

Exploring Communication Strategies, Phonological Errors, and Pragmatic Patterns through Students Self-Reported Perceptions in AI-Assisted English Learning

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Abstrak : This qualitative exploratory study examines communication strategies, phonological errors, and pragmatic patterns that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners report experiencing when interacting with AI conversational systems such as ChatGPT, Gemini, and Elsa Speak. Data were collected through an open-ended questionnaire completed by 15 students from the English Language Education Study Program at Universitas Negeri Manado, spanning Semester 2 to Semester 12. Responses were analyzed using Error Analysis for phonological aspects, the Cooperative Principle and politeness-based speech act frameworks for pragmatic aspects, and a communication-strategy taxonomy for strategic aspects. Findings reveal three patterns. First, students reported difficulty with interdental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/, unstressed vowel reduction (e.g., comfortable, vegetable), and vowel-length contrasts (e.g., ship-sheep), reflecting first-language transfer. Second, achievement-oriented strategies paraphrase, circumlocution, and appeal for assistance were reported more frequently than avoidance strategies, suggesting AI availability encourages compensatory behavior. Third, students described AI feedback prompting awareness of pragmatic infelicity, particularly excessive directness, leading to increased use of mitigated, hedged forms (e.g., could you, would you mind). Students also reported gains in speaking confidence, reduced anxiety, and concerns about generic feedback and over-reliance. The study suggests AI functions as a rehearsal space complementing classroom instruction.

Kata Kunci : Communication Strategies; Phonological Errors; Pragmatic Competence; AI-assisted Language Learning; EFL Speaking

INTRODUCTION

Spoken communicative competence remains one of the most persistent challenges for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Indonesia, where classroom instruction has traditionally emphasized grammatical accuracy and vocabulary memorization over functional, interactive language use (Pabur et al, 2025). Within this context, three linguistic dimensions repeatedly surface as sources of difficulty: the phonological dimension, in which learners' first-language sound systems interfere with the production of English phonemes that have no direct equivalent in the local language; the pragmatic dimension, in which learners struggle to calibrate politeness, directness, and register to the social distance between interlocutors; and the strategic dimension, in which learners must decide, in real time, how to keep a conversation moving when their linguistic resources fall short. These three dimensions do not operate independently, a learner's choice of communication strategy is frequently a response to a perceived phonological or lexical gap, and pragmatic appropriateness is judged not only on word choice but on how confidently and clearly an utterance is produced.

The emergence of generative artificial intelligence (AI) as an accessible conversation partner has introduced a new variable into this picture. Tools such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Copilot, and dedicated pronunciation applications like Elsa Speak now allow learners to rehearse spoken and text-based interaction outside the classroom, at any time, without the social risk of face-to-face judgment. Recent empirical work suggests that such AI-mediated practice can support gains in fluency, pronunciation accuracy, and speaking confidence when the tool is used as a supplement to, rather than a replacement for, teacher-mediated instruction (Ding & Yusof, 2025; Huang et al., 2022; Wu & Li, 2024; Yang et al., 2022). Chatbot-supported practice has also been shown to lower foreign language speaking anxiety and to increase learners' willingness to communicate by removing the immediate social stakes of a human interlocutor (Ding & Yusof, 2025; Pelenkahu et al, 2026). At the same time, several studies caution that AI feedback is not uniformly reliable: it can be generic, overly formal, or inattentive to the socio-pragmatic nuance that governs authentic interaction, and its benefits appear strongest when embedded in a pedagogically guided design rather than left to unstructured, independent use (Guo et al., 2022; Han & Reinhardt, 2022; Sambeka & Ali, 2024).

What remains comparatively underexamined is how these three classic dimensions of interlanguage-phonological error, pragmatic competence, and communication strategy-actually manifest when Indonesian EFL learners interact with AI systems on their own initiative, using whatever tools and habits they have already developed. Most existing research on AI-assisted speaking evaluates outcomes through pre-/post-test proficiency measures or anxiety scales (Ding & Yusof, 2025; El Walidayni et al, 2026), leaving the qualitative texture of learners' own strategic and pragmatic behavior largely unreported, particularly outside East Asian contexts. Indonesian learners bring a distinctive linguistic profile to this interaction: local vernaculars such as Manado Malay and, in this study's home region of North Sulawesi, Tontemboan lack several English phonemes, most notably the voiceless and voiced interdental fricatives /*th*/ and /*dh*/, and typically do not mark politeness through the same modal and hedging devices that English relies on (Wuntu et al, 2025).

