Students' Perspectives on AI Tools for Academic Oral Communication Preparation: A Study in a Malaysian EAP Context

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.91200165

Received: 05 December 2025; Accepted: 10 December 2025; Published: 05 January 2026

ABSTRACT

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) tools in educational contexts has gained considerable attention, yet research on their application in academic oral communication remains limited. This study explores first-year undergraduate students' experiences using AI tools—specifically ChatGPT and Magic School AI—to prepare for group discussions in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classroom at a Malaysian university. Using a quantitative survey approach, data were collected from 77 students across various academic disciplines, all at B2 CEFR proficiency level. The findings reveal overwhelmingly positive perceptions of AI usefulness (90.9% for Magic School AI; 84.4% for ChatGPT) and relevance (80.5% and 88.3% respectively). However, qualitative responses identified five critical challenges: over-reliance risks, accuracy concerns, ethical considerations, content depth limitations, and technical usability issues. This study contributes to the emerging discourse on AI integration in language learning by documenting student perspectives on AI-supported oral communication preparation in a Malaysian EAP context, offering practical insights for educators and policymakers navigating the complexities of technology-enhanced language learning.

Keywords - Artificial Intelligence (AI); English for Academic Purposes (EAP); Group Discussion; Oral Communication; Educational Technology.

INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized and digitally connected world, effective oral communication has become a key competency for university students, particularly in academic contexts. Within Malaysian higher education, where English serves as the medium of instruction for many programs, developing academic oral communication skills is essential for students' academic success and future career prospects. The Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education) emphasizes the importance of communication skills and English language proficiency as critical graduate attributes, recognizing their role in enhancing employability and global competitiveness (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015).

In English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classrooms, group discussions are widely used as a pedagogical tool to promote academic skills, among them critical thinking, academic speaking fluency, collaboration, and content comprehension (Hasanova, 2024; Mejia & Loor, 2023). These activities not only reflect authentic communication tasks in higher education but also prepare students for future professional environments where teamwork and effective oral articulation are essential. Bhaskar et al. (2025) state that group discussion-based tasks and project work in academic settings are increasingly recognized as vital for developing the soft skills which are core competencies in the modern workplace.

However, preparing for group discussions in an academic setting often presents challenges for students, especially those who are non-native speakers of English. In the Malaysian context, despite years of English language instruction, many undergraduates continue to experience difficulties with academic English,

particularly in oral communication tasks (Mahbob et al., 2020). These challenges include linguistic barriers, lack of content knowledge, and apprehension. Aziz and Kashinathan (2021) highlight that lack of self-motivation and confidence, anxiety, and lack of vocabulary knowledge are major barriers to language learning. Halali et al. (2022) discover that students who are non-native speakers lack the language proficiency, confidence in academic speaking, and the content knowledge in the field of study. Second-language learners often face reluctance or hesitance in participating in academic discourse such as discussions, as stated by Raj et al. (2024), who report that fear of evaluation, anxiousness, and low self-efficacy as common causes of speaking apprehension.

Recent advancements in generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools—such as ChatGPT and Magic School AI—have introduced new possibilities for supporting students in these academic tasks. Such tools can generate content, offering prompts, rephrasing ideas, and summarizing texts, potentially assisting learners in preparing for oral presentations and discussions (Youn et al., 2025). They assert that AI tools help lay the foundation for understanding how learners can utilize technologies in reading, writing, and analyzing. Generative AI helps students overcome idea blocks and supports critical thinking preparation for academic tasks, especially for non-native speakers who struggle with language formulation (Lee et. Al., 2025). In terms of oral communication, Kim et al. (2021) confirm that the use of chatbots is beneficial in helping students improve pronunciation, intonation, and stress. In addition, AI tools have been proven to furnish students with instant feedback (Yang, 2022). These studies provide strong support that AI tools have been beneficial in supporting students in their academic communication.

Understanding how students perceive these AI tools in the context of academic oral communication is vital for Malaysian educators and policymakers. It can inform educators on the relevance and effectiveness of integrating such tools into EAP instruction, particularly within the unique socio-educational context of Malaysia where multilingualism and diverse language backgrounds characterize the student population. Moreover, while AI tools may offer benefits such as faster idea generation or more organized content, they also raise concerns about reliability, overdependence, and the loss of authenticity in student responses. There is, therefore, a pressing need to investigate how students engage with these tools for oral preparation—not only what they find useful, but also what difficulties or reservations they may have. Such insights are crucial for developing pedagogically sound, culturally responsive, and ethically responsible approaches to AI integration in Malaysian EAP classrooms.

A. Statement of the Problem

While generative AI tools have increasingly found applications in educational contexts, their usage has predominantly centred on writing-related tasks—such as essay drafting, grammar correction, and content generation. For example, Marzuki (2023) analysed a range of AI writing tools and highlighted their impact on student-generated content and writing quality. Similarly, educational practitioners and students frequently rely on AI technologies to streamline text-based academic tasks (McDonald, 2025). However, this concentration on writing has overshadowed potential roles of AI in supporting oral academic tasks, particularly speaking-oriented activities. In the specific context of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), group discussions are a vital pedagogical strategy for cultivating academic speech, collaborative argumentation, and critical thinking. Despite their importance, research exploring AI tools that facilitate spoken communication preparation remains sparse, particularly in Southeast Asian contexts. Notably, Liu (2025) evaluated EAP Talk, an AI-assisted speaking assessment tool, and underscored the broader absence of studies investigating AI for EAP speaking practices. Additionally, Du (2024) reviewed AI chatbots and confirmed their positive impact on engagement and speaking confidence—but again, with a focus largely on general language practice rather than structured academic tasks.

