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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

# Audio-Based Discussions in Blended Learning: A Qualitative Study of Chinese University Students' English-Speaking Skills

**Ning Zhang[1*], Cynthia Yolanda Doss[2]**

[1]School of Education, Faculty of Social Sciences & Leisure Management, Taylor's University, No.1, Jalan Taylor's, 47500 Subang Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia
Email: zhangning@sd.taylors.edu.my
[2]School of Education, Faculty of Social Sciences & Leisure Management, Taylor's University, No.1, Jalan Taylor's, 47500 Subang Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia
Email: Cynthia.doss@taylors.edu.my

**CORRESPONDING AUTHOR (*):**
Ning Zhang
(zhangning@sd.taylors.edu.my)

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## ABSTRACT

English speaking skills are crucial for effective global communication. However, in EFL contexts such as China, where an exam-oriented education system prevails, the focus on developing oral skills is often neglected. Although blended learning has successfully enhanced English speaking proficiency, audio-based discussions, which provide a platform to balance speaking authenticity with social pressure, have received relatively little attention. This research aims to (1) explore how university students perceive their experiences with audio-based discussions, (2) examine the influence of audio-based discussions on their speaking anxiety, and (3) investigate the impact of audio-based discussions on specific speaking skills involving pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary, and grammar. The qualitative research involved semi-structured interviews with 11 first-year students at a selected Chinese university. The results show that students perceived audio-based discussions as a way to enhance engagement and promote genuine, reflective communication. Furthermore, initial anxieties among students regarding pronunciation and unfamiliarity with the technology gradually diminished with consistent practice and the presence of a virtual audience. Significant improvements were observed in pronunciation, fluency, and vocabulary, but students reported minimal progress in grammar. These findings demonstrate that audio-based discussions are a valuable and effective platform for addressing challenges in EFL speaking. This study highlights the practicability of incorporating audio-based discussions into blended learning environments and advocates for the integration of AI tools to provide targeted grammatical feedback during speaking activities.

**Contribution/Originality:** This study contributes to the existing literature by demonstrating the effectiveness of audio-based discussions as a practical tool for fostering authentic communication in exam-oriented learning environments, providing valuable insights for educators seeking innovative methods to enhance

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learners' oral proficiency.

## 1. Introduction

Speaking English is very important for communicating with people around the world. In our connected world today, being able to speak English helps us share ideas and information with others more easily (Rao, 2019). In higher education, speaking skills are particularly valued, as employers often associate strong communication abilities with higher employability for graduates (Ting et al., 2017). However*, in EFL contexts like China,* only 10% of Chinese university students demonstrated advanced communication proficiency, with the majority (73%) classified as having medium-level skills (Hu et al., 2022). Although speaking proficiency is crucial, developing speaking skills poses a significant challenge, especially in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This challenge is exacerbated in large-class settings, where opportunities for individualized practice are limited.

Blended learning, which combines face-to-face instruction with online components (Hockly, 2018), has gained recognition as a pedagogical approach that effectively enhances English-speaking proficiency (Teng & Zeng, 2022). By combining face-to-face guidance with digital interaction, blended learning not only enhances speaking competence but also promotes active participation in contextually relevant speaking tasks (Ehsanifard et al., 2020). A key component of blended learning is the inclusion of online discussions, which act as a platform for meaningful interaction and collaborative language practices (Han & Ellis, 2019). While existing studies have demonstrated the pedagogical value of text-based discussions and video-based discussions in improving speaking performance (Murphy et al., 2021; Swartzwelder et al., 2019), these findings may not fully apply to audio-based discussions due to differences in interactional modes.

Audio-based discussions occupy a unique intermediate position: they retain vocal cues that enhance the authenticity of communication while alleviating the visual pressure associated with video formats (West, 2008). Furthermore, audio discussions achieve a balance between structured preparation and opportunities for spontaneous verbal expression, unlike the delayed nature of text-based discussions (Hew & Cheung, 2012). While research has investigated the effectiveness of audio-based discussions on learners' overall speaking performance (Widyawan & Hartati, 2016), students' perceptions towards the usefulness of these discussions remain underexplored. To address this, the present study aims to explore the following research questions:

i. How do university students view their experiences with audio-based discussions in a blended speaking course?
ii. In what ways do audio-based discussions influence students' anxiety in speaking English?
iii. What are the effects of audio-based discussions on various aspects of English speaking, including pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary, and grammar?

