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EFL Students' Perception and Attitude towards the Use of ChatGPT to Promote English Speaking Skills in the Saudi Context

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Abstract:
This study aims to investigate English as a Foreign Language students' perceptions and attitudes towards using ChatGPT to enhance their English-speaking skills in English as a foreign language classroom. The study is significant as it contributes to the body of research on Artificial Intelligence in teaching and learning in English as a foreign language context in general and Saudi higher educational institutions in particular. 74 students from three public universities in Saudi Arabia participated by completing a five-point Likert scale questionnaire after carrying out oral tasks for six weeks using ChatGPT. The purpose of students' responses is to answer the research questions: What are students' perceptions and attitudes towards the use of ChatGPT to promote their English speaking skills? The Participants in the study were all female students majoring in English language in their departments at their educational facilities. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the questionnaire data. Results generally indicated a high-level of perception and a positive attitude toward using ChatGPT in English-speaking classes. The findings of this study will hopefully further the understanding of students' beliefs about ChatGPT and how this technology can be best employed for the advancement of English learning and teaching.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence, ChatGPT, English as a Foreign Language, English speaking skills, Saudi context, EFL Students' Perception

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Introduction:

The use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in education has a rich and fascinating history, dating back to the 1960s with the advent of computer-based instruction (CBI) systems. These early systems provided interactive learning experiences through programmed instruction, laying the groundwork for AI's transformative role in education. Over the decades, AI has evolved through groundbreaking innovations, offering a wide array of solutions to enhance teaching and learning.

One of the most impactful applications of AI in education is Intelligent Tutoring Systems (ITS), which deliver personalized and adaptive learning experiences by assessing students' knowledge and abilities. Similarly, adaptive learning platforms adjust content and activities based on individual performance and progress, ensuring a tailored educational journey. Advances in Natural Language Processing (NLP) have enabled computers to understand, interpret, and generate human language, facilitating more intuitive interactions between technology and learners.

AI's capacity for data-driven insights is further exemplified by machine learning for personalization, which analyzes students' behaviors, preferences, and performance data to anticipate their learning needs. In tandem, educational data mining (EDM) draws on information from sources like learning management systems and educational apps to identify patterns and inform instructional strategies. AI has also introduced virtual teaching assistants—AI-powered chatbots and agents that provide students and educators with real-time support, answer questions, offer guidance on assignments, and foster communication in online learning environments.

Among the myriad AI technologies reshaping education, ChatGPT, a language model developed by OpenAI, has gained remarkable popularity. Its versatility stems from its ability to personalize and adapt learning experiences, offering immediate feedback, explanations, and assistance across a wide range of subjects. This makes it an invaluable tool for catering to diverse learning styles and needs. Its 24/7 accessibility allows students to access support at any time, breaking down barriers related to time zones or rigid schedules.

Moreover, ChatGPT's conversational interface creates a more engaging and interactive learning environment. By simulating discussions, asking questions, and providing explanations in a natural, conversational manner, it enhances students' motivation and interest. As a supplemental learning tool, ChatGPT reinforces traditional teaching methods, offering practice exercises and additional resources to solidify understanding. Finally, its capacity for continuous improvement, driven by ongoing updates and user feedback, ensures that ChatGPT remains at the forefront of educational innovation, adapting to the ever-changing needs of students and educators.

From its early beginnings to its modern applications, AI continues to revolutionize the educational landscape, making learning more accessible, personalized, and engaging for all. Therefore, a number of research studies have been interested in exploring and investigating the merits and values of using ChatGPT. Many of these studies suggest that using ChatGPT and similar AI chatbots in EFL contexts can enhance students' English fluency, writing skills, grammar, vocabulary, and motivation, as well as reduce their fear of speaking, and improve their overall language proficiency and confidence. (Woo & Choi, 2021).

Literature Review

ChatGPT in EFL Contexts

Meniado (2023) conducted a literature review to investigate the effect that ChatGPT has on language learning, teaching, and assessment. The study reported that ChatGPT can foster English language learning and teaching by providing comprehensible language and feedback,

promoting fluency development but faces challenges such as inaccurate responses, non-emotionality, and technical limitations. In addition. Song & Song (2023) conducted a mixed-methods study to investigate ChatGPT's role in improving writing skills and motivation among 50 EFL students. The result indicated that the experimental group that received AI-assisted instruction showed significant improvement in writing skills and motivation compared to the control group.