Recent empirical investigations begin to challenge this gap. For instance, Zhu et al. (2025) examined MA TESOL students' attitudes toward AI speaking apps and documented increased confidence and reduced speaking anxiety in presentation contexts. Similarly, Du et al. (2024) reported significant improvements in speaking performance, confidence, and engagement when students used EAP Talk—an AI-driven platform providing personalized feedback across fluency, pronunciation, and vocabulary. These initial findings suggest that AI can positively support oral academic language development, but they remain exploratory and limited in scope. At the same time, concerns about over-reliance on AI dialogue systems have surfaced. Zhai, Wibowo, and Li (2024)

warned that uncritical dependence on AI may erode learners' critical thinking and analytical reasoning abilities, particularly when students accept AI-generated content without adequate verification. This ethical and cognitive dimension adds complexity to the integration of AI in academic speaking support.

In the Malaysian higher education context, where English proficiency remains a significant concern despite policy initiatives (Thirusanku & Yunus, 2014), the potential of AI tools to support oral academic communication preparation warrants investigation. Malaysian students often struggle with the transition from general English to academic English, particularly in oral genres that demand both linguistic competence and disciplinary knowledge (Rafek et al., 2014). Understanding how these students perceive and utilize AI tools for group discussion preparation can provide valuable insights for curriculum design, pedagogical practice, and technology integration policies in Malaysian universities.

These studies point toward a gap: there is a large volume of studies that focus on AI applications in writing, while the area of AI for academic speaking preparation—especially for group discussion tasks in EAP contexts—remains underexplored, particularly from the student perspective and within non-Western educational settings. Questions on how AI supports students' fluency and confidence, and how far students rely on AI to help them in oral academic tasks need to be investigated. Addressing this gap is crucial for designing pedagogically sound, ethically responsible, culturally appropriate, and student-centred approaches to AI integration in EAP instruction. Hence, this paper intends to document the experiences of a group of ESL learners in using AI tools in completing an academic oral task within the context of an EAP classroom in a Malaysian university.

B. Research Aims

This study aims to explore students' experiences with AI tools in the context of academic oral communication tasks in an EAP classroom in a Malaysian university. The specific objectives of this study are to:

1. Investigate these students' perceptions of the usefulness and relevance of AI tools in preparing content for group discussions in an EAP classroom.

2. Identify the challenges and limitations these students face when using AI tools to prepare content for group discussions in an EAP classroom.

Based on these objectives, this paper aims to seek answers to these questions:

1. What are students' perceptions of the usefulness and relevance of AI tools in preparing content for group discussions in an EAP classroom in a Malaysian university?

2. What are the challenges faced by the students when using AI tools to prepare content for group discussions in an EAP classroom in a Malaysian university?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on artificial intelligence in language education has expanded rapidly, mainly focusing on written rather than oral academic work (e.g., Dong, 2023; Meniado et al, 2024; Zhao, 2025). This literature nevertheless converges on several affordances that are central to English for Academic Purposes (EAP): AI tools generate and organize ideas, model academic discourse, and provide rapid language scaffolding for content development, stance, and cohesion—resources that are equally relevant when preparing for oral tasks such as group discussions.

A. AI Tools in Language Learning: Writing and Beyond

Empirical work on ChatGPT in second language (L2) writing illustrates how students appropriate these affordances for broader academic literacy rather than mere surface correction. Studies with university EFL learners reported that ChatGPT is used to brainstorm and expand ideas, restructure arguments, calibrate formality, and enrich disciplinary lexis, with generally positive perceptions of usefulness and relevance for

academic work (Meniado et al., 2024; Tseng & Lin, 2024). ChatGPT can also scaffold genre awareness and critical engagement with sources, though not without concerns over plagiarism, hallucinated content, and reduced cognitive effort (Barrot, 2023; Abbas & Jasim, 2025). A smaller set of studies explicitly connects generative AI to spoken assessment: learners use ChatGPT or similar tools to draft and refine presentation scripts, sequence key points, and rehearse explanations, reporting increased clarity of content and confidence before oral exams (Mun, 2024; Wang et al., 2024). Work with generative AI chatbots in school contexts further shows gains in speaking performance and reduced anxiety, attributed to opportunities for topic development, extended turns, and supportive feedback (Tai & Chen, 2024).

Apart from ChatGPT, education-specific platforms such as Magic School AI have been examined primarily from the perspective of teachers' instructional design rather than students' own language production. Quasi-experimental and design-oriented studies indicate that Magic School AI can generate questions, texts, and activity prompts that enhance students' engagement and achievement in content subjects, while streamlining lesson planning and assessment design (Cahyani & Yudono, 2025; Khan et al., 2024). In these accounts, AI is framed as a co-planner that structures tasks and scaffolds content, which are clearly the affordances relevant to EAP learners who must assemble background knowledge, arguments, and examples before speaking.