## 2. Literature Review

Speaking is a fundamental skill in the context of EFL and communicative competence. In China, the focus on exam-oriented education has marginalized speaking in English language instruction. English speaking is often overlooked in major assessments,

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including college entrance exams and various English proficiency certification tests (Zhao, 2023). As a result, the development of English-speaking skills in China faces several challenges, including insufficient exposure to English-speaking environments, limited speaking practice opportunities, and fear of making mistakes (Zhang & Lu, 2024).

Blended learning, defined as a pedagogical approach combining face-to-face and online learning experiences (Hrastinski, 2019), presents both challenges and opportunities. Challenges include students' difficulties with self-regulation and technology use, as well as educators' challenges in integrating technology into traditional classrooms (Rasheed et al., 2020). However, systematic reviews of the advantages of blended learning highlight its flexible learning times and locations, personalized learning spaces, and increased access to online resources (Celestino & Viana, 2021). These benefits may explain its success in EFL contexts, where blended learning has improved reading test scores (Ghazizadeh & Fatemipour, 2017), enhanced writing abilities (Liu, 2013), and boosted speaking proficiency (Baek & Lee, 2021; Ehsanifard et al., 2020).

Online discussions are a central component of blended learning, typically organized into text-, audio-and video-based formats (Swartzwelder et al., 2019; Shimizu, 2016). Topalov et al. (2023) found that university students presented the highest levels of anxiety in video-based learning environments, followed by audio-based online learning environments. In contrast, students report the lowest levels of anxiety in text-based communication environments. Namaziandost et al. (2021) highlighted the effectiveness of text-based discussions in reducing learners' speaking anxiety, whereas audio-form communication did not demonstrate the same benefits. While these studies use quantitative methods to investigate the impacts of different discussion formats on anxiety, there is a lack of qualitative research exploring how audio-based discussions influence participants' feelings.

Research highlights distinct advantages of text-and audio-based discussions for language development. For instance, according to Satar and Özdener (2008), text-based discussions enhance writing skills by allowing participants to draft and revise responses, while audio-based interactions improve speaking proficiency through real-time oral practices. Namaziandost et al. (2021) demonstrated that text-based discussions are particularly accommodating for less proficient learners, as they provide sufficient time to construct responses, mitigating anxiety caused by the gap between their current speaking ability and the demands of spontaneous interaction. Conversely, intermediate and advanced learners benefit more from audio-based discussions, which challenge them to expand vocabulary and fluency in dynamic, unscripted exchanges. Therefore, audio discussions are examined in the present study due to their higher efficiency in improving higher-level learners' speaking ability compared to text-based discussions.

Researchers have explored students' perceptions of audio-based discussions as a tool for learning. Trespalacios and Uribe-Flórez (2019) found that students viewed audio discussions as fostering a natural discussion environment, which they associated with more authentic and effective communication. Similarly, Hew and Cheung's (2012) study highlighted students' perceptions of audio discussions as an innovative medium, which enabled richer expression of ideas, deeper cognitive engagement, and inclusiveness for individuals less comfortable with or proficient in typing. While these studies revealed the perceived pedagogical value of audio discussions in fostering interaction, there

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remains a notable gap in empirical research focusing on students' perspectives within blended language learning contexts, particularly in speaking courses in Chinese educational settings.

## 3. Research Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach to deeply understand the development of certain behaviors, phenomena, or thought processes (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019). It aims to capture students' experiences, perceptions, and feedback on the usefulness of audio discussions in enhancing their speaking confidence during an English-speaking course.

The participants in this study consist of 11 first-year university students, selected based on the principle of data saturation, which occurs when no new information emerges from additional participants (Guest et al., 2006). These students were purposely selected for their active engagement in speaking classes. The group includes three male and eight female students, all of whom are enrolled in the English Language Department. Their English proficiency levels are generally higher than those of non-English majors, as they are required to achieve a minimum score of 120 out of 150 on the college entrance English exam, which assesses comprehensive English language skills. Moreover, all participants have prior experience with blended learning from their high school years, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. While some have previously participated in online discussions, their experiences were limited to asynchronous, text-based interactions. This study represents their first exposure to synchronous, audio-based discussions.

In the *English-speaking* course, participants engaged in synchronous audio-based discussions using Xuexitong, a multifunctional mobile application designed to facilitate classroom interaction. The emphasis on written English in exams makes audio discussions a novel intervention in this context. Since this was the first time participants used Xuexitong, the speaking teacher introduced its features and provided training before the commencement of the course.

