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ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING IN AN EFL CONTEXT: EXPLORING LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES IN SENEGAL

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Abstract: In the field of education, students are increasingly using Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools for pedagogical and learning purposes. For EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners, these tools offer new opportunities to practice and improve their language skills. However, using these AI tools does not imply that learners are aware of their full potential in the learning process. This paper investigates EFL learners' perceptions and practices related to English language learning in Senegal. A survey was conducted, exploring the students' challenges in English language learning, how they use AI tools to carry out classroom activities, and whether they prefer practicing English with a human partner or an AI tool. The results reveal that 58.2% of participants argue that speaking is the most challenging language skill. Consequently, 33% of students use AI to improve their speaking skills. But 39.6% of them prefer practicing with a human rather than an AI tool. Understanding learners' perceptions and AI literacy is a key step to take before implementing Artificial Intelligence into our education systems to ensure a safe environment and an ethical use of AI.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, education, EFL, the four-skills, Senegal

L'INTELLIGENCE ARTIFICIELLE ET L'APPRENTISSAGE DE L'ANGLAIS COMME LANGUE ÉTRANGERE : ANALYSE DES PERCEPTIONS ET PRATIQUES DES APPRENANTS AU SENEGAL.

Résumé : Dans le domaine de l'éducation, les apprenants utilisent de plus en plus les outils d'Intelligence Artificielle (IA) à des fins pédagogiques et d'apprentissage. Pour les apprenants de l'anglais comme langue étrangère, ces outils offrent de nouvelles opportunités pour pratiquer et améliorer leurs compétences linguistiques. Cependant, l'utilisation de ces outils n'implique pas pour autant que les étudiants soient conscients de leur plein potentiel dans le processus d'apprentissage. Cet article étudie les perceptions et pratiques des apprenants de l'anglais comme langue étrangère au Sénégal. Une enquête a été menée dans le but d'explorer les difficultés rencontrées par les étudiants dans l'apprentissage de la langue anglaise, leur utilisation des outils d'IA pour mener à bien leurs activités pédagogiques ainsi que leur préférence entre pratiquer l'anglais avec un partenaire humain ou un outil d'IA. Les résultats révèlent que pour 58,2% des participants, l'expression orale est la compétence linguistique la plus difficile à maîtriser. Par conséquent, 33% des étudiants utilisent l'IA pour améliorer leur expression orale. Mais 39,6% d'entre eux préfèrent pratiquer avec un humain plutôt qu'avec un outil IA. Comprendre les perceptions des apprenants et leur maîtrise de l'IA est une étape cruciale avant d'intégrer l'Intelligence artificielle dans nos systèmes éducatifs afin de garantir un environnement sûr et un usage éthique de l'IA.

Mots-clés : Intelligence Artificielle, éducation, EFL, les quatre compétences, Sénégal

Introduction

Learning a foreign language requires regular practice and constant training for learners to improve and maintain good academic standards. When we take the case of speaking skills, EFL students feel more comfortable with their mother tongue and first language. In fact, they have the proclivity to shift from English to French as soon as they face some speaking issues using English or are hesitant and careful about what to say while speaking. Shyness, fear of embarrassment, frequent use of fillers and lack of self-confidence may become obstacles for EFL learners to reach a good level of English-speaking proficiency. Syafitri (2017) argued that speaking was a complex skill. That complexity comes from the fact that the understanding of the vocabulary, the structure and the sound is not enough. Speakers must also conceptualize ideas they want to express and take into account the situation in which the oral exchange is happening. In our Senegalese schools, the average student has four hours or sometimes less per week to practice English and it is obviously not enough when we understand that teachers have to cover many other aspects of the language in English class activities. Added to that, EFL students may not have the ability to practice and improve their language skills outside their classrooms or English clubs they join. Implementing strategies and innovative approaches that will allow them to practice more often hence become a necessity.