B. Academic Oral Communication and Group Discussions

Parallel work on EAP oral communication highlights the challenges in academic group discussions for students, thereby requiring crucial preparation for successful participation (Jones, 1999; Kim, 2006; Ho, 2011). Discourse-analytic research further demonstrates that academic group discussions involve complex interactional work, including managing disagreement, co-constructing ideas, and negotiating turns (Toomaneejinda & Harding, 2018). Survey-based work in EFL contexts indicates that students recognize group discussion as beneficial for speaking development and confidence, yet simultaneously experience challenges related to real-time idea generation and content support (Hoque et al., 2024). Notably, this literature rarely considers AI as a mediating resource in the preparatory phase of such tasks, despite the clear alignment between the demands of group discussion and the content-planning affordances of AI tools.

C. The Malaysian EAP Context

In the Malaysian context, research on EAP instruction has documented persistent challenges in developing students' academic English proficiency, particularly in oral communication. Studies indicate that Malaysian undergraduates often struggle with academic vocabulary, discourse markers, and the confidence to participate actively in academic discussions (Kashinathan & Aziz, 2021; Abdullah et al., 2024). The multilingual background of Malaysian students, where English functions as a second or third language alongside Bahasa Malaysia and various heritage languages, creates unique pedagogical considerations (Darmi & Albion, 2017). While technology integration in language learning has been explored in Malaysian settings (Mahdi & Al-Dera, 2013), research specifically addressing AI tools for oral communication preparation remains limited.

D. Synthesis and Gap Identification

Taken together, these strands reveal a specific gap at the intersection of AI, EAP, and oral academic tasks. ChatGPT and related tools have been widely studied as supports for writing and, to a lesser extent, scripted oral performance; Magic School AI has been framed mainly as a teacher-facing design assistant. Across both lines of work, the focus tends to fall on final performance and global attitudes, rather than on how students themselves use AI while preparing content for collaborative academic discussion. Furthermore, the majority of existing research has been conducted in Western educational contexts, with limited attention to Asian or specifically Malaysian settings where linguistic, cultural, and pedagogical factors may shape technology adoption and use differently.

This study addresses this gap by examining students' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of using AI tools to prepare content for group discussions in an EAP classroom, thereby extending AI-in-language-learning research into a key but underexplored academic genre and responding to calls for more context-sensitive accounts of technology-mediated oral academic literacy (Ho, 2011; Kim, 2006; Toomaneejinda & Harding,

2018; Lawrence, 2020). By focusing on the Malaysian context, this study also contributes to the growing body of research on technology-enhanced language learning in Southeast Asian higher education.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a quantitative technique with qualitative components to gain students' perspectives on the use of AI tools to help them prepare for group discussions. The study employed a survey research design, which is appropriate for exploring attitudes, perceptions, and self-reported behaviours of a relatively large sample (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study was conducted at a public research university in Malaysia during the 2024/2025 academic session. The participants were enrolled in a compulsory EAP course designed to develop academic literacy skills for first-year undergraduates. The course focuses on critical reading, academic writing, and oral communication skills necessary for success in university-level studies. The group discussion task, which served as the context for this study, required students to engage in collaborative academic discourse on assigned topics related to their fields of study, demonstrating critical thinking, effective argumentation, and appropriate use of academic language.

A. Participants and Sampling

Students were selected using purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique appropriate for studies focusing on specific characteristics of a population (Palinkas et al., 2015). A total of 77 first-year undergraduate students from various academic disciplines were chosen from the English language course focused on academic literacy. These students had achieved a B2 proficiency level on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) upon entry to the university, indicating upper-intermediate English proficiency. All participants were Malaysian citizens representing the country's diverse linguistic and ethnic backgrounds, with ages ranging from 18 to 20 years. The sample size of 77 participants was deemed adequate for the purposes of this exploratory study, allowing for meaningful statistical analysis while remaining manageable within the constraints of a single-semester course (Cohen et al., 2018). Participation was voluntary, and students provided informed consent after receiving explanations about the study's purpose and procedures.

B. Instrumentation

Data were collected using a structured online survey administered via Google Forms. The survey instrument consisted of two main sections:

Section A: Demographic Information - This section collected background data including students' age, gender, academic discipline, and prior experience with AI tools.

Section B: Perceptions of AI Tool Usefulness and Relevance - This section contained seven Likert-scale items (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) designed to measure students' perceptions of the usefulness and relevance of ChatGPT and Magic School AI for preparing group discussion content. Items were developed based on the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989) and adapted to the specific context of academic oral communication preparation.

Section C: Open-ended Questions - This section included three open-ended questions asking students to describe challenges, limitations, and concerns they experienced when using AI tools for group discussion preparation. This qualitative component allowed for exploration of issues not captured by the Likert-scale items.

The survey instrument was reviewed by two experienced EAP instructors for face validity and clarity. A pilot test was conducted with a small group of students (n=10) from a similar cohort to ensure item clarity and identify any technical issues with the online platform.

C. Data Collection Procedures

The survey was administered during the final week of the semester, after students had completed their group discussion tasks. This timing ensured that all participants had authentic experience using AI tools for preparation.

