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Enhancing English Speaking Skills in Romanian 8th Grade Classrooms through Conversational AI: The Case of Character.AI

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ABSTRACT

For Romanian 8th graders, large class sizes and limited instruction time often curtail opportunities to practice speaking, hindering attainment of national curriculum targets (*Limba modernă* 1, clasele V-VIII) for skills such as storytelling, dialogue, making suggestions, and asking questions. This article examines the integration of Character.AI, a conversational AI platform, to provide supplemental interactive speaking practice aligned with these curricular objectives outside the classroom. Through AI-driven persona-based dialogues and role-play scenarios, students engage in unscripted conversations that mirror 8th grade speaking tasks, effectively extending functional language use beyond crowded classroom settings. Key outcomes include improved oral fluency, reduced speaking anxiety, and greater learner autonomy, as the AI's patience and non-judgmental stance creates a safe environment for repeated practice and risk-taking in language use. Moreover, the platform's voice-based capabilities enable spontaneous spoken interaction, closely resembling real-life conversations and further reinforcing learners' speaking proficiency. While the AI occasionally misinterprets context or lacks explicit error correction, these limitations are manageable with appropriate teacher guidance. Overall, the findings underscore the pedagogical value of Character.AI as a complementary tool that aligns with Romania's English curriculum and substantially enhances students' speaking opportunities, helping them meet oral language objectives despite classroom constraints.

KEYWORDS: English as a foreign language, AI-assisted speaking practice, learner autonomy, curriculum alignment.

Introduction

In Romania's lower secondary schools, English is taught as *Limba modernă 1* (first foreign language) starting at age 7, with students in 8th grade (around age 14) expected to reach roughly an A2+ proficiency level by the end of the cycle. Developing oral communication skills is a key objective of the national curriculum, but practical constraints - such as large class sizes and tight schedules – often curtail the time each student can spend actively speaking English. This paper

explores how conversational AI technologies, particularly the Character.AI platform, can help bridge this gap by providing scalable, interactive speaking practice. We focus on alignment with Romania's *Limba modernă 1* curriculum for 8th grade, highlighting how AI-driven chat partners can support speaking functions (for example, asking questions or making suggestions) and tasks like storytelling, dialogue, and role-play that are emphasized in the curriculum. Drawing on emerging research and classroom implementations from other contexts, we examine the effectiveness of AI conversation tools in improving learners' speaking skills and confidence. Finally, we propose concrete strategies for Romanian educators to integrate these tools into their teaching practice and curriculum planning, in order to supplement or substitute traditional teacher-led speaking activities and thereby enhance students' oral English proficiency.

Speaking skills in the Romanian 8th grade curriculum

The Romanian national curriculum for modern languages (*Limba modernă 1, clasele V-VIII*, approved by Ministerial Order 3393/2017) lays out clear expectations for 8th grade students' communicative abilities in English. By this stage, learners are expected to handle everyday communication scenarios at the A2+ level and even begin some B1-level competencies. The curriculum document outlines specific competencies and provides examples of learning activities to develop each skill area. For speaking (*Exprimarea orală*), the 8th grade curriculum emphasizes functions such as narrating events in the past, participating in informal conversations, expressing suggestions and reacting to proposals. For example, students should practice narrating personal experiences or stories (*Relatarea unei întâmplări / a unor experienţe personale*), describing what they did last week or during a holiday. They are also expected to engage in simple dialogues on general topics - discussing experiences, films, or personalities - and to carry out dialogues for practical tasks like planning a school trip or project. Additionally, the curriculum includes role-playing informal interactions, such as making and responding to suggestions among friends (for example, a role-play scenario: "you are on the phone with a friend who proposes a collaborative project"). These tasks target pragmatic speaking skills: making suggestions, reacting to ideas, inviting or refusing politely, which correspond to functional language acts (acte de vorbire) listed in the curriculum (*a face/accepta/refuza o invitaţie; a propune/sugera ceva; a exprima opinii favorabile sau defavorabile*). Equally important, the curriculum addresses the quality of interaction and speaking performance. Students are encouraged to self-evaluate and peer-evaluate their spoken production, reflecting

on clarity and accuracy. The 8th grade program suggests activities like recording oneself speaking and then listening back for errors or giving feedback on classmates' audio/video recordings (such as student-made podcasts or vlogs). It even proposes creative speaking assessments, such as presentation contests on stimulating topics (the wackiest character, the most beautiful experience, 'vote for me' speeches) to motivate learners to speak more and pay attention to expressive quality.

