

# Reducing Foreign Language Anxiety Through AI-Mediated Speaking Practice in the USA

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**ABSTRACT:** Foreign language anxiety remains a major barrier to oral participation in technology-enhanced language learning, particularly when learners must speak spontaneously and fear negative evaluation. In the United States, the need for effective English-language support remains substantial: 5.3 million English learners accounted for 10.6% of public school enrollment in fall 2021, and recent university guidance on generative AI has focused primarily on writing rather than speaking. This paper reviews research published between 2022 and 2026 and argues that AI-mediated speaking practice can reduce anxiety by providing low-stakes rehearsal, self-paced repetition, implicit feedback, and psychologically safer interaction. However, the literature also shows that AI speaking assistants may increase cognitive load and anxiety when learners must multitask during communication. The paper synthesizes these findings into practical design implications for adult ESL and other U.S. language-learning contexts.

**KEYWORDS:** foreign language anxiety, AI-mediated speaking practice, adult ESL, technology-enhanced language education, USA.

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## Introduction

In the U.S. context, technology-enhanced language education is increasingly important not only because of rapid AI adoption, but also because English-language support remains a large educational and social need. National Center for Education Statistics data show that English learners accounted for 10.6% of U.S. public school enrollment, or 5.3 million students, in fall 2021. At the same time, U.S.-based scholarship in adult ESL has emphasized the value of practical digital tasks, self-regulated learning, and multimedia-supported instruction for learners navigating everyday life, integration, and communication demands (Boiko et al., 2025; Hurskaya, 2026a, 2026b). These trends make the question of anxiety reduction especially relevant in the USA, where learners often need spoken English for employment, transportation, public services, and community participation.

The current U.S. AI environment also reveals a specific pedagogical gap. An analysis of documents from 116 U.S. R1 universities found that 63% encouraged the use of generative AI, and many provided sample syllabi and classroom guidance; however, most institutional advice focused on writing rather than on oral communication or speaking support (McDonald et al., 2024). This matters because speaking anxiety is not simply a linguistic issue. It is also emotional, social, and interactional. In short, if U.S. institutions are normalizing AI but not yet designing for speaking confidence, technology-enhanced language education needs a clearer research-based framework.

Recent studies suggest that AI-mediated speaking tools can address this gap, but only under certain conditions. Stylized avatars may reduce anxiety compared with more human-like avatars; self-representative AI systems can increase emotional engagement; mixed-reality group conversation tools can create safe spaces for speaking; and real-time AI support can improve self-efficacy when interactions are effectively scaffolded. Yet the same research also shows that poorly designed assistance can increase cognitive load and anxiety. The literature on online learning and self-regulated learning likewise indicates that digital support is most effective when learners can plan, rehearse, monitor, and reflect on their performance (Jalambo et al., 2025; Kay et al., 2022; Yu, 2023).

## Research Aim and Research Questions

This paper aims to synthesize recent research from 2022–2026 to identify how AI-mediated speaking practice can reduce foreign language anxiety in the USA, particularly in adult ESL and closely related technology-enhanced language-learning contexts.

The paper addresses three questions:

- What design features of AI-mediated speaking practice are associated with lower anxiety?
- Under what conditions can AI increase rather than reduce anxiety?
- How can these findings inform U.S. technology-enhanced language education for adult and community-based learners?

## Research Results

The literature points to a consistent pattern: anxiety decreases when AI-mediated speaking practice reduces the social risk of speaking while preserving conversational flow. Liu et al. (2026) found that avatar style matters, with stylized avatars producing lower anxiety than realistic avatars. Park et al. (2026) similarly showed that implicit feedback through AI rephrasing was experienced as more motivating than explicit correction. In both cases, the core mechanism was not only linguistic support, but emotional design: learners were able to speak without feeling constantly judged. For U.S. adult ESL learners, this is important because emotionally safer practice environments may help them rehearse real-life speaking tasks before high-stakes social interactions.

