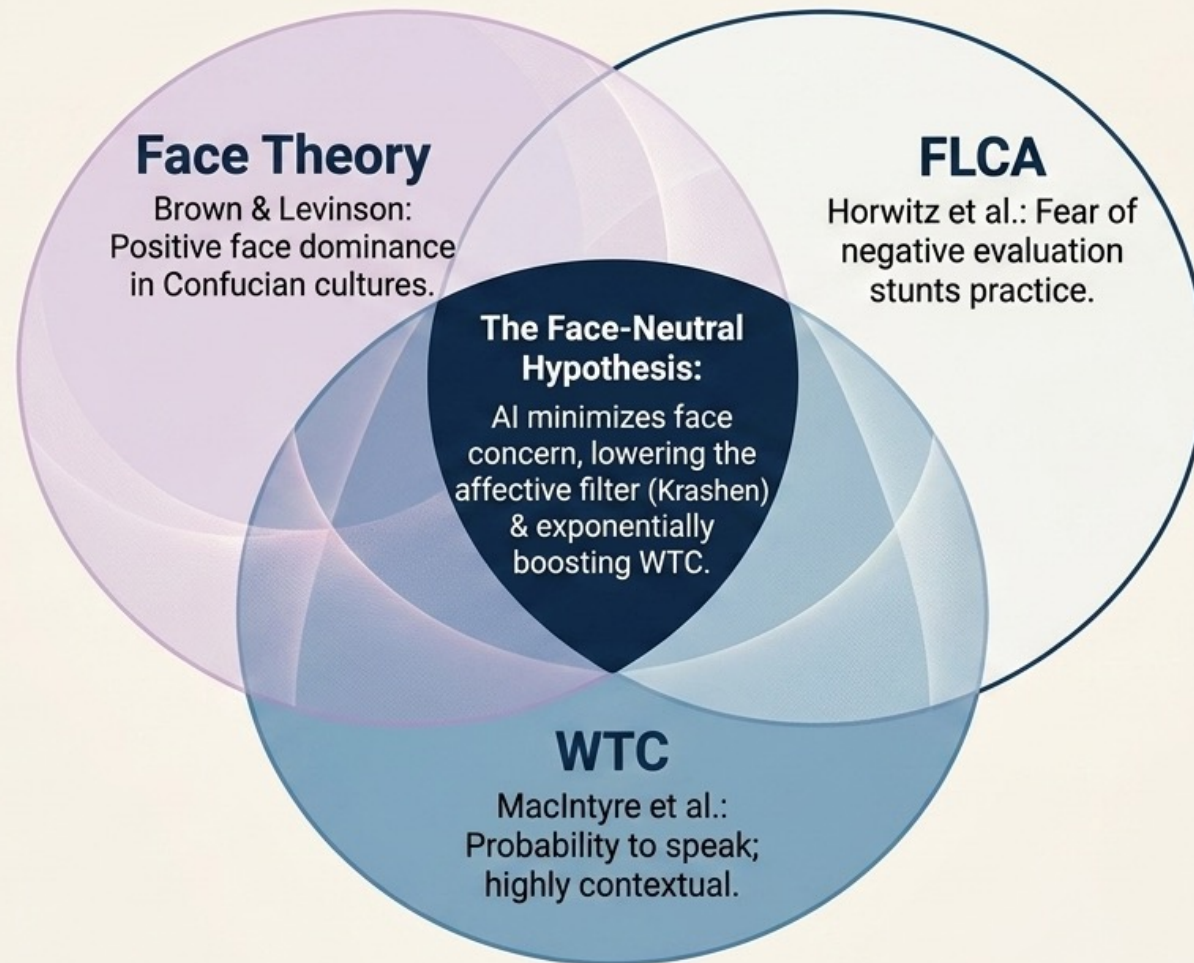
## Qualitative Impacts

RQ3 (Perceptions): How and why do learners feel AI affects their confidence?