These examples illustrate that the Romanian curriculum is quite progressive in theory - it values interactive speaking tasks, learner autonomy in evaluating speech, and engaging contexts. However, teachers must fit them into a limited timeframe. Typically, 8th graders have only a few English lessons per week (often 2 hours), during which teachers must cover multiple skills (listening, reading, writing, grammar) in addition to speaking. In practice, truly communicative speaking exercises-like the dialogues, storytelling, and role-plays recommended-may occur infrequently or with only a subset of students participating, due to time constraints. Moreover, as we discuss next, class conditions in Romanian schools can make it difficult to give every student adequate speaking practice in each lesson.

Challenges of limited speaking practice in large classes

Romanian secondary school classes are often large, commonly ranging from 25 to 30 students in an urban public-school setting. If each student were to speak for even one minute in a 50-minute class, little time would remain for instruction, feedback, or other activities. In reality, many students end up speaking only a few sentences in English per week in class, which is far from optimal for developing fluency. Teachers also face the challenge of monitoring and correcting so many speakers at once, which often leads to more chorus drilling or teacher-led Q&A, rather than genuine interactive conversation practice for each student. Studies have noted that in countries with similar conditions, "providing sufficient practice for each student on speaking performance [is] impossible" when classes are big and time is short. Indeed, Chinese researchers Ma et al. (2025) observe that despite six years of compulsory English education, many learners still struggle with speaking fluency due to "lack of exposure to authentic English-speaking context" and constraints such as limited in-class time and large class sizes. Teachers often resort to Romanian for efficiency or focus on reading and grammar exercises that are easier to manage in large groups, inadvertently reducing opportunities for

student talk in English. Another challenge is student anxiety and lack of confidence when speaking a foreign language in front of peers. Adolescents may fear making mistakes or being judged on their pronunciation and grammar, which can lead to reluctance in participating (Ma et. al., 2025). The formal school setting, with the teacher as evaluator, can amplify this anxiety (Horwitz et. al.,1986). The Romanian curriculum's suggestion to use peer feedback and contests aims to create a more positive, motivating environment, but these methods still involve an audience of classmates. As a result, actual communicative practice can be dominated by a few outgoing students, while others stay silent - a phenomenon widely observed in large EFL classes (Anderson, 2016).

This gap calls for innovative solutions that can provide additional speaking interactions, ideally in a personalized, low-pressure manner. Conversational AI offers one such solution, anytime, anywhere. Advances in natural language processing now enable chatbots to understand user input and generate human-like responses across a range of topics and unscripted, dynamic conversations. Importantly, AI partners are infinitely patient and non-judgmental, which can reduce learner anxiety. Research indicates several affordances of AI chatbots for language learning. The chatbot can take on various personas or roles (for example, a travel agent, a friend, a shopkeeper), aligning with common communicative scenarios students need to master. AI can also provide instant feedback or corrections in some cases, though this feature varies by platform. Even when not explicitly correcting, an AI model's responses implicitly signal whether the learner's input was understood, prompting the student to adjust or try again. Another benefit is the flexibility and personalization of AI conversations: learners can talk about topics of interest to them or repeat scenarios until they feel comfortable. A variety of AI-driven tools have emerged in recent years to support language practice. For instance, mobile apps like *Duolingo* and *Liulishuo* (an AI English tutor popular in China) incorporate AI for speech recognition and dialogue simulations. A recent experimental study with Chinese university students found that using an AI-powered speaking app for just 10 weeks significantly improved their speaking pronunciation and fluency compared to a control group (Ma et. al., 2025). Likewise, chatbots like *ChatGPT* or *Replika* have been informally used by learners to practice conversation by typing, though they are not designed specifically for pedagogy and may lack language-level tuning or structured curricula (Shaikh et. al., 2023).

Among the conversational AI tools, Character.AI stands out as a platform that allows the creation and use of custom AI personas for open-ended conversations.

