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EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF CHATBOT-MEDIATED PREPARATION TASKS ON VIRTUAL EXCHANGES

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	This study investigates whether AI chatbot–mediated pre-task practice can support university students' preparation for synchronous virtual exchanges and reduce foreign language anxiety (FLA), a persistent barrier to participation in online intercultural communication.
Background	While virtual exchanges provide authentic opportunities for global interaction, many learners experience anxiety that limits engagement and willingness to communicate. Despite growing interest in AI-supported language learning, little research has examined chatbot use specifically as a structured pre-exchange preparation tool for reducing FLA and enhancing communicative readiness.
Methodology	A mixed-methods design was employed to examine students' experiences with chatbot-mediated preparation embedded within a structured virtual exchange program. A total of 148 university students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds participated in five cycles of chatbot practice using the *Eduling* mobile application, followed by Zoom-based intercultural exchanges. Quantitative

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	survey data measured perceived enjoyment, confidence, anxiety, and willingness to communicate, while qualitative thematic analysis of open-ended responses provided insight into perceived benefits and limitations.
Contribution	This study contributes to research on AI-supported language learning by conceptualizing chatbot-mediated pre-task practice as an affective and communicative scaffold within virtual exchange design, extending prior work beyond classroom-based chatbot use to synchronous intercultural interaction contexts.
Findings	Quantitative results indicated that students reported moderate to strong agreement that chatbot practice increased confidence (M = 4.32), reduced anxiety (M = 4.36), increased willingness to communicate (M = 4.28), and reduced concern about making mistakes (M = 4.28) during subsequent Zoom exchanges. Qualitative findings revealed that students perceived the chatbot as a low-pressure, accessible environment that supported free expression, feedback, and topic familiarity, contributing to greater communicative readiness. At the same time, participants identified limitations in technical performance, limited conversational depth, and a need for more personalized and interactive features.
Recommendations for Practitioners	Educators designing virtual exchanges may benefit from integrating structured chatbot-based rehearsal tasks aligned with exchange topics to support emotional readiness and participation. Attention to task design, platform usability, and learner support is essential for maximizing effectiveness.
Recommendations for Researchers	Future research should examine how chatbot-mediated preparation impacts different learner groups and incorporate behavioral and performance-based measures to complement self-reported data, particularly across varying proficiency and digital literacy levels.
Impact on Society	As digital and intercultural communication become central to education, scalable tools that reduce anxiety and support participation can expand access to global learning opportunities.
Future Research	Longitudinal and comparative studies are needed to assess the durability of affective and communicative gains and to explore how different chatbot designs influence learning outcomes over time.

Keywords	virtual exchange, foreign language anxiety, chatbot-mediated learning, AI-supported language learning, willingness to communicate, intercultural communication

INTRODUCTION

Virtual Exchange (VE) has become an increasingly prominent feature of higher education as institutions seek to promote internationalization and digital collaboration (Sabzalieva et al., 2022). In this study, virtual exchange (VE) is defined as a structured, synchronous intercultural interaction conducted via Zoom between partner classes, in which students engage in small-group discussions across multiple sessions. These exchanges are designed to foster linguistic, intercultural, and communicative competencies through real-time interaction with international peers.

Alongside VE, this study focuses on the use of AI-driven educational chatbots, defined here as mobile-based conversational systems that generate prompts, simulate dialogue, and provide opportunities for repeated language practice. More specifically, Chatbot-mediated preparation tasks are defined as guided, speech-based rehearsal activities completed individually using the *Eduling* mobile application prior to live exchange sessions, where learners respond to prompts, practice extended speech,

and receive automated feedback. These tasks function as pre-task scaffolding designed to support both linguistic preparation and emotional readiness before real-time interaction.

Despite the pedagogical value of VEs, they frequently generate anxiety, particularly during live interactions with unfamiliar interlocutors. Learners often experience apprehension related to pronunciation, performance, and intercultural communication (Martinsen & Thompson, 2024; Schug & Simon, 2023). Such anxiety can reduce participation, as students who feel nervous or self-conscious may limit their contributions or disengage entirely (Rahmani et al., 2023). These challenges are especially pronounced in synchronous online environments, where communication occurs in real time and is often perceived as evaluative.

These experiences align with the construct of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), defined by M. B. Horwitz et al. (1991, p. 31) as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process." FLA reflects the tension between learners' desire to communicate effectively and their fear of negative evaluation. It is both anticipatory and physiological, characterized by heightened self-awareness and concern about performance (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2022; Spielberger, 1983). Within VE contexts, such anxiety can reduce enjoyment and willingness to communicate, and a negative effect has been shown to directly limit behavioral engagement (Halverson & Graham, 2019).

The causes of FLA are multifaceted, involving interactions between individual, instructional, and social factors. Learners' fear of mistakes, low self-confidence, and sensitivity to evaluation (Dewaele et al., 2008; Dörnyei, 2005; E. K. Horwitz, 2000; Kitano, 2001) intersect with instructional practices such as corrective feedback (Aydin, 2016; Kruk, 2018; R. Zhang & Zhong, 2012), task design (De Andrés & Arnold, 2009; E. K. Horwitz et al., 1986; Young, 1991), and group dynamics (Allwright et al., 1991; Gregersen, 2003; Liao & Liang, 2021; Stroud, 2017). In virtual exchanges, these factors are intensified by real-time interaction, intercultural diversity, and technological mediation. As MacIntyre (2017) notes, sustained anxiety can have long-term academic, cognitive, and social consequences, reinforcing avoidance behaviors and reducing communicative confidence.

Given these challenges, there is a clear need for pedagogical approaches that prepare learners both linguistically and emotionally before engaging in live virtual exchanges. One emerging approach involves the use of AI-driven chatbots as pre-task scaffolding tools. Chatbots provide learners with low-stakes, self-paced opportunities to rehearse language, repeat responses, and engage with topic-specific content without the pressure of real-time human interaction (Jeon, 2022; Kang & Sung, 2024; Okonkwo & Ade-Ibijola, 2021).

