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Japanese English learners' perceptions of ChatGPT for learning purposes: A preliminary study on use and guidance

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The language teaching and learning landscape has been particularly turbulent over the past half decade, influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic and emergence of various new technologies. The public release of ChatGPT, a generative artificial intelligence (AI) chatbot developed by OpenAI in November 2022, has led to much discussion about its positive and negative consequences for language learning within the field. While the ways in which ChatGPT can be used for language learning have been noted by many scholars, there has been a dearth of studies investigating how learners are responding to the new tool and the guidance they need from their teachers. The current study therefore set out to examine English learners' experiences with and their views on the use of ChatGPT for learning purposes. A total of 37 Japanese university students enrolled in English language classes were given a brief guidance session on how to use ChatGPT to assist with their self-learning, and subsequently, were asked to fill out a questionnaire. Based on the self-reported data, insights into the realities of how some English learners in Japan are using ChatGPT and the importance of providing guidance to students are highlighted.

Keywords: ChatGPT, language learning, artificial intelligence (AI), English learners, Japan

Introduction and background

While the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) is not a recent phenomenon, due to the introduction of ChatGPT and other similar generative AI technologies, the past few years witnessed a surge of interest in the use of such technologies for language learning purposes. ChatGPT has been recognised for offering language learners a variety of pedagogical affordances, such as easy access to vocabulary definitions and examples (Kohnke et al., 2023) and functioning as a writing assistance tool (Barrot,

2023). As such, the benefits associated with the use of ChatGPT for language learning purposes have been highlighted in recent literature, but exactly what support learners need to effectively use ChatGPT for their learning remains uncertain.

Japan, which is often considered to be a “tech-savvy” country, appears to be rather behind on its official policies regarding the use of ChatGPT for educational purposes: at the time of writing, there is only a 14-page provisional guideline released by the Ministry of Education in Japan that has not been updated since July 2023 (MEXT, 2023). In an attempt to provide better assistance to learners and teachers, this study aims to explore Japanese English learners’ experiences of using and learning about ChatGPT. Specifically, the following research questions (RQs) were set to guide the study:

RQ1: Are Japanese English learners using ChatGPT, and if so, how?

RQ2: What do they think about receiving guidance on how to use ChatGPT for language learning purposes?

Methods

To answer the two guiding research questions, a survey-research design was employed for the study (Braun et al., 2021). Specifically, 37 students majoring in Business Administration in two intact English classes at a private Japanese university in the Greater Tokyo region first received a short guidance session led by the present author on how to use ChatGPT on their own to improve their English. In the guidance session, which the author devised based on relevant literature on the use of ChatGPT for language teaching and learning (e.g., Kohnke et al., 2023), the students were introduced to various useful prompts, such as ways to use ChatGPT for learning new English vocabulary and practising their communication skills. After the session, the participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire which included six closed-ended questions and seven open-ended questions. The questions predominantly focused on understanding their experiences and perceptions of using ChatGPT for learning purposes and receiving guidance on how to incorporate ChatGPT into their studies. The closed-ended questionnaire items were described using descriptive statistics (Baffoe-Djan & Smith, 2023), and the open-ended questionnaire items were analysed using inductive qualitative content analysis, allowing themes and patterns to emerge from the data set without preconceived categories (Selvi, 2023).

Key findings

After receiving a short guidance session on how to use ChatGPT for their learning purposes, 37 English language learners were asked to fill out the questionnaire. More than half of the respondents (62.2%, $n = 23$) reported that they had used ChatGPT for personal and/or learning purposes prior to the guidance session. They were using it for a myriad of different reasons, including obtaining assistance for their assignments, gaining ideas and hints when writing their essays/reports, and translating English texts into Japanese. Among these 23 respondents, two indicated that they were using it two or three times a week, six were using it once a week, seven were using it once every two weeks, seven were using it once a month, and one

was no longer using it. Out of the 37 respondents, only four indicated that they had received some type of guidance session on using ChatGPT for self-learning purposes to improve their English skills. One student explained that one of her English teachers gave an assignment where she had to use ChatGPT. Another student mentioned that he received a similar guidance session like the one for this study, where he learned about useful prompts for learning purposes.