Over the past six years, we observed the rise of AI (Artificial Intelligence) chatbots like ChatGPT, Deepseek, Gemini, and several others that revolutionized almost all sectors, including education and other fields like science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). OSIRIS (2025) claims that the Senegalese government plans to train over 105,000 educators in the monitored integration of Artificial Intelligence for the 2026-2027 academic year. Applying that decision could become a game-changer in our education system and several students are already using that technology in their classroom activities. Year after year, we notice how demotivated both learners and teachers get. New techniques and tasks need to be set up and implemented in learning and teaching strategies. This will improve not only the students' language level but also stimulate their interest in the learning process when they realize that they can achieve and have a good command of English-speaking skills. Implementing such a complex tool in our education system requires cautious policies and studies that will ensure its safe usage and impact on our students. This paper explores the learners' perceptions of Artificial Intelligence and how they are already using it in their learning journey.

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The specific objectives are of this study are:

-To identify which of the four skills learners find most difficult to develop;

-To identify the AI tool most frequently used by learners;

-To determine whether learners prefer practicing English with AI tools or a human language partner.

The Research hypotheses are:

-speaking is the language skill learners find most difficult to develop;

-ChatGPT is the AI tool most frequently used by learners;

-learners prefer practicing English with a human partner rather than with an AI tool.

1. Methodology

An online survey was created using the Google Forms platform and it allowed us to collect data that illustrated the various aspects of our study. 91 students participated in the

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survey. We targeted high school and university students as they not only have more access to smartphones and mobile data but they also use AI chatbots more often in their daily tasks. They had to answer a certain number of questions that were related to their school level, the language skill they struggle with the most, how familiar they already are with Artificial Intelligence, and most importantly, their preference between a human or chatbot language partner and why.

2. Results and Discussion

2.1 Results

Ninety-one (91) students agreed to participate in the survey. The questions can be divided into three main parts dealing with the learners' linguistic situation, their awareness of artificial intelligence and how they use it to improve their language skills.

-Learners' Linguistic Situation

Our target audience is composed of 91 students divided into two groups: the first one being university students with a percentage reaching 85.7% and the second group is composed of high school students, totaling 14.3% (**Diagram 1**).

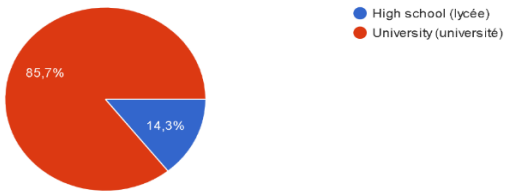

Diagram 1 : Learners' school level

In their language learning journey, 58.2% of students claimed that speaking is the most challenging language skill. The listening skill comes next with 24.2% of participants claiming its difficulty. 9.9% of students struggle the most with writing and finally, 7.7% of students believe that reading is the most challenging macro skill (Diagram 2).

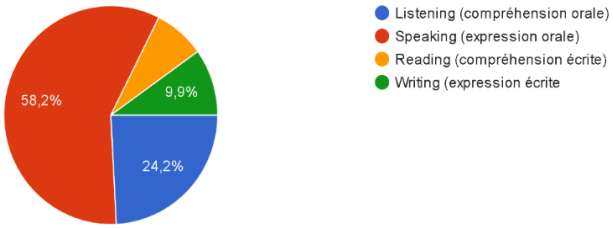

Diagram 2 : The language skills students struggle the most with

36.3% of participants declared that they rarely practice oral activities in class. 29.7% asserted that they sometimes carry out speaking activities. 19.8% affirmed that they often practice that skill in class, a small percentage (6.6%) acknowledged that they explored speaking activities very often and a concerning percentage (7.7%) declared that they never practice speaking activities in class (Diagram 3).

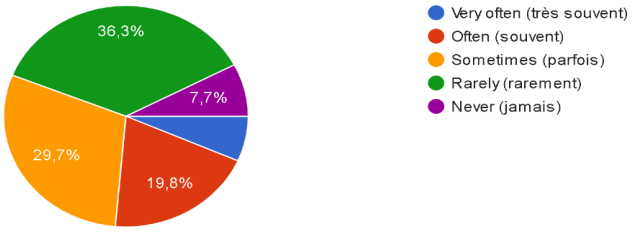

Diagram 3: Speaking practice's frequency in class

Several candidates (76.9%) are not or have never been members of an English club and 23.1% attended at least one (**Diagram 4**).