The course was held twice a week for 16 weeks, with each session lasting 90 minutes. To enhance students' speaking skills, the teacher organized audio discussions four to five times per week, employing various formats, such as whole-class discussions, group discussions, and peer discussions. Specifically, the teacher assigned discussion topics aligned with the speaking curriculum, allowing students to reflect on the topics, structure their responses, search for relevant online resources, and practice their expressions before submitting the recorded audio files to Xuexitong. As illustrated in Figure 1, the audio discussions in Xuexitong support synchronized text recognition, enabling students to choose whether to display the transcribed text based on their individual preferences. Furthermore, the audio discussions allow both teachers and students to listen to and provide feedback on each other's responses, fostering an interactive and collaborative learning environment.

The data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews conducted at the end of the first semester. Participants were informed that the interviews would be audio-recorded, and the transcripts would be anonymized as S1 to S11 and used merely for data analysis purposes. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. The transcripts were analyzed based on three key themes: students' experiences with

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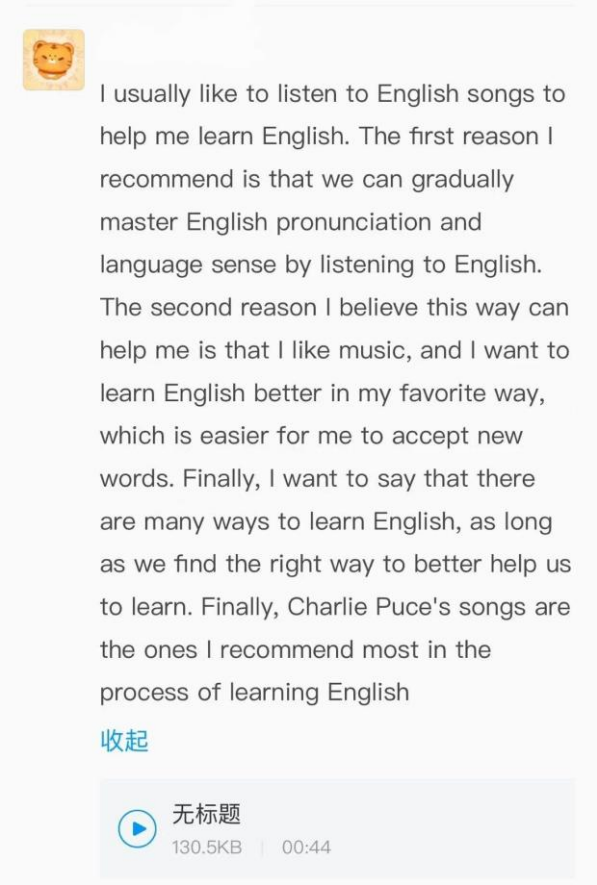
blended learning and online discussions, their perceptions of audio-based synchronous discussion, and their development of speaking skills.

Figure 1: Sample of Uploaded Audio File




## 4. Results

### 4.1. Student Perceptions of Audio-Based Discussions in Blended Learning

This section explores students' perceptions of audio-based discussions in blended learning, focusing on their preferences, engagement, and the unique benefits of this approach compared to traditional methods. Students responded positively to the integration of technology through audio-based discussions in blended learning, finding them both novel and engaging. Despite experiencing blended learning in high school, most students mainly engaged in asynchronous activities, such as accessing online resources before class and completing exercises online after class. Some students had participated in text-based online discussions to enhance class engagement during warm-up activities, but they had not previously used audio-based discussions as an interactive tool. As it was their first time participating in an audio discussion, students found the experience both helpful and interesting.

Many students appreciated the novelty of audio discussions, finding them more engaging than traditional classroom activities. As S1 explained:

> *"Blended learning makes the class more interesting. Sitting in a classroom and just listening for too long can get boring. But with audio discussion,*

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> *you get to use your phone a little, and the technology makes it feel more engaging."*

Students demonstrated a preference for audio discussions over face-to-face discussions, particularly in large-scale speaking classes where opportunities to participate were limited. As S4 noted:

> *"In face-to-face classes, there's limited time and a large number of students, so there are fewer opportunities to participate in discussions. We usually have to raise our hand to speak, but because of time constraints, not many people get the chance."*

On the other hand, audio discussions create a more dynamic and engaging speaking environment by allowing all students to participate. This highlights how audio discussions democratize participation, ensuring that even shy or less confident students have an equal opportunity to contribute. As highlighted by S7:

> *"When the teacher asks students to answer individually in class, it can waste time and slow down the lesson. But if the teacher posts the task on Xuexitong with a five-minute deadline, all students can participate, and the teacher can quickly check their thoughts, making the class more efficient*."