Existing research suggests that chatbot-based practice can reduce anxiety, increase confidence, and improve readiness for communicative tasks (Belda-Medina & Calvo-Ferrer, 2022; Deng & Yu, 2023). Learners report lower anxiety when interacting with chatbots compared to human interlocutors (Wang et al., 2024), along with increased enjoyment and speaking gains when chatbots are integrated into communicative activities (Wu et al., 2025). Additional benefits include enhanced autonomy (Yuan & Lyu, 2024), greater willingness to communicate (D. Zhang et al., 2024), and improvements in vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation (Al Ghaithi & Behforouz, 2025; Khalil et al., 2025). However, challenges such as technical issues and unreliable feedback remain (Bozkurt et al., 2023; Duong & Chen, 2025; Polakova & Klimova, 2024).

Despite these advances, a critical gap remains. Prior studies have demonstrated that chatbots can reduce anxiety and improve speaking confidence in controlled or classroom-based contexts (e.g. Çakmak, 2022; Huang et al., 2022; Susoy, 2025). Similarly, research on virtual exchange has highlighted the role of anxiety in limiting participation during synchronous intercultural interaction (Dooly & Vinagre, 2021; Martinsen & Thompson, 2024). However, these two strands of research remain largely disconnected. Existing chatbot studies focus primarily on within-platform outcomes such as practice performance and self-reported comfort, while VE research focuses on real-time interaction outcomes without structured AI-mediated preparation.

As noted in recent reviews, there is limited empirical evidence examining whether affective benefits gained through chatbot interaction transfer to real-time communicative contexts (Huang et al., 2022; Şahin Kızıl et al., 2025). Therefore, it remains unclear whether reduced anxiety and increased confidence observed in chatbot environments translate into improved participation in synchronous virtual exchanges.

To address this gap, the present study examines university students' experiences with chatbot-based pre-task practice before participating in multi-session Zoom-based virtual exchanges. It focuses on both affective outcomes (anxiety, confidence, enjoyment) and behavioral readiness (willingness to communicate) in subsequent interactions.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. How do university students perceive the impact of pre-task chatbot practice on their anxiety, confidence, enjoyment, and willingness to communicate during subsequent virtual exchanges?

RQ2. Which features of chatbot-mediated pre-task practice do students find most beneficial for preparing for virtual exchanges?

RQ3. What improvements do students suggest for integrating chatbot-based preparation into virtual exchange contexts?

LITERATURE REVIEW

FOREIGN LANGUAGE ANXIETY (FLA)

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) has long been recognized as a central affective factor influencing second language learning. M. B. Horwitz et al. (1991, p. 31) define it as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process." Rather than a singular emotional response, FLA represents an interaction of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions shaped by the specific demands of language use. From a psychological perspective, it is characterized by tension, apprehension, and physiological arousal linked to anticipated performance outcomes (E. K. Horwitz et al., 1986; Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2022; Spielberger, 1983).

Research has consistently shown that FLA emerges from multiple interacting sources. At the individual level, learners' fear of making mistakes, sensitivity to evaluation, and low self-confidence contribute to heightened anxiety (Dewaele et al., 2008; Dörnyei, 2005; E. K. Horwitz, 2000; Kitano, 2001). Instructional practices also play a role, as feedback styles and classroom expectations can either mitigate or intensify anxiety (Aydin, 2016; Kruk, 2018; R. Zhang & Zhong, 2012). In addition, task design and classroom structure influence emotional responses: poorly scaffolded tasks, competitive environments, and insufficient preparation tend to increase anxiety levels (Allwright et al., 1991; De Andrés & Arnold, 2009; Gregersen, 2003; E. K. Horwitz et al., 1986; Liao & Liang, 2021; Stroud, 2017; Young, 1991). Taken together, these findings suggest that FLA is not solely an individual trait but a context-dependent phenomenon shaped by the interaction of learner characteristics, pedagogy, and social environment.

The effects of FLA are substantial. MacIntyre (2017) highlights its academic, cognitive, and social consequences, including reduced performance, impaired language processing, and avoidance of communication. This avoidance is particularly problematic in communicative approaches to language learning, where participation is essential. These dynamics become even more complex in technology-mediated environments such as virtual exchange.

FLA in Virtual Exchange (VE) Contexts

Virtual exchange introduces new opportunities for authentic communication while also amplifying the conditions under which FLA develops. As online collaboration becomes more widespread (Sabzalieva et al., 2022), learners are increasingly required to communicate in real time with geographically and culturally diverse peers. While this enhances authenticity, it also intensifies performance pressure.

In VE contexts, anxiety often manifests through concerns about clarity, accuracy, and social evaluation during synchronous interaction (Martinsen & Thompson, 2024; Schug & Simon, 2023). The visibility and immediacy of video-based communication can heighten self-awareness, making errors more salient and potentially more consequential. Learners may become overly focused on monitoring their language use, which can inhibit fluency and participation.

Intercultural dynamics further complicate this experience. Differences in communication styles, cultural expectations, and language proficiency can create uncertainty and increase fear of negative evaluation (O'Dowd, 2025; Pichette, 2009). As a result, learners with lower confidence may withdraw from interaction, limiting the benefits of the exchange. This aligns with findings that negative emotional states reduce behavioral engagement, particularly in collaborative online environments (Halverson & Graham, 2019; Rahmani et al., 2023).

Technological and cognitive demands also contribute to anxiety. Managing multiple tools while processing a second language can create cognitive overload, increasing stress and reducing performance (Nissen et al., 2025; Zhao, 2022). Moreover, task modality plays a critical role: synchronous interactions tend to produce higher anxiety than asynchronous ones due to the lack of planning time (Dooly & Vinagre, 2021). These findings highlight the importance of structured preparation prior to live exchanges. Pre-task scaffolding, including opportunities for rehearsal, has been recommended as a way to reduce anxiety and support participation (Fondo & Jacobetty, 2020). This need for effective pre-task support has led researchers to explore AI-mediated solutions, including chatbots.