This study therefore asks three research questions. First, what patterns of phonological difficulty do students report and notice through their interaction with AI systems? Second, what communication strategies do students draw on most frequently when their linguistic resources are insufficient for a communicative goal? Third, in what ways, if any, does AI feedback shape students' pragmatic awareness-particularly their sense of politeness, directness, and register? Addressing these questions is intended to contribute both a theoretical account of interlanguage behavior in an AI-mediated context and a set of practical recommendations for lecturers seeking to integrate AI tools into English Language Education curricula in a way that is pedagogically deliberate rather than incidental.

The significance of this inquiry extends beyond a single study program. Findings of this kind are directly relevant to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), to institutional key performance indicators for higher education in Indonesia, and to the broader national research agenda on educational innovation and applied linguistics, insofar as they translate an increasingly common but pedagogically under-guided student practice-independent AI use-into concrete, evidence-based recommendations for curriculum design. Understanding precisely which phonological items, strategic behaviors, and pragmatic lessons recur across learners allows lecturers to treat AI not as an unpredictable, unregulated influence on student language development but as a source of diagnostic information that can sharpen, rather than dilute, the goals of speaking instruction.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. The next section outlines the theoretical framework and reviews recent literature on AI-assisted EFL speaking, phonological interference among Indonesian learners, and pragmatic competence development. The methodology section then describes the qualitative exploratory design, participants, and analytic procedure. The findings and discussion section presents the three dimensions of the data in turn, integrating illustrative excerpts from participants' own accounts. The article closes with a conclusion, pedagogical implications, and acknowledgment of the funding source.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative exploratory design, appropriate for capturing the nuanced, self-reported linguistic experiences of learners interacting with AI systems in naturalistic, out-of-classroom settings (Li, 2025). Rather than imposing a controlled speaking task, the study solicited learners' own accounts of how they use AI, which allowed the specific tools, habits, and problem areas that learners have already developed on their own initiative to surface. Participants were 15 students enrolled in the English Language Education Study Program, Faculty of Languages and Arts, Universitas Negeri Manado, recruited through convenience sampling. This sampling strategy was chosen deliberately rather than as a matter of convenience alone, since the study's central aim was to examine communication strategies, phonological errors, and pragmatic patterns as they emerge specifically through AI-mediated practice; this required participants who already had first-hand experience using AI conversational tools for English learning, a prerequisite that convenience sampling of self-selected, experienced students could satisfy more directly than random or probability-based sampling, particularly given that convenience sampling

remains common in applied linguistics research involving accessible university populations where the phenomenon under study depends on a specific prior experience (Farsani & Barzegar, 2025).

Participants ranged in age from 19 to 25 years and were distributed across Semester 2 through Semester 12, with the majority in Semesters 5 through 8. This wide semester range was retained intentionally rather than restricted to a single cohort, since it allowed the study to capture how communication strategies, phonological difficulty, and pragmatic awareness are reported across learners at different stages of formal English instruction, and by extension, differing exposure to explicit phonetics, grammar, and pragmatics coursework; semester level is treated in the analysis as contextual background that helps interpret variation in responses, such as whether more advanced students report greater metalinguistic awareness of pragmatic infelicity than newer students, rather than as a controlled or matched variable. Ten participants identified as female and five as male. Self-rated English proficiency clustered around the intermediate (B1) band, with responses ranging from "not fluent yet" to "upper-intermediate," indicating a reasonably representative cross-section of the study program rather than a proficiency-homogeneous sample. All participants reported some prior experience using AI tools most commonly ChatGPT, followed by Gemini and the pronunciation-focused application Elsa Speak for English learning purposes.