Respondents were also asked if they wanted to learn more about using ChatGPT for self-learning purposes to improve their English skills, and specifically, what they wanted to learn. The majority of respondents (75.7%, $n = 28$) indicated that they wanted to learn more about ChatGPT: for instance, they commented that they wanted to learn “what kind of questions to ask ChatGPT” (Student #4), “specific examples of its use” (Student #10), and “how to use it efficiently and tips on how to get more out of it” (Student #32). It should also be noted that 14 respondents indicated that they did not want to learn more about ChatGPT. The three most common reasons given were that they felt they already “know how to use ChatGPT” (Student #2), they “do not trust the answers provided by it” (Student #16), and they “learned a lot from today’s class” (Student #29).

In the subsequent section, the respondents were asked whether they thought that it is important for them to receive guidance on utilising ChatGPT. A large proportion of the respondents (86.5%; $n = 32$) responded “yes,” and commented that they felt that it was important because “without learning how to use ChatGPT properly, they could end up committing plagiarism” (Student #4) and “because ChatGPT will become even more important in the future” (Student #14). On the other hand, those who believed that it was not important to receive any guidance (13.5%, $n = 5$) explained that they felt this way because “ChatGPT does not produce accurate answers, and it would be difficult to use it for self-studying purposes even with guidance” (Student #16) and that they thought that “most people already know how to use it” (Student #37).

In the final part of the questionnaire which asked if the respondents had any concerns about the use of ChatGPT for their studies, more than half (51.4%, $n = 19$) reported that they had some concerns, particularly regarding plagiarism and the accuracy and reliability of the answers provided by ChatGPT.

Discussion

The study’s findings illustrated that the Japanese university students who participated in the study were frequently making use of ChatGPT, with little or no prior guidance, and held positive views towards receiving some kind of guidance from their English teachers so that they could become more proficient in the use of ChatGPT for learning purposes. Based on the author’s informal survey of official websites provided by Japanese universities, various universities in Japan appear to provide concise guidelines on students’ use of ChatGPT and other generative AI technologies for assignments, but the decision on how to use such tools is left largely to the students’ discretion, often with teachers not making it clear how they should incorporate them in their studies. Rather than turning a blind eye and letting their students use them freely, like what most participants in this study felt, the students are likely to benefit from teachers taking more initiative and showing them how they can capitalise on

the tools more appropriately and responsibly in their classes. Having said this, it would be ill-considered to assume that all teachers are competent enough in using ChatGPT for language teaching and learning purposes and able to adequately guide their students.

Recent scholarship has demonstrated that teachers do not necessarily feel confident in using ChatGPT and other generative AI technologies themselves (Alm & Ohashi, 2024) and lack of institutional support, including training sessions for teachers, seems to be one of the main inhibiting factors for adoption of ChatGPT in their classrooms (Al-Mughairi & Bhaskar, 2024). Although it would be ideal if teachers are given a chance to receive formal training sessions to increase their generative AI competencies, like shown in Moorhouse et al.'s (2024) study, often due to time and financial constraints, relying on informal learning options, such as ChatGPT-focused online teacher communities formed on social media platforms (e.g., Ito, 2024) could potentially offer more of a realistic solution. Considering that much remains unknown about how teachers can be educated as to how to guide their students to use ChatGPT, further investigation should be carried out.

Conclusion

This preliminary study sought to investigate if and how some Japanese English learners are making use of ChatGPT for learning purposes and their attitudes towards receiving guidance on using ChatGPT for a more enriching language learning experience. Although the perceptions of only 37 learners were examined, it is hoped that the study will serve as a stepping stone toward a deeper understanding of how teachers can support learners in the age of generative AI. As AI is not going anywhere, it is imperative to further understand how students and teachers can smoothly work with these technologies.

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