

ChatGPT as a Learning Strategy: A Study on High School EFL Students' Engagement in Language Acquisition in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract—This study investigates the role of ChatGPT as a learning strategy in enhancing engagement and language acquisition among Saudi high school EFL students. It employs quantitative and qualitative research approaches to gather students' perceived engagement and learning strategies while using ChatGPT in the learning process. The study results showed that Saudi high school students highly perceived the efficacy of ChatGPT as a learning aid and its role in promoting English acquisition in an EFL setting. Qualitative findings highlight five key factors necessary for the effective use of ChatGPT as a learning aid in the EFL classroom: (i) enhancing its interactivity as a classroom tool; (ii) positioning it as an intelligent learning companion; (iii) advancing its technical development for EFL-specific contexts; (iv) improving the quality of its conversational AI experience; and (v) increasing its accessibility and ease of use. Based on these findings, the study suggests integrating AI-driven tools like ChatGPT to support language competence development in Saudi EFL classrooms while looking for enhancements in its features.

Index Terms—ChatGPT, language acquisition, learning strategy, AI-driven tools

I. INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) has significantly impacted the field of education, particularly in language learning. AI-powered language tools, such as ChatGPT, provide students with an interactive learning experience by offering real-time feedback, personalized responses, and opportunities for autonomous learning (Wang & Tahir, 2022). In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, AI-driven technologies have demonstrated the potential to enhance student engagement, motivation, and linguistic competence (Sun, 2022). However, while AI-based language models continue to evolve, their effectiveness as a learning strategy remains an area of ongoing research. Rule-based chatbots are generated with predetermined rubrics that specify how they should respond to particular inquiries. Consequently, they cannot understand sophisticated questions (Kuhail et al., 2023; Alqahtani, 2024).

Saudi Arabia has actively integrated digital transformation initiatives into its education system, aligning with Vision 2030, which prioritizes using technology to enhance learning outcomes (Al-Khalifa, 2021). Alotaibi and Alshehri (2023) have highlighted the growing interest in AI applications in Saudi education, emphasizing their potential to personalize learning and improve engagement. In particular, adopting AI-powered tools in EFL classrooms presents new opportunities for improving language acquisition and student participation. Despite these advancements, there is limited empirical research on how Saudi high school EFL students perceive ChatGPT as a learning strategy and its impact on their language acquisition. Addressing this research gap is essential to understanding the role of AI in facilitating language learning and shaping future pedagogical practices and the challenges of integrating tools like ChatGPT into EFL instruction, particularly in the Saudi context, where cultural and educational dynamics may influence their effectiveness.

Previous studies indicated that AI-assisted learning tools can foster a more engaging and interactive learning environment by providing students with immediate feedback, improving their writing and speaking skills, and increasing exposure to authentic language use (AbuSahyon et al., 2023). Furthermore, ChatGPT's ability to simulate human-like conversations may help EFL learners develop communication skills in a low-pressure setting (Zhu, 2023). However, challenges such as content accuracy, ethical considerations, and the need for proper pedagogical integration remain concerns that educators must address (Alqahtani & Wafula, 2024).

This study aims to explore Saudi high school EFL students' perceptions of ChatGPT as a learning strategy and its impact on their language acquisition. Specifically, it seeks to (1) assess students' perceptions of utilizing ChatGPT in their learning, (2) determine the extent to which ChatGPT supports their language acquisition, and (3) develop recommendations for optimizing student engagement and learning outcomes through AI-based tools. By focusing on these aims, this research hopes to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on AI-enhanced language learning. It offers insights into its potential applications in Saudi EFL education. This study aims: a) to assess the Saudi EFL students' perceptions of utilizing ChatGPT in their learning; b) to determine the impact of ChatGPT on the language

acquisition of Saudi EFL learners; c) to develop recommendations for enhancing student engagement and language acquisition through the use of AI-based tools like ChatGPT in EFL instruction.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Integrating artificial intelligence (AI) in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education has garnered significant attention recently. AI-powered tools, such as ChatGPT, offer interactive learning experiences by providing real-time feedback and personalized responses, thereby fostering autonomous learning among students (Wang & Tahir, 2022). These technologies have demonstrated particular potential in enhancing student engagement, motivation, and linguistic competence within EFL contexts (Sun, 2022).

