Harnessing AI for Oral English Proficiency Enhancement in Non-native Tertiary Teachers

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Abstract

Tertiary teachers in Hong Kong as subject matter experts often receive training in pedagogical training but lack training in presentation skills, which are crucial for helping students understand complex and abstract concepts. This study examines the effectiveness of using AI speech-recognition and generative AI tools to enhance non-native teachers' oral English skills. Throughout a semester-long business course, the teacher reviewed the AI-generated transcripts after each lecture, focusing on four dimensions of oral skills, namely grammar, vocabulary, phonology and discourse, with weekly feedback from a generative AI tool. After tracking pronunciation for 13 weeks, the teacher's pronunciation accuracy improved, evidenced by a 25% reduction in the effective Word Error Rate (WER). The teacher also experienced a significant reduction in unnecessary repetitions and long pauses, indicating improvements in vocabulary and discourse skills. Moreover, the teacher demonstrated increased proficiency in adjusting speech rates based on the cognitive demands of the material, as evidenced by variations in words per minute (WPM) in later lectures. However, our results suggested that the teacher's grammar skills did not improve as much as in other dimensions. This research presents a practical, self-sufficient and embarrassment-free approach for university faculty members to independently improve their English delivery. Drawing on our experiences, this study also explores effective prompting techniques for AI tools in oral English proficiency enhancement and highlights the limitations of AI technologies encountered during the language development process.

Keywords: generative AI, speech recognition, oral English proficiency, non-native tertiary teachers

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Introduction

In certain technical subjects, tertiary teachers might have less willingness to improve their English proficiency (Dearden, 2014). This could potentially hinder language acquisition for tertiary teachers. On the other hand, some tertiary teachers often find themselves lacking sufficient vocabulary to explain abstract concepts (Fürstenberg et al., 2021). Since tertiary teachers, other than those who teach English, are employed as subject matter experts, they might not have gone through proper teacher education. In other words, there are no training standards (Dearden, 2014), nor is there life-long continuous development in their English delivery for educational purposes (Güngör, 2020). This could pose an even bigger challenge in Hong Kong, as Chinese learners are often less willing to seek help (Mok et al., 2008). In fact, the concern about the English proficiency of tertiary teachers also applies to Hong Kong (Dearden, 2014), as a place in the outer circle based on the prevalence of English in educational contexts (Gu & So, 2015), where many of the tertiary courses are taught in English by non-native-speaking teachers.

Meanwhile, artificial intelligence (AI) has reshaped the education sector in many aspects (Nidhom et al., 2022). In particular, generative AI, as indicated by its name, is designed to generate human-like language responses to prompts. This could be used as a tool for language acquisition (Pellas, 2023), especially for tertiary teachers who are often considered mature learners. The aim of this research is to provide a case study in which a non-native English-speaking teacher utilizes AI tools, including an AI-enabled automatic speech recognition tool (ASR) and a generative AI tool, to improve his English delivery within a semester-long business course.

In the following sections, we will first present the relevant literature, including the need for good oral English among tertiary teachers, the use of AI for English improvement, and different dimensions of oral English. This is followed by a description of our methods and the context of this research. The indicators of the English standards of the tertiary teacher will then be provided, followed by a discussion on the usefulness, practicality, and limitations of our approach to incorporating AI as a tool for language development among tertiary teachers.

Literature Review

Tertiary teachers need to possess good English for several reasons. The first and the utmost important reason is, of course, to enhance clarity in teaching (Ginsberg, 2007; Hativa, 1998). In the tertiary context, teachers often have to explain complex and abstract concepts. This often goes beyond a higher level of language use than English for general purposes. As reported by Fürstenberg et al. (2021), despite a general confidence in English for daily communication, English still holds tertiary teachers back in the classroom at Austrian University. Tertiary teachers often have to look up precise and specific disciplinary terms if they did not learn the related concepts in English. Since teachers are continually explaining ideas with their spoken language, they would be more reflective about concepts if they could use more precise language to explain complex ideas. This relies on whether the teachers are language-aware or not (Andrews, 2007).