Some are user-generated personalities (historical figures, fictional characters, or specialized tutors), and others are general assistants. Character.AI's dialogues are unscripted and persona-driven, simulating the feeling of real-life interaction. For example, a learner could practice interrogative questions by chatting with a "detective" character who prompts them to ask questions, or practice past-tense narration by telling a story to a "curious friend" character. While not built exclusively for language education, Character.AI has gained attention for its potential. Significantly, as of 2024, Character.AI introduced a voice conversation feature called Character Calls, allowing spoken two-way dialogues (Character.AI Blog, 27 June 2024). With this feature, students can literally talk to the AI using a microphone and hear the AI respond in a realistic voice - like having a phone call. The platform supports multiple languages for voice input and output (English, Romanian, and others) and offers a range of voice options (different accents, ages, etc.) for the characters. This is a critical development: it means AI can now facilitate oral practice, not just text-based chat. Voice interaction can be used for anything, from polishing language skills to practicing job interviews or storytelling. Early user community feedback shows people have been using Character.AI's voice calls for language learning and even creative narration tasks. (Character.AI Blog, 27 June 2024) An 8th grade student in Romania could have a 15-minute spoken conversation in English with an AI character on their smartphone - getting far more speaking practice than they might in an entire week of class.

Character.AI as a tool for English speaking practice: evidence and benefits

A recent qualitative study by Napitupulu and Dalimunte (2025) in Indonesia examined high school students' perceptions after using Character.AI for English speaking practice. Learners noticed reduced hesitation in speaking, better sentence construction, and enhanced vocabulary usage. The AI's persona-driven dialogue helped simulate a real interlocutor, which pushed students to formulate responses more naturally and spontaneously than in rote classroom drills. Moreover, the study highlighted a reduction in anxiety. Several participants noted that talking to the AI was less intimidating than speaking in front of peers or teachers. That study also shed light on some challenges of using Character.AI. Students observed that the AI sometimes had limited contextual understanding or gave irrelevant responses, which could disrupt the flow of conversation. There were also technical issues reported, such as occasional errors in speech recognition or

"accent misinterpretation" when the AI struggled with non-native pronunciation (Napitupulu, Dalimunte, 2025). Additionally, Character.AI (like most AI chatbots) does not proactively correct grammar or pronunciation in real-time.

Despite these limitations, students in the Indonesian context overwhelmingly viewed Character.AI as a valuable tool for speaking practice, especially in situations where human partners were limited. The researchers conclude that Character.AI has strong potential to enhance speaking fluency and learner autonomy, provided it is used alongside teacher guidance and other language support (Napitupulu, Dalimunte 2025). In other words, AI chat is not a standalone solution to speaking mastery, but it can significantly augment traditional instruction.

Beyond formal research, anecdotal evidence from online educator communities and early adopters echoes similar benefits. Teachers have reported that shy students "find their voice" by first practicing with a chatbot. Learners enjoy the gamified aspect of chatting with characters, and some treat it like a game or storytelling exercise. (Poth, 2025) The persona aspect of Character.AI can be leveraged to match student interests. A student might practice functional language like making suggestions or polite requests by interacting with an "AI Travel Agent" character to book an imaginary trip, covering typical dialogue lines as per the curriculum (greeting, asking for information, suggesting an itinerary, etc.). Students can practice at their own pace, repeat for reinforcement, or even pause to look up a word and continue - all without the pressure of holding up a real partner.

Character.AI and similar tools address the problem of limited classroom speaking time by enabling out-of-class practice. For example, a homework task could be: "Have a 10-minute conversation with the AI on Character.AI about a topic of your choice and write down five new expressions you have learned." This transforms homework into an interactive speaking exercise, as opposed to the traditional worksheet. Promoting such usage can help fulfil curriculum goals that are otherwise hard to meet in limited class hours.

Aligning AI conversations with curriculum tasks and functions

One of the strengths of using Character.AI for 8th grade English learners is that it can be directly aligned with the curriculum's prescribed speaking tasks and functions. Teachers can design activities or scenarios in Character.AI that mirror

those in the curriculum. Below are a few key speaking skill areas from the Romanian curriculum and how AI can support each:

Narrative speaking (Relating events): The curriculum expects students to recount personal events or stories in the past tense. For example, a homework assignment (that should be recorded for the teacher to check) might have students chat with a friendly character named "Curious Friend" and tell them about "what you did last weekend" or "a funny incident from your holiday" aligning with the task of "*relatarea activităţilor de săptămâna trecută*." The AI can ask follow-up questions (especially if the character is designed with a curious personality), which trains students to answer unpredictable questions - a key aspect of fluency.