ChatGPT, developed by OpenAI, is a language model that generates human-like text based on user prompts. Its application in language learning environments allows students to engage in simulated conversations, aiding in developing communication skills in a low-pressure setting (Zhu, 2023). Serhiy et al. (2021) have discussed how AI has influenced language learning by providing personalized, interactive, and collaborative experiences. It classifies AILE research into four domains: language-specific applications, adaptive learning systems, intelligent tutoring systems, and conversational agents.

AlHarbi (2024) addresses a significant gap at the intersection of big data, language pedagogy, and the context of Saudi Arabia's unique educational system, offering valuable insights to guide future initiatives in this understudied area. In their study, Asadi et al. (2025) investigated the impact of integrating ChatGPT into educational contexts, specifically focusing on its role in providing individualized feedback on English essay writing for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Their findings suggest that AI-assisted feedback can support language development by offering timely, tailored guidance aligned with learners' needs. Moreover, their study explored the perspectives of eight teachers on integrating such AI tools ethically and effectively. The study found that the participants demonstrated a significantly more significant improvement with ChatGPT feedback than the group receiving only teacher feedback. They also emphasized the transformative result of incorporating AI tools with traditional teaching methods to deliver personalized feedback, significantly advancing EFL learners' writing proficiency and addressing practical challenges in writing instruction. Koraiishi (2023) claimed that ChatGPT may be used to improve materials and streamline the process of developing engaging content. The study also discovered that ChatGPT has the ability to provide real-time, individualized feedback on student performance.

In Saudi Arabia, adopting AI technologies in education aligns with the nation's Vision 2030 initiative, which emphasizes technological integration to enhance learning outcomes (Al-Khalifa, 2021). Recent empirical studies have explored the impact of ChatGPT on Saudi EFL learners. For instance, research involving 57 female high school students utilized a quasi-experimental design to assess the effectiveness of a ChatGPT-based application in enhancing vocabulary learning. The findings indicated significant improvements in vocabulary acquisition among the experimental group compared to the control group (Alshammari, 2023; Albelihi & Al-Ahdal, 2024).

Faisal (2024) investigated the potential benefits of integrating ChatGPT in higher education. She identified AI's role in teaching, improving student learning and engagement, aiding language learning, and promoting inclusivity. She also claimed that AI can reshape the educational landscape and bridge language gaps. She, furthermore, asserts that AI emerges as a transformative tool enabling educators and students to bring into line with Saudi Arabia's pursuit of academic excellence and future workforce readiness.

Another study enrolled 235 undergraduate students across two Saudi universities to evaluate their perceptions of ChatGPT in EFL classrooms. The results revealed that students generally held positive views regarding the tool's usability and potential to enhance language learning. However, challenges such as content accuracy and the need for proper pedagogical integration were also highlighted (Alharbi & Meccawy, 2023; Aljabret et al., 2023).

While AI-driven tools like ChatGPT offer great benefits, several challenges persist. Concerns regarding content accuracy, ethical considerations, and the necessity for effective pedagogical strategies are prevalent (Alqahtani & Wafula, 2024). Educators must integrate AI applications thoughtfully into curricula to complement traditional teaching methods and address potential limitations.

A vast corpus of studies uphold the potential of AI tools in enhancing EFL learning. They also highlight the importance of contextual and cultural adaptation to maximize the effectiveness of AI in diverse educational settings. Leading among the pros are the immense opportunities for enhancing student engagement and language acquisition. Empirical evidence from the Saudi context underscores its potential benefits yet also emphasizes the importance of addressing associated challenges such as content accuracy, ethical concerns, and pedagogical integration.

III. METHOD

The study seeks to answer the research questions: a) what is the students' perception of using ChatGPT as a learning strategy?; to what extent does the use of ChatGPT contribute to promoting EFL acquisition among Saudi EFL learners?; what can be recommended to improve students' language learning engagement using ChatGPT?

