

Enhancing Linguistic Comprehension in Intermediate ELs Using ChatGPT

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Summary: In this reflection, the author highlights the evolving role of teachers and the integration of ChatGPT in an English language learning classroom setting. Emphasizing both the tool's benefits and challenges, the author offers teaching tips, including training, setting boundaries, and encouraging critical thinking. The narrative underscores the importance of balancing technology with traditional teaching, advocating for judicious and adaptive use.

Keywords: AI, ChatGPT in the language classroom, English learner (EL), critical thinking using AI

Introduction

Teaching in a digitally connected world presents both challenges and opportunities. In my adult English language classroom at a U.S. community college, the primary goal is to enhance the linguistic comprehension of intermediate English Learners (ELs). This includes understanding complex language structures, vocabulary, and theories—such as syntax, semantics, and language acquisition frameworks—beyond basic reading skills (Oakhill et al., 2015). My students come from culturally diverse backgrounds, including Russia, Pakistan, Puerto Rico, Sweden, Kazakhstan, and South Korea—each bringing a unique perspective shaped by their native languages and lived experiences. This diversity enriches the classroom environment while also presenting challenges in ensuring consistent comprehension across students. When assigned to read a passage on second language acquisition, many struggled with theoretical concepts like Chomsky's *universal grammar* and Pinker's psychological models. This revealed a gap in understanding abstract linguistic content. I turned to ChatGPT as a possible solution—an AI tool capable of offering personalized, accessible explanations. This reflection shares how integrating ChatGPT supported deeper comprehension and critical engagement with difficult content, offering insights for educators seeking to merge traditional and technological instruction.

Introducing ChatGPT

ChatGPT, an AI language model developed by OpenAI, offers dynamic, interactive responses that go beyond the static results of conventional search engines. In my ESOL classroom, it allowed students to request simplified explanations tailored to their proficiency level, fostering greater clarity and engagement with complex linguistic concepts.

This adaptability made ChatGPT a valuable tool for enhancing comprehension and supporting learner autonomy.

Implementation

Recognizing the immense potential of ChatGPT as an instructional tool, I integrated it seamlessly into our classroom dynamics. The primary aim was not to replace traditional teaching methods but to supplement them, providing students with an additional avenue for exploration and clarification. Recent research highlights ChatGPT's capacity to foster personalized learning and interactive engagement by offering adaptive, real-time support tailored to individual student needs (Munaye et al., 2025). I asked students about their prior experience of using ChatGPT, and they said they had not used it before. I found that students were empowered to take charge of their learning, especially when faced with perplexing terms or abstract concepts. This autonomy cultivated a proactive approach to learning.

Instead of limiting their interactions to seeking straightforward definitions, students were actively encouraged to dive deeper. For example, after encountering the term *universal grammar* in their reading, students asked ChatGPT to explain its core principles, provide real-life examples, and clarify how it applies to second language acquisition (Meyers, 2013). They were nudged to treat ChatGPT as a virtual tutor, engaging in comprehensive dialogues and delving into topics until they felt confident in their understanding. This iterative process of questioning and clarifying mimicked a genuine tutor-student interaction, ensuring that learning was both thorough and personalized.

An illustrative example of this dynamic interaction came to the fore during our discussion on linguistic theories. One student was struggling to understand Noam Chomsky's *universal grammar* theory and asked ChatGPT to explain it in

simpler terms. True to its design, ChatGPT responded with a beginner-friendly explanation. Building on this foundation, the student then asked follow-up questions—such as requesting examples, comparisons, and clarification of related terms—to deepen their understanding. This process of asking targeted questions and refining their knowledge step by step helped the student move from initial confusion to clearer comprehension.

In today's digitally infused educational environment, the tools and resources we employ play a pivotal role in shaping the learning experience. Alongside our standard curriculum resources, which include textbooks, handouts, and supplementary reading materials, I introduced an additional layer of technology into the mix as every student had a smartphone with a stable internet connection. This technological addition was crucial because it served as the primary bridge between the students and ChatGPT, granting them the ability to engage with the AI model in real time.

Introduction to ChatGPT

Before letting my students navigate ChatGPT, I dedicated a session to introducing the platform and highlighting its unique features. Unlike static search engines, ChatGPT offers dynamic, two-way interaction—students can ask follow-up questions, request simpler explanations, or tailor responses to their English level. This personalized exchange helps them receive information in a format that matches their individual learning needs.

Guided Practice

Rather than expecting students to instinctively know how to extract the most value from ChatGPT, I adopted a hands-on approach. I conducted demonstrations, showcasing the best ways to frame questions and illustrating the importance of follow-up inquiries. For example, I demonstrated to the students how to use ChatGPT to understand a difficult concept. I asked ChatGPT, "Please explain the universal grammar theory in simple language (for intermediate ELs)." After I got the response from ChatGPT, some sentences were still too complicated for the learners to understand. Then I copied and pasted those sentences and asked ChatGPT, "Please elaborate this sentence/idea more with examples." ChatGPT provided a detailed elaboration with some examples. Following this, students assured me that they understood the concepts and theories better. After demonstrating the process, I asked them to tailor their questions based on their needs. These initial guided sessions paved the way for students to delve deeper and extract layered understandings from their future interactions.

