

Student-Directed Language Learning with ChatGPT: Preferences from within Japanese University Classrooms

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Abstract

Little is still known about student preferences towards using ChatGPT in their learning journey. A classroom-based study was undertaken within a Japanese university to address this. Students worked in groups to create and teach short classes about using ChatGPT to learn English. After all the classes were finished, a survey about student opinions was administered. A thematic analysis of the responses highlighted ChatGPT's usefulness for planning language learning strategies, scheduling, and practicing conversation, while drawbacks included problems with understanding and trusting the feedback provided by the technology.

Keywords: Student-directed learning, ChatGPT, AI, Language learning, English

Introduction and Research Gaps

ChatGPT can provide support for language learning (summarized well by Balci, 2024), including motivating students more (Ali et al., 2023), supporting their needs (Kasneci et al., 2023; Xiao & Zhi, 2023), streamlining the achievement of learning objectives (Farrokhnia et al., 2023), personalizing the learning (Firat, 2023; Khasawneh et al., 2023), and promoting self-directed learning (Du & Alm, 2024; Lin, 2024). It can also help develop specific skills such as communicative competence (Rusmiyanto et al., 2023) and writing abilities (Alharbi, 2023; Dwina, 2024). However, self-directed learning with ChatGPT can present challenges with supporting autonomy among students due to problems

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such as vagueness and unreliability in responses (Mohamed, 2024; Ngo, 2023), as well as difficulties in interpreting non-human response (Teng, 2024).

However, some significant research gaps exist. Firstly, there is a scarcity of data on Japanese university students' personal preferences. Without this, teachers cannot be confident that they are designing learning to be well-aligned with students' needs. Secondly, although student-generated knowledge for teacher-designed AI tasks has shown to motivate them more (Khosravi et al., 2023), there is little research involving student-generated AI classes. Allowing students to experiment with and generate their own approaches to using ChatGPT can improve their understanding and encourage self-directed learning. Thirdly, more closed-ended responses are needed to better understand how to design classes to suit the needs of Japanese students.

Method

Research Question

To address the research gaps above, this study focused on the research question: *“How do Japanese university students prefer to use ChatGPT (or not) for their personal language learning journey when given the freedom to do so?”*

Procedure

Across a 14-week semester, 21 Japanese university students in a Tokyo-based seminar class (13 male and eight female, all aged 19–20) took part in the study. A survey found that none of the students reported using ChatGPT to assist with their learning English in the past. Following basic ChatGPT guidance and training, students were put into six different groups and asked to work together to create a 20-minute class about how to use ChatGPT for language learning purposes for their classmates. Presented in the semester's final class, students reflected on their experiences in both creating and participating in the classes.

Data Collection and Analysis

At the end of the semester, open- and closed-ended survey questions collected student perspectives on the use of ChatGPT for their learning (see the appendix for an English version). A thematic analysis (like the approach by Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the open-ended questions generated themes for the usefulness of and problems for ChatGPT. Responses were read multiple times and grouped under reoccurring themes after several iterations.

Results and Discussion

The topics chosen by the six student groups for the 20-minute classes were (1) English speaking skills, (2) Conversation practice (for traveling abroad), (3) Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) planning and schedule making, (4) International English Language Testing System (IELTS) planning and schedule making, (5) Making research questions, and (6) Café English skills.

Table 1 shows the closed-ended responses about overall impressions of using ChatGPT across the 14-week semester and during the six student-generated classes. ChatGPT was reported as effective ($M = 4.90$), motivating ($M = 4.86$), easy ($M = 4.62$) and fun ($M = 4.90$) to learn English with. This helps confirm that ChatGPT has the potential to motivate students more (Ali et al., 2023) and potential to improve language skills such as speaking and writing (Alharbi, 2023; Dwina, 2024; Rusmiyanto et al., 2023).

Table 2 shows a summary of the open-ended responses about the usefulness and problems with using ChatGPT. ChatGPT was reported to be a cost effective (5 responses) way to support the language learning process. In addition, students valued its ability to generate study plans (11 responses), explain learning strategies (14 responses), help with creativity (4 responses), and support both individual (3 responses) and collaborative work (4 responses). This data highlights student opinions that would not be apparent to the teacher and shows the importance of allowing students to provide direct feedback on preferred uses of ChatGPT.

Table 2 also shows that the main problems with using ChatGPT related to the reliability and specificity of data (Mohamed, 2024; Ngo, 2023) and difficulties in using ChatGPT without teacher instruction (Teng, 2024). These

Table 1. Closed-ended responses about ChatGPT (N = 21)

ChatGPT was...	Effective for Learning English	Motivating for Learning English	Easy to Learn English with	Fun to Learn English with
MEAN	4.90	4.86	4.62	4.90
SD	0.77	1.06	1.16	1.09

Note. 1 = very untrue, 2 = untrue, 3 = somewhat untrue, 4 = somewhat true, 5 = true, 6 = very true.

Table 2. Student perspectives of ChatGPT within language learning (N = 21)

Usefulness of ChatGPT for Language Learning	ChatGPT Language Learning Problems
Language Learning Strategies (14 responses)	Data Accuracy/Reliability (7 responses)
Study Plans (11 responses)	Lack of Specificity (6 responses)
Conversation and Speaking (9 responses)	Learning How to Use (4 responses)
Cost-Efficiency and Accessibility (5 responses)	Lacking Effective Instructions (4 responses)
Creative Writing (4 responses)	Limitations in Checking (3 responses)
Collaborative Learning (4 responses)	Outdated Information (2 responses)
Individualized Learning Plans (3 responses)	Dependency on User Proficiency (3 responses)
Effective Instructions and Input (3 responses)	Impact on Independent Thinking (2 responses)
Matching Own Interests (2 responses)	Training for Speaking/Writing (2 responses)
Critical Thinking and Engagement (2 responses)	Mistakes/Ambiguity (2 responses)

findings confirm the difficulties that students will experience if using ChatGPT for self-directed learning and suggest more support is needed than provided in this study to help them confidently undertake self-directed learning.

Recommendations for Teachers

In line with the results above, four key recommendations are proposed for teachers using ChatGPT in language learning classes:

- Allow students to experiment with designing their own AI-supported class content, as this process was reported to be fun, motivating and effective for learning English.
- Help students use ChatGPT to not only practice language skills, but to also organize their out-of-class study. For instance, ask them to generate weekly self-study plans with ChatGPT to better prepare for upcoming tests.
- Utilize ChatGPT to support creative and collaborate classroom activities, such as story writing in groups. Students valued the technology when working together to create enjoyable content using AI responses.

- Be prepared to support students when ChatGPT provides unclear or unreliable responses. Although student-directed language learning with AI can produce the above-mentioned benefits, students still require teacher assistance when difficulties arise.

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Appendix

Survey (English version)

Part 1. Score each sentence for how true you think it is:

1 = very untrue, 2 = untrue, 3 = somewhat untrue, 4 = somewhat true, 5 = true, 6 = very true

ChatGPT is...

Effective for learning English
Motivating for learning English
Easy to learn English with
Fun to learn English with

Part 2. Please write as much detail as you can for the following questions:

What ways do you think ChatGPT can help you learn English more effectively?

What kind of problems do you think there are when trying to learn English with ChatGPT?