Beyond more opportunities for participation, audio discussions allow students to engage in deeper reflection by replaying their recorded responses. As S1 mentioned:

> *"I prefer audio discussions. Face-to-face talks can spark instant ideas, but audio discussions give me more time to think deeply after class and choose the right words to express my thoughts. These are things I often struggle to come up with in class."*

Additionally, audio-based discussions provide a platform for students to access and engage with their peers' perspectives. Through reviewing the discussions in Xuexitong, students can expand their understanding by incorporating new ideas or drawing inspiration to develop original thoughts. Furthermore, recognizing that their contributions introduce novel insights may foster a sense of achievement. As S2 noted:

> *"In audio discussions, everyone thinks differently and talks about broad topics. By sharing our thoughts, we can combine different viewpoints and come up with new conclusions—sometimes even more than one. Audio discussions also help us improve our own thoughts. If my opinion hasn't been mentioned, I can share it with the group. This makes the discussion richer and makes me feel good about contributing."*

Compared to text-based discussions, audio-based discussions facilitate more natural and authentic communication, encouraging students to think quickly and express their ideas spontaneously. This authenticity supports the development of speaking skills by creating a more personal and less restrictive environment than the formal conventions of written language. Additionally, audio discussions promote active engagement by reducing students' reliance on translation tools to convert their ideas from Chinese to

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English, as often occurs in text-based discussions. This direct language use fosters greater fluency. As S3 shared:

> *"Sometimes I feel that answering questions in spoken language is more humane than typing words, because typing words can seem cold and some of them are not what I really want to say, but what the translator translates. Although my spoken expression is a bit "Chinglish", it is my real, honest response."*

The findings indicate that students perceive audio discussions as an innovative and engaging method that encourages them to participate. This approach facilitates more genuine communication than traditional discussion formats, contributing to a more interactive learning environment.

### 4.2. Anxiety Dynamics in Audio Discussions

This section examines the anxiety dynamics associated with audio discussions, highlighting students' initial challenges and how repeated practice and reduced social pressure helped them overcome anxiety. Students reported feelings of nervousness, anxiety, embarrassment and even frustration when they initially engaged in audio discussions. Their concerns centered around issues of pronunciation accuracy, speaking fluency, and potential technical difficulties. As highlighted by S1, S 8, and S10:

> *"At first, it was a bit tough. My speaking wasn't great, and sometimes the voices conveyed via Xuexitong wasn't the one I actually meant to say." (S1)*

> *"It was actually a bit nerve-wracking, because the audio format discussions meant that we had to express ourselves clearly and completely without pauses." (S8)*

> *"At first, I felt a bit nervous because audio discussions is different from face-to-face discussions. The first time I tried it, I felt a little panicked and wasn't sure how to go about it." (S10)*

Despite these initial challenges, students gradually became more comfortable and confident through repeated use. In earlier lessons, students had limited opportunities to listen to their speech, as they primarily focused on listening to others. The ongoing practice enabled them to become familiar with their voices delivered from the audio discussion platform. As S3 shared:

> *"At first, hearing my own voice made me feel embarrassed, and I was scared to listen to my recordings, but I didn't mind listening to others. However, as I practiced more, I got used to my voice, and I felt less embarrassed. In the end, I realized that listening to my own recordings wasn't as awkward as I thought."*

Unlike face-to-face discussions, which required immediate responses to the given topic, audio discussions allowed students time to prepare and refine their utterances before uploading the audio file to Xuexitong. This alleviated students' pressure to express their opinions on the spot. As shared by S4:

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> *"When recording audio, I try multiple times within the given time and choose the best version to share. When I listen back after submitting my audio file, I can notice my progress, feel a sense of achievement, and gain more confidence."*

Moreover, students reported experiencing reduced anxiety as they did not have to worry about potential negative feedback from their instructor or peers. Unlike traditional classroom settings, where students must speak in front of the entire class, the only audience in audio-based discussions was the mobile application Xuexitong. The absence of direct interaction with a real person alleviated their pressure, creating a more supportive and comfortable environment for speaking. As a student mentioned:

> *"When I participate in audio discussions, I focus more on the questions. I immerse myself in thinking about the issues and confront my weaknesses without worrying about the attention and judgment of my teacher and classmates." (S8)*