Good English communication also enhances immediacy in tertiary classrooms (Ginsberg, 2007). Teachers with poor spoken English may find it difficult to give instructions (Güngör, 2020) and manage classrooms (Fürstenberg et al., 2021). In contrast, if teachers find it

difficult to moderate student ideas and lead class activities in English, they might tend to take a more teacher-centered approach and adopt direct instruction in their classes.

Apart from the practical educational needs, tertiary teachers' English proficiency is also highly related to their professional identity (Güngör, 2020). Teachers with good spoken English are often perceived as having better credibility (Cooc & Kim, 2022). In some eastern contexts, one's ability to speak fluent English is an indicator of being well-educated (Dearden, 2014). Students tend to enroll in courses taught by teachers who possess better language proficiency, even if they can fully understand teachers who do not speak English as fluently. Although the primary objective of content subjects is not related to the language development of students, teachers who possess better language proficiency can better cultivate the English skills of their students (Feng et al., 2017). From the tertiary teachers' perspective, good English skills could also enhance research capability (Tang & Ye, 2023), as they find it easier to engage in professional communities (Güngör, 2020).

Four Dimensions of Oral Skills

Although it is believed that tertiary teachers should possess good communication skills, including good language skills in the language they teach, there are different views on what constitutes good oral English proficiency alone. Empson (1989) holds a rather traditional view on oral English by suggesting that pronunciation is a less important quality than grammar and vocabulary. When compared to grammar skills and vocabulary use, pronunciation is more affected by one's cultural background. However, it is also suggested by some recent literature (e.g., Abimanto & Sumarsono, 2024; Cooc & Kim, 2022) that accented English may affect students' learning and hinder teachers' credibility.

From a language skill perspective, Aguilera (2012) suggested that grammar, lexis, and pronunciation constitute three functions of language in different situations. Focusing on oral language skills, Massonnié et al. (2022) propose a model that consists of four foundational dimensions, namely phonology, vocabulary, grammar, and discourse skills. In their paper, vocabulary and grammar skills are also regarded as core language skills. The same skill set is highly regarded by other scholars and in non-academic contexts. For example, the British Council referred to the same four oral language skills as the four systems of language (British Council, n.d.). In this work, we adopt the terminology of four dimensions of oral skills to stay highly relevant to academia.

After the pandemic, some tertiary institutions retained part of the remedial learning support, such as providing lecture recordings and maintaining some blended learning classes. As such, the pronunciation quality of tertiary teachers, especially for technical terms, could benefit students' learning through more accurate machine-generated transcription (Takenouchi, 2022) and, hence, the AI-generated learning summary.

Use of AI for English Improvement

In the past few years, many artificial intelligence (AI) tools have been stepping into the work of many tertiary educators, whether in teaching, research, or other administrative tasks (Chow, 2025). Although AI-enabled tools are frequently reported as effective teaching tools, they are seldom considered as tools for self-learning for tertiary teachers. As discussed in the previous sections, tertiary teachers have clear needs for language development but lack effective life-long continuous development programs (Güngör, 2020). In this regard, AI tools could fill the

gaps as self-learning tools for tertiary teachers. Apart from being fun and convenient to use, users often feel less embarrassed (Takenouchi, 2022) because the particular difficulties or weaknesses of learners are not exposed to any real person, especially for tertiary teachers whose English proficiency is highly related to their professional identity.

For oral English, Abimanto and Sumarsono (2024) presented a case on using AI-enabled Speech-To-Text (STT) and Automatic Speech Recognition (ASR) to enhance one's pronunciation. By using a specific learning app, students receive feedback on their intonation and pronunciation while reading out sentences or words in English. Takenouchi (2022) reported another study using automatic speech recognition (ASR) software as a means to practice pronunciation skills together with explicit pronunciation instruction for Japanese adult learners. After the learning program, the learners were assessed by ASR, which was found to have a positive correlation with the assessment results from human assessors. Evers and Chen (2022) also reported another study for Chinese-speaking learners practicing English pronunciation with ASR software. They suggested that peer feedback is also important due to the limitations of ASR software, including environmental factors and the technical abilities of such software.