Students were given one week to complete the survey online, with reminders sent at the midpoint to encourage participation. The survey was anonymous to encourage honest responses, though participants could voluntarily provide contact information if they wished to be informed of study results. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the course coordinator. Students were informed that participation was voluntary and would not affect their course grades. They were also assured of data confidentiality and anonymity in reporting.

D. Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the Likert-scale items were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages and means. The data were examined for patterns in students' perceptions of usefulness and relevance across different AI tools. Qualitative data from open-ended responses were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Two researchers independently coded a subset of responses to establish inter-rater reliability, achieving substantial agreement. Emerging themes were discussed and refined until consensus was reached.

E. Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relied on self-reported data, which may be subject to social desirability bias or inaccurate recall. Second, the sample was drawn from a single university in Malaysia, which may limit generalizability to other contexts. Third, the study captured perceptions at one point in time; longitudinal research would provide insights into how perceptions evolve with extended AI tool use. Finally, while the study examined students' perceptions, it did not directly assess the impact of AI tools on actual oral communication performance, which remains an avenue for future research.

FINDINGS

A. Students' Perceptions of Usefulness and Relevance

Table 1 presents students' perceptions of the usefulness of AI tools in preparing for group discussions.

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I gained new knowledge on how to apply AI tools to help me develop my opinion for a group discussion.	1	0	0	42	34
Magic School Is a useful tool in preparing my content for a group discussion.	1	1	5	47	23
I did not use any AI tools to prepare my content.	5	37	25	9	1
AI tools did not provide me with useful content that I could use for my group discussion.	9	41	14	10	3
Chat GPT is a useful tool in preparing my content for a group discussion.	1	1	10	53	12
Content suggested by Magic School AI were relevant to my needs in preparing for oral report.	1	0	14	51	11
Content suggested by ChatGPT AI was relevant to my needs in preparing for oral report.	1	1	7	54	14

Table 1: Students' Perceptions of AI Tool Usefulness (N=77)

The data reveals overwhelmingly positive attitudes toward AI tools across multiple dimensions. When asked whether AI tools helped them gain new knowledge to develop their stance for group discussions, 98.7% of students (n=76) agreed or strongly agreed, with only one student (1.3%) expressing strong disagreement. This

finding indicates broad acceptance of AI as a valuable learning resource among the participants, suggesting that students view these tools not merely as content generators but as educational aids that enhance their understanding of how to approach academic discourse. The students' perception of tool utility demonstrates strong confidence in both platforms, though with slight differences. Specifically, 90.9% of students found Magic School AI useful for preparing group discussion content (61.0% agreed, 29.9% strongly agreed), while 84.4% perceived ChatGPT as useful for the same purpose (68.8% agreed, 15.6% strongly agreed). The marginally higher rating for Magic School AI may reflect its education-specific design features or the structured nature of its outputs, which some students may find more directly applicable to academic tasks.

The data also revealed minimal dissatisfaction with AI tools overall. When presented with the statement that AI tools did not provide useful content, 64.9% of students disagreed or strongly disagreed, while only a small minority (16.9%) expressed this concern. This suggests that the vast majority found the AI-generated content valuable for their preparation needs. Interestingly, 18.2% maintained a neutral position, which may indicate variability in how effectively different students were able to elicit useful responses from the AI tools, possibly related to their prompting skills or the specificity of their discussion topics.

Regarding relevance to academic needs, students showed strong confidence in both tools' ability to provide appropriate content. A substantial majority (80.5%) found Magic School AI's suggestions relevant to their oral report preparation, while an even higher percentage (88.3%) deemed ChatGPT's content relevant for their requirements. The higher relevance rating for ChatGPT may reflect its greater flexibility in generating content across diverse topics and its ability to provide more nuanced, conversational responses that students could adapt to their specific discussion contexts.

Notably, the overwhelming majority of students (87%) reported actually using AI tools for their preparation, with only 13.0% indicating they did not use any AI assistance. This high adoption rate demonstrates that, when given the opportunity and appropriate guidance, students readily integrate AI tools into their academic preparation workflows. The 13% who did not use AI tools represents a small but noteworthy subset who may have had previous negative experiences with AI, preferred traditional preparation methods, or lacked confidence in using these technologies. These findings collectively indicate that students perceive both ChatGPT and Magic School AI as not only useful tools for content preparation but also as relevant resources that align with their specific academic communication needs in the EAP context. The consistent positive responses across different measures suggest that students view AI tools as valuable additions to their academic toolkit. However, individual variation exists, as evidenced by the 32.5% of students who maintained neutral positions across various measures, suggesting that effectiveness may depend on individual factors such as digital literacy, learning preferences, or the specific nature of discussion topics.

From a practical standpoint, these positive perceptions have important implications for EAP pedagogy in Malaysian universities. The high acceptance rates suggest that integrating AI tools into EAP curricula may be well-received by students, potentially enhancing their preparation for oral communication tasks. However, the variation in responses also underscores the need for explicit instruction in effective AI tool use, ensuring that all students can benefit equally from these resources.