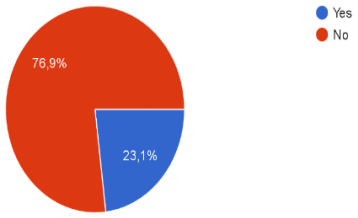

Diagram 4: Ratio of English club members

When conducting this survey, 45.1% of students felt unconfident when it came to speaking English in public. 27.5% of them did not feel confident at all. In other words, 72.6% of our candidates find it difficult to speak English publicly. However, 26.4% are confident when they speak in front of an audience and only 1.1% feel very confident (Diagram 5).

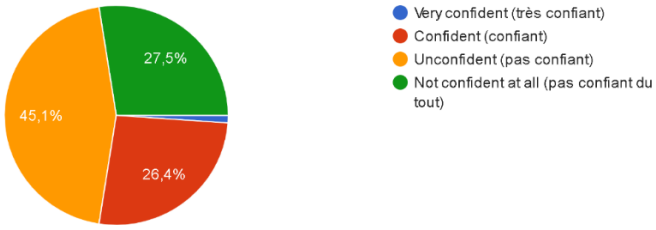

Diagram 5: Students' self-confidence in public speaking

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-Learners' awareness of Artificial Intelligence

Almost all participants (95.6%) had already heard about Artificial Intelligence (AI) and only 4.4% pretended that they had never heard about it (Diagram 6).

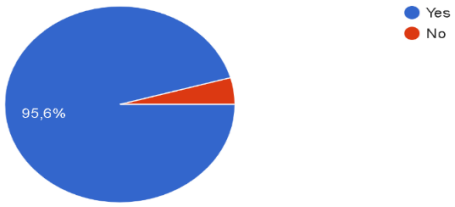

Diagram 6 : Learners' awareness of artificial intelligence

ChatGPT is by far the most used Artificial Intelligence (AI) tool with 60.4% of students choosing it as their favorite tool. Meta AI comes next with 13.2%. Claude AI is also popular among our candidates with 12.1% and Gemini as well with 8.8% of students using it (Diagram 7).

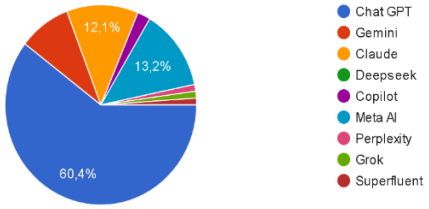

Diagram 7: the AI tools used the most by students

-Artificial Intelligence and Language Practice

Over 39.6% of students affirmed using AI tools to improve their languages from time to time. 18.7% of them rarely use AI tools to practice and 5.5% declared having never used AI tools in their language learning process. On the other hand, 19.8% often use AI tools and 16.5% of pupils use them very often (Diagram 8).

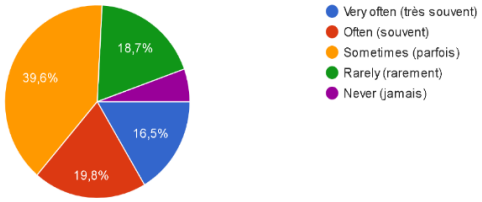

Diagram 8 : Frequency of language practice with AI

Several students (79.1%) are aware of the fact that AI tools can be used to practice English, especially speaking skills. The remaining 20.9% do not know that AI tools can help them improve their speaking skills (Diagram 10).

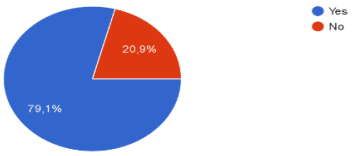

Diagram 9 : Language practice awareness

Speaking is again the language skill practiced the most by students (33%) with AI tools. 31.9% of them also use those same tools to practice their writing skills. 17.6% of our candidates use AI chatbots to improve their reading skills and only 8.8% use those tools to develop their listening skills. 8.8% of them do not practice any skill with AI tools (Diagram 9).