In these research works facilitated by ASR, some traditional metrics are used to evaluate one's fluency and quality of speech. Speech rate is a simple and quantitative indicator of the fluency of speech. It is suggested that native speakers, in general, possess a higher speech rate. Given both the audience and speakers are native speakers, the speed of British English could reach 125-247 words per minute (WPM), with an average of 173 WPM (Li, 2021). However, it is also suggested that a pace of about 100 WPM could generate a higher level of cognitive input in lecturing, compared to a typical speaking rate of 150-200 WPM (Fisher & Frey, 2024). From a viewer's perspective of transcriptional video content, Rai et al. (2023) reviewed 8000+ hours of speech datasets, estimating an average word error rate (WER) of 13-15% when different ASR systems are applied for MOOC videos. WER studies the number of words corrected, inserted, or deleted as a percentage of the total word count. Given a massive dataset used, this figure could also be used for benchmarking tertiary teachers' accuracy in pronunciation.

Natural language processing (NLP) is a subset of AI that aims at understanding the natural language input of human beings (Denecke et al., 2021). With the incorporation of emerging generative AI technology, computers can now give meaningful responses to many different tasks based on human language input. Such characteristics could actually be put into language education use to create individualized learning experiences and provide human-like responses (Mohamed, 2024). Although generative AI is generally recognized as a revolutionary tool in education, the full potential of generative AI in language learning is still yet to be explored (Moorhouse et al., 2024). As generative AI amazes the world, early education programs based on generative AI tools focused on language writing (e.g., Pellas, 2023). However, as technology matures, generative AI tools can now understand different forms of input, for example, spoken language and images, and generate multimedia outputs.

Methods

Our research is based on a self-directed learning process of a non-native English-speaking teacher in Hong Kong during a 13-week-long semester. The business operations management course took place once a week, with 2 hours of lecturing and a 1-hour tutorial session each week and was supposed to be delivered in English. As a subject matter expert, the teacher

possessed a master's degree in operations management; however, the teacher did not go through any formal teacher education before he started his teaching career in a tertiary context. The target of this course was non-native students in their third year of study in an undergraduate degree program, who should be able to communicate effectively in English.

According to the policy of the higher institution, the teacher had to upload the video recording of the classes after every session. Therefore, the teacher opened the Microsoft Teams video conferencing software and enabled the recording before class began. For the sake of language development, the teacher also enabled the transcription functions provided by the ASR tool from Microsoft Teams and downloaded the transcripts for self-learning purposes.

The self-directed learning process is summarized in the following steps:

First, after every class, the tertiary teacher listened to his own lecture recordings, together with the transcripts generated by the ASR tool. The lecturer revised the transcripts based on the actual words used in classes, without fixing any grammatical mistakes.

Second, to review the pronunciation of the teacher, all the Speech-To-Text errors were recorded and grouped into four categories (refer to Table 1). System errors referred to transcription errors caused by the ASR tool rather than the teacher. Since the ASR tool may not have enough information on the context, it may not return the correct acronym or provide words that are homophones. Also, there were transcription errors in situations when the teacher pronounced specific words very precisely. For this, the teacher consulted the opinion of a tertiary English teacher who held a linguistics master's degree with more than 10 years of teaching experience. Apart from the system errors, the other errors led to the calculations of effective WER for further analysis. Minor errors were pronunciation errors where audiences could understand the teacher even without the correct word provided. In contrast, major errors were pronunciation errors that caused problems for the listener's understanding when they reviewed the transcripts. Errors of technical terms were grouped into a standalone category because of their importance in technical subjects (Dearden, 2014).