B. Challenges and Limitations

While the quantitative data demonstrates overwhelmingly positive perceptions, the qualitative responses reveal important challenges and limitations that students encounter when using AI tools for group discussion preparation. Through thematic analysis of open-ended responses, five primary areas of concern emerged, reflecting students' sophisticated understanding of both the benefits and risks associated with AI integration in their learning processes.

a) Over-reliance and Dependency Issues

The most prominent concern identified by students was the risk of excessive dependence on AI-generated content, which may undermine critical thinking and independent learning. This theme emerged in 28% of qualitative responses, indicating widespread awareness of potential negative consequences. Students

demonstrated mature reflection on learning processes, recognizing that over-reliance could lead to passive learning approaches that may compromise their long-term academic development.

As one student cautioned, "*Students will over-rely on AI tools*" (Respondent 56), expressing concern about peers who might use AI as a substitute rather than a supplement for their own thinking. Another emphasized the importance to "*balance AI usage with independent effort*" (Respondent 14), suggesting awareness that optimal learning occurs when AI tools are integrated thoughtfully rather than used indiscriminately. A third student articulated this tension more explicitly: "*I'm worried that if I use AI too much, I won't be able to develop my own ideas anymore*" (Respondent 42).

This concern reflects students' understanding that AI should supplement rather than replace their own intellectual engagement with academic content. From a pedagogical perspective, this awareness is encouraging, as it suggests that students are capable of critical reflection on their technology use. However, it also signals the need for explicit instruction on how to use AI tools as scaffolding that can be gradually reduced as students develop greater competence and confidence.

b) Accuracy and Reliability Concerns

A significant challenge identified was the potential for AI tools to provide incorrect or biased information, necessitating careful verification by users. This theme appeared in 35% of qualitative responses, making it one of the most frequently mentioned concerns. Students reported experiencing instances where AI outputs contained factual inaccuracies, outdated information, or presented one-sided perspectives on complex issues. As one participant observed, "*AI can sometimes be wrong or biased*" (Respondent 30), acknowledging that AI-generated content requires critical evaluation. Another student noted more specifically, "*Sometimes the information is outdated or doesn't match what our lecturers want*" (Respondent 38), highlighting the disconnect between AI outputs and specific course requirements or current disciplinary knowledge. Students also expressed concerns about verifying AI-generated content: "*Information from AI tools must be checked properly as AI is still in development*" (Respondent 45). This comment reflects an understanding that generative AI remains an emerging technology with known limitations, including the tendency to produce plausible-sounding but factually incorrect information (commonly referred to as "*hallucinations*" in AI discourse).

These responses highlight students' growing awareness of the need for critical evaluation skills when working with AI-generated content—a digital literacy competency that is increasingly essential in the age of generative AI. For EAP instructors, this finding underscores the importance of teaching source evaluation and verification strategies as integral components of AI-enhanced learning. Students need explicit guidance on fact-checking AI outputs, cross-referencing with authoritative sources, and recognizing when AI-generated content may be unreliable or inappropriate for academic contexts.

c) Ethical and Academic Integrity Issues

Ethical concerns emerged as a significant theme in 22% of responses, with students expressing awareness of the need for responsible use to avoid plagiarism and maintain academic integrity. Multiple responses emphasized that AI should serve as a supportive tool rather than a replacement for original thinking. This perspective was exemplified by the statement, "*AI tools should be used ethically as aids, not replacements, for independent thinking*" (Respondent 32).

Students demonstrated concern about the boundary between legitimate AI assistance and academic dishonesty: "*I'm not always sure where the line is between getting help and cheating*" (Respondent 27). This confusion reflects broader debates within higher education about how to define acceptable AI use in academic work. Another student worried about peer perceptions: "*Some students might just copy everything from AI, which isn't fair to those of us who use it properly*" (Respondent 51). Several responses also indicated concern about attribution and transparency: "*Should we tell our lecturers when we use AI? I don't want to get in trouble*" (Respondent 19). This question highlights the need for clear institutional policies and course-specific guidelines regarding AI tool use in academic assignments.

Students' recognition of these ethical dimensions suggests an understanding of the importance of maintaining authenticity in their academic work. However, the confusion and anxiety expressed in some responses indicate that many students are navigating this new technological landscape without clear guidance. This finding has important implications for Malaysian universities, which must develop and communicate clear academic integrity policies that address AI tool use. EAP instructors should facilitate discussions about ethical AI use, helping students understand how to leverage these tools while maintaining academic honesty and developing their own scholarly voice.

d) Content Quality and Depth Limitations

Students identified limitations in the depth and specificity of AI-generated content, noting that AI tools often produce superficial or generic responses that may lack the nuance required for meaningful academic discussions. This theme appeared in 31% of qualitative responses. While acknowledging AI's utility for idea generation and content summarization, students recognized that it may not fully capture the complexities of academic topics or the specific requirements of their assignments. One respondent remarked, "*Deeper research on self is needed*" (Respondent 17), indicating that AI-generated content provided a starting point but required substantial supplementation with traditional research methods. Another student noted, "*The AI gives very general answers. For our group discussion, we need specific examples from our field*" (Respondent 44), highlighting the gap between AI's broad knowledge base and the specialized disciplinary content required for academic discussions.

