CHARACTER AI IN EFL CLASSROOMS: STUDENT PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES

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Abstract: This study investigated the perceptions and experiences of EFL students using Character AI in their English learning process. Character AI, an advanced chatbot service designed for human-like interactions, offers potential benefits in language education. A qualitative approach was employed, involving 15 junior high school students at SMP Negeri 3 Magelang who interacted with Character AI for a 40-minute session. Data were collected through report cards and classroom observations and analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings indicate that students found Character AI engaging and enjoyable, enhancing their motivation and participation in learning English. The AI provided personalized feedback and real-time corrections, contributing to noticeable improvements in students' grammar and sentence construction skills. This study highlights the potential of Character AI as a valuable educational tool in EFL classrooms, emphasizing its role in enhancing student engagement, motivation, and participation while offering personalized feedback and real-time corrections.

Keywords: character AI, chatbot, English as a foreign language, language learning, student's perceptions

INTRODUCTION

Artificial Intelligence (AI) stands at the cutting edge of technological progress, particularly in creating systems that mimic human intelligence. Moreover, as revealed by Ramadhika et al. (2022), as a listening tool, Artificial Intelligence (AI) possesses an exceptionally refined capability for converting auditory signals into textual representations. This sophisticated system can accurately interpret and transcribe various sounds, including spoken language,

ambient noise, and other auditory inputs, into written text. The precision and sensitivity of AI in this process allow for nuanced and contextually appropriate translations, making it an invaluable tool in applications such as voice recognition, automated transcription services, and assistive technologies for the hearing impaired.

Chatbots, initially created for entertainment using simple keyword matching, such as ELIZA (Shawar & Atwell, 2007), have evolved significantly and are now widely applied in education. Early examples include Knill et al. (2004), who used chatbots to teach mathematics, and Kerfoot et al. (2006), who employed them in medical training. A key innovation in this field is Character AI, which introduces interactive digital personas specifically designed to enhance educational experiences, marking a significant step forward in leveraging AI for learning.

Character AI, also known as c.ai or Character.ai, is a neural language model chatbot service capable of generating human-like text responses and engaging in contextual conversations. Created by the developers behind Google's LaMDA, Noam Shazeer and Daniel De Freitas, the beta version was released to the public in September 2022 (Tiku, 2022). This development democratizes access to advanced Character AI models, allowing users to utilize their capabilities for various purposes, including education.

Learning English as a foreign language (EFL) requires building skills in vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and sentence structure. Traditional classrooms often need to meet the diverse needs of EFL students, leading to differences in proficiency and engagement. This is often due to passive teaching methods, where students only receive information without active participation. In

contrast, the Merdeka Curriculum promotes active learning with dynamic and interactive teaching methods tailored to each student's needs (Mastuti et al., 2020).

Character AI plays a crucial role in supporting active learning for EFL students by encouraging real-time, interactive conversations. This dynamic practice helps students explore and learn independently, think critically, form sentences, and apply grammar rules in context, aligning with the Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on student-centered learning. The AI offers personalized feedback, adapting its responses to individual needs, which helps students learn at their own pace.

While studies like Haristiani (2019) and Fryer and Carpenter (2006) highlight the benefits of chatbots—such as accessibility,

convenience, and repetitive practice—they often overlook emotional engagement and usability. Character AI addresses these gaps by providing engaging interactions and practical tools for language learning. However, challenges remain, including accessibility issues for resource-limited schools and the risk of over-reliance on AI, which might reduce opportunities for human connection and collaboration. By focusing on students' emotional responses and the ease of using AI, this study offers new insights into how these factors impact learning, going beyond the traditional focus on AI's educational effectiveness.

While AI in education has been researched, more is needed about how EFL students in junior high perceive and use these tools. This study fills that gap by focusing on

young learners building basic language skills. It offers practical insights to help educators tailor AI tools to support early-stage learners better and improve their learning experience.