Similarly. Haggag (2023) conducted a quasi-experimental study to assess the efficiency of utilizing a ChatGPT-powered program in facilitating descriptive writing ability and improving the use of English grammar. Results showed significant improvement in the participants' writing skills and grammar use after being introduced to ChatGPT. Shaikh et al. (2023) conducted a quantitative research study using a standard questionnaire-based approach to obtain the participants' feedback about the usefulness and effectiveness of ChatGPT in learning formal English. The findings from this study revealed that ChatGPT can be an effective tool for formal English language learning. Utilizing a desk research approach, Fauzi et al. (2023) examined the impact of ChatGPT on enhancing student efficiency in higher education. The study concluded that ChatGPT provides students with useful information, resources, and support, facilitating collaboration, increasing time efficiency, and enhancing motivation.

Overall, these studies contribute to the fast-growing research domain focused on using ChatGPT to improve EFL students' writing style, enhance accurate grammar use, and expand vocabulary.

ChatGPT to Improve English Speaking Skills

In EFL-speaking classes, opportunities to carry out additional practice after class with a regular partner are quite few (Ye et al., 2022). However, ChatGPT and chatbots like Microsoft Xiaoying offer EFL learners access to a virtual companion for practicing conversations, enabling them to engage in language learning at their convenience, regardless of time or location, making AI a useful tool for after-class oral practice (Alafnan et al., 2023). To investigate the potential use of chatbots to enhance learners' language production, Yang et al. (2022) and Jin et al. (2019) explored the use of AI chatbots as English conversation partners in EFL speaking classes. In Yang's study, findings showed that the chatbot encouraged student engagement and had a high task success rate, while Jin's study highlighted some difficulties with voice recognition and lengthy utterances. Young and Shishido (2023) further investigated the potential of AI chatbots, specifically OpenAI's ChatGPT, in producing refined conversational materials for EFL students. This study reported that the system's dialogues were well-suited for elementary and intermediate-level students. These studies collectively suggest that AI chatbots have the potential to enhance EFL speaking classes, but also highlight the need for further research and development to address technical challenges and ensure the quality of dialogue materials.

Perception and Attitude with respect to ChatGPT

Regarding learners' perception of chatbots, Darma et al. (2023) carried out a descriptive quantitative study investigating EFL students' perceptions of using ChatGPT at a university in Indonesia. The study explored students' beliefs in three areas: their overall understanding of the use of ChatGPT, their views about the advantages of ChatGPT and their perceptions about the disadvantages of ChatGPT. The study concluded that the participants supported the incorporation of ChatGPT into their instruction and seemed to acknowledge both the merits of ChatGPT (e.g., promoting language proficiency, problem-solving abilities, and critical thinking skills) and its

demerits (e.g., academic integrity and over reliance). Consistent with the previous study, Song & Song (2023) employed semi-structured interviews to elicit students' perceptions about AI-assisted instruction using ChatGPT. Qualitative results again revealed a range of viewpoints, from acknowledgment of AI's innovative instructional function and its beneficial impact on writing skills and motivation to apprehensions regarding contextual precision and excessive dependence.

Taecharungroj (2023) collected tweets about ChatGPT during the first month after its launch to elicit people's opinions about what this chatbot can do. 233,914 English tweets were analyzed using latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA). The analysis revealed once again that ChatGPT was believed to have potential positive and negative effects on humans and shed light on the multifaceted abilities of ChatGPT and the implications it may have in various domains. In addition, Keleş & Aydın (2021) conducted a survey of 130 students at a university in Anatolia. Results revealed both positive and negative reactions to the use of AI. Again, Bii et al. (2013) investigated students' attitudes towards the use of a chatbot named Knowie in high school instruction, and the findings indicated that students maintained a positive attitude towards using this chatbot during class instruction and seemed to recognize the potential value that Knowie offers in improving their learning.