Data were collected through a structured, open-ended online questionnaire comprising 17 substantive items, covering demographic and proficiency background; patterns of AI use for spoken English practice; perceived benefits and challenges; communication-strategy use, including how students proceed when they cannot express an idea; phonological difficulty and AI's role in pronunciation correction; pragmatic awareness, including politeness and register; and perceived impact on confidence, communicative competence, and recommendations for lecturers. The questionnaire was developed by the research team specifically for this study, informed by the communication-strategy elicitation approach used in Li (2025) and the error-identification logic outlined in Tuerah et al. (2025), and was grounded throughout in the three theoretical frameworks underpinning the analysis: Error Analysis for the phonological dimension, the Cooperative Principle and politeness-based accounts of speech acts for the pragmatic dimension, and a communication-strategy taxonomy for the strategic dimension.

Each item was mapped to one of these three dimensions during instrument construction to ensure conceptual alignment between the questions asked and the analytic categories subsequently applied, following the principle that content validity in instruments generated from qualitative or exploratory aims depends on demonstrating a traceable link between each item and the construct it is intended to capture (Christalle et al., 2022). Responses were analyzed through a three-layer qualitative coding procedure aligned with the theoretical framework. First, phonological references were extracted and grouped by the specific sound, word, or error pattern named by participants, following an Error Analysis logic of identification, description, and classification (Tuerah et al., 2025). Second, statements describing how participants managed communicative gaps were classified according to a communication-strategy taxonomy distinguishing achievement-oriented strategies,

such as paraphrase, circumlocution, code-switching, and appeal for assistance, from reduction-oriented strategies, such as avoidance and message abandonment (Li, 2025). Third, statements describing AI's role in shaping politeness, directness, or register were coded for the specific speech act involved, typically requests, and for the direction of pragmatic change reported, whether from direct or informal forms toward mitigated or formal ones, or the reverse. Coding was conducted independently by two members of the research team and reconciled through discussion, with disagreements resolved by consensus, consistent with standard inter-rater reliability procedures in qualitative interlanguage research.

Several limitations should be noted. Because data were self-reported rather than drawn from recorded and transcribed AI interaction logs, the study captures learners' perceptions and recollections of their linguistic behavior rather than direct behavioral evidence; this is a deliberate trade-off that allowed the study to reach a broader range of authentic, self-selected AI use episodes than a controlled recording protocol would have permitted, but it also means that reported phonological errors and strategy use should be read as learner-salient patterns rather than an exhaustive inventory. The sample, while diverse in semester level, is drawn from a single study program at one university, which constrains generalizability beyond similar EFL contexts in North Sulawesi.

Table 1. Participant Demographic Profile (N = 15)

Characteristic	Category	n
Gender	Female	10
	Male	5
Age range	19-25 years	15
Semester	Semester 2-4	2
	Semester 5-8	10
	Semester 9-12	3
Self-rated proficiency	Pre-/Intermediate (A2-B1)	10
	Upper-Intermediate to B1-C1	3
	Not fluent / needs improvement	2
Most-used AI tool	ChatGPT	9
	Gemini / other chatbots	4
	Elsa Speak (dedicated pronunciation app)	2

Note: categories are based on participants self-reported free-text responses, grouped by the research team into comparable bands.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the study's findings in three parts corresponding to the phonological, strategic, and pragmatic dimensions outlined above, followed by a fourth part addressing students perceived gains in confidence and communicative competence, and a fifth part synthesizing pedagogical implications. Illustrative excerpts from participants own responses are included verbatim, identified by respondent number (R1-R15), to preserve the texture of learners self-reported experience.

Phonological Error Patterns

Consistent with prior research on Indonesian EFL learners' pronunciation (Sayogie & Adbaka, 2022), the single most frequently reported source of phonological difficulty across the sample was the pair of interdental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/, named explicitly by the majority of respondents in words such as *think*, *three*, *this*, *though*, and *thought*. R9 reported difficulty with “the sounds /θ/ and /ð/... such as in the words *think*, *three*, and *this*” while R4 described needing repeated AI-guided practice on the unvoiced /θ/ in *thought* and *method*, noting that the AI “detected the pattern, pointed out the error, and gave me clear phonetic guidance on tongue placement”. This convergence across independently surveyed participants supports treating the /θ/-/ð/ substitution as a systematic, first-language-transfer error rather than an idiosyncratic slip, since neither Indonesian nor the regional vernaculars of North Sulawesi possess an interdental fricative in their phoneme inventories.