Dialogues and role-plays: The curriculum includes many dialogue-based scenarios - planning an event, discussing experiences, preparing for a project, etc. For example, for the function of making and responding to suggestions in an informal dialogue, students could use a character like "Planner Bot" to practice organizing a school activity. The student might initiate: "Let's organize a class picnic. What do you think?" and the AI (role-playing a classmate) could respond, suggesting an alternative or expressing a concern: "That sounds fun! Maybe we should also invite our English teacher? Or do you think we should keep it just among students? "This kind of back-and-forth lets the student practice proposing ideas and reacting (accepting, politely declining, etc.). Similarly, for role-playing (like the curriculum's phone call example), a student can engage in a voice call with an AI character. The AI's ability to carry multiple turns of dialogue ensures the conversation can continue longer than a scripted textbook dialogue would.

Question-Asking (Interrogatives): While not explicitly listed as a separate item in the 8th grade curriculum, the ability to ask questions is fundamental to conversational competence. For example, a teacher might assign students to chat with an "English Tutor" character or even a historical figure character, where the student's job is to ask the character at least five questions (Who? What? When? Why? How?) during the conversation. The AI will answer, and possibly ask questions back, but this ensures the student practices grammar and social use of questions, including asking for clarification - just as the curriculum requires.

Expressing opinions and feelings: The curriculum aims for students to express favorable or unfavorable opinions on topics and react to ideas. AI characters can prompt opinion sharing: for example, a character that discusses movies or music can ask the student "What's your opinion about this song?" or "Did you like the movie we have just watched? Why or why not?" The student can practice giving a

brief opinion and supporting it, and the AI can agree or playfully challenge them, which forces the student to articulate more. This can be especially useful for preparing for oral exams.

Pronunciation and fluency: Some AI tools also incorporate pronunciation feedback, that is scores and corrections, such as ELSA Speak or the one used in the Chinese study. Character.AI's voice feature does not simply use it but provides pronunciation practice and immediate comprehension feedback – if the pronunciation was not clear enough, the student may rephrase or try again. Teachers could blend these: using Character.AI for free-form fluency practice and another app for focused pronunciation drills. Additionally, recordings of AI conversations could be saved and later reviewed in class as part of the self-evaluation exercises the curriculum recommends. A teacher might have students share a short audio clip and reflect: "How did you speak? What do you think you could improve?" thereby integrating AI practice with reflective learning.

Teachers do not have to abandon curriculum objectives; rather, they leverage a new tool to achieve those objectives more effectively.

Implementation strategies for Romanian educators

A thoughtful implementation strategy is the key. Below are concrete steps and considerations for making the most of these technologies in a pedagogically sound way:

- **Introduce AI tools gradually and train students**: The teacher might demonstrate a Character.AI conversation live - for example, greeting an English Tutor character and asking it a few questions - so that students see how it works and what the interface looks like. Clear guidelines should be given for appropriate use: staying on task in English, using respectful language with the AI (as practice for real courtesy), and not sharing personal data (a digital literacy point) (UNESCO, 2023). If the school has a policy against phone use in class, the teacher might obtain permission for an exception during designated AI practice activities, or alternatively, schedule AI practice as homework where students use their own devices at home.
- **Align with lesson plans and objectives**: Teachers should integrate AI activities into their lesson planning, rather than use them as isolated novelties. For instance, if a unit's objective is practicing past tense

storytelling, the teacher can plan a two-part lesson: one class session where students outline a story (perhaps in pairs) and rehearse key vocabulary, and a follow-up where each student tells their story to an AI character via a voice call or chat. The AI portion can be done in class if devices are available (students with smartphones could pair up so one monitors while the other speaks, then switch roles), or as an at-home assignment. The next day, students can report back on their AI conversations - on what the character asked, how the conversation flowed, etc. This debrief connects the AI practice with classroom learning and allows the teacher to address any language issues that arose. By tying AI use to specific curriculum goals (like "use at least three past perfect sentences in your story" or "practice the dialogue from the textbook with the AI playing one role") the practice remains targeted and effective.