Finally, mixed findings were reported in Gallacher et al. (2018), whose work is especially relevant to the present study as it concerned student perceptions about speaking. The researchers investigated the perceptions of 253 Japanese students towards using chatbot partners to improve their English conversation skills. Findings revealed that the participant students perceived AI as an innovative technique in learning, but felt it lacked richness and genuineness in interaction.

The ongoing discussion suggests that there is a gap in exploring how learners perceive ChatGPT's conversational abilities and whether these perceptions evolve with increased exposure to the tool, and how broader cross-cultural studies are needed to determine whether perceptions of ChatGPT in speaking classes differ by region, cultural attitudes toward AI, or educational systems.

Overall, students' perceptions and attitudes concerning the introduction of AI into their learning are varied. This is important since student beliefs influence how successfully AI can be integrated into their learning process and how beneficial such technology will be for them. Therefore, this study sought to further ascertain the attitudes and perceptions of EFL students with respect to the use of AI, specifically ChatGPT, in order to inform the establishment of best practices for its implementation in teaching and learning in the Saudi context. The specific focus is on oral interaction since that is a well-known problem skill for students in a country like Saudi Arabia where English is not widely heard and spoken outside the classroom. Furthermore, it is an area informed by fewer previous studies of student perceptions and attitudes, whose focus, as shown above, has more often been on AI assistance in writing, grammar and vocabulary.

Method

In order to o investigate students' perceptions and attitudes concerning the use of AI in promoting English-speaking skills, three AI chat/assistant software packages associated with automatic speech recognition (ASR) technologies were initially considered: Alexa, Google Assistant and ChatGPT. According to Dizon (2020), Alexa (https://developer.amazon.com/alexa) offers learners a range of features that can support English-speaking practice and language learning for users of all levels. Similarly, Chen et al. (2023) stated that Google Assistant (https://assistant.google.com/) can engage users in conversation to practice speaking English. Learners can ask questions, hold discussions on various topics, and receive feedback on

their pronunciation and grammar. As for ChatGPT (https://chat.openai.com/), research findings indicate that it enhances student engagement and interactivity, making the learning process more captivating. When linked to speech-to-text and text-to-speech software, as in the mobile app version used in this study, it can mimic spoken dialogue, pose inquiries, and deliver explanations in a conversational style, thus boosting student motivation and fostering a deeper interest in learning (Kim et al., 2021, Wang et al., 2021). Based on that research, ChatGPT was chosen to be used in this study.

Participants

The initial pool of participants was 88 students who enrolled in a Listening and Speaking course in their departments of English Language at three public universities in Saudi Arabia. However, a total of 10 students withdrew from the course in the various departments, and four students declined to take part in the study. Hence, in the end, 74 EFL students voluntarily participated by engaging in extra speaking practice via ChatGPT and then completing a questionnaire concerning their beliefs and feelings about using this app. All student participants were Saudi females at levels three, four, and five (second and third year BA) in departments dealing with English Language. The Listening & Speaking course in all these departments uses the textbook Mosaic 2 Listening and Speaking. The course instructor in each department cooperated with the researcher by following up classes with ChatGPT speaking tasks done at home, and encouraging the participants verbally to complete the questionnaire. Table 1 provides demographic information about the participants.

Table 1. *Participant demographics*

#	Educational Facility	Department	No. of Participants	Nationality	Gender	level 3	level 4	level 5
1	Uni A	English Language & Translation	34	Saudi	F	7	21	6
2	Uni B	Applied Linguistics	26	Saudi	F	5	16	5
3	Uni C	English Language	14	Saudi	F	2	10	2

Instrument

The current study implemented a quantitative survey, through a questionnaire. Questionnaires are popular tools in studies in the research area as they allow a great deal of attitude and perception information to be elicited from many participants in a short time (Dornyei &Csizer, 2012). Aside from background and demographic questions, the questionnaire included 20 items about ChatGPT and English speaking, each with a 5-point Likert scale response. The items were designed in a number of subcategories (described with Results below) to elicit participants' perceptions and attitudes concerning the use of ChatGPT to enhance their English-speaking skills.

To ensure the questionnaire's quality, first, face and content validity were enhanced by showing the items to two professors of applied linguistics. They checked the questionnaire items, and their suggestions were taken into consideration. Second, in order to assess the questionnaire's reliability, internal consistency among the 20 questionnaire items was measured using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. A reliability value of .98 was obtained, which signifies a very high degree of consistency among the 20 items.