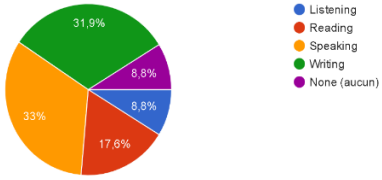

Diagram 10 : language skills' practice with AI

When they had to choose between a human or an Artificial Intelligence tool as a language partner, 39.6% of students preferred practicing speaking English with a human partner. 17.6% declared that they prefer working with an AI tool. 26.4% of our candidates want to practice with both a human being and an AI chatbot and 16.5% are still undecided (Diagram 10).

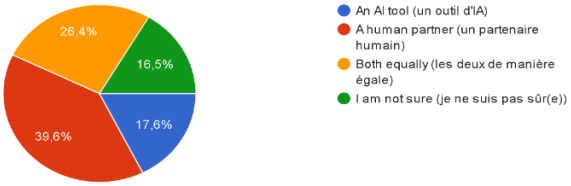

Diagram 11 : Choosing between a human or an AI language partner

3.Discussion

This survey revealed issues that students and teachers are facing in class. Even though 85.7% of them are studying at the university, which is an advanced level, we can see how similar their problems are. Among the four language skills, 58.2% claimed that speaking is the one they find the most challenging. 24.2% argued that they struggle with listening. This result is far from being surprising when we consider how important those skills are. Speaking and listening are the first major skills a human being acquires before learning to read and write. Rao (2019) asserted that speaking is the skill that students will be judged upon the most in real-life situations. When we express ourselves using a foreign language, people pay attention to our fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, accent and other linguistic characteristics that cannot be mastered overnight. Harmer (2007) asserted that when we speak, we build words and phrases with unique sounds and we change intonation and other

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linguistic aspects to convey different meanings. Adem & Berkessa (2022) conducted a survey related to teaching speaking skills and declared that:

> "Speaking was chosen by most of the participants (117/60.9%) as the weakest part of their learners. The other oral skill, listening, ranked as the second weakest side of the learners as it was chosen by 56 (29.2%) of the respondents. The remaining four skills/ aspects were only selected by about 10 percent of the respondents. Teachers' evaluation of the weakest part of the students did not have statistically significant relationships with their gender and experiences." (Adem & Berkessa, 2022:75).

Foreign language learners face the same obstacles during their learning process and the main cause of these speaking issues are due to the fact that speaking activities are not carried out as often as they should. Indeed, 36.3% of the students who participated in our survey confessed that they rarely practice speaking in class. Only 6.6% of them acknowledged that they practice that skill very often. In Senegal for instance, we generally teach vocabulary and grammar through reading comprehension activities and which can explain the small percentage of students (7.7%) who struggle with reading skills. In an EFL context, students are mainly exposed to that language when they attend English classes. Apart from their classroom, the other opportunity they have to improve their speaking skills is by joining an EC (English Club). Learning a language should be done in a stress-free environment that can foster learners' motivation. Dewi *et al*. (2024) explained that English clubs provide a valuable extracurricular environment for EFL learners to practice and improve their skills in an informal setting that is quite different from the rigid treatment of formal classrooms (28). Both students and teachers adopt a more joyful and playful mindset when they are in an English club. Practicing in such an environment encourages students to be more confident and more creative in their learning process. Unfortunately, when we take the case of our survey, up to 76.9% of the students had never joined an English club and that negatively impacted their level of self-confidence. 45.1% of those students feel insecure when it comes to speaking English in public. 27.5% of them do not feel comfortable at all with the idea of speaking English in public. Only 26.4% are confident enough to speak English publicly, which is slightly the same ratio as those who attended an English club (23.1%). Ur (1996) underlined that:

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> "Unlike reading, writing and listening activities, speaking requires some degree of real-time exposure to an audience. Learners are often inhibited about trying to say things in a foreign language in the classroom: worried about making mistakes, fearful of criticism or losing face, or simply shy of the attention their speech attracts." (UR, 1996:121)