Chatbot-Mediated Pre-Task Practices

AI-driven chatbots have gained attention as tools for supporting language learning through flexible, interactive practice. Their primary affordance lies in providing low-pressure, repeatable, and self-paced interaction, which directly addresses several sources of FLA. By allowing learners to rehearse language without fear of social judgment, chatbots create a practice environment that encourages experimentation and risk-taking (Jeon, 2022; Kang & Sung, 2024; Okonkwo & Ade-Ibijola, 2021).

Research on chatbot use highlights three key areas of benefit. First, *linguistic development:* studies show improvements in vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation through repeated interaction and feedback (Al Ghaithi & Behforouz, 2025; An, 2025; Khalil et al., 2025; Waziana et al., 2024). Second, *affective outcomes:* chatbot use has been associated with reduced anxiety, increased enjoyment, and greater confidence in speaking (Belda-Medina & Calvo-Ferrer, 2022; Chen, 2024; Deng & Yu, 2023; Wang et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2025; Yuan & Lyu, 2024). Third, *interactional affordances:* features such as immediate feedback, conversational simulation, and autonomy support can enhance learners' willingness to communicate (Godwin-Jones, 2023; Hsu et al., 2023; Kim, 2024; Lin & Mubarok, 2021; Yang et al., 2022; D. Zhang et al., 2024).

Importantly, some studies suggest that chatbot practice can have transferable effects, improving learners' ability to organize ideas and participate more effectively in subsequent communicative tasks (Lin & Mubarok, 2021). This indicates potential for chatbot use beyond isolated practice, particularly as preparation for more complex interactions.

However, the literature also identifies limitations. Technical issues can disrupt engagement and increase frustration (Duong & Chen, 2025; Polakova & Klimova, 2024), while inaccurate or misleading feedback may hinder learning if not carefully monitored (Bozkurt et al., 2023). These concerns highlight the importance of structured implementation and pedagogical integration.

Taken together, existing research demonstrates that chatbots can reduce anxiety and support language development, while studies on VE show that learners often struggle with anxiety in real-time intercultural communication. However, these two strands of research remain largely disconnected. There is limited empirical work examining how chatbot-mediated pre-task practice can serve as a bridge between preparation and performance in virtual exchange contexts, particularly regarding the transfer of affective and behavioral outcomes.

This study addresses this gap by investigating chatbot-based preparation as a structured pre-task intervention within synchronous, Zoom-based virtual exchanges. By focusing on learners' perceptions of anxiety, confidence, enjoyment, and willingness to communicate, it aims to clarify how AI-mediated preparation can support both emotional readiness and active participation in authentic intercultural communication.

Taken together, the literature reveals a clear division: studies such as Belda-Medina and Calvo-Ferrer (2022) and Deng and Yu (2023) emphasize anxiety reduction and affective benefits of chatbot interaction, while research on virtual exchange (e.g., Dooly & Vinagre, 2021; O'Dowd, 2025) focuses on participation challenges in real-time intercultural communication. However, no studies to date have directly examined whether these affective benefits transfer from chatbot-based rehearsal to live synchronous interaction, highlighting a critical gap addressed in the present study.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to examine students' perceptions of chatbot-mediated preparation and its influence on participation in virtual exchanges. Quantitative data were collected through Likert-scale survey items to identify general trends in students' reported anxiety, confidence, enjoyment, and willingness to communicate. Qualitative data from open-ended responses were used to provide deeper insight into students' experiences and to explain how and why chatbot-based preparation influenced their participation. Together, these approaches enabled a more comprehensive understanding of both the outcomes and underlying processes associated with the intervention.

PROCEDURE

The project was conducted over a three-month period from September to December 2025 (shown in Figure 1) and followed a structured sequence of registration, chatbot-based preparation, and live Zoom exchanges. Students first received guidance on using the chatbot application and the Zoom platform. Each topic cycle consisted of a week-long chatbot practice phase followed by a one-hour Zoom exchange.

Five thematic cycles were implemented: Self-Introduction, My Hobbies, Food, My Neighborhood, and My Dream. Across the project, students completed a total of 20 chatbot-based preparatory tasks (four tasks per topic), each requiring approximately 5–10 minutes. This structure was designed to provide repeated, low-pressure opportunities for learners to rehearse language and build familiarity with discussion topics prior to live interaction.

After completing the final exchange, students were invited to complete a post-project survey. The overall design aimed to scaffold both linguistic and emotional readiness, supporting students before engaging in synchronous, intercultural communication.

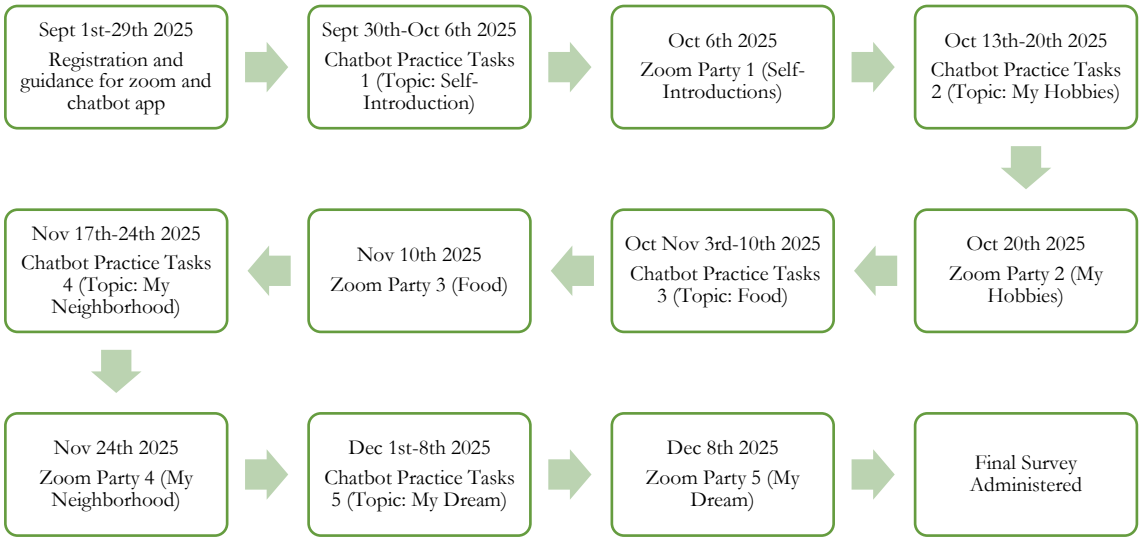

Figure 1. Project procedure

PARTICIPANTS

A total of 148 undergraduate university students (119 female and 29 male) participated in the project during their regular class time under the supervision of one of the six researchers. Participants were recruited through their existing university courses, and thus the sample represents a convenience, course-based sample rather than a randomly selected group. Participation in the activities formed part of normal instructional practice, while completion of the survey was voluntary.