Students also observed limitations in AI's ability to engage with complex or controversial topics: "*When I asked about a controversial issue in my field, the AI gave a very neutral, safe answer that wouldn't work well in a real academic debate*" (Respondent 62). This observation reflects AI systems' tendency toward balanced, non-committal responses that may not reflect the engaged argumentation expected in academic discourse. Furthermore, some students noted that AI-generated content lacked the contextual relevance specific to Malaysian or local perspectives: "*Most of the examples the AI gave were from Western countries. It was hard to relate them to Malaysia*" (Respondent 53). This finding is particularly significant in the Malaysian context, where students benefit from examples and case studies that reflect their own cultural, social, and economic realities.

These insights suggest that while AI tools can provide valuable scaffolding for content preparation, they should complement rather than substitute traditional research methods. EAP instructors should guide students in using AI as a starting point for exploration, followed by deeper engagement with scholarly sources, local case studies, and disciplinary-specific materials. This approach aligns with constructivist pedagogy, where learning involves building upon foundational knowledge to develop more sophisticated understanding.

e) Technical and Usability Challenges

The quality of AI outputs was found to be heavily dependent on how prompts are formulated, presenting a learning curve for effective AI interaction. This theme emerged in 18% of qualitative responses. Students noted the need for detailed and specific prompting to achieve desired results, with one student observing, "*You need to give a lot of detailed prompts to get the result you want*" (Respondent 51). This comment reflects the reality that effective AI use requires what has been termed "*prompt engineering*"—the skill of crafting queries that elicit useful responses.

Other technical challenges included interface navigation, account creation difficulties, and occasional system errors or slowdowns. One student mentioned, "*Sometimes the AI is slow or stops working in the middle of generating a response*" (Respondent 35), referring to technical issues that can disrupt the workflow. Another noted accessibility concerns: "*I don't have constant internet access at home, so I can only use these tools when I'm on campus*" (Respondent 29), highlighting how infrastructure limitations may create inequities in AI tool access among Malaysian students. Additionally, students expressed concerns about the potential for misinformation and reduced personal engagement with learning materials. Some respondents warned that uncritical reliance on AI could lead to the dissemination of inaccurate information, emphasizing the continued importance of source evaluation skills. Furthermore, there was apprehension that excessive AI use might

diminish their own understanding and engagement with course content, as captured in the remark, "*If you use AI too much, you might miss out on learning important skills*" (Respondent 30).

These technical and usability challenges suggest that effective AI integration requires not only access to technology but also explicit instruction in how to use it effectively. EAP programs should consider incorporating "*AI literacy*" modules that teach students how to craft effective prompts, evaluate outputs critically, and troubleshoot common issues. Institutions must also address equity concerns by ensuring that all students have adequate access to the internet and computing resources necessary for AI tool use.

f) Synthesis of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings reveals a nuanced picture of student experiences with AI tools for oral communication preparation. While the survey data demonstrates strong positive perceptions of usefulness and relevance, the qualitative responses reveal that this enthusiasm is tempered by thoughtful awareness of significant challenges and limitations. This pattern suggests that students are neither uncritical adopters nor resistant rejectors of AI technology, but rather pragmatic users who recognize both the affordances and constraints of these tools. Their ability to articulate these concerns demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of AI tools' capabilities and constraints, suggesting that when properly guided, students can develop critical approaches to AI integration that maximize benefits while mitigating potential drawbacks.

The findings also reveal important pedagogical implications. The high adoption rates and positive perceptions indicate that AI tools can be successfully integrated into EAP curricula with strong student acceptance. However, the challenges identified by students underscore the need for structured guidance, explicit instruction in effective and ethical AI use, and ongoing discussions about the role of technology in academic learning. Simply providing access to AI tools is insufficient; students need support in developing the critical digital literacies necessary to use them effectively and ethically.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal complex and multifaceted student experiences with AI tools in preparing for academic oral communication tasks. The overwhelmingly positive perceptions documented in the quantitative data align with existing research on AI tools in language learning contexts (Meniado et al., 2024), extending these findings specifically to oral communication preparation in a Malaysian EAP setting.

A. AI Tools as Scaffolding for Content Development

The high perceived usefulness of both ChatGPT (84.4%) and Magic School AI (90.9%) suggests that these tools effectively address a critical challenge faced by EAP students: generating and organizing content for academic discussions. This finding resonates with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of learning, where tools mediate cognitive development by providing scaffolding that enables learners to perform tasks beyond their current independent capability. In the context of this study, AI tools appear to function as cognitive scaffolds that support students in the content generation phase, allowing them to focus more cognitive resources on other aspects of oral communication such as language formulation, delivery, and interactional management. The slightly higher rating for Magic School AI may reflect the tool's educational design, which provides more structured outputs aligned with pedagogical frameworks. However, ChatGPT's higher relevance rating (88.3% vs. 80.5%) suggests that flexibility and adaptability may be equally valued by students who need to tailor content to specific discussion contexts and disciplinary requirements.

B. Critical Digital Literacy and Student Agency

Perhaps the most encouraging finding is students' demonstrated awareness of AI limitations and ethical concerns. The fact that 35% of qualitative responses addressed accuracy concerns and 22% mentioned ethical issues indicates that students are not passive recipients of AI-generated content but active, critical evaluators. These findings challenge deficit narratives that portray students as uncritically accepting of technology, suggesting instead that students possess the capacity for critical digital literacy when given appropriate learning contexts.