Table 1

Categories of Pronunciation Error

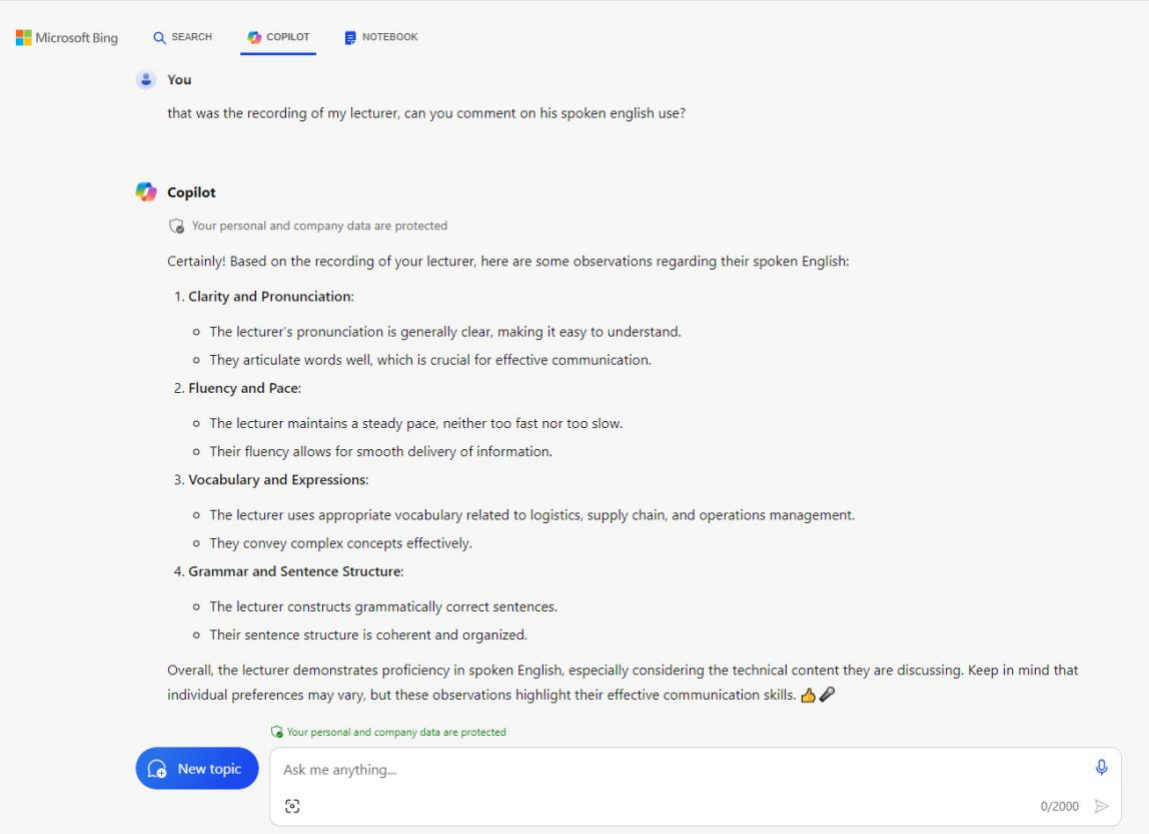
Category	Example
System Error	-
Minor Error	have to/ have the
Major Error	Strength/ straight; ten/ then; all the/ audit
Technical term	Surface/ service

Third, the teacher also recorded the problems with his vocabulary skills which were quantifiable. After the first class, it was observed that there were occasions where the teacher unnecessarily repeated himself and could not find the right word, which was characterized by rather unintentional long pauses. Besides, the teacher reflected that he had repeatedly used the phrases "ok," "so," and "I mean" too often. For instance, in the first two hours of the lecture, "I mean" occurred 23 times.

Fourthly, once the correction of transcripts was done every week, the transcripts were commented on by the Microsoft Copilot generative AI tool. The tool was chosen because the paid version was provided by the higher institution, which safeguarded privacy, and it was

enabled by GPT-4, which was considered a powerful, general-purpose generative AI tool. To check the level of understanding of the generative AI tool, the teacher first asked more general questions, for example, “Can you comment on his spoken English use?” (Figure 1) and “What are the possible improvements for him?” The teacher also followed up on specific language skills based on the responses of the generative AI tool. For example, “You talk about transition phrases. Can you be more specific about where the problem is and how improvement can be made?”