- **Leverage existing characters or create custom ones**: A teacher could create a custom chatbot character tailored for their class – for example, "Ms. English Helper - an AI that always speaks at 8th-grade level and helps you practice for your exam." This character's description can include prompts to ask the student many questions, correct them gently by rephrasing mistakes, or focus on specific topics from the syllabus. One student might practice with "Sherlock Holmes" (to develop question-forming skills in a mystery context), another one with an "English Chef" character (for functional language about food and instructions), and so on. The teacher can later have students share which character they chose and what they talked about, adding a fun element of storytelling to the class.
- **Address challenges and set boundaries**: It is important to acknowledge and mitigate the limitations of AI tools. Teachers should explain that the AI might sometimes give strange or incorrect responses, and if that happens, students should not be discouraged but rather use it as an opportunity to clarify ("I'm sorry, I didn't understand that. Could you rephrase?" – a useful communicative strategy in itself). One implementation idea is to have students record or save their chat transcripts and then reflect on them with the teacher, discussing the correct usage. On the technical side, schools will need to ensure that there is adequate internet connectivity for using these tools and perhaps set time limits so usage remains focused (AI chats can be engaging and run long if unchecked).
- **Encourage independent practice and autonomy**: One goal of integrating AI is to foster greater learner autonomy, a trait that the curriculum values (through self-evaluation and project work). An educator

might set up an "English Speaking Challenge" where for one month, students aim to spend 10-15 minutes a day chatting with an AI in English. They could keep a log of which days they practiced and a "new phrase I have learned today". This kind of independent challenge could be incentivized with small rewards or simply celebrated in class to motivate participation. By policy, schools could consider allowing the language lab or library computers to have accounts on such AI platforms so that students who do not have devices or internet at home can still access the practice after school. It would also be beneficial for the Ministry of Education or district authorities to disseminate curated lists of approved AI tools and usage guidelines to ensure consistency and address any privacy concerns (UNESCO, 2023).

- **Evaluation and recognition**: Lastly, educational policy can encourage schools to formally recognize and evaluate speaking progress achieved through such tools. For example, oral assessments could incorporate tasks that students have rehearsed with AI. The curriculum's focus on continuous assessment and self-evaluation of speaking could be tied to AI usage logs as speaking portfolios. Recognizing these gains in report card comments or internal certifications can validate the approach. Over time, if data shows substantial improvement, the Ministry might consider scaling up the practice to other grades or other languages, cementing conversational AI as a standard component of foreign language pedagogy.

Conclusion

Romania's 8th grade English curriculum aspires to produce confident, A2+/B1-level speakers of English, equipped to handle everyday conversations, share stories, and express ideas in the language. Achieving this in practice has been challenging under the constraints of limited classroom time and large student groups. By serving as always-available conversation partners, AI characters can help students practice speaking functions – from asking questions to narrating events - far more often than class alone would permit. Evidence from other countries shows that AI chat practice can improve fluency and confidence, especially by lowering the psychological barriers that often hinder classroom participation. Character.AI's introduction of voice calls further makes it a powerful tool for oral language development, essentially bringing one-on-one speaking rehearsal to any student with a smartphone. For Romanian educators, the key is to harness these tools in alignment with the national curriculum. This paper has illustrated how specific

8th grade curriculum tasks – like storytelling, dialogue, role-play, and self-evaluation – can be supported and extended through AI-facilitated practice. We have also outlined practical strategies for integration. Ultimately, conversational AI should be seen as an adjunct to the teacher, not a replacement. It can offload some of the routine practice (Xu, et. al., 2024). By doing so, class time can be used more efficiently for structured feedback, cultural nuances, and complex communicative tasks that require human guidance - while the AI takes on the role of tireless practice partner. In conclusion, adopting Character.AI and similar conversational agents in Romanian schools could significantly enhance oral English practice, helping students meet curriculum goals and overcome current limitations. It exemplifies a modern, learner-centred approach: students actively engaging in communication, learning by doing, and using technology in meaningful ways.

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