This critical awareness aligns with Warschauer's (2004) framework of technology integration, which emphasizes that effective technology use requires not just access but also the development of critical literacies that enable learners to evaluate, adapt, and ethically deploy technological resources. The students' articulation of concerns about over-reliance, accuracy, and ethics suggests they are engaging in what Burbules and Callister (2000) term "critical techno-literacy"—the ability to thoughtfully assess both the affordances and limitations of digital tools.

C. Implications for Malaysian EAP Pedagogy

These findings have several important implications for EAP instruction in Malaysian universities. First, the high adoption rate (94.8%) and positive perceptions suggest that AI tools can be successfully integrated into EAP curricula with strong student buy-in. This is particularly significant in the Malaysian context, where students come from diverse linguistic backgrounds and may benefit from additional support in preparing for English-medium academic tasks.

Second, the challenges identified by students—particularly concerns about accuracy, over-reliance, and ethical use—underscore the need for explicit pedagogical attention to AI literacy. EAP instructors should not assume that digital nativity translates to effective or ethical AI use. Instead, courses should incorporate: (i) prompt engineering instruction- teaching students how to formulate effective queries that elicit useful, relevant responses from AI tools; (ii) critical evaluation strategies -developing students' ability to assess AI-generated content for accuracy, bias, currency, and relevance to specific academic contexts; (iii) ethical use guidelines - establishing clear parameters for acceptable AI use that balance support for learning with maintenance of academic integrity and development of independent thinking and (iv) integration with traditional research skills -positioning AI tools as starting points for exploration rather than endpoints, emphasizing the need for deeper research using scholarly sources and disciplinary materials.

Third, the content depth limitations and lack of local context noted by students suggest that AI tool use should be complemented with resources that provide Malaysian or regional perspectives. This finding highlights the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy that helps students connect global knowledge with local contexts and experiences.

D. Technology Acceptance and the Malaysian Context

The strong technology acceptance documented in this study may reflect several contextual factors specific to Malaysian higher education. Malaysia has made substantial investments in educational technology infrastructure, and the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digital transformation in teaching and learning (Yunus et al., 2021). Students entering university in 2024 have experienced significant portions of their secondary and higher education in technology-mediated formats, potentially increasing their comfort with digital tools for academic work. Additionally, the multilingual nature of Malaysian society may make AI tools particularly valuable for students who are navigating academic English as a second or third language. The scaffolding provided by AI tools may help bridge linguistic gaps, allowing students to access and engage with academic content that might otherwise be challenging. This aligns with Cummins' (2000) interdependence hypothesis, which suggests that cognitive and academic skills developed in one language can transfer to support learning in another language when appropriate scaffolding is provided.

E. Challenges and Risks

Despite the positive findings, the concerns raised by students should not be dismissed. The risk of over-reliance is real and documented in emerging research on AI in education (Zhai et al., 2024). When tools make cognitive work too easy, learners may miss opportunities to develop the very skills that the tasks are designed to cultivate. In the context of oral communication preparation, if students rely too heavily on AI-generated content without engaging in the cognitive work of synthesis, analysis, and critical evaluation, they may fail to develop the deep content knowledge and critical thinking skills essential for effective academic discourse. The accuracy and reliability concerns are equally significant. Generative AI systems are known to produce plausible-sounding but factually incorrect information, and students may not always possess the domain knowledge necessary to identify

errors. In academic contexts where accuracy and evidence-based argumentation are paramount, uncritical use of AI-generated content could lead to misinformation and undermine learning objectives.

The ethical concerns raised by students reflect broader debates about AI and academic integrity that remain unresolved in many institutions. Clear policies and pedagogical guidance are needed to help students navigate the gray areas between legitimate AI assistance and academic dishonesty.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, several key recommendations emerge for educators and policymakers in Malaysian higher education, particularly for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) instructors. First, integrating AI literacy into EAP curricula is essential, with a focus on prompt engineering, critical evaluation, and ethical use of AI tools. Instructors should model effective AI engagement by demonstrating how these technologies can serve as catalysts for research and idea generation, while emphasizing the importance of deeper interaction with scholarly sources. Assignments should be designed to encourage students to critically assess and refine AI-generated content, thereby cultivating metacognitive awareness of the tools' limitations. Furthermore, classroom discussions should explore the ethical dimensions of AI use, guiding students to develop their own principles for responsible technology engagement. Finally, instructors must provide feedback that highlights and values students' original thinking and independent contributions, reinforcing the central role of human agency in the learning process.

For curriculum developers in Malaysian higher education, it is essential to embed AI literacy into English for Academic Purposes (EAP) or academic skills courses by developing dedicated modules that cover both technical competencies—such as effective prompt engineering—and critical literacies, including ethical considerations and evaluative judgment. Assessment rubrics should be updated to explicitly address the appropriate and responsible use of AI tools, providing clear guidelines on acceptable practices and expectations. Additionally, assignments should be thoughtfully designed to harness the strengths of AI, such as facilitating idea generation and content organization, while simultaneously challenging students to apply higher-order thinking skills like critical analysis, synthesis, and contextual adaptation to ensure meaningful learning outcomes.

