

EXPLORING EFL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND LEARNING EXPERIENCES IN UTILIZING SMALLTALK2ME MEDIA IN ENHANCING SPEAKING SKILLS

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Article Info	Abstract
<p>Article History Received: May 2025 Revised: August 2025 Accepted: January 2026 Published: April 2026</p> <p>Keywords AI Learning; Learning experiences; Learning media; Smalltalk2me media; Speaking skills;</p>	<p><i>This study investigates EFL students' perceptions and learning experiences in using SmallTalk2Me, an AI powered speaking platform, to support speaking development. Employing a descriptive qualitative design, the study involved ten students from the English Education Study Program at the State Islamic University of Mataram, selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through classroom observation during a mini workshop and semi structured interviews. The findings reveal that students generally perceived SmallTalk2Me positively because it provided immediate and useful feedback on fluency, pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. Contextualized prompts, interactive features, and CEFR based evaluations increased learners' confidence, motivation, and willingness to speak more spontaneously. Participants also appreciated the platform's natural conversational practice and its support for self directed learning. However, several challenges emerged, including limited access to free features, unstable internet connections, difficulty understanding some features, and a lack of topic variety, especially for beginners. Students suggested expanding conversation topics, providing more detailed corrective feedback, and making premium services more affordable. Overall, SmallTalk2Me shows strong potential as an adaptive medium for enhancing EFL speaking practice, although further development is needed to improve accessibility, inclusivity, and effectiveness in broader instructional contexts.</i></p>
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INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, technological advancements have brought about major transformations in various fields, including education. In English language learning, technology offers various conveniences to access information related to learning, enhancing communication and student participation, which can improve the quality of teaching and learning (A, 2019; Ghory & Ghafory, 2021; Sathish, 2023). Educators and students can now use technology to strengthen exposure and experience with English learning, ranging from mobile apps to online platforms that support collaborative and independent learning (Ariawan

et al., 2024; Rintaningrum, 2023). The rise of Artificial intelligence (AI) due to emerging technologies, as stated by Umar (2024), has had an enormous impact and is now a crucial component of the learning process.

The advent of AI-driven technologies in the Education sector, particularly in English, provides various features that continue to be developed and allow for the personalization of interactive and adaptive learning activities (Gulistan, 2024; Umar, 2024). The intelligent AI system can give automatic feedback in real-time for personalized learning according to the student's preferences. It is undoubtedly advantageous to support learning, especially speaking. Considered as the most difficult skill among the four skills (Ariawan et al., 2021), speaking also holds the role as one of the most important productive skills to master due to its crucial contribution in using language to communicate (Ariawan, 2024; Cendra & Sulindra, 2022). However, with these remarkable capabilities, the presence of technology is not accompanied by challenges in English Language Teaching (ELT) and English Language Learning (ELL). Kovalenko & Baranivska (2024) stated that the successful integration of AI poses several challenges in its implementation. The use of AI in learning speaking has some issues, such as limited tools, learners' fear of lack of digital cognition to use the tool (Thi & Le, 2023), and the inability of AI to convey cultural nuances in language (Crompton et al., 2024).

Addressing these challenges, SmallTalk2Me is an AI-driven language assessment tool, particularly for practicing speaking, promoting objective evaluation and immediate feedback for self-directed learning that results in more proficient speaking (Zhang et al., 2024). The presence of Natural Language Processing (NLP) in AI, as explained by Sharma et al. (2023), is designed specifically for machines to understand and generate languages with natural and precise speech recognition. Although this platform is more specialized as an IELTS (International English Language Testing System) speaking test simulation, the variety of features provided in SmallTalk2Me, such as a speech analyzer, English proficiency level test based on CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) standards, vocabulary booster, interview simulation, and various course topics (Manggiasih et al., 2023) make this AI a complete platform for practicing speaking, especially for university students. This study further investigate EFL students' perceptions of utilizing smalltalk2me for learning speaking. Researchers will examine students' experiences when utilizing SmallTalk2Me features in their speaking and learning process.