The sample comprises 122 High School students in Saudi Arabia (Table 1). This was a random sample with a female majority of 74.6%, and 25.4% males. The participants were aged between 16-17 years (63.11%), 14-15 years (15.58%),

and 21.31% aged between 18-19 years. Almost all students (99.2%) were enrolled at public schools, with one student (forming 0.8%) going to a private school. Table 1 displays the grade level of the participants: 62.3% are in the third secondary level, 37.7% were in the first secondary level, and none from the second secondary level.

TABLE 1
STUDENTS' PROFILE

		Frequency	Percentage
Age	14-15	19	15.58%
	16-17	77	63.11%
	18-19	26	21.31%
	Total	122	100%
Gender	Female	91	74.6%
	Male	31	25.4%
	Total	122	100%
Type of school	Public School	121	99.2%
	Private School	1	0.8%
	Total	122	100%
Grade	First Secondary Level	46	37.7%
	Second Secondary Level	0	0.0%
	Third Secondary Level	76	62.3%
	Total	122	100%

A close-ended questionnaire comprising 15 items was administered to gather the required data from the students. The questionnaire was intentionally divided into three sections. In section one, four demographical variables were included to provide information about gender, types of school, level of study and age. The second comprised 5 items (5-Likert scale) to gather students' perceptions of using ChatGPT as a learning strategy. The last dimension (third) consisted of 10 items to gather information about students' perceptions of leveraging ChatGPT for English language acquisition. Cronbach's Alpha scale was utilized to measure the consistency of the scale. The scale's reliability (Table 2) was high, at an average of .972. The first dimension which includes 5 items to measure students' perception of using ChatGPT as a learning strategy, scored a value of .899. Finally, the second dimension, regarding ChatGPT participation in promoting EFL acquisition scored a very high consistency score of .974. These scores (as they outperformed the 0.7 benchmark) showed that the scale is internally consistent to measure the construct of the study.

TABLE 2
RELIABILITY OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Dimensions	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
ChatGPT as a learning strategy	.899	5
ChatGPT participate in promoting EFL acquisition	.974	10
Average	.972	15

The result of Cronbach's Alpha indicated that the tool was reliable as the accepted values of Cronbach's Alpha range from .65 onwards. An interview as the second study tool was utilized to triangulate the data. Thirty-two students volunteered to answer the interview (Appendix). Their answers were coded, and themes were identified.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section systematically answers the research questions using the descriptive tools of Mean and Standard deviation.

RQ1- What is the students' perception of using ChatGPT as a learning strategy?

The following table illustrates these students' perceptions of utilizing ChatGPT in their learning:

TABLE 3
HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF USING CHATGPT AS A LEARNING STRATEGY

Statements	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
ChatGPT helps me to clarify complex topics to enhance my language learning.	122	3.59	1.080
I appreciate the ability of ChatGPT to complete assignments without waiting for teacher.	122	3.71	1.202
ChatGPT allows me to learn at my own pace.	122	3.44	1.178
I often use ChatGPT to help me brainstorm ideas while I write topics.	122	3.63	1.172
ChatGPT supplies me with additional resources for English language learning.	122	3.61	1.181
Average	122	3.60	.982

Saudi high school students' perceptions of using ChatGPT as a learning strategy are illustrated in Table 3, showing highly positive perceptions (average Mean =3.60, Standard deviation =.982). The mean scores of their responses on the Likert Scale ranged from 3.44 to 3.71, which ranked among the high positive attitudes, indicating that Saudi high school students generally appreciate the benefits of ChatGPT in enhancing their English language learning. This finding aligns with the results of studies by Ali (2023), Leat and Taylor (2023), and Alqahtani (2024), who reported that participants in their research acknowledged the potential benefits of ChatGPT and experienced enhanced learning outcomes. Table 3

shows that students valued the ability of ChatGPT to complete assignments efficiently (3.71) and provide supplementary learning resources (Mean =3.61) to clarify complex topics (Mean =3.59). They also recognize the smoothness of learning at their own pace (Mean 3.44) and receive help brainstorming ideas (Mean =3.63). Overall, the average mean score illustrates the usefulness of ChatGPT as a learning tool.