Procedure

In the third week of the second semester of the academic year 2023, an online session was conducted via Zoom to meet with the potential participants and explain to them the purpose of the study and how to use ChatGPT to practice English speaking after school hours. Students who agreed to participate were asked to download the ChatGPT app on their mobile or smart devices and to set up their accounts. Next, they were given clear instructions on how to type the prompt for each interactive session, telling ChatGPT about the desired interaction (Table 1 below). Students were given a practice prompt to type and converse with their virtual partners. Prompts were designed based on the course topics, and each prompt was sent after they covered the topic in class. Prompts were set by the researcher to ensure the appropriateness and accuracy of the language used because well-designed prompts yield a better interaction with ChatGPT. All prompts were carefully worded and tested. Students were given 6 weeks to practice additional English interaction with a virtual partner. After finishing all their tasks, the participants responded to the questionnaire. The questionnaire was presented online via Google Forms. This was more convenient and practical for two reasons. First, it enabled me to contact participants from different universities in Saudi Arabia. Second, it ensured the privacy and anonymity of the participants. Table 1 represents the timeline of the study.

Table 1. *Timeline of the study intervention*

Week no.	Task	Prompts
1	Orientation	Ø
2	Regular class	Ø
3	Regular class + online session to introduce the use of ChatGPT and mock practice	I want you to act like my class mate. You will ask me questions about how a language is acquired and learned. Do not exceed five questions. Do not ask me all the questions at once. Ask me the questions one by one and wait for my reply.
4	Regular class + additional practice Topic: Danger and Daring	I want you to act as an English teacher. I will be the student, and you will ask me questions about the topic of extreme sports. Ask me to discuss the risks and thrills associated with activities like skydiving, rock climbing, or BASE jumping. Do not exceed ten questions. I want you to only reply as a teacher. Do not ask me all the questions at once. Ask me the questions one by one. Ask me a question and wait for my answer. If I make any English mistakes, I want you to correct me and explain the correction. After the tenth question, give me feedback on the whole discussion. Let's begin.
5	Regular class + additional practice Topic: Gender and Relationship	Same prompt, but change the topic to raising boys vs. raising girls in Saudi Arabia.
6	Regular class + additional practice Topic: Transitions	Same prompt, but change the topic to how I became different as I grow up
7	Regular class + additional practice Topic: Working	Same prompt, but change the topic to what would be my future career
8	Regular class + additional practice Topic: Breakthroughs	Same prompt, but change the topic to technological Innovations: explore emerging technologies that are reshaping industries and society, such as artificial intelligence, renewable energy, or 3D printing
9	Regular class + additional practice Topic: Art and Entertainment	Same prompt, but change the topic to wedding ceremonies in Saud Arabia and how they are culturally

		different from other wedding ceremonies around the world
10	Filling out the questionnaire	Ø

Data Analysis:

The data was analyzed quantitatively using SPSS. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the participants' responses to the 20 items on the 1-5 Likert scale in the perception and attitude questionnaire. For descriptive purposes, this was summarized using means and standard deviations (SD) for each item.

Results:

The questionnaire covered a considerable range of areas of students' perceptions and attitudes. In order to effectively interpret the responses of the respondents, the items were divided into two main categories: perception and attitude. Students' perception items were then classified into thematic subcategories to gain a better understanding of the participants' beliefs.

