

Meeting the Learner in their First Language: Metering an AI Conversation Partner for Low-Cost ESL at Scale

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Abstract

Learners across Southeast Asia routinely complete years of formal English instruction, reach intermediate reading proficiency, and still avoid speaking. The barrier reported most often is not vocabulary but the anxiety of the opening exchange. This paper describes the redesign of LearnEnglishAbc, an ESL platform serving 396 registered learners, around an AI conversation partner intended to remove that opening barrier. Two design decisions are examined: greeting each learner in their own first language before moving into English, and coupling a graded reading library of 161 titles spanning CEFR A1 to C1 to the conversation itself. The paper's principal contribution is the metering layer that makes such a system viable at a USD 3.99 monthly price. Because synchronous AI conversation incurs cost per second rather than per request, entitlement is expressed as conversation-seconds per plan period with top-up grants. We report four integrity constraints, each derived from a defect observed in production, alongside a failure in which a clock-skew-induced negative duration took the access gate offline for every user simultaneously. We close with what migrating off a compromised content management system cost in practice, and with what this platform still does not measure.

Keywords

Technology-enhanced learning, English as a second language, conversational AI, learner anxiety, extensive reading, usage metering, affordability.