RQ2- To what extent does ChatGPT use promote EFL acquisition among Saudi EFL learners?

TABLE 4
SAUDI HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF CHATGPT'S ROLE IN PROMOTING EFL ACQUISITION

Statements	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
ChatGPT has helped me understand English grammar better.	122	3.60	1.243
Using ChatGPT has increased my confidence in speaking English.	122	3.54	1.128
I feel more engaged in my language lessons when using ChatGPT as a learning tool.	122	3.35	1.170
ChatGPT provides useful feedback that helps me improve my English language skills.	122	3.43	1.212
I am able to practice my pronunciation effectively using ChatGPT.	122	3.43	1.185
ChatGPT has made learning English more enjoyable for me.	122	3.57	1.219
I find it easy to incorporate ChatGPT into my study routine for language learning.	122	3.44	1.164
Using ChatGPT has improved my vocabulary and word usage in English.	122	3.41	1.204
I believe that ChatGPT is an effective tool for developing my listening skills in English.	122	3.72	1.234
I would recommend ChatGPT to my classmates as a valuable resource for learning and practising English.	122	3.52	1.234
Average	122	3.50	1.082

The results in Table 4 indicate that Saudi high school students perceive ChatGPT as a tool that promotes English EFL acquisition to a high level (overall mean =3.50, Standard deviation =1.082). The students' mean scores, ranging from 3.35 to 3.72 (ranging from medium to high attitudes), suggest their agreement on the advantages of using ChatGPT in acquiring English. Notably, Table 4 demonstrates that the highest mean score (3.72) was recorded for the belief that ChatGPT is an effective tool for developing my listening skills in English. On the contrary, the lowest mean score was recorded for the impact of ChatGPT in engaging students in their language lessons (Mean =3.35). Table 4 also shows that Saudi students reported improvements in mastering English grammar (Mean =3.60, STD=1.243), acquiring confidence in speaking (Mean =3.54, STD=1.128), and vocabulary development (Mean = 3.41, STD= 1.204). They also found ChatGPT to be enjoyable (Mean=3.57, STD=1.219) and ease of incorporation (Mean=3.44, STD=1.164) into their study routine.

RQ3- What can be recommended to improve students' language learning engagement using ChatGPT?

The interview responses were analyzed, and five leading themes pertaining to ChatGPT were reported as follows: interactive classroom tools, smart learning companions, technical development, enhancing conversational AI experience, and enhancing accessibility and use.

Making ChatGPT an interactive classroom tool was the first theme. This theme occurred four times, and the key phrases are reproduced here: Student 1: "Teachers are required to use it to explain lessons"; Student 25: "Leveraging it into school syllabus"; Student 27: "developing its integration with learning activities"; Student 17: "enhancing its capabilities to explain lessons".

The second emerging theme was centred around making ChatGPT an intelligent learning companion. It occurred 5 times. The key phrases were: " Receiving lesson explanations and answers", "learning reading and writing rules", "assistance with study tasks", "interactive exercises and collaborative learning," and "sharing it with others".

The third theme was recommending technical development for ChatGPT. It occurred 7 times with the leading phrases being: "accepting PDF files and images", "functionality without internet connection", and "further development to make it easy for the public to use".

The fourth theme suggests enhancing the Conversational AI Experience which occurred four times. The key phrases were: "extending conversation duration for more than an hour" and "training in on various language dialects for better understanding". Furthermore, humanizing it is also among the recommendations. For instance, student 23 mentioned "improving its speed to voice response for a more human-like experience", while student 31 added, "boosting its effectiveness by customizing conversations according to the student's level". The fifth theme that emerged is enhancing accessibility and use, which occurred three times, the key phrases being "providing students with free access to use it", "considering providing paid accounts to students", and "allocating time from the English class to explain the tool to students further".