A second recurring pattern involved multisyllabic words whose orthography does not transparently predict their stressed, reduced pronunciation. Several respondents singled out *comfortable* and *vegetable* as persistently mispronounced, with R9 explaining that these are “words that are pronounced differently from how they're spelled”. R10 offered a detailed account of AI correction for exactly this pattern: “I used to pronounce every syllable, but AI showed me that native speakers usually say 'comf-ter-bul'. After practicing several times, my pronunciation became more natural”. This illustrates a specific, teachable sub-pattern-vowel reduction and syllable elision in unstressed positions-that spelling-based instruction alone is unlikely to resolve, since the orthographic form actively misleads learners toward a full, unreduced pronunciation.

A third, less frequent but linguistically informative pattern concerned vowel-length and vowel-quality contrasts, illustrated by R15's difficulty distinguishing *ship* from *sheep* and by the same respondent's difficulty with the consonant cluster in *schedule*. Two respondents (R14, R13) also cited long, low-frequency, or foreign-origin words-*supercalifragilisticexpialidocious* and *worcestershire sauce*-as maximally difficult; while these items are atypical of everyday spoken English and unlikely to represent a systematic classroom priority, their mention suggests that some learners use AI interaction partly as a novelty or challenge-seeking exercise rather than purely remedial practice.

Across nearly all phonological accounts, a consistent interactional pattern emerged: students reported that AI-mediated correction operated through a notice-model-repeat cycle. Students produced an utterance, the AI signaled non-comprehension or explicitly flagged the mispronunciation, offered a corrected model, and the student repeated the target form multiple times until it was internalized (R1, R9, R10, R11, R12). This cycle mirrors, in an unstructured, learner-initiated form, the explicit corrective-feedback loops that structured pronunciation instruction aims to provide, and it appears to function precisely because it removes the social cost of repeated error in front of peers or an instructor-several respondents (R2, R15) explicitly framed AI practice as low-pressure or judgment-free, consistent with reports that chatbot-mediated feedback lowers foreign language speaking anxiety (Ding & Yusof, 2025; Susoy, 2026).

Table 2. Summary of Recurring Phonological Error Patterns

Error Pattern	Example Words	Reported Cause
Interdental fricative substitution /θ/, /ð/	think, three, this, though, thought, through	No equivalent phoneme in Indonesian / regional vernaculars
Vowel reduction / syllable elision	comfortable, vegetable	Misleading orthography; unfamiliarity with reduced/weak forms
Vowel length / quality contrast	ship-sheep	L1 vowel inventory does not mark the same length distinction
Consonant cluster complexity	schedule, Worcestershire	Cluster/onset patterns absent or rare in L1
Low-frequency polysyllabic items	supercalifragilisticexpialidocious	Limited exposure to rare lexical items

Note: Compiled from participants' free-text descriptions of the sounds and words they found most difficult to pronounce.

Communication Strategies

When asked what they do when they cannot express an idea in English, participants overwhelmingly described achievement-oriented rather than reduction-oriented strategies. Paraphrase and the use of simpler words were the most common response, articulated clearly by R7: “When I lack a specific academic word in English, I use simpler words to describe the concept,” and by R9, who explained substituting umbrella with “something we use when it rains” so that a listener could still follow the intended meaning. This preference for circumlocution over avoidance is notable because reduction strategies-topic avoidance or message abandonment-were reported by only a small minority of respondents, and even then typically as a last resort after other strategies had failed (R14).

A second prominent strategy, distinctive to the AI-mediated context, was direct appeal for assistance addressed to the AI itself. Rather than treating AI merely as a passive audience, several respondents described actively soliciting linguistic help mid-conversation: R6 recounted forgetting how to explain an idea and asking ChatGPT for help, which “suggested a simple way to say it. That helped me continue the conversation more naturally”, while R8 described asking the AI for “follow-up questions and alternative viewpoints” when running out of things to say. This pattern extends the classic appeal-for-assistance category, traditionally studied in human-human interaction (Li, 2025), to a human-AI context in which the interlocutor is always willing and able to respond, potentially lowering the threshold at which learners choose to appeal rather than struggle silently or abandon the exchange.