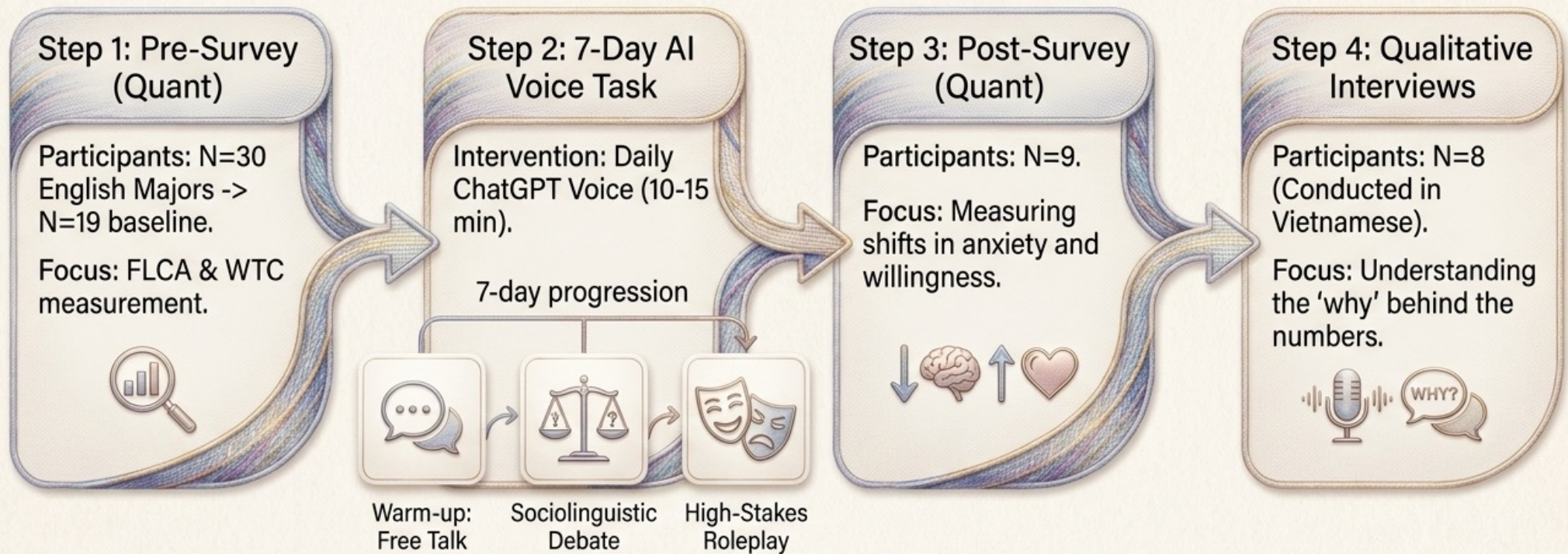
## Qualitative Impacts

RQ4 (Transferability): Does AI practice transfer to human-to-human interaction?

# The Face-Neutral Hypothesis



# Mixed-Methods Explanatory Sequential Design



# A Dramatic Boost in Willingness & Confidence

**+18.5%**

Overall increase in Willingness to Communicate (WTC).



**+53%**

Dramatic increase in confidence starting conversations with native speakers.



**-17%**

Decrease in behavioral avoidance (choosing to stay silent).