The study found that Saudi high school students highly perceive using ChatGPT as a learning strategy with a high output of positive attitudes. These high perceptions align with Aldowsari and Aljebreen (2024) who pointed out that ChatGPT assisted EFL students to improve their language skills. The findings of this study agree with Alharthi (2024) and Jamshed et al. (2024), which showed that university students have a highly positive perception of using ChatGPT for developing their communication skills. Similarly, Javaid et al. (2023) reported that students viewed ChatGPT as a valuable resource for practising conversational skills and receiving personalized feedback, leading to improved communication abilities.

The study reported Saudi high school students' attitudes on the impact of ChatGPT in attaining language mastery. This finding reiterates Al-Safadi et al. (2023), which pointed out that ChatGPT enhances students' language skills. The

results are also consistent with Alsalem (2024), which affirmed the impact of ChatGPT in developing students' speaking skills.

The study received some recommendations for engaging students to participate in the classroom. These recommendations are training ChatGPT to become an interactive classroom tool, assisting as an intelligent learning companion, providing technical development, enhancing conversational AI experience, and enhancing accessibility and use. These findings uphold AbuSa'aleek and Alenizi's (2024) findings, which reported that ChatGPT can be used as a learning tool. The findings of this study also agree with Klayklung et al. (2023), which affirmed that ChatGPT should assist in developing EFL teaching practice.

V. CONCLUSION

This study examined Saudi high school students' perceptions regarding using ChatGPT as a learning strategy in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) acquisition. The findings revealed that students hold highly positive attitudes towards ChatGPT, valuing its ability to facilitate language learning, complete assignments efficiently, provide supplementary resources, and clarify complex topics. The quantitative results, with an overall perception mean of 3.60, suggest that students generally recognize the benefits of ChatGPT in enhancing their learning experience.

Moreover, the study demonstrated that students perceive ChatGPT as a beneficial tool in promoting EFL acquisition, with an overall mean of 3.50. They particularly acknowledged its role in improving listening skills, grammar mastery, confidence in speaking, and vocabulary development. However, the lowest mean score was recorded for its role in engaging students in language lessons, highlighting a potential area for further improvement in integrating ChatGPT into interactive learning environments.

In addition to the quantitative findings, the study identified five thematic recommendations for optimizing ChatGPT's use in the language classroom: enhancing its role as an interactive classroom tool, establishing it as an intelligent learning companion, furthering technical development, improving the conversational AI experience, and increasing accessibility and ease of use. These insights align with previous research, affirming that ChatGPT can be a valuable learning aid when integrated effectively into EFL instruction.

Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of research on AI-driven educational tools, reinforcing the potential of ChatGPT as an innovative and supportive language learning strategy.

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that educational stakeholders must be aware of the use of ChatGPT and similar AI tools in EFL classrooms, specifically in enhancing ChatGPT's role as an interactive classroom tool to increase student engagement during language lessons. Additionally, technical advancements should aim to improve the conversational AI experience, ensuring its accessibility and user-friendly aspects for students and teachers alike. Moreover, future studies should assess the long-term impact of ChatGPT on language proficiency and skill development. Further studies can be undertaken to provide a more holistic understanding of teachers' perspectives on integrating ChatGPT into EFL instruction.

For future research, it is to acknowledge that this study could not explore strategies for increasing student engagement through interactive activities and the long-term impact of ChatGPT on language proficiency. Additionally, teachers' perspectives on ChatGPT integration were not included here. Future research should, therefore, focus on developing best practices for integrating AI tools in language learning and exploring their long-term effects on learning outcomes.

APPENDIX. INTERVIEW ITEMS

Item No.	Interview Questions
1	Can you describe how using ChatGPT has impacted your confidence in speaking and understanding English?
2	In what ways has ChatGPT influenced your engagement during your English language lessons?
3	What challenges, if any, have you faced while using ChatGPT to improve your language skills?
4	How effective do you think ChatGPT is in helping you develop specific language skills like grammar, vocabulary, or fluency?
5	What suggestions do you have for making ChatGPT a more effective tool for enhancing language learning in your classroom?

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