Students were based in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Japan, Uzbekistan, South Korea, Nepal, and the Philippines. They ranged in age from 18 to 26 years old (mean = 20.2 years), and their English proficiency levels varied from low to advanced, based on recent TOEIC, TOEFL, or IELTS scores submitted during the registration phase.

Table 1 summarizes participants' countries of residence and nationalities. While 148 participants were enrolled in the project, they represented a broader range of nationalities than countries of residence, as some students were studying abroad. This distinction is reflected in the table to provide a more accurate representation of the sample's diversity.

Table 1. Project participant information

Country	Residence	Nationality
Japan	50	46
Bosnia and Herzegovina	31	31
Uzbekistan	30	30
South Korea	25	15
Philippines	6	6
Nepal	6	6
France	0	5
Kazakhstan	0	3
Vietnam	0	2

Country	Residence	Nationality
China	0	2
Taiwan	0	1
Netherlands	0	1
Total	148	148

Chatbot Practice Procedure

The chatbot intervention was implemented using the *Eduling* (www.eduling.ai) mobile application, an AI-driven conversational tool designed to support language learning through structured interaction. The system generated topic-specific prompts, simulated conversational exchanges, and required learners to produce multiple responses, promoting active language use and repetition.

The chatbot practices (see Figure 2 and Appendix A) provided structured opportunities for students to organize ideas, rehearse language, and prepare for virtual exchanges. For each topic, students completed four preparatory tasks during the week preceding the Zoom session. Each task took approximately 5–10 minutes and required ten responses to chatbot-generated prompts. Tasks could be completed flexibly at any time during the week.

The fourth task required students to deliver a one- to two-minute spoken response on the assigned topic, serving as a rehearsal activity to consolidate ideas and practice extended speech prior to live interaction. Across five topic cycles (Appendix A), students completed 20 chatbot sessions (four per topic), each lasting 5–10 minutes, resulting in a total estimated engagement time of 100–200 minutes per participant.

The chatbot generated various prompt-based interactions, including question–answer exchanges (e.g., "What do you usually do in your free time?"), guessing games, and short speech tasks. It utilized generative AI architecture, enabling dynamic responses rather than rule-based outputs. Feedback was provided implicitly through follow-up prompts and model responses rather than numerical scoring, encouraging self-correction and repeated practice.

This design aligned with the communicative demands of subsequent Zoom exchanges by offering structured, low-stakes rehearsal that supported both linguistic preparation and anxiety reduction. To protect student privacy, all screenshots in this study were generated from a conversation between the first author and the chatbot rather than from student interactions.

Virtual Exchange Procedure

Figure 3 illustrates the structure of the one-hour Zoom exchanges. At the beginning of each session, students were welcomed, and the topic and schedule were introduced by the host. Breakout rooms of three to four participants were formed by randomly assigning students from different countries to encourage intercultural interaction.

Each breakout room included either a designated student leader, selected in advance and trained to facilitate turn-taking and encourage participation, or a teacher involved in the project. This structure was intended to support interaction and reduce communicative anxiety during the initial phase of discussion.

For the first 30 minutes, students discussed the assigned topic within their breakout rooms under guided facilitation. After this period, groups were re-assigned to allow students to interact with new peers, increasing exposure to diverse interlocutors. The second 20-minute discussion followed the same topical focus but was conducted without designated leadership, allowing observation of whether students could sustain interaction more independently. At the conclusion of each exchange, the host thanked participants and reminded them of the preparatory chatbot tasks for the next session.

Figure 2. Chatbot practice screenshots example

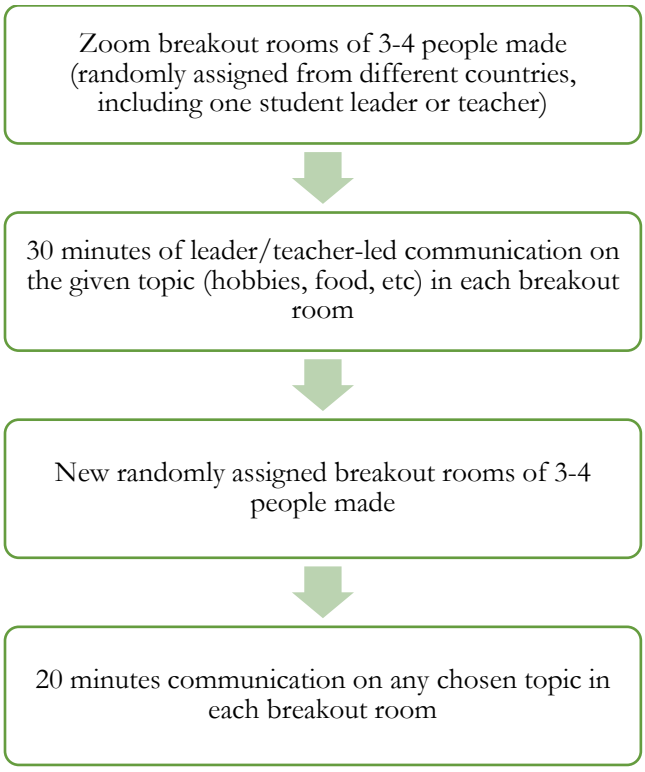

Figure 3. One-hour zoom party procedure

Survey Design and Administration

A post-project survey was administered to examine students' perceptions of the chatbot practices and their influence on participation in the virtual exchanges. As part of a mixed-methods approach, the survey combined quantitative and qualitative data.