Technology-Enhanced Language Learning (TELL) has developed as an essential tool in English language education. TELL continues to develop all the time, and one of the results of its development is the inevitable integration of artificial intelligence (AI)-based technology in ELT (Mohammadkarimi, 2024). Previous studies have shown that the use of AI-powered tools in learning offers numerous benefits, from the ability to foster student motivation and participation to provide personalized learning experiences and real-time feedback that supports learners in their personal evaluation (Wulyani et al., 2024). In speaking instruction, AI-powered tools have also proven effective in harnessing learners' pronunciation accuracy, fluency, and confidence. These tools offer immediate feedback on real-life communication scenarios and enable learners to refine their speaking skills independently with an enjoyable and engaging learning process (Mohammadkarimi, 2024). The utilization of AI tools is also evidenced to be more effective in improving performance and enthusiasm for communication than with ordinary tools (Fathi et al., 2024).

Many studies have shown various approaches to using AI in learning speaking since its emergence. Some studies focus on exploring students' speaking proficiency using AI with a descriptive qualitative approach, and some studies examine the impact of an artificial intelligence platform on English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' willingness to communicate (WTC). Some studies also examined the advantages and disadvantages and

students' perceptions of AI for learning speaking. Ulinuha et al. (2024) conducted a descriptive qualitative study on the use of Smalltalk2Me with 78 dental students as research subjects. The study aimed to investigate the utilization of AI to enhance dentistry students' speaking skills and to explore its effects on English language acquisition. The findings revealed that most students were at the intermediate level, followed by the upper intermediate level. In speaking, the students demonstrated advanced fluency and grammatical usage skills. The thorough and rapid feedback offered by AI underlines AI's function in supporting students in improving their level of speaking proficiency, which aids teachers in constructing lesson plans that are appropriate for the student's proficiency level.

Another research by Fathi et al. (2024) employed qualitative and quantitative methods to assess the influence of the Andy English Chatbot's AI on speaking abilities and willingness to communicate (WTC). Thirty-three EFL students were randomly distributed to the experimental group (AI group), whereas thirty-two EFL students were distributed to the control group (face-to-face group). The findings showed that AI-mediated interactive speaking activities enhanced WTC and EFL learners' speaking abilities. Other studies have also explored the influence of utilizing AI on increasing students' speaking skills motivation and the potential benefits and drawbacks of using AI for learning speaking (Ariawan, 2024; Perez Peguero, 2024; Qin & Zhong, 2024; Umar, 2024; Umaroh et al., 2023).

More specific research related to Smalltalk2Me AI was conducted by Manggiasih et al. (2023). This study used a mixed-method approach focusing on exploring the advantages and limitations of AI as a language assessment tool by teachers. The results showed that Smalltalk2Me AI is easy to use, creates a private space that makes students comfortable to speak and can automatically provide feedback in the form of grammar improvements to alternative vocabulary. However, the main concern with this AI is that while it can encourage natural speaking, it cannot fully replicate complex real-life conversational contexts. Also, there are limited features for non-premium users and technical barriers such as network. Previous studies have demonstrated AI's potential to assist in teaching and learning speaking skills. From the many AIs that can be used, the researcher chose SmallTalk2Me, an AI-enabled service platform that is developing how people learn English speaking as the focus of the study. This study is limited to knowing how students perceive the use of Smalltalk2Me in learning or practicing speaking without measuring the improvement of speaking skills. Based on previous research, the researcher is interested in exploring EFL students' experiences using this AI to practice or learn speaking.

Smalltalk2Me emerged as an AI-based platform designed to assist English language learning, particularly in speaking skills adaptively. The adaptive AI system can personalize learning according to the learner's needs and provide real-time feedback that allows learners to evaluate their abilities (Qin & Zhong, 2024). Smalltalk2Me allows individuals to practice their speaking, vocabulary, and communication skills for various purposes such as IELTS, job interviews, or simply for better fluency. Among many other characteristics, one of the most notable is the ability for oral input to identify and deliver feedback, including recordings of spoken answers, grammar, pronunciation, fluency and vocabulary evaluations, and CEFR score results (Umaroh et al., 2023). This allows the user to discover more about their English speaking rapidly.