Figure 1
Comments Provided by Generative AI



Further Data Analysis

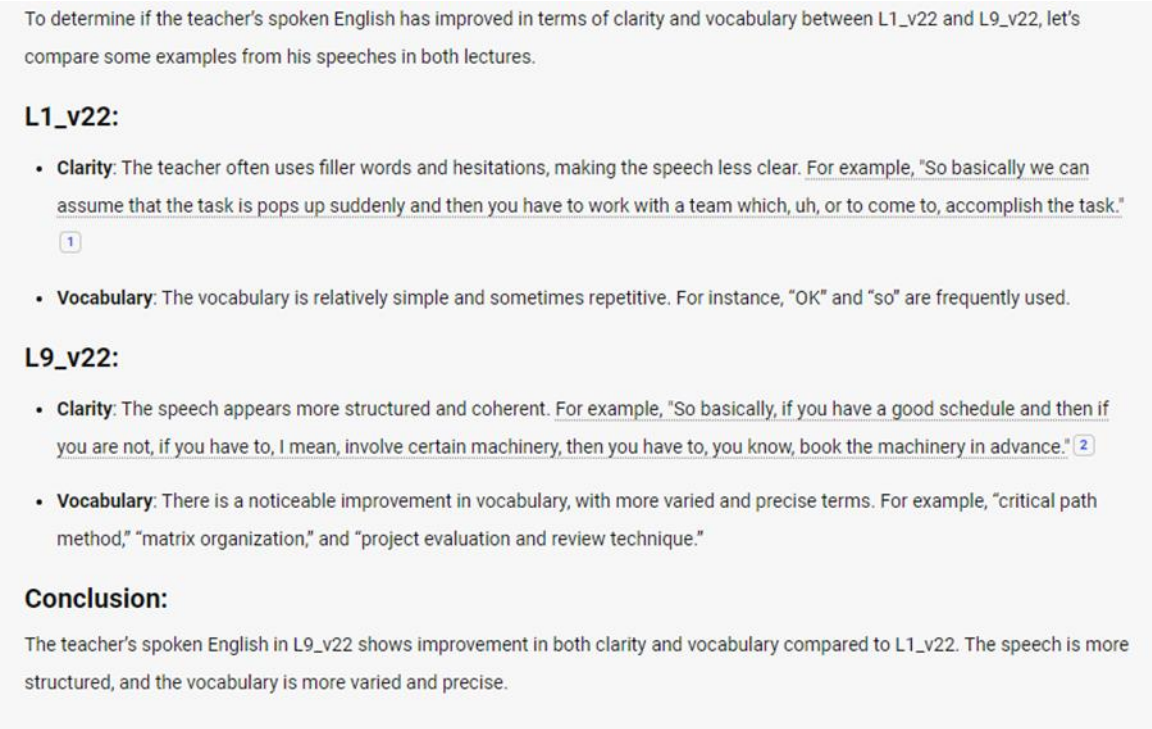
In order to systematically review the improvement of the teacher’s oral skills, further data analysis was conducted for this research. Due to resource constraints, this paper only presents findings based on a comparison of the transcripts from the first lecture and a relatively late lecture. The phonological skills were mainly judged by the effective WER (Word Error Rate) calculated as mentioned in the previous section. Since the teacher was reviewing his transcripts during work breaks, he divided the recordings into several 10-minute sections. The WER used in this research is based on the number of words being revised every 10 minutes divided by the word count in that section. The teacher also conducted a simple word count on each 10-minute recording transcript, which provided direction in analyzing the teacher’s speech rate as a dimension of discourse skills.

As mentioned in the previous section, the analysis of the teacher’s vocabulary skills was partly based on quantifiable measures derived from the teacher’s reflection on his speech. The results were considered alongside the comments from the generative AI tool, which also

judged whether there were improvements in terms of grammar skills. The two sets of transcripts were provided to the generative AI tool for comments. Again, the chat started with a more general question: "Has the teacher's spoken English improved in Lecture 9 compared to Lecture 1?" In order to trace the potential changes in oral English skills across the four dimensions of oral skills, the teacher also purposefully prompted specific questions based on each dimension (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Further Data Analsis Provided by Generative AI



To determine if the teacher's spoken English has improved in terms of clarity and vocabulary between L1_v22 and L9_v22, let's compare some examples from his speeches in both lectures.

