

Exploring Applications of ChatGPT to Improve Spoken Chinese Self-efficacy of International Students: Theoretical Rationales, Limitations, and Recommendations

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ABSTRACT

As China joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) and its national strength continued to grow, enthusiasm for learning Chinese has been heating up globally. Chinese language education has gradually integrated into the education systems of more countries, becoming a significant focus of attention and study. However, despite the increasing demand for learning Chinese, international students still face several challenges in learning spoken Chinese due to limitations in teaching hours and the number of teachers, especially a lack of personalized, timely targeted feedback. This paper aims to explore the feasibility of using ChatGPT to assist international students in enhancing their spoken Chinese self-efficacy based on Social Cognitive Theory. The discussion focuses on how ChatGPT can help improve students' spoken Chinese self-efficacy through creating opportunities for successful learning experiences, offering indirect learning opportunities, using verbal persuasion, and adjusting emotional and physiological states. The paper also discusses the issues related to ChatGPT, such as the timeliness of information updates, potential language and cultural biases, and inadequate handling of non-verbal communication, and offers targeted suggestions.

Keywords: ChatGPT; International Students; Spoken Chinese; Self-Efficacy; Social Cognitive Theory

INTRODUCTION

As China joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) and rapidly strengthened its national power, exchanges and collaborations between China and foreign countries have become increasingly frequent, presenting a pattern of multi-level, multi-domain cooperation. China's open-door policy has not only propelled economic development but also enhanced cultural and educational exchanges and cooperation. China's education system has progressively opened its doors to the world, offering more opportunities for learning Chinese and understanding Chinese culture globally. Under the active promotion of the Chinese government, Confucius Institutes have rapidly expanded and strengthened worldwide. As a vital platform for promoting Chinese culture, Confucius Institutes are dedicated to spreading Chinese language and culture, enhancing cultural exchanges and cooperation between China and other countries. Confucius Institutes not only provide high-quality teaching resources and learning environments for foreigners learning Chinese but also play an active role in promoting Chinese culture globally and fostering friendships and cooperation between China and other countries (Bodomo et al., 2024; Gil, 2017; Sun, 2023).

With China's rise and the advancement of its open-door policy, Chinese, as one of the most spoken languages in the world, has increasingly garnered attention and importance internationally. Chinese is not only the native language of the Chinese people but has also become a link connecting China with the world. The importance of Chinese is not only evident in cultural exchanges (Fatima & Saman, 2024) but also holds significant value in international trade (Ismail, 2010), technological innovation (Chai, 2023) among other fields. As the global influence of Chinese continues to expand, more and more people wish to master the language to better understand Chinese culture, communicate with Chinese people, and gain a competitive edge in careers related to China. Especially in the context of globalization, an increasing number of multinational corporations and institutions require employees with Chinese language skills to tap into the Chinese market and strengthen cooperation with China.

In recent years, Chinese as a foreign language education has shown a robust development trend globally. The age of learners is becoming younger, not limited to adults or university students, but increasingly extending to high schools, middle schools, elementary schools, and even kindergartens (Miller, 2021; W. Xu, 2021). More and more countries are incorporating Chinese into their national education systems, integrating Chinese language instruction into school curricula to cultivate students' cross-cultural communication skills and global competitiveness, for instance, Philippines (Jingyi & De Dios, 2024), Saudi Arabia (Alshammari, 2020) and America (S. Zhang, 2021). This trend not only reflects the growing demand for learning Chinese but also demonstrates a strong interest in and

recognition of Chinese culture and China's development.

As language serves as the primary tool for human communication, its importance is self-evident. In language teaching, oral instruction occupies a crucial position (Алаудинова, 2022). Speaking is the most direct and commonly used form of language in daily communication, characterized by its practicality and immediate communicative impact. Therefore, teaching speaking is not only an important part of language learning but also a key element in developing students' language application abilities and enhancing their communicative skills. The ultimate goal for Chinese learners is to be able to use Chinese proficiently in communication. This includes not only simple everyday conversations but also broader and more complex communication scenarios such as academic discussions, business negotiations, and social interactions. With the ongoing process of globalization, communicative ability has become one of the main objectives of language education worldwide. In this context, as one of the most spoken languages globally, the orientation of oral proficiency testing in the overseas national education systems has become increasingly important. Among the 'listening, speaking, reading, and writing' skills, international students generally consider 'speaking' the most important (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021), because oral skills directly reflect a person's level of language application and communicative ability. However, compared to reading and writing, learning and mastering speaking skills are indeed more challenging. For international students who come to China, quickly mastering oral skills relevant to daily life and study is very urgent. Adapting to the new language environment in a short time and effectively communicating with Chinese people are their primary challenges. Thus, rapidly improving their speaking skills is crucial. This not only helps them better integrate into the Chinese living and learning environment but also enhances their learning efficiency and communication abilities.