The survey consisted of four parts (see Appendix B). The first collected demographic information. The second measured perceived effects on enjoyment, anxiety, confidence, and willingness to communicate using four items per construct on a six-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree). The six-point scale was selected to eliminate a neutral midpoint and encourage more decisive responses.

Items were developed for this study, drawing on established constructs in foreign language anxiety and willingness-to-communicate research (E. K. Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre, 2017) and adapted to the virtual exchange context. Internal consistency reliability was acceptable (Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$), and content validity was established through expert review by two researchers in applied linguistics and educational technology.

The third section included open-ended questions on how the chatbot practices influenced preparation and participation, while the fourth invited suggestions for improving chatbot integration in future exchanges.

The survey was administered online via Google Forms immediately after the final session. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and completion required approximately 10 minutes.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the Likert-scale items were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Mean and standard deviation values were calculated for all 148 responses (shown in Table 2) to provide an overview of general trends in students' perceptions.

Qualitative data from open-ended responses were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2021). Responses were first reviewed and translated into English with the assistance of AI where necessary. The analysis then proceeded through stages of familiarization, initial coding, theme development, and refinement.

Responses from the third part of the survey were used to identify perceived impacts on enjoyment, anxiety, confidence, and willingness to communicate, while responses from the fourth part informed suggested improvements to chatbot use. Coding was conducted using QualCoder software, and themes were reviewed collaboratively. Qualitative coding was conducted by two independent coders, with the unit of analysis defined as individual student responses to open-ended survey questions. Intercoder reliability was calculated using percent agreement, resulting in a final agreement rate of 95%. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus.

RESULTS

RQ1: Overall Perceptions of the Impact of Chatbot Practices on VEs

Table 2 presents the quantitative results for students' perceptions of how chatbot practices influenced their affective and communicative experiences during the virtual exchanges. Students rated four items on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 6 = Strongly Agree), with mean scores ranging from 4.28 to 4.36. The reported impact is also visualized in Figure 4.

The highest mean score was observed for the item "The chatbot helped me feel more relaxed about speaking English on Zoom" (M = 4.36, SD = 1.18), indicating that students generally perceived a reduction in anxiety. Similarly, students reported positive perceptions for increased confidence (M = 4.32, SD = 1.21), greater willingness to communicate (M = 4.28, SD = 1.19), and reduced worry about making mistakes (M = 4.28, SD = 1.21).

Overall, the results in Table 2 show a consistent pattern of moderate to strong agreement across all four affective variables, indicating that students perceived chatbot-based preparation as positively influencing their emotional readiness and participation in subsequent Zoom-based virtual exchanges.

Table 2. Reported impact of chatbot practices on FLE, FLA, confidence, and WTC for VEs

Survey item	Mean	SD
The chatbot helped me feel MORE CONFIDENT speaking English on Zoom.	4.32	1.21
The chatbot helped me feel MORE RELAXED about speaking English on Zoom.	4.36	1.18
The chatbot helped me to WANT TO SPEAK MORE in English on Zoom.	4.28	1.19
The chatbot helped me WORRY LESS ABOUT MISTAKES in English when I spoke on Zoom.	4.28	1.21

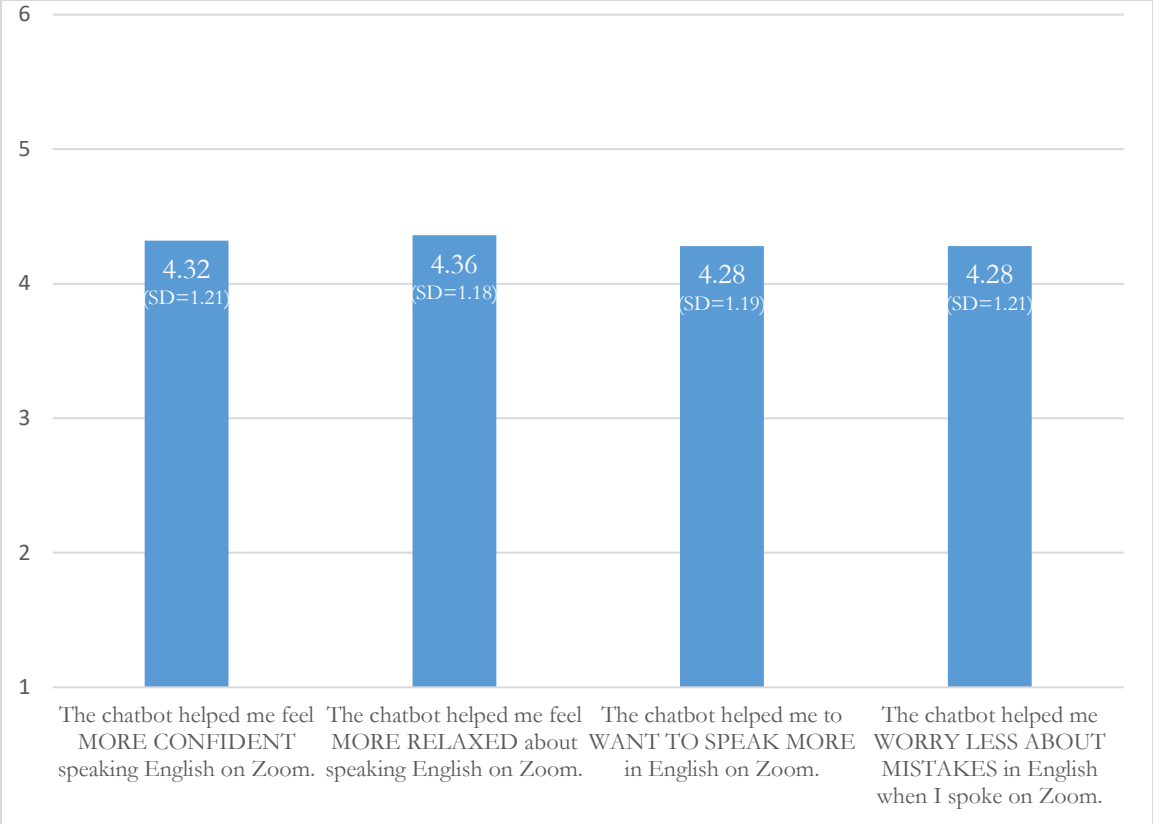

Figure 4. Mean scores for perceived impact of chatbot-mediated preparation
(1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree)

RQ2: Specific Benefits of Chatbot Practices for VEs

Table 3 summarizes the results of the thematic analysis of open-ended responses related to the perceived benefits of chatbot use. Ten themes were identified, representing different dimensions of students' experiences.