Independent Usage

After equipping them with the necessary skills, I gradually allowed students more autonomy to interact with ChatGPT. This freedom enabled them to ask questions that aligned with their personal curiosities and to delve into topics at

their unique pace, cultivating a self-directed learning environment. I saw that students were asking more questions and requesting examples relevant to the topic and based on their needs. I asked for their feedback on their usage. They described their positive experience of using ChatGPT for better understanding. One student said:

When using Google, sometimes I cannot get the explanation and examples the way I want. But here, I can ask what I want and ChatGPT answers based on my questions. I can also ask for an explanation of a particular sentence from my text or lesson by typing that line in the chat box.

So, they found it helpful according to their needs.

Group Discussions

Learning is not just about individual comprehension but also about collaborative exchange. After their independent research sessions with ChatGPT, we convened for group discussions. Here, students told their newfound insights into the clarifications they had gleaned and reflected on their interactions with ChatGPT. Students described their experiences of how they formulated the questions to ChatGPT. Some said they typed the sentence from the text in the chat box and then asked ChatGPT to explain this line. Some said that they asked for examples to understand the concept better. However, their sharing of experience enriched the class's collective knowledge and fostered a sense of community and shared learning.

Assessment, Feedback, and Outcomes

To explore the impact of ChatGPT on learning, I assessed students on the topics they had researched. I then held one-on-one feedback sessions with each student to review their comprehension progress, discuss specific areas for improvement, and recognize their growth. Unlike the peer-based group discussions, these sessions were individualized and instructor-led.

The results were transformative. The depth of understanding improved significantly, as shown in class discussions, assignments, and tests. Students who previously hesitated to ask questions—worried about being judged—began engaging more confidently with the material. They learned to tailor ChatGPT's responses to match their level, starting with simple explanations and gradually exploring more complex ideas. The tool served as a supportive supplement, helping clarify concepts without placing all the burden on the teacher.

As we embarked on this experimental journey, I witnessed its profound impact on student comprehension. For example, some students found it challenging to grasp Noam Chomsky's theories on language acquisition and the concept of *universal grammar* due to the complex language used in the text. To address this, they turned to ChatGPT for explanations of these theories in simpler

terms, suitable for beginners or intermediate ELs. ChatGPT provided clear and straightforward explanations, aiding the students in understanding the basic concepts. With this foundational understanding, they revisited the original text. This time, equipped with a clearer grasp of the theories, they found it easier to comprehend the advanced and complex language of the text, overcoming their initial difficulties in understanding the concepts.

Teaching Tips

Train Students First

Before introducing any innovative tool into the classroom, it is paramount to ensure students are well-acquainted with it. Prior training sessions can help the students become acquainted with the tool's functionalities. By familiarizing them with the nuances of ChatGPT, or any other platform, the teacher can ensure a smoother transition and more productive engagements in actual lessons.

Set Boundaries

The allure of technology is undeniable, but without clear boundaries, it can easily become a source of distraction. It is essential to demarcate specific periods within the lesson for accessing tools like ChatGPT.

Encourage Critical Thinking

While AI platforms like ChatGPT offer a wealth of information, it is crucial for students not to take everything at face value. Encouraging a culture of skepticism and critical analysis ensures they do not become passive consumers of information. Urge them to cross-reference facts, pose challenging questions to the tool, and even discuss findings with

peers, promoting a holistic understanding and analytical mindset.

Adapt and Evolve

As with all teaching methodologies, it is essential to remain adaptive when integrating technology. Regularly monitor how students are interacting with ChatGPT: Are they overly dependent? If the tool is used in the classroom, the teacher should monitor every student. Are they engaging critically? Based on these observations, be prepared to adjust the teaching strategy, ensuring the tool remains an asset and not a hindrance.

Conclusion

In today's evolving educational landscape, educators are no longer just transmitters of knowledge but strategic guides navigating a growing array of tools. My integration of ChatGPT reflected this shift, offering students an accessible way to engage with complex linguistic concepts and deepen their understanding. The results were immediate: students gained clarity and confidence through interactive, personalized explanations. However, the tool also presented challenges. Some students began relying on ChatGPT even for basic concepts, highlighting the need to set boundaries and promote critical thinking. This experience reinforced an important lesson: technology should enhance—not replace—traditional instruction. When used thoughtfully, tools like ChatGPT can support meaningful learning while maintaining the core values of curiosity, independence, and teacher guidance. Ultimately, balancing innovation with intentional use is key to reshaping how students access, process, and engage with knowledge in the modern classroom.

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