In traditional international Chinese speaking classes, there are some noteworthy issues. Firstly, the limited class practice time makes it difficult to cover a wide range of practical topics, resulting in some topics being outdated and disconnected from everyday life. Moreover, for international students, learning spoken Chinese requires a lot of repetitive practice, and the traditional classroom model may not provide each student with sufficient practice opportunities, which restricts the improvement of their speaking abilities. Limited by teaching duration and the number of teachers, international students often cannot receive adequate personalized and timely targeted feedback during their spoken Chinese learning process. This situation presents certain challenges to the enhancement of their speaking capabilities.

In recent years, modern educational technology has been widely applied in Chinese language learning, attracting the interest of many learners. Research indicates that Chinese speaking apps (such as iChinese, aha Chinese, Fluent Conversation: Learning Chinese, etc.) are highly valued by learners, particularly impacting beginner-level Chinese learners significantly. However, these apps still have some deficiencies in content and technology. For example, current Chinese speaking software usually only provides practice for specific speaking materials and most can only offer feedback at the phonetic level. This limitation leads to these apps not being very effective. Effective spoken expression is not just about the accuracy of phonetic pronunciation but also involves grammar usage, vocabulary selection, comprehension abilities, and fluency among other aspects (Brown, 2024). However, current speaking apps often fail to provide comprehensive feedback and cannot help learners improve their speaking abilities in these areas comprehensively.

With the rise of generative artificial intelligence represented by ChatGPT, more and more people are beginning to realize the potential of this technology in the field of language learning (Li et al., 2023; X. Xu et al., 2024). It can be anticipated that generative artificial intelligence will play an increasingly important role in language learning, offering learners a more personalized and efficient learning experience. Although many scholars and educators have extensively explored the application of generative AI technologies like ChatGPT in the field of English education, these studies are primarily focused on aspects such as English listening (Xing, 2023), English writing (Fitria, 2023), reading comprehension (Xiao et al., 2023), and oral practice (Young & Shishido, 2023). However, research in the field of oral communication within international Chinese education is relatively scarce.

When predicting a person's performance on a task, self-efficacy is one of the most important factors. Self-efficacy, the confidence an individual has in their ability to accomplish a specific task (Bandura, 1977), directly influences their behavior, motivation, and performance. In the field of language learning, particularly in speaking, self-efficacy plays a crucial role (X. Zhang, 2018). A learner's confidence in their ability to express themselves fluently, understand accurately, and communicate effectively with others directly impacts their engagement and ultimate performance in language learning tasks. Learners with high self-efficacy are usually more inclined to actively participate in learning activities, brave in trying new ways of language expression, and have a stronger ability to cope with mistakes and challenges, thereby achieving better learning outcomes. Therefore, when predicting a person's performance in the oral domain of international Chinese education, it is essential to consider their level of

self-efficacy, which will provide educators with important references to develop personalized teaching strategies to help learners enhance their speaking skills and achieve better learning success.

Although research on ChatGPT in English education is relatively abundant, its application in international Chinese education is still relatively limited. Particularly in the field of Chinese speaking, there are few studies on using ChatGPT to assist international students in improving their speaking skills. Moreover, in oral learning, the self-efficacy of international students in Chinese speaking plays a crucial role in their oral performance. Therefore, the current will analyze the possibility of using ChatGPT to help foreign students enhance their Chinese speaking self-efficacy and thereby improve their speaking performance, based on social cognitive theory.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

SOCIAL COGNITIVE THEORY

Social Cognitive Theory, proposed by American psychologist Albert Bandura (Bandura, 1986), is a foundational social psychology theory that views learning and behavior as inherently social. This implies that the interactions between individuals, their environments, and the interplay between the individual and the environment are crucial for understanding their learning and behavioral outcomes, hence the concept of 'triadic reciprocal determinism' was introduced. The theory considers environmental factors, behaviors, and personal factors as relatively independent yet interactively influencing theoretical entities. Environmental factors refer to the external environment surrounding the individual, including physical, social, and cultural settings. Specifically, the physical environment includes virtual or real learning environments, such as online or offline learning settings; the cultural environment includes cultural values, social norms, and language usage; the social environment includes factors such as peer pressure. These environmental factors impact an individual's cognitive processes and behavioral performance. Personal factors include individual cognition, emotions, motivation, personality, etc. These personal aspects influence how individuals perceive, understand, and respond to their environments.