The most frequently reported themes were Increased Confidence & Reduced Anxiety (n = 68) and Ease of Use & Accessibility (n = 54), indicating that students commonly viewed the chatbot as both emotionally supportive and practically convenient. Other prominent themes included Opportunity for Free Expression (n = 47) and Feedback and Error Correction (n = 41), suggesting that learners valued the ability to practice without judgment while receiving guidance.

Additional themes such as Enjoyable and Engaging Activities (n = 38), Topic Variety and Cultural Learning (n = 36), and Improvement in Speaking Fluency and Pronunciation (n = 34) highlight the perceived motivational and linguistic benefits of the chatbot. Less frequent but still notable themes included Preparation for Real Conversations (n = 29), Interactive and Human-like Conversations (n = 27), and Increased Motivation to Speak (n = 24).

Overall, Table 3 shows that students identified a range of affective, cognitive, and interactional benefits associated with chatbot-based preparation for virtual exchanges.

Table 3. Reported positive effects of chatbot practices for VEs

Theme	Responses	Example 1	Example 2	Example 3
1. Increased Confidence & Reduced Anxiety	68	*"It made me feel more confident and less stressed because I could practice speaking and learn how to express myself better before the Zoom meetings."*	*"The chatbot helped boost my confidence and eased my stress during English sessions."*	*"I felt prepared and calm when speaking in front of others after practicing with it."*
2. Ease of Use & Accessibility (Anytime, Anywhere Practice)	54	*"I enjoyed that the chatbot was always available, answered quickly, and made practicing English easy and comfortable."*	*"I can use it every time without any limits, and this app could give me an opportunity to speak a lot."*	*"It's easy to use and not time-consuming."*
3. Opportunity for Free Expression & Safe Practice Environment	47	*"I liked that I could freely express myself."*	*"It was great to speak without judgment and just practice naturally."*	*"I could make mistakes without fear because it's not a real person."*
4. Feedback and Error Correction for Learning	41	*"It gives back good feedback and suggestions."*	*"This chatbot helped correct my grammar and pronunciation instantly."*	*"It didn't criticize, conversely helped me to correct mistakes."*
5. Enjoyable and Engaging Activities (Games, Quizzes, Fun Tasks)	38	*"I enjoyed interesting games and questions while doing the exercises."*	*"Word guessing games were really fun."*	*"The missions and quiz format made it more interesting to do."*
6. Topic Variety & Cultural Learning	36	*"I liked being able to talk on diverse topics."*	*"I learned about different cultures and traditions I didn't know before."*	*"It helped me speak about many kinds of topics like hobbies and food."*
7. Improvement in Speaking Fluency & Pronunciation	34	*"I enjoyed speaking practice because it improved my pronunciation."*	*"The chatbot helped me speak more fluently and naturally."*	*"It was like talking to native English people, and this is the most enjoyable."*
8. Preparation for Real Conversations/Zoom Sessions	29	*"It helped me prepare for the Zoom party and know what to talk about."*	*"I could practice for topics we would discuss in class."*	*"It's kind of preparation for me before Zoom."*
9. Fun, Interactive & Human-like Conversations	27	*"It was really fun and interactive, like talking to a friend."*	*"I liked how natural the conversations felt."*	*"It felt like a genuine conversation partner."*
10. Motivation to Speak More & Increased Participation	24	*"The chatbot motivated me to speak more on Zoom."*	*"It made me realize that speaking English is not about being perfect but about communicating."*	*"After using it, I wanted to share more about myself during the Zoom sessions."*

RQ3: Suggested Improvements to Chatbot Practices for VEs

Table 4 presents the results of the thematic analysis of students' suggestions for improving chatbot-based preparation. Ten themes were identified, reflecting areas where students felt the experience

could be enhanced. The most frequently mentioned themes were Speed and Technical Performance (n = 29) and Interactive, Game-Based Features (n = 26), indicating that technical reliability and engagement were key concerns. Other common suggestions included More Cultural Content and Real-Life Topics (n = 23) and Personalized Feedback or Error Correction (n = 21), highlighting the importance of relevance and adaptive support. Further themes included Personalization and Level Adjustment (n = 18), Increased Speaking Practice and Conversation Depth (n = 17), and Improved Clarity and Ease of Use (n = 11). Less frequent suggestions addressed Preparation Time, Natural Conversation Flow, and Listening Features.

Overall, Table 4 indicates that while students reported generally positive experiences, they also identified specific areas for improvement related to technical performance, interactivity, and personalization.