Apart from the diverse features that serve a great deal of utility, the content utilizes video materials from native speakers, which is beneficial in increasing motivation and exposing users to authentic sources (Palupi & Arfani, 2023). Despite its outstanding list of capabilities, SmallTalk2Me has a handful of drawbacks, such as limited functions for non-premium users (Manggiasih et al., 2023) and the format of the exercises requires pretty complex responses (Seedhouse & Nakatsuhara, 2018). The questions and anticipated responses may be challenging and do not correspond to the learning level of beginners who

require essential and guided practice. However, SmallTalk2Me is a helpful tool for anyone learning English beyond the novice stage, and its real-life applications are beneficial for general purposes. Hence, the present research aims to explore the EFL students' perception and experience in using SmallTalk2Me AI in enhancing their speaking skills.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This research utilizes a descriptive qualitative approach to explore and understand students' experiences in using SmallTalk2Me for learning to speak. Descriptive qualitative research focuses on providing rich, detailed descriptions of phenomena as they are experienced by individuals, without the use of numerical data. According to Yuliani (2018), this method is particularly effective for uncovering in-depth insights related to the experiences, perceptions, and feelings of a group of people. In this study, the descriptive qualitative design allows the researcher to gather comprehensive narratives from students, highlighting their interactions with SmallTalk2Me, a digital tool designed to support speaking practice. By analyzing these narratives, the study aims to identify common themes, challenges, and benefits that students encounter while using the application. This method also facilitates the discovery of individual and collective patterns of learning behavior, preferences, and progress. Furthermore, the qualitative approach enables the inclusion of participants' voices, providing a more authentic understanding of their learning experiences. Through interviews, observations, and open-ended responses, the data collected can shed light on how SmallTalk2Me supports or hinders students' development in spoken language skills. Overall, this approach contributes to a deeper understanding of technology-assisted language learning from the learner's perspective.

Participants

This study involved ten students from the English Education Study Program at the State Islamic University of Mataram as the research participants. The participants were intentionally drawn from different academic levels to provide a broader representation of student experiences and perspectives in using SmallTalk2Me for speaking practice. Specifically, three participants were from the fifth semester, six participants were from the third semester, and one participant was from the first semester. This variation in semester level was expected to offer richer insights into how students with different levels of academic exposure and English learning experience perceived the use of the platform. To determine the participants, the researchers employed purposive sampling. This sampling technique was chosen because it allows researchers to select individuals who are considered most relevant and capable of providing meaningful information in relation to the research objectives. By using purposive sampling, the study aimed to ensure the credibility, transferability, and dependability of the qualitative data collected (Campbell et al., 2020).

Instruments

In collecting data, researchers conducted observations and interviews. These techniques are crucial in qualitative research to gain more profound information and develop better interpretations as they allow the researcher to identify the actions of individuals (Mehrad et al., 2024). To conduct the observation, the researcher used a mini workshop to introduce smalltalk2me with the participants in 45 minutes. One of the researchers gave a presentation about smalltalk2me from the registration process until the procedure of using the features, while the other two researchers became observers. After a fifteen-minute presentation, participants were asked to try SmallTalk2Me for thirty minutes before ending with a questions and answers session. During this activity, observers paid attention to participants' reactions

during the presentation and interaction when using smalltalk2me. Observation guidelines, which contain five aspects and twelve indicators, guide the activity.

After conducting observations, researchers arranged semi-structured interviews, a combination of structured and unstructured interviews. While a few questions were planned, the rest were unplanned. Budiarti et al. (2024) stated that semi-structured interviews allow researchers to acquire in-depth information and evidence from interviewees while considering the focus of the study. The interviews were conducted separately with an estimated five to ten minutes to further explore students' experiences with smalltalk2me. The interview instrument is utilized and becomes the guide for the researcher conducted the interview. Researchers interviewed ten participants who had been observed during the mini workshop. The interview instrument consisted of four questions related to students' perceptions, experiences, and suggestions for improving smalltalk2me in the future.