SELF-EFFICACY

Self-efficacy is an individual's estimation and judgment of whether they can successfully complete a particular behavior. This concept was first introduced by psychologist Albert Bandura in 1977, who defined self-efficacy as an individual's confidence in their ability to execute the skills necessary to accomplish specific tasks. Bandura et al. (Bandura et al., 1999) conducted extensive research on the factors influencing self-efficacy, pointing out that it can be developed through the following four pathways: (1) Mastery experiences: Building confidence and self-efficacy through one's own successful experiences. Successful experiences can enhance an individual's confidence, making them believe they have the ability to complete tasks; (2) Vicarious experiences: Enhancing one's self-efficacy by observing the successful experiences of others. When individuals see others similar to themselves successfully complete a task, they may believe they have the same capabilities, thereby boosting their self-efficacy; (3) Verbal persuasion: Verbal encouragement and persuasion from others can help individuals build confidence and self-efficacy in their abilities. When others express trust and support and provide encouragement, individuals may feel more confident to take on challenges; (4) Effects of physiological and affective states: An individual's emotional and physiological states can also affect their self-efficacy. When individuals feel relaxed, happy, and positive, their self-efficacy may be enhanced; conversely, when they feel tense, anxious, and negative, their self-efficacy may decrease.

CHINESE PROFICIENCY GRADING STANDARDS FOR INTERNATIONAL CHINESE LANGUAGE EDUCATION

The *Chinese Proficiency Grading Standards for International Chinese Language Education* (GF0025-2021) (hereafter referred to as *Standards*) is a language standard developed by the Center for Language Education and Cooperation under the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. It was released in March 2021 and officially implemented from July 1, 2021. The *Standards* classifies learners' Chinese proficiency into 'three levels and nine grades,' and construct a 'four-dimensional benchmark' consisting of *syllables*, *Chinese characters*, *vocabulary*, and *grammar*. It forms three evaluation dimensions based on *communicative competence*, *topic task content*, and *language quantitative indicators*, employing *listening*, *speaking*, *reading*, *writing*, and *translating* as five language skills to accurately determine learners' Chinese proficiency.

Specifically, *speaking* is divided into three levels and nine grades, examining elements such as syllables, vocabulary, grammar, communication, impromptu speeches, debates, discourse expression, opinion expression, logic, content, pronunciation, intonation, rhetoric, and intercultural content. For example, at the ninth grade, the

The *Standards* specify that learners at this level should be proficient in using advanced language quantitative indicators of syllables, vocabulary, and grammar to competently handle topic expressions and communication tasks. They are expected to have a strong ability in discourse expression and flexible language use. Learners should

be capable of expressing their thoughts and insights completely, accurately, and fluently, with content that is rich and logically structured. Additionally, their pronunciation should be precise and their intonation natural. They should also be adept at using rhetorical techniques to enhance the effectiveness of their oral expressions, thereby demonstrating robust intercultural communication skills.

CHATGPT

ChatGPT is a natural language processing model developed by OpenAI, one of the artificial intelligence models trained on a large-scale language dataset. It can generate responses based on patterns and statistical rules observed during its pre-training phase and interact based on the context of the conversation, truly communicating like a human. It can even complete tasks such as writing papers, emails, scripts, copy, translations, and code. ChatGPT can understand and generate human-like text, making it widely used in fields such as translation (Cao & Liu, 2024; Gao et al., 2024; Sahari et al., 2023), scientific research (Khlaif et al., 2023, 2023), English teaching (Kostka & Toncelli, 2023; Lou, 2023; Z. Zhang, 2024).

THEORETICAL RATIONALE

This section explored in detail the feasibility of using ChatGPT to enhance the spoken Chinese self-efficacy of international students from four aspects: providing successful experiences, offering indirect learning opportunities, engaging in verbal persuasion, and adjusting emotional and physiological states.