A third recurring strategy was code-switching or translation-mediated production, in which students composed an idea in Indonesian first and asked the AI to render it into natural English. R2 described this explicitly: “I often use code-switching. For example, if I forget an English word mid-sentence, I mix it with an Indonesian word and ask the AI to correct it”, while R15 provided a concrete example, translating the Indonesian request “Saya mau izin tidak masuk kelas” into the natural English equivalent “I would like to ask for permission to miss class” with AI

assistance. This strategy differs from traditional first-language transfer errors in that it is a deliberate scaffolding device rather than an involuntary interference pattern, and it appears to function as a bridge strategy that several respondents (R2, R8, R15) used specifically for pragmatically sensitive utterances-requests to authority figures-where getting the register right mattered as much as getting the vocabulary right.

Overall, the distribution of strategies reported here-achievement-oriented paraphrase and appeal for assistance dominating over reduction strategies-aligns with findings that AI conversational availability supports sustained engagement rather than topic avoidance, and is consistent with the broader finding that chatbot practice increases learners' willingness to communicate (Ding & Yusof, 2025). It also suggests a shift in the traditional cost-benefit calculation behind strategy choice: because an AI interlocutor imposes no social penalty for repeated clarification requests, students appear more willing to attempt achievement strategies that in face-to-face interaction might carry a higher perceived risk of embarrassment.

Pragmatic Patterns and Politeness Awareness

The clearest and most consistent pattern in the pragmatic dimension of the data concerns requests, and specifically a shift from bald, direct imperatives toward mitigated, modally hedged forms following AI feedback. Multiple respondents independently reported near-identical episodes in which the AI reformulated a direct request such as "Give me the information" or "Give me the file now" into a conventionally indirect form using *could* or *would* (R5, R9, R12). R9 described the correction explicitly: "I used to use phrases that sounded too direct, like 'Give me the information'. After receiving feedback from the AI, I learned to use more polite phrases, such as 'Could you give me the information, please?'" R5 reported a similar episode involving a request phrased as "Give me the file now," which the AI reframed as "could you please send me the file when you have time?" The recurrence of this exact pragmatic pattern-directness mitigated through modal verbs and the addition of *please*-across independently surveyed respondents indicates that request mitigation is the single most salient pragmatic lesson students associate with AI interaction.

A second pattern involved register calibration for specific addressees, particularly messages directed at lecturers or other authority figures. R11 described asking AI for help composing a message to a lecturer, resulting in "more polite words, so my message sounded more respectful", and R2 described a similar episode in which AI suggested "Dear Professor" and "Best regards" in place of casual phrasing for an email to a professor. R15 offered a fuller reflective account, noting that AI helped correct the use of casual openers such as "Hey" or "What's up" when addressing someone older or in a position of authority, and recommended that lecturers design activities contrasting formal and informal expressions so that students learn to differentiate "talking to lecturers versus chatting with friends". This suggests that students are not only receiving isolated corrections but, in some cases, generalizing them into an explicit awareness of audience-sensitive register variation.

A third, related pattern concerns learners' own retrospective recognition of pragmatic failure, distinct from cases where the AI proactively flagged an error. Several respondents reported becoming aware, only after receiving AI feedback, that expressions they had translated directly from Indonesian idioms sounded unnatural or overly blunt in English (R10, R15). R15 described this as a moment of realizing that

certain phrasing “could be misunderstood or sound impolite”, language that closely echoes the theoretical distinction between grammatical accuracy and pragmatic appropriateness: an utterance can be well formed and still fail communicatively if it violates expectations of politeness or register (Guo et al., 2022). This distinction is significant pedagogically because it indicates that pragmatic failure of this kind is often invisible to learners until an external source—here, the AI—makes the social cost of the phrasing explicit.