Furthermore, introverted students particularly benefited from the reduced social pressure associated with the audio discussions. These students were often less visible in traditional classroom settings because they rarely volunteered to share their perspectives. However, this does not imply that introverted students are unwilling to share their ideas. In fact, when provided with an equal opportunity for every student to participate in an audio discussion, these students experience less psychological pressure, enabling them to engage more comfortably. As a student noted:

> *"The audio discussions give introverted students more opportunities to showcase their abilities, as they don't have to engage in face-to-face interaction and can feel more confident sharing their thoughts." (S9)*

Audio discussions, while initially causing some anxiety, ultimately fostered a supportive environment where students confidently built their skills. The combination of repeated practice, self-reflection, and reduced social pressure helped students overcome their initial fears and engage more actively in the learning process.

### 4.3. Skill-Specific Impacts on English Speaking

This section analyzes the skill-specific impacts of audio-based discussions on students' English-speaking abilities, including pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary, and grammar. Several students reported that participating in audio discussions enhanced the accuracy of their pronunciation. The speech recognition feature of the audio discussion in Xuexitong converts spoken language into text simultaneously, allowing students to review the transcription. If they notice discrepancies between their intended message and the recognized text, they can correct it and re-record their speech, refining their pronunciation. As a student mentioned:

> *"We will read the words recognized in Xuexitong, and if we mispronounce a word, we can look up the correct pronunciation to strengthen our memory of the word and avoid making the same mistake next time."* (S5)

The instructor also provided feedback on pronunciation during face-to-face sessions after reviewing the uploaded audio files. However, some students questioned the

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effectiveness of the feedback, noting that it may not address the needs of all students. As a student expressed,

> *"The teacher cannot explain every student's pronunciation problem in detail because everyone's issues are different. While the teacher can address most students' needs, it's unrealistic to meet everyone's problems." (S6)*

Students also provided valuable insights into the impact of audio discussions on their speaking fluency. As students can re-record their audio responses, they had the opportunity to practice and refine their fluency in a targeted way, such as focusing on improving areas where they were stuck while speaking. According to S2:

> *"When I submit the audio recording, my goal is to speak fluently from start to finish. If I stumble or hesitate in the middle, I delete that part and re-record it. This way, I can keep practicing and improving my fluency until I'm happy with the final version."*

In the context of lexical use in audio-based discussions, students demonstrated an ability to acquire advanced vocabulary and diverse sentence structures from their peers' audio responses. As S4 stated:

> *"In audio discussions, we can hear many different opinions and come across new words. I can write down these words and study them repeatedly, which helps me improve my vocabulary so I can use them more comfortably next time. This method really expands my vocabulary."*

Audio discussions provide a platform for communication and sharing, allowing students' speech to be heard and commented on by the instructor and peers. As a result, students are motivated to present their ideas effectively and make a positive impression. One way they achieve this is by incorporating high-level vocabulary, as S2 illustrated:

> *"Since people might hear me when I speak in audio discussions, I pay more attention to the words I use to avoid sounding childish. At the same time, I also try to use more advanced vocabulary to expand my word bank."*

Students observed significant improvements in pronunciation, fluency, and vocabulary usage while speaking, noting that grammar enhancements were less pronounced in comparison. While some students indicated that they concentrated more on grammatical precision during audio discussions, only a few students acknowledged a noticeable enhancement in their ability to employ varied sentence structures. As stated by S5:

> *"When using phrases or clauses, we often make grammar mistakes, like using the wrong singular or plural form or choosing the wrong preposition. Through audio practice, we use grammar more often, but we might hesitate because we're unsure about the correct usage. These mistakes encourage us to check grammar rules so we can use them more accurately next time."*

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The skill-specific benefits of audio discussions demonstrate their strong potential to improve pronunciation, fluency, and vocabulary. However, additional support could be beneficial in tackling grammatical challenges to further enhance overall language proficiency. The combination of self-correction, peer learning, and instructor feedback creates a dynamic environment for students to develop their speaking skills in a targeted and meaningful way.

## 5. Discussion

This study examined the perceptions of selected students from a Chinese university regarding the use of audio-based discussions in English-speaking courses. It focused on audio discussions in blended learning, the dynamics of speaking anxiety, and improvements in specific skills. The findings strongly suggest that students view audio discussions as an invaluable resource that should be seamlessly integrated into the English-speaking environment. Moreover, students reported a gradual reduction in anxiety over time. In terms of language development, although progress in grammatical use was less pronounced, students demonstrated noticeable improvements in pronunciation, fluency, and vocabulary use.