Table 4. Suggested improvements to chatbot practices prior to VEs

Theme	Responses	Example 1	Example 2	Example 3
1. Improve Speed, Loading, and Technical Performance	29	*"It's really slow, and it wastes a lot of my time."*	*"As far as I saw, the bot was taking quite some time to give me tasks."*	*"Sometimes it is slow even when the internet connection is fine, so I hope something can be done about this."*
2. Add More Interactive, Fun, or Game-Based Activities	26	*"Maybe include more games and more pictures to talk about and compare."*	*"I recommend making the chatbot more engaging by adding games or activities focused on cultural topics."*	*"I suggest that the chatbot should have more games!"*
3. Include More Cultural Content and Real-Life Topics	23	*"It would be great if the chatbot included more interactive speaking activities and cultural examples."*	*"I think the chatbot is very good, but maybe it could ask more culture questions and give short videos or pictures."*	*"Add more fun cultural facts and stories."*
4. Add Personalized Feedback and Error Correction (Grammar, Pronunciation, Listening)	21	*"Maybe it can correct our grammar errors."*	*"It would be great if the chatbot could give short pronunciation feedback or speaking tips."*	*"It would be better if the chatbot sometimes pointed out grammatical errors so we can learn."*
5. Offer Personalization and Level Adjustment (Different Difficulty Levels or Tailored Tasks)	18	*"Tasks are interesting for lower English speakers, maybe you should add options to choose your English proficiency level."*	*"I hope it can be more personalized — customized responses based on my answers."*	*"Let us choose different conversation levels or themes depending on our English level and interests."*
6. Increase Speaking Practice and Conversation Depth	17	*"The chatbot could give more opportunities to practice speaking naturally, like through short dialogues or role plays."*	*"Speaking more, not just typing answers."*	*"Questions that can be built on more."*

Theme	Responses	Example 1	Example 2	Example 3
7. Add More Preparation or Reflection Time Before Speaking	12	*"I think it could have a prepare time for the 2-minute question. For about 40 seconds."*	*"Give us some more time."*	*"More time should be added before we answer."*
8. Improve Clarity and Ease of Use (Instructions, Interface, Accessibility)	11	*"Firstly, I had some issues starting the app because the explanations are not quite clear."*	*"It's not easy to understand how to play the game."*	*"Introduce how it works, how we can talk with foreigners — just a small introduction."*
9. Encourage More Natural Conversations and Follow-up Questions	10	*"Maybe the chatbot could focus more on follow-up questions to make the conversation feel like a real discussion."*	*"People should ask more questions!"*	*"Continue to develop questions and responses to feel more authentic."*
10. Add Listening-Focused Practice or Features	8	*"It should improve listening skill."*	*"Add some lessons focused on listening comprehension."*	*"It would be effective if there were more listening parts."*

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study investigated the role of chatbot-mediated pre-task practice in supporting university students' participation in synchronous virtual exchanges, with a particular focus on foreign language anxiety (FLA), confidence, enjoyment, and willingness to communicate. The findings across all three research questions provide consistent evidence that chatbot use contributes positively to both affective and communicative aspects of language learning in this context.

With respect to RQ1, the quantitative results indicate that students generally perceived improvements across all measured affective variables. Participants reported feeling more relaxed, more confident, more willing to communicate, and less worried about making mistakes when engaging in Zoom-based exchanges. These findings confirm previous research demonstrating that chatbot-based practice can reduce anxiety and enhance communicative confidence (Belda-Medina & Calvo-Ferrer, 2022; Deng & Yu, 2023; Wu et al., 2025). More specifically, the results suggest that chatbot-mediated preparation functions as a form of affective scaffolding, helping learners regulate anticipatory anxiety before participating in real-time interaction.

The qualitative findings from RQ2 deepen this interpretation by illustrating how students experienced these benefits. Frequently reported themes such as increased confidence, reduced anxiety, and opportunities for free expression indicate that the chatbot created a psychologically safe, low-pressure environment. This supports theoretical perspectives emphasizing the importance of emotional comfort in language learning (E. K. Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre, 2017). At the same time, themes related to feedback, fluency development, and topic familiarity suggest that the chatbot also contributed to cognitive and linguistic preparation, reinforcing the idea that effective language learning tools must address both emotional and skill-based dimensions.

Importantly, this study extends prior research by situating chatbot use within a virtual exchange context, where communicative pressure is often heightened due to real-time interaction with unfamiliar international peers. While previous studies have demonstrated the benefits of chatbot use in classroom settings, the present findings suggest that these benefits transfer to synchronous, intercultural

communication environments. This positions chatbot-mediated practice as a bridge between preparation and performance, supporting learners as they transition into more demanding communicative situations.

In addition, the findings demonstrate a transfer effect between learning environments. While previous studies have shown that chatbot interaction reduces anxiety in isolated practice contexts (Deng & Yu, 2023; Huang et al., 2022), and VE research has documented anxiety as a barrier to participation (Dooly & Vinagre, 2021), this study provides evidence that affective gains achieved through chatbot-mediated rehearsal can carry over into real-time interaction. This supports the conceptualization of chatbot use as a bridging mechanism between preparation and performance, rather than a standalone practice tool.

The findings from RQ3 provide a more critical perspective by identifying areas for improvement. Students emphasized the importance of technical reliability, interactive features, and personalized feedback, indicating that the effectiveness of chatbot-based learning depends heavily on design quality. Requests for more natural conversation, follow-up questions, and listening-based activities suggest that learners expect increasingly adaptive and human-like interaction. These observations align with existing concerns about the limitations of current chatbot systems and the need for pedagogically guided implementation (Bozkurt et al., 2023; Duong & Chen, 2025).

Taken together, the findings suggest that chatbot-mediated pre-task practice offers meaningful benefits for reducing foreign language anxiety and enhancing communicative readiness, while also highlighting the importance of thoughtful integration and system design.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the growing literature on AI-supported language learning by demonstrating that chatbot use can function not only as a linguistic practice tool but also as an affective support mechanism in high-pressure communicative contexts. It emphasizes the importance of addressing emotional factors alongside cognitive skill development in technology-mediated environments.

In conclusion, chatbot-mediated pre-task practice represents a promising approach for preparing learners for synchronous virtual exchanges by supporting both emotional regulation and communicative readiness, while also pointing to the need for continued refinement of AI-supported language learning tools.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study offer several important pedagogical, technological, and research implications for the design and implementation of chatbot-assisted pre-task practice in Virtual Exchange (VE) contexts. Rather than reiterating the benefits identified earlier, this section focuses on how those findings can inform practice and development.