Not all reported experiences with AI-mediated pragmatic feedback were positive. A small number of respondents indicated that AI feedback occasionally felt generic or overly agreeable, potentially limiting its pedagogical value. R3 explicitly requested that lecturers “pick an AI that doesn't always agree with us and would give us a proper and clear explanation”, while R7 noted that AI outputs sometimes required manual verification because the system “sometimes struggles with hyper-specific cultural idioms, hyper-local contexts, or subtle pragmatics”. These reservations echo broader concerns in the literature that AI feedback, while often accurate on surface-level politeness markers, does not reliably capture the deeper socio-pragmatic nuance that governs authentic intercultural communication, and that its instructional value depends heavily on learners' own critical engagement with its output rather than passive acceptance (Han & Reinhardt, 2022; Lee et al., 2025).

Perceived Impact on Confidence and Communicative Competence

A striking near-uniformity in the data concerns learners' perception that AI interaction increased their confidence in real, human conversation. Thirteen of the fifteen respondents described a confidence gain in some form, most commonly attributing it to the judgment-free, repeatable nature of AI practice. R9 stated plainly that AI “has increased my confidence because I can practice speaking without feeling embarrassed”, while R15 reported feeling “less nervous” because AI interaction helped her “get used to thinking and responding in English quickly”. R4 offered a more analytic account, describing how repeated, low-pressure practice of a specific problematic sound (the unvoiced /θ/) allowed her to “build muscle memory for the correct pronunciation” without the embarrassment that might accompany repeated correction in a classroom setting. This pattern is broadly consistent with recent quantitative findings that structured AI conversational practice measurably reduces foreign language speaking anxiety alongside gains in speaking proficiency (Ding & Yusof, 2025; Ali, 2025), and extends those findings by showing, in learners' own words, the mechanism—repetition without social risk—through which this reduction in anxiety appears to operate.

Reported gains in communicative competence, however, were less uniform in depth. Several respondents described broad, holistic improvement spanning vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and register awareness together (R2, R9, R10, R15), suggesting that for these learners AI practice functioned as an integrated rehearsal space rather than a tool targeting a single skill in isolation. Other respondents described more circumscribed gains, limited chiefly to vocabulary acquisition or grammar correction (R1, R12, R13), indicating that the depth of benefit is not uniform across the sample and may depend on how deliberately and extensively individual learners engage with the tool, echoing findings that AI's benefits for

language skill development vary depending on the intensity and structure of use (Oroh et al, 2025; Posumah & Ali, 2026; Wu & Li, 2024).

A minority of respondents also flagged risks alongside these benefits. R11 cautioned that AI “can lead to dependency” if “not used wisely”, and R7 raised a related concern about reduced critical thinking from over-reliance on AI-generated suggestions. These self-identified risks align closely with caution expressed in recent systematic reviews, which note that while AI-mediated speaking support shows consistent benefits for fluency and confidence, its value depends on being embedded within a pedagogically guided design rather than left to fully unstructured, independent use, and that unmediated reliance on AI feedback risks under-developing learners' capacity for autonomous linguistic judgment (Ali & Lestari, 2024; Han & Reinhardt, 2022).

Students' Own Recommendations for Lecturers

Because the questionnaire closed by asking students directly what they would recommend to lecturers integrating AI into English Education courses, this final set of responses offers a useful check on the pedagogical implications drawn from the analysis above, since it reflects learners' own diagnosis of what made AI practice valuable and where it needed to be supplemented by human instruction.

The most frequent recommendation, echoed in various phrasing by roughly half of respondents, was that AI should be positioned as a supplementary practice and feedback tool rather than a replacement for lecturers or classroom interaction. R9 recommended that AI “be used as a supplement to classroom learning, not as a replacement for lecturers”, while R6 stated the same idea more forcefully: “AI should only support learning, not replace classroom interaction. Most importantly, humans should control AI, not let AI control humans”. This recurring insistence on human oversight, volunteered without prompting, suggests that students themselves are wary of the over-reliance risk noted in the confidence and communicative-competence findings above, and that any lecturer-designed AI integration is likely to be well received precisely because it frames AI as a rehearsal supplement rather than a substitute for instruction.