Data Analysis

This research employs the qualitative data analysis steps proposed by (Miles et al., 2014) which include data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Observation and interview data are first reduced by organizing, coding, and summarizing key points to highlight the most relevant information. The reduced data are then displayed using visual formats such as tables or thematic charts to make patterns and connections more visible. Finally, the researcher draws and verifies conclusions by interpreting the data, comparing findings across sources, and ensuring consistency through triangulation. This systematic approach helps capture the depth and complexity of students' experiences using SmallTalk2Me.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

The observation showed that most participants were interested in using Smalltalk2Me to learn speaking. All participants paid attention to the researcher's explanation of the features. They expressed high curiosity, as shown by the questions and feedback given by most of the participants during the presentation. The majority of participants were able to follow the instructions well and interacted with the platform for a considerable amount of time to explore the features. Regarding operational capabilities, although most participants could use Smalltalk2Me comfortably and without significant technical barriers, a few notes of internet delays slightly disrupted their experience. However, this did not detract from the participant's confidence in using the platform, as all participants demonstrated the ability to speak confidently while practicing. Participants also responded positively to the feedback from the AI. Most found the suggestions to improve their speaking skills helpful. In addition, while most participants found the platform easy to access and operate, some faced a few technical barriers. The result of the observation can be seen in the following table.

Table 1

Aspects	Observation Result	
	Indicators	Yes No
Involvement	Participants appeared interested when the researcher explained the features and uses of Smalltalk2me.	100% 0%
	Participants actively asked questions and provided feedback during the presentation.	50% 50%
	Participants showed interest when they first tried using smalltalk2me.	100% 0%
Ability to operate	Participants did not experience any technical difficulties when accessing and using smalltalk2me.	0% 100%
	Participants can follow the instructions well when using Smalltalk2me features.	70% 30%

Aspects	Indicators	Yes	No
	Participants interacted with Smalltalk2me for a considerable amount of time to explore features.	100%	0%
Emotional Response	As seen from facial expressions and body language, participants showed enthusiasm when using AI.	70%	30%
	Participants did not appear confused or frustrated while using the platform.	80%	20%
Interaction with AI	Participants speak confidently while practicing speaking using smalltalk2me.	100%	0%
	Participants responded positively to feedback from the AI and appeared to be helped by the feedback provided.	70%	30%
Flexibility of Use	Participants look comfortable using Smalltalk2me with available devices (laptop, mobile phone).	70%	30%
	Participants found the platform easy to access and operate without significant technical barriers.	50%	50%

After conducting the observation, the researcher interviewed the ten participants using semi-structured interviews. There are four questions the researcher asked the interviewees: their overall experience with Smalltalk2Me, whether this AI can help them in learning speaking, any difficulties or obstacles in using it, and any feedback or suggestions for maximizing the potential of this AI for speaking or suggestions to maximize the potential of this AI for future speaking learning. The interview results show that Smalltalk2Me provides a positive learning experience in English language learning, especially speaking. Learning experience in English language learning, especially speaking. The researcher discusses the findings further based on each question point.

Experience using smalltalk2me

Most respondents had a very positive experience with Smalltalk2Me, while a few had a moderately positive experience. These positive experiences include the functions of AI, which are suitable for learning and practicing speaking. This is because the speaking exercises are based on topics and situations relevant to the user, making learning more natural. Respondents also stated that AI motivates and helps build confidence as they can respond immediately. They also found it very helpful to know their speaking level based on CEFR standards.

R2: "This AI provides an enjoyable and interactive experience for me, useful for speaking lessons, as the conversations are natural."

R3: "Overall, it is enjoyable, especially for English-speaking practice. The AI features provide a more realistic experience and motivate me to keep practicing. AI can provide quick and relevant evaluations, making speaking practice more natural. I also felt confident to speak with this AI."

R10: "I think it really helps us in learning speaking. We can also see how far our speaking level is from the speaking test and evaluation."

The role of smalltalk2me in learning speaking skills

Most respondents acknowledged the great benefits of Smalltalk2Me in improving speaking fluency, pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. AI can improve fluency by encouraging users to speak more spontaneously without much time for thinking. In addition, it helps practice pronunciation by listening to AI responses as examples. Not only in terms of pronunciation and fluency, it also introduces new vocabulary in the context of conversation, improving word comprehension in relevant situations. Respondents are also helped to learn correct grammar through example sentences from the AI, thus improving grammar indirectly. Furthermore, the prompts and video materials provided in the course sections enable students to speak in a structured way.

R1: "Yes, it can improve my speaking skills in pronunciation and fluency based on AI feedback, which corrects the errors I make."