The study adds to research on AI in education, highlighting how emotional and usability factors can improve or limit AI use in EFL classrooms. Its findings could guide educational policies and AI development, ensuring future tools prioritize user experience and emotional engagement.

This study aims to address the following research questions (1) How do EFL students perceive the use of Character AI in their language learning? (2) What are the perceived benefits and challenges of using Character AI from the student's perspective? and (3) How does Character AI influence students' engagement and motivation in learning English?

METHODOLOGY

This study used a descriptive qualitative approach to explore how junior high school students at SMP Negeri 3 Magelang perceive using Character AI for language learning. According to Moleong (2006), qualitative research avoids statistical analysis and focuses on detailed descriptions, as Creswell (2012) explains, providing a narrative of the findings in words. This approach was chosen to gain deep insights into students' experiences and perspectives.

The study included 15 students from class VIII-B at SMP Negeri 3 Magelang. The participants were selected using the Purposive

Sampling Technique to ensure relevance. All were EFL learners who had never used Character AI before. Before writing their reports, the students were introduced to Character AI and engaged with it in a 40-minute session.

Data collection involved using report cards and classroom observations to gather detailed information. Observations were semi-structured, with a predefined set of indicators to ensure consistency while allowing flexibility to capture spontaneous behaviors that could provide additional insights.

Student engagement was measured using clear criteria. Active participation included how often and effectively students interacted with Character AI, such as starting conversations or asking questions.

Sustained attention was tracked by observing focus and how long they engaged without distractions. Emotional responses, like smiling, laughing, fidgeting, or disengaging, showed enjoyment or frustration. Verbal feedback was also noted, capturing students' comments and reflections about their experience with the AI during the session.

Students received a report card with open-ended questions to reflect on their interactions with Character AI. One question, "Write down what you have talked about with your chatbot friend here!" prompted them to describe their conversations, the topics discussed, and the nature of their engagement.

The second question, *"Sum up your chatbot escapade! Any lessons learned or unforgettable words?"* invited students to reflect on their

overall experience. They were encouraged to summarize key takeaways, lessons learned, or memorable moments from their interactions. This allowed students to express their impressions and highlight any impactful or enjoyable aspects of using Character AI for learning.

Classroom observations were conducted to see how students interacted with Character AI in a natural learning setting. It focused on their engagement, participation, and reactions to the AI's feedback. Detailed notes were taken to capture student behavior and interactions.

During the 40-minute sessions, students used Character AI mainly for natural conversation practice. The chatbot mimicked human-like dialogue, helping students use their English skills in real-world situations. They practiced forming sentences, building vocabulary, and improving fluency by responding to prompts, asking questions, and holding conversations on various topics.

While Character AI did not provide explicit feedback on grammar, sentence structure, or vocabulary corrections, its conversational approach still offered valuable language practice. Students were encouraged to experiment with language use in a low-pressure environment, where they could practice constructing sentences and using new words without fear of making mistakes. This informal, real-time practice helped students become more comfortable with the flow and structure of everyday English conversation.

The AI's ability to maintain contextually relevant and coherent conversations allowed students to see how language works in context, exposing them to correct forms naturally, rather than through direct corrections. As students conversed, they had the opportunity to recognize their own mistakes and self-correct over time, making the practice process more organic and engaging.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key themes and patterns. The analysis process involved the following steps: (1) responses from the report cards and classroom observation notes were coded manually, (2) codes were grouped into categories, and major themes and sub-themes were identified, (3) to ensure reliability, several strategies were employed.

Two strategies were used in this research. One key strategy was member checking. After the initial analysis of the data, a selection of students was invited to participate in a member-checking process. During this phase, participants reviewed the findings and interpretations related to their experiences with Character AI. This feedback loop allowed students to confirm whether their perspectives had been accurately captured and represented in the research. By incorporating their insights, the analysis gained additional credibility, ensuring that the interpretations aligned with the students' actual experiences.