Table 2. *Questionnaire Item Results*

#	Statement	No.	Mean	Std. Deviation
1.	Using ChatGPT has improved my confidence in speaking English.	74	3.57	.760
2.	ChatGPT has helped me practice English speaking in a convenient and accessible way.	74	3.95	.792
3.	Interacting with ChatGPT has enhanced my vocabulary and language skills.	74	3.11	1.504
4.	ChatGPT has provided useful feedback on my English speaking abilities.	74	3.46	1.377
5.	I would recommend using ChatGPT to others as a tool for improving English speaking skills.	74	4.01	1.199
6.	ChatGPT has increased my motivation to practice English speaking regularly.	74	3.82	.998
7.	Using ChatGPT has helped me overcome hesitation and fear when speaking English.	74	3.39	1.259
8.	ChatGPT provides a comfortable environment for me to practice speaking English without judgment.	74	4.43	.760
9.	I feel more fluent in English after using ChatGPT for speaking practice.	74	3.26	1.239
10.	ChatGPT accurately understands and responds to my English speech.	74	3.93	1.102
11.	Using ChatGPT has helped me identify and correct errors in my English pronunciation.	74	3.76	1.203
12.	I enjoy the interactive nature of practicing English speaking with ChatGPT.	74	4.34	.603
13.	ChatGPT has broadened my understanding of colloquial and informal English expressions.	74	3.42	1.216
14.	Using ChatGPT made me feel more comfortable engaging in English conversations with English speakers.	74	3.53	1.219
15.	ChatGPT has effectively supplemented my traditional English learning methods (e.g., classroom instruction, textbooks).	74	3.96	1.013
16.	I want ChatGPT to be used regularly in my English-speaking classes.	74	3.72	1.104
17.	I like conversing with a virtual partner.	74	3.73	1.242
18.	I prefer to interact with a human partner.	74	4.70	.918
19.	I feel excited when using ChatGPT to practice my English-speaking skill.	74	3.66	1.162
20	I feel anxious when I practice English conversation with my virtual partner.	74	2.16	1.228

As table 2 shows, students generally believe that ChatGPT helps in improving specific aspects of English proficiency relevant to English speaking. In descending order of approval, they are: pronunciation (item 11, Mean 3.76), colloquial language (item 13, mean 3.42), fluency (item

9, mean 3.26) and vocabulary (item 3, mean 3.11). The last is relatively one of the least endorsed of all the questionnaire items, but still clearly above the mid rating of 3.

Perceived usefulness and accuracy of ChatGPT feedback for speaking development in general are also endorsed (item 4, mean 3.46; item10, mean 3.93; and item 11, mean 3.76). ChatGPT's value as a convenient and effective adjunct to the usual taught course was also recognized (item 2, mean 3.95; item 15, mean 3.96).

Furthermore, there was a very positive perception among the participants of the affective role that ChatGPT plays in combating English speaking anxiety (item 7, mean 3.39; item 20, reverse worded, mean 2.16). Correspondingly, students reported increased confidence and a feeling of comfort when speaking English (item 1, mean 3.57; item 14, mean 3.53; item 8, mean 4.43). Item 8 referred specifically to the non-judgmental nature of ChatGPT, and gained the second highest of all the approval ratings in the study. Consistent with those findings, motivation and enjoyment associated with speaking were also reported to be enhanced (item 6, mean 3.82; item 19, mean 3.66). Enjoyment was especially generated by ChatGPT's interactive nature (item 12, mean 4.34). Generally, the high mean responses (all > 3) suggest that the participants have a highly positive perception of the use of ChatGPT in association with speaking classes.

Consistent with the above, students' overall attitudes toward the use of ChatGPT in relation to English speaking also suggest strong endorsement speaking English with ChatGPT both currently (item 17, mean 3.73) and going forward (item 5, mean 4.01; item 16, mean 3.72). However, when it comes to spoken interaction, the student participants report an even greater preference for having a human partner, with the highest endorsement in the whole study (item 18, mean 4.70), compared with a virtual one (item 17, mean 3.73).

Discussion

The findings of the current study can be compared with those of studies such as the ones reviewed above which described both objective and student-reported features of AI that are relevant to learning foreign language speaking. Although the present study is in a different context from those studied before, many of the findings are similar.

The present findings agree with Meniado (2023) with respect to AI providing good feedback and enhancing fluency. Young and Shishido (2023) found ChatGPT especially suited to students of elementary and intermediate levels, which are the levels of students in the present study, and the responses of the students in this study echo that. However, it is worth noting that suitability of level is perhaps ensured as much by the nature of the prompts that the teacher has the students use to guide ChatGPT as by the AI program acting alone. In the present study, the prompts largely restricted the spoken interaction to archetypal 'classroom language' exchanges where the teacher asks a question, the student answers, and the teacher provides feedback on the answer (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975). While suitable for the student level in the present study, that is not very like normal conversation with native speakers so it remains uncertain how well ChatGPT would deal with that with higher proficiency students.