R2: "This AI can help me practice my pronunciation by listening to the responses and help me learn correct grammar by providing examples of correct sentences. In addition, it improves vocabulary because it introduces me to new words in a conversational context and gives me examples of correct sentences."

R4: "I think this AI can help improve my speaking skills, especially fluency and pronunciation. The interaction with the AI encourages me to speak more fluently, try new vocabulary, and improve my grammar because the AI evaluates with a list of grammar I should use and correct sentences."

R6: "The prompts encourage me to speak more. Although it is challenging, it really helps me to speak up more in a structured way."

Difficulties and obstacles in using smalltalk2me

The general barriers that respondents encountered were limited free features, unstable internet connection, the need for time to understand the use of features, and a slight difficulty for respondents with a beginner speaking level. The remaining respondents stated that there were no significant obstacles.

R1: "Yes, the difficulty is only because we can only use it on a limited basis. One try for the speaking test because it is not premium."

R2: "Some of these AI features were difficult to understand, so it took me some time to learn how to use them properly. Moreover, as for the technical challenges, sometimes there were connection issues."

R5: "Sometimes the AI is difficult for me to understand, who is at a beginner speaking level. Also, the internet connection is slow, so it takes a long time to respond. But other than that, no problem."

Suggestions for future improvement

The researcher asked this question to get feedback from users for future use. The results show that respondents provided various suggestions to improve the AI, such as expanding the topics of conversation, providing more specific autocorrections, and making premium features more affordable.

R2: "Maybe there are some suggestions from me to make this AI easier and more effective for learning speaking, such as increasing the variety of topics, more varied so we do not get bored."

R7: "My suggestion is that Smalk2me's AI gives more specific feedback, for example, about mistakes in pronunciation or grammar because I think it is constructive in evaluating our learning."

R9: "My suggestion is to increase the payment discount for students because it is too expensive for me as a student."

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that SmallTalk2Me has considerable potential to support EFL students in developing speaking skills, particularly in the areas of fluency, pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. The positive responses recorded during both the observation and interview stages suggest that the platform does not merely function as a technological tool, but also as a learning medium that promotes engagement, confidence, and self reflection in speaking practice. Most participants showed strong interest when the platform was introduced, and they remained actively involved while exploring its features. This pattern suggests that the attractiveness of AI based speaking applications lies not only in their novelty, but also in their capacity to offer immediate, individualized, and contextualized learning experiences. These findings support the argument of Qin and Zhong (2024), who emphasize that adaptive AI systems can respond to learners' needs in ways that make language practice more relevant and meaningful.

A particularly important finding of this study is the role of SmallTalk2Me in increasing students' confidence to speak. All participants were observed speaking confidently while using the platform, and interview responses confirmed that the contextualized prompts helped them speak more spontaneously and with less hesitation. In foreign language learning,

confidence is often a major factor affecting speaking performance, since many learners hesitate because of fear of making errors or being judged by others. In this study, the platform appeared to reduce that psychological barrier by creating a more private and less threatening learning environment. This supports previous findings by Fathi et al. (2024), who found that AI mediated speaking interaction can increase learners' willingness to communicate. In this sense, SmallTalk2Me does not only provide language practice, but also contributes to the affective side of learning, especially motivation, confidence, and speaking readiness.

The study also shows that real time feedback is one of the strongest pedagogical advantages of SmallTalk2Me. Participants reported that feedback from the AI helped them notice their weaknesses and improve specific aspects of speaking, especially pronunciation, grammatical structure, and fluency. This is significant because effective speaking development requires learners to receive feedback that is timely and understandable. Unlike conventional classroom situations, where teacher feedback may be delayed or limited by time, the platform allows students to receive direct responses immediately after speaking. Such instant feedback can encourage learners to engage in self correction and repeated practice. These results are consistent with Ulinuha et al. (2024), who found that SmallTalk2Me supports speaking proficiency development through rapid and detailed feedback, and with Liya Umaroh et al. (2023), who argue that AI powered tools can strengthen speaking ability across several components simultaneously.