The study ensured transparency through detailed coding, theme development, and analysis documentation, enabling precise tracking and replication. Key themes

included engagement, motivation, personalized feedback, and sentence structure improvement, supported by participant quotes.

Universitas Tidar granted ethical approval. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, rights, and voluntary participation. Informed consent was obtained, confidentiality was maintained, and data were securely stored for research purposes only.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study involved 15 class VIII-B junior high students new to Character AI. After a 40-minute session, students shared their experiences via report cards, describing the learning method as fun and engaging. They praised Character AI's human-like interaction and variety of characters.

Feedback and observations were analyzed to identify key themes.

Engagement and Motivation

Many students reported finding the experience enjoyable and engaging. They mentioned that interacting with Character AI felt like a fun activity rather than a traditional learning task.

> *"It's really fun chatting with the chatbot. The topics we talk about are continuous."*

The student's statement highlights that interacting with the chatbot was enjoyable and engaging, fostering motivation and entertainment—critical factors for effective learning, especially in language acquisition (Oga-Baldwin & Nakata, 2020). It also shows that Character AI maintains fluid dialogue, supporting continuous practice in a natural context. It aligns with Huang et al.'s (2022) findings

on chatbots' effectiveness in enhancing language skills through relevant conversations.

> *"During the conversation, the chatbot always responded well to me, as he said, 'Of course, I would be happy to help with your homework."*

Another student's comment indicates that Character AI not only assists them but also motivates them in various ways, including helping with homework. This suggests that Character AI can be a valuable tool in supporting students' learning processes, beyond simply serving as a companion. It highlights the potential of Character AI to enhance students' engagement with their studies, provide personalized support, and foster a more interactive and enjoyable learning experience (Thomas & Alkhafaji, 2023)**.** By helping with academic tasks and serving as a motivating presence, Character AI can play a significant role in facilitating effective learning and promoting student success.

Personalized Feedback

Aside from being engaging and motivating, Character AI also gives students personalized feedback during the conversation. Students appreciated the instant feedback provided by Character AI, which helped them understand and correct their mistakes in real time.

> *"The lesson I got from talking to the chatbot is that we can learn more about English that we don't understand and it can also train us to speak."*

Students reported that communicating with Character AI expanded their understanding of English concepts they needed help with. The AI explained, corrected, and supplemented their knowledge, providing immediate feedback and

helping them correct errors effectively.

Research by Liang et al. (2023) shows that chatbot tools work best when they use methods like graphical interfaces or guided self-correction instead of directly providing answers. Guided self-correction encourages learners, especially those with lower skills, to engage more actively, improving their understanding and retention.

A student shared that using the chatbot helped them learn more about English topics they needed help understanding.

> *"When I struggled to explain something, the AI would rephrase my sentences more clearly, showing me how to express my thoughts better. "*

This shows that Character AI helps students fill knowledge gaps by giving clear explanations and extra context. Research shows that

immediate, personalized feedback boosts understanding and retention in language learning (Huang et al., 2022). By addressing specific mistakes, Character AI helps students learn profoundly and strengthen their language skills.

Learning and Improvement

Students reported improved sentence construction after using Character AI, which provides instant feedback and corrects grammar in real-time, helping them quickly learn and reinforce proper grammar usage.

> *"I feel like the AI was talking directly to me and helping me improve step by step."*

The quote underscores the value of personalized and incremental learning provided by Character AI. The student's feeling of being directly addressed by the AI and guided through a step-by-step improvement process highlights the

tool's effectiveness in creating a supportive and engaging learning environment. This personalized approach not only enhances engagement and motivation but also contributes to more effective skill development and increased confidence in language use.

> *"Talking to the AI felt like having a real conversation, which helped me see how grammar works in everyday language."*

The student's comment that "talking to the AI felt like having a real conversation" highlights Character AI's ability to simulate natural interactions, fostering engagement and realistic language practice. This authenticity helps students apply grammar in real-world contexts. The remark also shows that Character AI demonstrates practical grammar, enhancing understanding and retention.