That fear of speaking in public stems from an unsupportive environment, where students are the laughing stock of the entire class whenever they make the smallest mistake. Teachers play a pivotal role during those moments. They need to manage and monitor classroom activities in such a way that all those mockeries will be avoided by constantly empowering and encouraging students to speak in front of people. Rahmaniah & Asbah (2019) explained that two main factors hinder students from speaking in public known as internal and external factors. Internal factors can be explained by the lack of linguistic items and some speech impediments that can challenge students while they speak. The external factor can be the context itself. EFL learners, most of the time, stay in places where English is barely spoken and that lack of practice may slow down their learning process. Since the

early 2020s', Artificial Intelligence has been constantly making headlines, with AI tools revolutionizing sectors like healthcare, agriculture and education as well. In our survey, 95.6% of students have already heard about AI and 60.4% of them mostly use OpenAI's ChatGPT, 13.2% use Meta AI, 12.1% use Anthropic's Claude AI, and 8.8% use Google's Gemini. Nonetheless, only 19.8% of them often use these AI chatbots to improve their language level, up to 39.6% of them sometimes practice with AI tools, 18.7% rarely use them in their learning journey and only 16.5% do it on a regular basis.

Moreover, speaking is the most practiced skill with 33%, writing is practiced by 31.9% of our participants and finally reading then listening with 17.6% and 8.8%. We noticed a high percentage of students using AI to sharpen their listening skills because of a high level of awareness. 79.1% of those students had already known they could use AI tools to improve their language skills. But the most important question they had to answer the language partner they would choose between a human and a chatbot, and why. Practicing with a human partner is preferred by 39.6% of the participants because, according to some participants, there would be more interactions with a human partner. Other participants also picked a human partner because they felt more comfortable practicing English with a human being, as it allowed them to communicate naturally, improve their speaking skills and gain confidence. Others argued that they would understand better and faster when a human being is teaching them. Working with AI tools is chosen by 17.6% because, according to some of them, AI chatbots were more efficient, another participant declared that AI could adapt and match their level and correct mistakes whenever they were made. They also added that practicing with an AI tool was more practical and more convenient. But most of them claimed that they wanted to work with an AI because they would not be judged or mocked at when they made mistakes. With an AI tool, they are not afraid to mispronounce words, they can learn at their own pace, without any pressure and most importantly, AI tools are available at any moment of the day, allowing regular practice, and those tools can be asked to explain one concept as many times as needed until the user genuinely understands.

26.4% preferred practicing with both a human and an AI tool because they believed that humans and machines are complementary. Humans bring a profound emotional understanding and real presence while AI tools offer constant availability with more efficiency. Other candidates also picked both with AI tools, they could practice without feeling embarrassed when they make mistakes while a human partner communicates with them in a more natural fashion. 16.5% were still undecided and did not know which one to choose between a human and an AI tool as a language partner. Even if AI tools are already being used in our schools, AI literacy still needs to be taught so that teachers and students learn how to use it in an ethical and responsible way. Duong & Suppasetseree (2024) affirmed that:

> "If English-speaking classrooms are integrated with the AI tool, a relaxing atmosphere and more chances may be experienced by students, increasing exposure to improve English speaking skills. If it is skillfully applied by teachers, it is possible to increase students' interests and excitement in English classrooms, motivating them to speak more. If it is carefully used by students, it provides a stress-free learning environment, bringing more confidence to students to learn and improve English speaking skills. Careful instruction should be given in the AI-assisted learning environment." (Duong & Suppasetseree, 2024:316)

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Fully integrating AI tools in our schools can be a double-edged sword. Excessive screen exposure causes damage that we still cannot measure. Nationwide electricity and internet access are still gaps to be bridged in some parts of our countries and beforehand, we still need to understand what AI is really capable of and what we want to do with that capacity.

Conclusion

This study was conducted to explore EFL learners' practices and perceptions of using AI chatbots to improve their linguistic skills. The advent of Artificial Intelligence will create new opportunities and strategies to improve and optimize our teaching and learning process. In our results, we have seen how students struggle with some English skills, especially speaking, which is one of the hardest skills to master due to its complex characteristics. At first glance, integrating Artificial Intelligence into our curriculum could be the best choice to make. An AI race is going on and the fear of missing out or finishing in the last position is haunting almost all governments. That fear should not prevent leaders from treading carefully with that technology. Most of our students are already familiar with AI tools and we are starting to see how they are using it in a negative and unethical way. Teaching AI literacy, studying its impact and how it can affect learners and teachers should be the first aspects to explore if we want to ensure a safe environment for our children and educators in the long run.

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