L1_v22:

- **Clarity**: The teacher often uses filler words and hesitations, making the speech less clear. For example, "So basically we can assume that the task is pops up suddenly and then you have to work with a team which, uh, or to come to, accomplish the task." [1]
- **Vocabulary**: The vocabulary is relatively simple and sometimes repetitive. For instance, "OK" and "so" are frequently used.

L9_v22:

- **Clarity**: The speech appears more structured and coherent. For example, "So basically, if you have a good schedule and then if you are not, if you have to, I mean, involve certain machinery, then you have to, you know, book the machinery in advance." [2]
- **Vocabulary**: There is a noticeable improvement in vocabulary, with more varied and precise terms. For example, "critical path method," "matrix organization," and "project evaluation and review technique."

Conclusion:

The teacher's spoken English in L9_v22 shows improvement in both clarity and vocabulary compared to L1_v22. The speech is more structured, and the vocabulary is more varied and precise.

Results

The generative AI tool provided positive comments based on the transcript of the recordings from Lecture 1, stating that "Overall, the lecturer demonstrates proficiency in spoken English, especially considering the technical content they are discussing." In the transcript of Lecture 1, 281 word errors were identified out of 14,999 words in the transcript, with an effective WER (Word Error Rate) of 1.49%, which is significantly lower than the average of 13–15% (Rai et al., 2023). This suggested that the teacher possessed generally good pronunciation skills. Based on the initial comments from the generative AI tool, the teacher also "uses appropriate vocabulary" and "constructs grammatically correct sentences." Meanwhile, it was also noted that the teacher frequently repeated certain phrases, such as "So this is…" and "What is it about?" The AI tool suggested that the teacher incorporate "transition phrases to smoothly move from one point to another."

To trace the improvement of the teacher, the number of word errors for the first lecture and the second-to-last lecture were recorded (Table 2). The number of word errors reduced from 281 to 201. Considering only the minor errors, major errors, and errors on technical terms, along with the total number of words in the transcripts, the effective WER dropped from 1.49% to 1.11%, which indicated an improvement of 25.50%. This suggested that the teacher's phonological skills improved.

Table 2
Pronunciation Errors of Lecture 1 and Lecture 9

	System Error	Minor Error	Major Error	Technical term	Total number of words
Lecture 1	58	107	95	21	14999
Lecture 9	79	32	70	20	10945

Interestingly, the WPM (Words Per Minute) of the teacher showed higher variations in the latter lecture. In the first lecture, the teacher produced between 1,169 and 1,452 words per 10 minutes, with an average of 134.5 WPM. However, by the end of the semester, the teacher's pace varied from 1,073 to 1,567 words per 10 minutes, with an average of 130.0 WPM. Although there was not much difference in terms of the average speaking speed, it was observed that the teacher intentionally slowed down when addressing complex calculations and abstract concepts. Benchmarking a pace of 100 WPM for content with higher cognitive input, as proposed by Fisher and Frey (2024), this suggests that the teacher's discourse skills had improved.

As mentioned in the previous section, both the teacher himself and the generative AI tool observed repeated use of phrases. It was noted that the number of unnecessary repetitions and long pauses reduced from 52 and 4 to 22 and 2, respectively. This indicates that the teacher's vocabulary skills had improved to a certain extent, as there were fewer occasions where the teacher struggled to find the right word to express himself. This improvement was also reported by the generative AI tool, which stated that "there is a noticeable improvement in vocabulary, with more varied and precise terms." However, it was also observed that there is still room for improvement, as evidenced by the consistently high usage of certain phrases, such as "OK" and "So…," in the latter lecture.