Another important point is that the platform seems to create a more authentic and structured learning experience. Participants perceived the conversations as natural and useful because they were based on relevant themes and practical situations. This suggests that SmallTalk2Me helps bridge the gap between classroom practice and real communication. The platform not only asks students to produce isolated utterances, but encourages them to respond within meaningful contexts. Such contextualization is important in speaking pedagogy because students often struggle when they are asked to communicate without clear communicative purposes. Moreover, the CEFR based evaluation feature was appreciated by several participants because it helped them recognize their speaking level. This indicates that learners value tools that do not only train them, but also provide a visible sense of progress. Therefore, SmallTalk2Me may support both communicative practice and learner autonomy, since students can monitor their own performance and identify areas for improvement independently.

Despite these positive findings, the results also reveal several limitations that should be considered critically. The most frequently mentioned challenges were the limited access to free features, unstable internet connection, and the difficulty experienced by some students in understanding how to use certain features. These obstacles show that the effectiveness of AI based learning is influenced not only by pedagogical quality, but also by accessibility and usability. Although most participants found the platform useful, the limitations of non premium access reduced opportunities for repeated practice. Likewise, technical problems such as slow internet disrupted interaction and may have affected the smoothness of speaking activities. These findings echo Manggiasih et al. (2023), who also identified restricted free features and technical barriers as central limitations of SmallTalk2Me. In addition, the responses of beginner level learners suggest that the platform may be more suitable for students who already possess a basic level of speaking competence, since some prompts and tasks require relatively complex responses.

The students' suggestions for improvement also provide important implications. Their recommendations to increase topic variety, provide more specific feedback, and offer student friendly pricing indicate that learners are not passive users, but active evaluators of educational technology. Topic variety is essential to prevent boredom and maintain long term motivation. More detailed feedback on pronunciation and grammar could make the platform

more instructionally effective, especially for learners who need explicit guidance. Meanwhile, affordable access is necessary if the technology is to be adopted more widely in higher education settings. These suggestions reinforce the idea that AI tools should be continuously improved to become more inclusive, practical, and responsive to learners' contexts.

This study demonstrates that SmallTalk2Me is a promising AI based medium for EFL speaking practice. Its strengths lie in immediate feedback, contextualized interaction, confidence building, and support for autonomous learning. However, its pedagogical potential can only be maximized when issues of technical access, learner level suitability, and feature affordability are adequately addressed. For this reason, future research should move beyond perception based data and examine the measurable impact of SmallTalk2Me on speaking achievement across different proficiency levels and learning environments.

CONCLUSION

The use of SmallTalk2Me as an AI-based platform for learning speaking has shown positive experiences among EFL students. Using a descriptive qualitative approach through observation and interviews involving ten students from English Education Department who are in their first, third and five semesters, researchers aimed to investigate students' perceptions and experiences using SmallTalk2Me in learning speaking. From the findings, it is found that SmallTalk2Me effectively helps in learning speaking, including fluency, pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary through AI feedback features. Most students felt confident and motivated to speak more spontaneously because of the presence of contextualized prompts and topics. Despite some limitations of free features, topic variety and internet connection interruptions. While technical challenges were noted, these did not overshadow the potential of SmallTalk2Me. Through the last interview question, respondents suggested expanding conversation topics, providing more specific feedback, and enhancing accessibility.

These findings show the great potential of Smalltalk2Me as an adaptive tool for supporting EFL students in learning speaking, with room for further development to enhance its inclusivity and effectiveness. However, this research involved a small sample size from a single institution and focused only on perceptions without measuring actual speaking improvements. Moreover, future studies could address these limitations by incorporating mixed-methods approaches to measure speaking improvements. Expanding the sample size and examining the effectiveness of SmallTalk2Me in different instructional settings, such as blended or offline learning environments, also could maximize Smalltalk2me potential as a comprehensive language learning tool.

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

Participation in this study was fully voluntary and based on informed consent. Before taking part, participants received clear information about the study's purpose, procedures, possible risks, and expected benefits. They were assured that their identities would remain confidential, their responses would be used only for research, and withdrawal was possible anytime without consequence.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data supporting this study are not publicly available because participant privacy and ethical responsibilities must be protected. Nevertheless, access may be granted upon reasonable request for verification or further analysis. Any sharing of data requires prior approval from the relevant institutional ethics board to ensure compliance with consent agreements.

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