From a pedagogical standpoint, the results emphasize the value of structured pre-exchange scaffolding through chatbot interaction. Chatbot-based tasks can be integrated as preparatory activities aligned with VE themes, allowing learners to rehearse key ideas and language before live sessions. Such preparation may help reduce anticipatory anxiety and support more active participation during synchronous interaction.

The study also highlights the importance of adaptive and personalized learning design. Students' suggestions for adjustable difficulty levels and individualized feedback indicate a need for systems that respond to varying proficiency levels and learning needs. Incorporating adaptive features such as tailored prompts or feedback may help sustain engagement and ensure that chatbot practice remains relevant and appropriately challenging.

Technological considerations are equally important. Students' feedback regarding response speed and interactivity underscores the need for reliable, user-friendly systems. Enhancing chatbot functionality

through more dynamic interaction, clearer interfaces, and varied task formats may improve both usability and learning outcomes. Additionally, incorporating culturally relevant topics and authentic communicative scenarios may strengthen the connection between chatbot practice and real-world interaction.

Overall, the implications suggest that chatbot-mediated preparation can be a valuable component of virtual exchange design when supported by careful pedagogical planning and robust technological implementation. classrooms.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings and identifying directions for future research.

First, the participant cohort included students from diverse linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds with varying levels of English proficiency. While this diversity reflects authentic virtual exchange contexts, it also makes it difficult to determine how chatbot practice may differentially affect specific learner groups. Future research could incorporate subgroup analyses or more targeted sampling strategies to examine how proficiency level or background variables influence outcomes.

Second, the international nature of the sample introduced variability in contextual factors such as internet access, familiarity with AI tools, and prior virtual exchange experience. These factors may have influenced both usability and perceptions of effectiveness. Future studies could explore these variables more systematically or include measures of digital readiness to better account for their impact.

Third, the study relied primarily on self-reported survey data and open-ended responses. While these provide valuable insights into learners' perceptions, they may not fully reflect actual changes in communicative behavior. Future research could triangulate self-reported data with performance-based measures such as participation frequency, fluency, or interaction patterns during virtual exchanges.

Finally, the study focused on short-term outcomes following chatbot use. The longer-term effects of chatbot-mediated preparation on language development and emotional resilience remain unclear. Longitudinal and comparative studies would be particularly valuable in examining how sustained use of chatbots influences both affective and linguistic outcomes over time.

Despite these limitations, this study provides a foundation for further exploration of how chatbot-mediated practice can support learners in technology-mediated language learning environments.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: CHATBOT PRACTICE TASKS

Dates/focus	Task 1 (5-10m)	Task 2 (5-10m)	Task 3 (5-10m)	Task 4 (1-2m)
Sept 30th-Oct 6th 2025 Chatbot Practice Tasks 1 (Topic: Self-Introduction)	*Questions About You* - the student answers simple questions about their background.	*Two Truths and One Lie* - the chatbot guesses which statements are true or not about the student.	*Asking Questions to Someone New* - the student asks the chatbot questions to get to know a new friend.	*Talk about Yourself* - the student gives a one-minute speech to introduce themselves.
Oct 13th-20th 2025 Chatbot Practice Tasks 2 (Topic: My Hobbies)	*Talk About Your Hobbies* - the student describes their hobbies in short sentences.	*Asking Questions about Hobbies* - the student asks the chatbot acting as their conversation partner questions about their hobbies.	*Hobbies Guess Game* - the student guesses the hobby based on short descriptions and by asking questions.	*Talk about Your Hobbies* - the student gives a two-minute speech about their hobbies.
Oct-Nov 3rd-10th 2025 Chatbot Practice Tasks 3 (Topic: Food)	*Food Guessing Game* - the student asks questions to guess the food that the chatbot has chosen.	*Food Description Game* - the chatbot asks questions to guess the food that the student is describing.	*Food conversation* - the chatbot asks the student questions about their favorite food.	*Talk about Food* - the student gives a two-minute speech about their food preferences.
Nov 17th-24th 2025 Chatbot Practice Tasks 4 (Topic: My Neighborhood)	*Questions About Your Neighborhood* - the chatbot asks the student questions about their neighborhood.	*Neighborhood Word Game* - the chatbot tries to guess the city-related word based on the student's description.	*Compare the Cities* - the student compares two city pictures (Tokyo and Bihac).	*Talk about Your Neighborhood* - the student gives a two-minute speech about their neighborhood.
Dec 1st-8th 2025 Chatbot Practice Tasks 5 (Topic: My Dream)	*Talk about Your Dreams* - the chatbot asks simple questions about the student's future hopes and dreams.	*Asking Questions about Dreams* - the student asks the chatbot, acting as their conversation partner questions about their future hopes and dreams.	*Quotes about Dreams* - the student unscrambles sentences to guess the dream being described.	*Project Reflection* - the student gives a two-minute speech about their project experiences and future goals.

APPENDIX B: STUDENT SURVEY

Part 1. Please tell us a little about yourself:

My age

The country I live in

My nationality

My gender

Any English scores you have from tests (TOEIC, TOEFL, IELTS, etc)

Part 2. Please score the following statements from 1-6 for how true they are for you (1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Slightly Disagree, 4=Slightly Agree, 5=Agree, 6=Strongly Agree):

The chatbot helped me feel MORE CONFIDENT speaking English on Zoom.

The chatbot helped me feel MORE RELAXED about speaking English on Zoom.

The chatbot helped me to WANT TO SPEAK MORE in English on Zoom.

The chatbot helped me WORRY LESS ABOUT MISTAKES in English when I spoke on Zoom.

Part 3. Please answer the following questions (IN ANY LANGUAGE) with as much detail as you can:

What did you ENJOY MOST about using the chatbot to practice English?

Did the chatbot help you feel MORE CONFIDENT or LESS STRESSED when speaking English on Zoom? Why or why not?

Did the chatbot help you WANT TO SPEAK MORE on zoom? Why or why not?

Part 4. Please answer the following question (IN ANY LANGUAGE) with as much detail as you can:

What SUGGESTIONS do you have for improving the chatbot planning tasks to help make future virtual exchanges better?

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