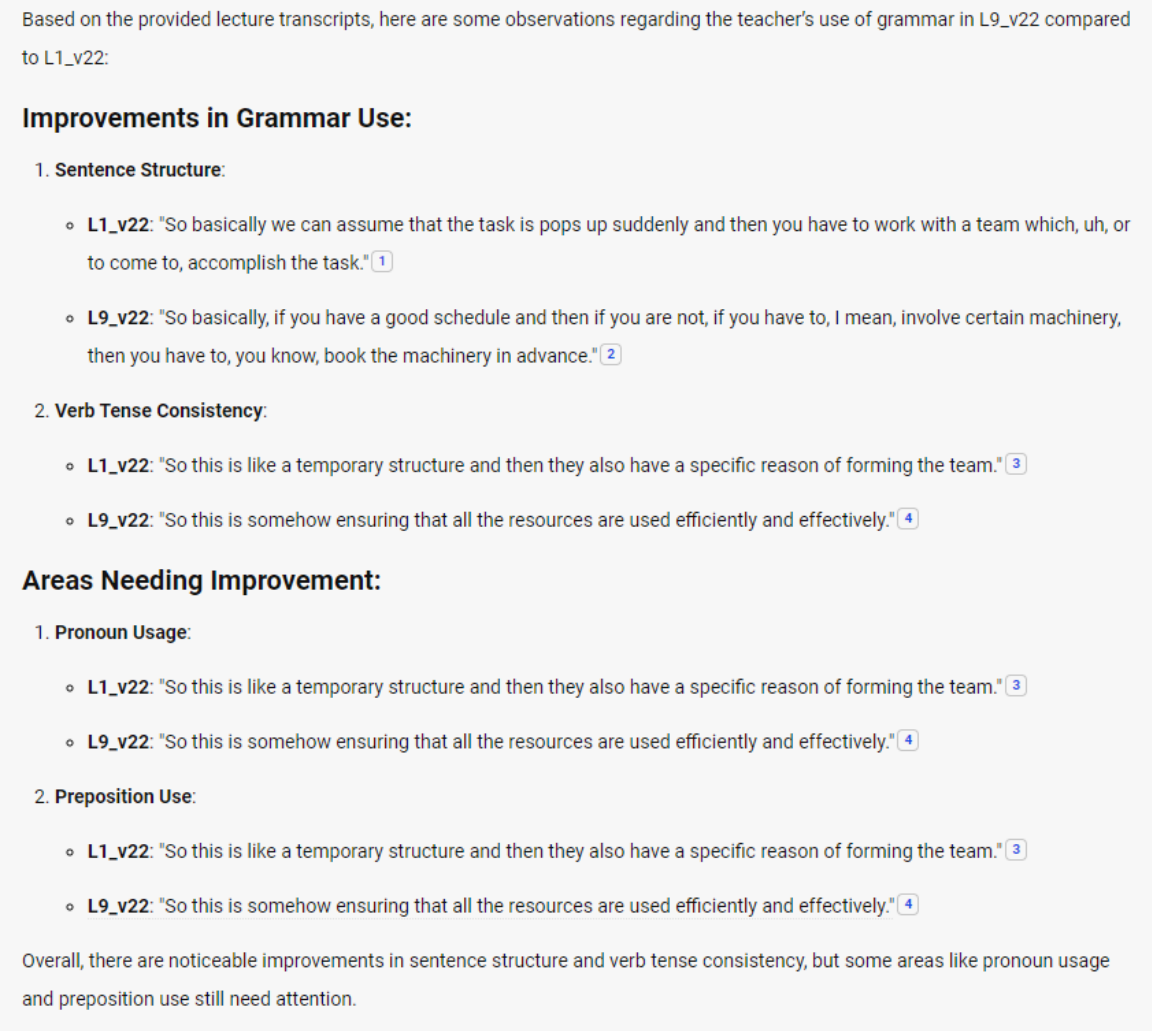
Table 3
Repeated Phrases of Lecture 1 and Lecture 9

	Unnecessary Repeat	"OK"	"So…"	Long Pause with more than 1 second
Lecture 1	52	239	309	4
Lecture 9	22	253	260	2

The analysis of grammar skills was conducted solely by the generative AI tool (Figure 3). The AI tool suggested that there were "noticeable improvements in sentence structure and verb tense consistency, but some areas like pronoun usage and preposition use still need attention." Although the generative AI generally returned positive comments regarding the teacher's English proficiency, it explicitly pointed out areas that needed improvement by referring to particular sentences. This suggests that the teacher's grammar skills did not improve as much as skills in other dimensions of oral skills.