A second pattern is that AI can support willingness to communicate by making practice flexible, situated, and meaningful. Fernandez-Espinosa et al. (2025) found that mixed-reality group conversations increased engagement and willingness to communicate while providing a safe space to speak. Recent U.S.-based applied work in adult ESL likewise points toward practical, life-linked use of technology and self-regulated digital learning rather than technology for its own sake (Hurskaya, 2026a, 2026b). This suggests that in the USA, AI-mediated speaking tasks should be tied to authentic needs such as workplace communication, civic participation, healthcare, or transportation rather than abstract drills alone.

A third pattern is cautionary. Not all AI support lowers anxiety. Qin et al. (2025) found that an AI-based speaking assistant improved the logical flow and depth of learners' speech. However, the additional multitasking of entering and reviewing output could elevate workload and anxiety. By contrast, Qin et al. (2026) found reduced interactional anxiety when AI support was more integrated and communicatively collaborative. This difference is crucial for instructional design: AI should not create a second task layer that forces learners to divide attention between reading, monitoring, and speaking under time pressure.

A fourth pattern is that anxiety reduction is strongest when AI is embedded in broader self-regulated learning and teacher-supported pedagogy. Recent research on digital learning emphasizes planning, feedback, monitoring, and reflection as central mechanisms of success (Faza & Lestari, 2025; Huang & Zhang, 2026; Jalambo et al., 2025; Yu, 2023). In the U.S. context, this point is reinforced by McDonald et al. (2024), who showed that institutional AI guidance is growing rapidly, but still needs more concrete pedagogical direction for oral communication. Taken together, the evidence suggests that AI-mediated speaking practice in the USA should be designed as guided rehearsal rather than unsupervised automation.

**Table 1**

*Comparative Overview of AI-Supported Speaking Research*

| Study                            | Context                                        | AI-mediated speaking feature                          | Main anxiety-related result                                               | Implication for the USA                                          |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Liu et al. (2026)                | ESL speakers in avatar-mediated interaction    | Stylized vs. realistic avatars                        | Stylized avatars lowered anxiety relative to realistic avatars            | Use less threatening visual design in online speaking tasks      |
| Park et al. (2026)               | Adult ESL learners                             | AI rephrasing and implicit feedback                   | Higher emotional engagement and motivation than explicit correction       | Prefer supportive feedback that preserves conversational flow    |
| Fernandez-Espinosa et al. (2025) | L2 learners in mixed reality                   | Group conversation with AI agents                     | Greater engagement, willingness to communicate, and safe practice space   | Build authentic, low-stakes speaking rehearsal activities        |
| Qin et al. (2025)                | Non-native speakers in real-time communication | AI speaking assistant with on-screen support          | Better speech organization, but possible increase in workload and anxiety | Avoid cognitively overloaded interfaces                          |
| Qin et al. (2026)                | NNS-NS collaborative tasks                     | AI speaking support plus mutual-understanding channel | Improved self-efficacy and reduced interactional anxiety                  | Integrate communicative scaffolds, not only language prompts     |
| McDonald et al. (2024)           | 116 U.S. R1 universities                       | Institutional GenAI guidance                          | Widespread AI adoption, but speaking underemphasized                      | Expand U.S. AI policy from writing support to oral communication |

Source: author's own development

**Conclusions**

Recent research supports the view that AI-mediated speaking practice can reduce foreign language anxiety in the USA, but only when the technology is designed with emotional safety, implicit feedback, authentic communicative goals, and manageable cognitive load in mind. The strongest

evidence points to three priorities: create low-risk speaking environments, align AI tasks with real-life communication, and keep teachers centrally involved as designers of guided practice. For U.S. adult ESL and community-based language programs, this means that AI should be used to expand rehearsal opportunities, not to replace human interaction. Future U.S.-based studies should test these design principles directly with adult ESL populations in colleges, community programs, and refugee-serving organizations, since the current evidence base is promising but still thinner for U.S. adult contexts than for the broader international literature.

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