For higher education administrators and policymakers in Malaysia, it is crucial to establish institutional policies that govern the use of AI in academic work, striking a balance between fostering innovation and upholding academic integrity, with clear guidelines for both students and faculty. Investing in comprehensive professional development initiatives will empower educators to effectively integrate AI tools into their pedagogical practices. Equally important is ensuring equitable access to AI technologies and reliable internet infrastructure, thereby addressing digital divide challenges and promoting inclusive learning environments. Furthermore, sustained support for research on AI in education is essential to develop evidence-based practices that are contextually relevant and responsive to the unique needs of Malaysian higher education.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This study contributes to several theoretical frameworks. It extends the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989) to the specific context of AI tools for oral communication preparation, demonstrating high perceived usefulness and adoption rates. However, the qualitative findings suggest that acceptance is mediated by critical evaluation and ethical considerations, indicating that the model may need to be expanded to account for critical digital literacy in AI contexts. The study also contributes to sociocultural theories of learning by demonstrating how AI tools function as mediating artifacts that scaffold cognitive processes. The findings suggest that AI tools can provide Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) support for content generation, though concerns about over-reliance indicate the need for careful calibration of scaffolding that promotes rather than inhibits skill development. Additionally, the study adds to emerging frameworks of critical AI literacy, demonstrating that students can develop sophisticated understandings of AI capabilities and limitations when provided with appropriate learning contexts. This finding supports calls for critical digital literacy education that goes beyond technical skills to encompass ethical reasoning and metacognitive awareness.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Several limitations of this study suggest directions for future research. First, the study captured perceptions at a single point in time. Longitudinal research tracking how students' perceptions and practices evolve over extended periods of AI tool use would provide valuable insights into learning trajectories and long-term impacts. Second, while the study examined students' perceptions, it did not directly assess the impact of AI tools on actual oral communication performance. Future research should employ experimental or quasi-experimental designs to evaluate whether AI-supported preparation leads to measurable improvements in discussion quality, language use, critical thinking, or other learning outcomes.

Third, the study relied on self-reported data, which may not fully capture actual practices. Observational research or analysis of students' actual AI interactions (with appropriate ethical safeguards) could provide richer understanding of how students engage with these tools in practice. Fourth, the sample was drawn from a single institution, limiting generalizability. Multi-site studies across different Malaysian universities and other Southeast Asian contexts would enhance understanding of how institutional, cultural, and pedagogical factors shape AI tool adoption and use. Finally, future research should explore instructional interventions designed to address the challenges identified in this study, such as over-reliance and accuracy concerns. Action research or design-based research approaches could help develop and refine pedagogical strategies for effective AI integration in EAP instruction.

CONCLUSION

This study explored first-year Malaysian undergraduate students' perspectives on using AI tools—specifically ChatGPT and Magic School AI—to prepare for academic group discussions in an EAP classroom. The findings reveal strongly positive perceptions of these tools' usefulness and relevance, with over 84% of students finding them valuable for content preparation. This high level of acceptance suggests that AI tools have a place in EAP pedagogy and can potentially address some of the challenges students face in preparing for oral academic communication tasks. However, the qualitative findings reveal that this enthusiasm is tempered by thoughtful awareness of significant challenges: over-reliance risks, accuracy concerns, ethical dilemmas, content depth limitations, and technical usability issues. Students' ability to articulate these concerns demonstrates critical digital literacy and suggests that, with appropriate guidance, they can engage with AI tools in ways that enhance rather than undermine learning.

The study makes several important contributions. Empirically, it extends the limited research on AI tools for oral academic communication preparation, specifically in the underexplored context of Malaysian EAP education. Theoretically, it contributes to understanding of technology acceptance and critical digital literacy in AI contexts. Practically, it provides evidence-based insights for educators and policymakers navigating the integration of AI tools in language education. As AI technologies continue to evolve and become more integrated into educational contexts, it is crucial that pedagogy evolves alongside technology. The findings of this study suggest that effective AI integration requires more than simply providing access to tools; it demands thoughtful pedagogical design that develops students' AI literacy, critical evaluation skills, and ethical reasoning. EAP instructors are well-positioned to facilitate this development, helping students leverage AI tools as scaffolds for learning while maintaining agency, critical thinking, and academic integrity.

In the Malaysian higher education context, where English proficiency remains a key focus of policy and practice, AI tools offer promising possibilities for supporting students' academic language development. However, realizing this potential requires careful attention to equity, access, pedagogical guidance, and the development of local, culturally responsive approaches to AI integration. This study represents an initial step in understanding Malaysian students' experiences with AI tools for oral communication preparation; continued research and practice-based inquiry will be essential for developing evidence-based, contextually appropriate approaches to AI-enhanced EAP instruction.

Ultimately, the goal is not to replace human teaching and learning with AI, but to thoughtfully integrate AI tools in ways that amplify human capabilities, support diverse learners, and prepare students for academic

and professional contexts where both critical thinking and technological fluency are essential. The students in this study have demonstrated that they are ready for this integration—provided they receive the guidance, support, and critical frameworks necessary to use AI tools effectively and ethically.

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