Figure 3

Analysis on Grammar Skills Provided by Generative AI



Based on the provided lecture transcripts, here are some observations regarding the teacher's use of grammar in L9_v22 compared to L1_v22:

Improvements in Grammar Use:

1. **Sentence Structure**:
   - **L1_v22**: "So basically we can assume that the task is pops up suddenly and then you have to work with a team which, uh, or to come to, accomplish the task." [1]
   - **L9_v22**: "So basically, if you have a good schedule and then if you are not, if you have to, I mean, involve certain machinery, then you have to, you know, book the machinery in advance." [2]
2. **Verb Tense Consistency**:
   - **L1_v22**: "So this is like a temporary structure and then they also have a specific reason of forming the team." [3]
   - **L9_v22**: "So this is somehow ensuring that all the resources are used efficiently and effectively." [4]

Areas Needing Improvement:

1. **Pronoun Usage**:
   - **L1_v22**: "So this is like a temporary structure and then they also have a specific reason of forming the team." [3]
   - **L9_v22**: "So this is somehow ensuring that all the resources are used efficiently and effectively." [4]
2. **Preposition Use**:
   - **L1_v22**: "So this is like a temporary structure and then they also have a specific reason of forming the team." [3]
   - **L9_v22**: "So this is somehow ensuring that all the resources are used efficiently and effectively." [4]

Overall, there are noticeable improvements in sentence structure and verb tense consistency, but some areas like pronoun usage and preposition use still need attention.

Discussion

Speech recognition systems are not specifically designed as AI tools for improving spoken English (Evers & Chen, 2022). Our research suggests that a combined use of ASR (Automatic Speech Recognition) tools and generative AI tools can improve the oral English skills of tertiary teachers to some extent, as evidenced by an improved WER (Word Error Rate) and larger variations in WPM (Words Per Minute). This presents a self-sufficient, personalized, and embarrassment-free learning method (Takenouchi, 2022). During the process, the generative AI tool often provided generally positive comments, which encouraged the teacher to complete the self-learning process. By listening to their own recordings in detail, the teacher had the opportunity to compare how certain pronunciations led to correct word recognition in the ASR tool. This allowed the teacher to reflect on their delivery as a whole and develop a higher level of language awareness (Andrews, 2007), ultimately leading to improvements in other dimensions of oral skills.

However, this self-learning approach was found to be less effective in improving grammar skills compared to other dimensions of oral skills. Correct grammar usage is a long-term language development process that requires detailed and mindful practice. It is not a skill that can be easily learned or applied through brief comments from a generative AI tool.

There are also limitations to the AI tools used in this language learning process. For instance, the generative AI tool often commented on intonation, despite the fact that only transcripts were provided. It is questionable whether intonation, as an important part of communication (Leech & Svartvik, 2013), can be sufficiently evaluated through this learning process. Additionally, there were grey areas in determining whether a pronunciation error should be attributed to the teacher or the system. For example, in the first lecture, the ASR tool consistently recognized the word "inventory (/ˈɪn.vən.tɔːr.i/)" as "infantry (/ˈɪn.fən.tri/)," even though the linguistic teacher considered the teacher's pronunciation to be accurate in some instances. It was later discovered that the ASR tool could only recognize the word if the teacher pronounced all four syllables clearly and at a very slow pace. The teacher ultimately decided to maintain the same pronunciation, as all students in the class were able to associate the pronunciation with the correct word.

Conclusion

Our research documented a self-directed learning process undertaken by a non-native English-speaking teacher during a semester-long business operations management course. The findings indicate that the teacher's oral skills improved across all four dimensions, although to varying extents. This research demonstrates a self-sufficient learning process for improving tertiary teachers' oral delivery in class. Future research could further explore specific oral skills, such as the extent to which this learning process benefits teachers' spoken grammar, given that spoken grammar often features simpler phrase structures and repetitive use of a restricted lexicogrammatical repertoire (Andrews, 2007).

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