Alafnan et al. (2023) among others pointed out the convenience of AI support for speaking and again my participants strongly endorsed that (item 2). This is perhaps notable because using ChatGPT there is an initial slight inconvenience for the student in needing to type the teacher-provided prompt for ChatGPT. In contrast, one can start a spoken interchange with applications like Alexa immediately without typing such a prompt.

With respect to affective impact, the present study resembles studies such as Woo and Choi (2021) in finding that AI support for speaking helps allay the fear of speaking. No doubt this is because of the non-judgmental tone adopted by ChatGPT in its feedback as well as the fact that the students know they are not talking with a real person. It is that ambience that generates the enjoyment reported by our students which in turn encourages continued use of ChatGPT for speaking practice, Yang et al. (2019) for example also refer to improved engagement which is supported by our students reporting the enjoyment and motivation associated with ChatGPT speaking practice (items 12, 6).

Previous studies have not, however, been unequivocally favorable to AI as an aid to speaking. It has been found or reported to be sometimes inaccurate or suffer voice recognition problems, be unrealistically unemotional, and lack richness and genuineness of interaction (Meniado, 2023; Jin et al., 2022; Gallacher et al., 2018). In the present study accuracy was endorsed (e.g. items 10, 11), but of course the students responding may not have identified some subtle forms of inaccuracy in what they heard from ChatGPT. With respect to the richness and realism of the content that they received, it seems likely that they held the same view as earlier studies and this was what led them to so strongly prefer a human interlocutor over ChatGPT (item 18 being the only proposition that they strongly agreed with).

Finally, it is worth pointing out that some more fundamental objections to AI in language teaching and learning voiced in the literature do not really apply to its use in activities like those in the present study. The complaints that students over-rely on it and that it damages academic integrity (Darma et al., 2023; Song and Song, 2023) are very relevant for example in relation to writing, where ChatGPT can be used to compose an entire essay for the writer/student, which is widely seen as 'cheating'. However, in the case of ChatGPT supporting interactive or conversational speaking in the manner of the present study, the AI assistance is not of that sort. AI is the interlocutor and does not play the role of the student speaker who still has to do all the work to produce their own responses to what ChatGPT says. Hence there is no 'cheating' involved and indeed it is hard to see how one could regard a student as ever 'over-using' this sort of practice, provided the prompts to ChatGPT are such as to generate interchanges consistent with the student proficiency level. English teachers in Saudi Arabia are typically delighted at any evidence of students engaging in English speaking of any sort outside the classroom.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insight, in a less studied EFL context, into students' perceptions of ChatGPT's English-speaking skills and value as a provider of practice in interactive English speaking. The findings indicate that ChatGPT is generally perceived as a convenient and accurate tool to improve English-speaking skills among EFL students, especially in pronunciation, colloquial language and fluency. It is also evident that ChatGPT helps students emotionally, reducing anxiety and enhancing enjoyment and motivation. Nevertheless, it is not regarded as superior to a human interlocutor.

The implication for teachers and students is clear. Unlike some other uses of AI, e.g. in relation to EFL writing, the use endorsed in this paper seems innocuous with respect to violation of principles of academic fairness. Therefore, its use in the oral interlocutor role should be encouraged to help students become more fluent interactive English speakers. The only caution is that the teacher still needs to be involved. If EFL students are left to engage in spoken interaction with ChatGPT entirely unsupervised they may engage at a level that is too easy. In that case their

ability may fossilize as they do not progress (Krashen, 1982). The teacher needs to be involved in guiding the initial prompts that students provide to ChatGPT so that the interactions are suitable for the student level, i.e. provide some challenge, and progress towards more normal conversation with native speakers.

Finally, the implication for researchers is also clear. It is by now clear that ChatGPT can play the role of interlocutor in EFL speaking, and indeed is seen by students around the world to help, but is not superior to a native speaker interlocutor. Studies therefore need not replicate studies to confirm that general conclusion. Rather we need to explore the different kinds of prompt to ChatGPT that can generate the many different kinds of spoken interaction that a learner of English may eventually need to engage in. Such expertise as 'prompt engineers' is not only important for teachers but also for students themselves so that they can eventually take full control of their use of ChatGPT to enhance their oral communicative ability.

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