A second cluster of recommendations focused on critical evaluation skills. R7 recommended that lecturers “teach students how to critically analyze AI outputs for pragmatic appropriateness, grammar, and factual accuracy rather than blindly accepting them,” directly anticipating the pedagogical implication, discussed above, that a pragmatics module should train learners to question rather than passively accept AI-suggested phrasing. R3 made a related point about tool selection, recommending an AI configured to challenge rather than simply agree with the learner.

A third cluster centered on structured, task-based integration. R15 recommended activities that explicitly “compare formal and informal expressions using AI”, and R5 recommended using AI “for role-play and instant feedback”. Several respondents (R10, R12) more generally recommended that lecturers incorporate AI into speaking, writing, grammar, and pronunciation exercises as a structured classroom component rather than leaving its use entirely to student initiative outside class. Taken together, these recommendations converge closely with the pedagogical implications derived independently from the phonological, strategic, and pragmatic

findings, lending additional, learner-sourced support to the proposal that AI be integrated as a deliberately designed, critically framed supplement to, rather than a substitute for, teacher-led instruction.

Pedagogical Implications

Three implications follow directly from the patterns reported above. First, because /θ/, /ð/, and vowel-reduction errors in polysyllabic words recur so consistently across independently surveyed learners, these items represent efficient, high-yield targets for explicit, in-class pronunciation instruction rather than being left entirely to incidental AI correction; instructors could use minimal-pair and stress-pattern drills specifically built around the words learners themselves named as difficult (think, three, this, comfortable, vegetable, schedule).

Second, because achievement-oriented strategies-paraphrase and appeal for assistance-dominated over avoidance in AI-mediated interaction, lecturers can deliberately design tasks that transfer this same strategic willingness into human-human interaction, for instance by scaffolding classroom discussion tasks with sentence starters modeled on the paraphrase and clarification-request patterns learners already practice successfully with AI.

Third, because request mitigation and register calibration emerged as the most salient and consistently recalled pragmatic lessons, and because several respondents explicitly recommended that lecturers design activities contrasting formal and informal registers, a structured module comparing direct and mitigated request forms across addressee types (peer, lecturer, unfamiliar adult) would build directly on a pragmatic pattern learners have already begun to notice on their own. At the same time, respondents' own reservations about generic or overly agreeable AI feedback suggest that such a module should explicitly teach learners to evaluate AI-generated pragmatic suggestions critically rather than accept them uncritically, consistent with recommendations that AI be positioned as a supplement requiring learner reflection and instructor mediation rather than an autonomous authority (Han & Reinhardt, 2022; Ali, 2024).

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This study explored how phonological error, communication-strategy use, and pragmatic awareness manifest in the self-reported AI-mediated interaction of 15 English Language Education students at Universitas Negeri Manado. Three findings stand out. Phonologically, difficulty clusters predictably around the interdental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/ and around vowel reduction in polysyllabic, orthographically misleading words, consistent with first-language transfer from Indonesian and regional vernaculars. Strategically, students overwhelmingly favored achievement-oriented behavior-paraphrase, circumlocution, and direct appeal to the AI for assistance-over avoidance, suggesting that the low-stakes, always-available nature of AI interaction shifts the strategic calculus learners make when facing a communicative gap. Pragmatically, AI feedback most consistently prompted a shift from direct, bald requests toward mitigated, modally hedged forms, and in several cases fostered a broader, generalized awareness of register variation across addressees.

Together, these findings position AI conversational systems not as a substitute for classroom instruction but as a rehearsal space that surfaces, in an unusually visible and learner-salient way, exactly the linguistic patterns that instruction should subsequently address explicitly and critically. The recurrence of specific, nameable errors and pragmatic lessons across independently surveyed learners—rather than a diffuse, unspecifiable sense of “improvement”—is itself evidence that AI interaction generates diagnostically useful data that lecturers can draw on directly when designing pronunciation and pragmatics components of speaking courses.

Future research building on this exploratory study could move from self-report toward recorded and transcribed AI-learner interaction data, allowing direct verification of the error and strategy patterns identified here, and could extend the design to a larger, multi-institutional sample to test whether the phonological and pragmatic patterns observed in this North Sulawesi context generalize to other Indonesian EFL populations with different first-language backgrounds.

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