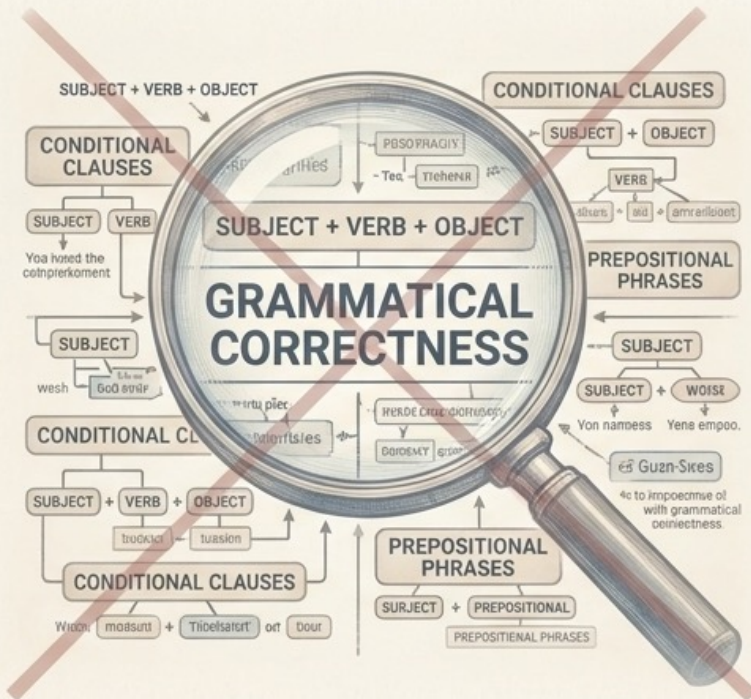
**100%**

Of learners found AI more relaxing than humans (Rated 4.56/5).

# The Freedom to Fail: Form -> Meaning

## The AI Environment (Zero Judgment)

100% Face-Neutrality. Mistakes remain entirely private.



## The Learner Shift (Freedom to Fail)

Decreased perfectionism leads to a cognitive shift from Form-Focused (Grammar) to Meaning-Focused (Communication).



"I started thinking in simple English, not perfect English."

# Scaffolding with Recognized Limitations

## AI Practice

Confidence Building.

**Identity Shift:** From "permission-seeking student" to "tool-using communicator."

## Human Dialogue

Cultural Nuance.

**The Caveat:** AI lacks pragmatic competence and real-time cultural reactions. It is a safe bridge, not a human replacement.

78% expected increased willingness  
in future human classes.

# Redefining Anxiety in Asian Contexts

The Paradox: Anxiety dropped only slightly (-7.5%), but WTC spiked (+18.5%). Why?

| Trait Anxiety                                              | Sociolinguistic Anxiety                                                           |
|------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| (Nature): Internal, personality-based, rigid.              | (Nature): Contextual, culturally rooted (Face-Concern), triggered by environment. |
| (Solution): Requires long-term psychological intervention. | (Solution): Remediable through environmental redesign (removing public failure).  |

**Key Insight:** WTC is unlocked independently of global anxiety when the affective cost of public failure is removed.

# Pedagogical Framework: AI Integration Do's & Don'ts



**DO**

Create a clear, simple master prompt establishing non-judgmental norms (e.g., "correct only if you don't understand my meaning").

Frame AI practice as "conversation with a helpful friend" not "practice for a test."

Gradually increase task complexity and stakes over time.



**DON'T**

Don't use default AI settings that over-correct grammar or respond with formal lectures.

Don't position AI as a grammar-checking or correction tool.

Don't explicitly teach learners that AI is a replacement for human interaction; it is a supplement for building confidence.

# Culturally Responsive Tech Integration



- ‘Face-saving’ is a deeply valued cultural norm, not a pathology.
- Pedagogy should not try to erase culture; it should provide safe spaces to practice.
- AI chatbots protect cultural identity while actively expanding communicative horizons.
- The Result: Transitioning learners from anxious silence to confident, unscripted English.

## 3 Key Takeaways & Contact

**1**

**Zero Judgment  
= High WTC.**

Removing social  
threat exponentially  
boosts confidence.

**2**

**Meaning Over  
Form.**

AI safety naturally  
shifts learners from  
perfectionism to  
actual  
communication.

**3**

**Scaffold, Not  
Solution.**

AI builds the  
confidence bridge;  
humans teach the  
cultural nuance.

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Tran et al., 2026