The above findings are consistent with previous research on blended learning, which underscores the effectiveness of technology in fostering an engaging and interactive learning environment (Celestino & Viana, 2021). This study offers valuable insight into the existing literature by highlighting the effectiveness of audio-based discussions in overcoming the challenges faced in large-scale educational settings. In environments focused on speaking, opportunities for oral participation in traditional face-to-face classrooms can be quite restricted. This research demonstrates how audio discussions can enhance engagement and interaction among students in such contexts. Moreover, the reduced social pressure and increased chance for self-reflection in audio discussions were highly effective in alleviating students' anxiety in speaking, contrasting with the findings of Namaziandost et al. (2021). While substantial improvements in pronunciation, fluency, and vocabulary were observed, the limited progress in grammatical variety can likely be attributed to the emphasis on communication over grammatical variation in the English-speaking class. Additionally, it is challenging for the instructor to offer immediate feedback on grammatical precision to individuals within a limited time. Future research could explore the integration of grammar instruction within audio-based discussions to address this gap.

The findings offer valuable insights that have important implications for both practical applications and methodological approaches. Firstly, audio discussions can be widely used because participants have positive attitudes toward them due to the communicative and engaging speaking environment. Second, students' ability to reflect on and evaluate their own learning improves through audio-based discussions, such as self-assessing their pronunciation by listening to the audio recordings. Finally, this study enhances anxiety research by using qualitative interviews, addressing the limitation of primarily measuring statistical changes in speaking anxiety.

This study, while contributing valuable insights, has limitations in two key areas. First, the research data were collected solely through interviews, which lacked methodological triangulation, such as classroom observations or analysis of assignment texts. This limitation could impact the credibility of the findings. Second, this study focuses exclusively on Chinese students majoring in English language learning, which restricts

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the generalizability of the results to non-English major students or individuals from different cultural backgrounds.

In future research on the use of audio-based discussions in English speaking courses, university EFL instructors should provide targeted feedback on grammatical use to complement the limited support that audio discussions can offer in this regard. Furthermore, the use of novel AI-driven tools is also recommended to improve learners' grammar use in speaking skills (Zou et al., 2023), as these tools provide automatic feedback, which may be more efficient than one-to-one feedback from instructors. Second, given the positive reception of audio-based discussions, future researchers could explore their application in other EFL courses, such as listening and writing. Such an extension could promote a more interactive learning environment in the holistic development of EFL learning, thereby enhancing students' engagement and skill development across these areas. Third, it is essential to include a more diverse participant pool to explore the broader effects of audio-based discussions, specifically by involving non-English major students. Lastly, this study underscores the importance of incorporating multiple data sources, such as logs and classroom observations, to enhance the validity of the research findings.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study examined Chinese EFL students' perceptions of audio-based discussions in blended English-speaking courses, revealing three key findings. First, audio-based discussions have proven to be an effective method for enhancing participation in large classes. Compared to face-to-face and text-based discussions, students viewed audio-based discussions as a more tolerant, equitable, and engaging platform for authentic communication. Second, technological affordances, such as automatic speech recognition, transcript review, and recording playback, enabled an effective anxiety management mechanism. Research indicates that students often experience significant anxiety related to pronunciation challenges and a lack of familiarity with technology. However, this anxiety can be mitigated through repeated exposure to the learning environment and by reducing social pressure. As a result, students can shift their anxiety into motivation for self-regulated learning. Finally, improvements in speaking subskills were inconsistent, with notable advancements in pronunciation, fluency, and vocabulary, while there was limited progress in grammatical complexity. This indicates a need for targeted intervention in this area.

This research adds valuable insights to the blended learning domain by examining the role of audio-based discussions in enhancing English-speaking skills. This area has been less studied in comparison to traditional face-to-face and text-based discussion formats. Additionally, it demonstrated the use of audio-based discussions on the Xuexitong platform in the exam-oriented learning context prevalent in countries such as China, where there has been limited emphasis on speaking skills in university curricula. The findings of this study strongly advocate for the integration of audio-based discussions into EFL curricula, enhancing the development of various English language subskills.

## Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The researchers adhered to the ethical guidelines set by the Human Ethics Committee of Taylor's University. All procedures involving human participants were carried out in full

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compliance with the ethical standards established by the institutional research committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were assured of their anonymity and the confidentiality of their responses. Participants were informed that the research data would only be used for research purpose and they were free to withdraw at any time without any consequences.

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**Conflict of Interest**

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest concerning the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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