Understanding grammar in context is a critical aspect of language learning (Pawlak, 2020). By experiencing how grammar rules are used in natural conversation, students can better grasp their practical significance and apply them correctly in their speaking and writing. This contextual learning bridges the gap between theory and practice, making grammar instruction more effective.

Students found their interactions with Character AI fun and engaging, praising its ability to maintain interest, respond effectively, and provide supportive assistance. Additionally, students found Character AI educational, helping improve their English and writing skills with clear, easy-to-understand responses. One student

noted that it even taught patience when facing challenges.

Class VIII-B students responded positively to their first experience with Character AI. During a 40-minute session, the AI's human-like conversations and diverse characters were engaging, making the learning enjoyable and educational.

Students highlighted Character AI's ability to foster engagement and motivation, describing it as a fun, seamless, and fluid learning experience. They appreciated its responsiveness, including help with homework, which enhanced both enjoyment and academic support, crucial for effective language learning (Van Horn, 2024).

Students valued Character AI's personalized feedback, with real-time corrections helping them quickly understand and fix mistakes. One student noted that it filled gaps in their English knowledge, promoting active learning and improving grammar usage (Kohnke, 2023).

Students reported improved sentence construction due to Character AI's real-time feedback, which helped them understand and correct errors immediately. They appreciated the step-by-step guidance and authentic conversations, which boosted confidence and showed how grammar works in practical contexts, enhancing language proficiency (Yang et al., 2022).

The study found that EFL students had very positive perceptions of using Character AI. Many students said that it made learning fun and engaging, turning

lessons into enjoyable activities. They described their interactions as "entertaining" and "continuous," feeling understood and supported by the AI. These positive experiences reflect the importance of engagement in language learning, as noted in previous research. Character AI not only acts as a learning tool but also as a companion that makes the learning journey more enjoyable, encouraging students to participate and improve their language skills actively.

Students identified several benefits of using Character AI, such as personalized feedback and improved language skills. They appreciated the instant corrections, which helped them quickly understand and fix mistakes. Many reported better grammar and sentence construction, as well as

learning aspects of English they previously needed help with.

However, some challenges were noted, like the AI's difficulty in understanding complex questions or providing deeper context. These limitations show the need for ongoing improvements in AI technology.

Overall, Character AI proves to be a valuable tool for EFL learning, especially with its real-time feedback, which reinforces proper usage. This aligns with research showing that personalized feedback boosts language learning. Still, improving the AI's ability to handle more complex interactions will be vital to enhancing its effectiveness.

Character AI has proven to significantly boost student engagement and motivation in EFL education, transforming learning

from a routine task into an enjoyable and interactive experience. Students likened using AI to playing a game rather than traditional studying, appreciating its help with homework, quick responses, and engaging conversations. This supportive tool encourages more frequent and focused practice, helping students stay motivated and improve their language skills.

To effectively integrate Character AI into classrooms, teachers can include 15–20-minute sessions aligned with lesson goals, such as practicing vocabulary on specific topics. Prompts or guided questions can focus on student interactions, while follow-up discussions allow students to share their experiences and learn from each other. Teachers should track progress using data from the AI to adjust lessons, assigning tasks based on proficiency to meet individual learning needs. Training and workshops for teachers can ensure they are well-prepared to use Character AI effectively, designing lessons that are practical, fun, and engaging for students.

CONCLUSION

EFL students responded positively to using Character AI, finding it fun, engaging, and effective for improving grammar through natural, real-time interactions. Schools should integrate it into structured programs, train teachers, and enhance AI with updated content, character options, and progress-tracking tools to maximize its potential. Group activities can encourage peer learning. However, the study's small

sample size and cultural focus highlight the need for broader, more diverse research.

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