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUCCESSFUL LEARNING EXPERIENCES

ChatGPT can offer feedback and guidance, helping students identify and correct language errors, and advising them on the accuracy and fluency of their spoken expressions. By promptly detecting and pointing out mistakes, students can understand their shortcomings and improve their spoken Chinese abilities with the help of ChatGPT.

Firstly, as an artificial intelligence-assisted tool, ChatGPT has significant advantages in providing timely feedback. Through interactions with ChatGPT, students can instantly understand their performance, and this real-time feedback is crucial for improvements in their spoken practice. ChatGPT's analytical capabilities can also help students comprehensively understand their level of language expression and identify specific areas needing improvement, allowing them to target their oral practice effectively and thus continuously accumulate successful experiences.

Secondly, ChatGPT can provide not only general feedback but also personalized and targeted feedback based on the student's oral task performance. By analyzing students' spoken expressions, ChatGPT can accurately identify language problems and offer improvement suggestions tailored to their individual needs. This personalized feedback not only helps students gain a deeper understanding of their language level but also stimulates their motivation to learn, encouraging them to practice speaking more diligently and thus gain more successful experiences.

Additionally, ChatGPT can provide personalized learning content, study plans, and practice materials based on the students' needs and proficiency levels. Through interaction with ChatGPT, students can choose learning materials and practice content that suit their learning goals and progress, thus more effectively enhancing their spoken Chinese abilities. This personalized learning experience not only helps students systematically train their speaking skills but also allows them to accumulate more successful experiences in oral practice, thereby improving their spoken Chinese self-efficacy.

OFFERING INDIRECT LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

As an intelligent language model, ChatGPT can not only provide an experience of conversing with learners but also simulate real spoken language interactions, allowing learners to immerse themselves in a simulated language environment. By dialoguing with ChatGPT, learners can observe spoken expressions in simulated scenarios, and accumulate a wealth of Chinese speaking techniques, vocabulary usage, and grammatical structures. This real-time communication experience helps learners intuitively understand the essentials of oral communication and enhance their ability to respond in actual spoken interactions.

Observing ChatGPT's simulated spoken expressions, learners can also perceive and empathize with others' experiences and apply them to their own speaking practice. By imitating and learning from the spoken materials generated by ChatGPT, learners can gradually develop their own style and techniques of spoken expression, continually improving and perfecting these in practice. This indirect method of learning not only boosts learners' confidence in their speaking abilities but also enhances their communicative skills, enabling them to use spoken Chinese more fluently in daily life and learning.

Furthermore, learners can also observe language skills by watching interactions between their classmates and ChatGPT, or from their own conversations with ChatGPT. By sharing and discussing their experiences interacting with ChatGPT, learners can inspire each other and explore techniques and strategies for spoken expression, thereby collectively enhancing their spoken efficacy. This collaborative learning method not only promotes interaction and cooperation among learners but also deepens their understanding and mastery of spoken expression, offering them more inspiration and assistance in their language learning.

USING VERBAL PERSUASION

Apart from making targeted assessments of learners' spoken expression, thinking logic, and grammar, ChatGPT can also simulate human-like interactions by expressing timely support and encouragement to learners, thereby helping international students build confidence in their Chinese speaking abilities.

Firstly, ChatGPT can promptly offer encouragement and recognition to international students, showing support and affirmation for their efforts in learning. By praising and acknowledging their achievements in learning spoken Chinese, students feel that their efforts are worthwhile and recognized, which in turn enhances their self-efficacy in spoken Chinese. For example, if international students perform well during oral practice with ChatGPT, it can encourage and praise their progress and efforts, making them feel that their achievements are acknowledged and valued.

Secondly, ChatGPT can provide motivation and support when students face difficulties or challenges. It encourages students to actively confront challenges in spoken Chinese, reinforcing their belief that they can overcome difficulties. This positive verbal persuasion can inspire students to bravely face challenges in learning, boosting their spoken Chinese self-efficacy, and thereby improving their spoken Chinese performance. For instance, when students encounter difficulties in oral practice, ChatGPT can convey encouraging messages, tell them to believe in their abilities, and offer advice and support to help them overcome obstacles and make progress.

In summary, by simulating human interactions, ChatGPT can offer a more comprehensive and personalized learning experience to international students by offering timely encouragement and support, helping students build confidence and enhance their self-efficacy in spoken Chinese.

ADJUSTING EMOTIONAL AND PHYSIOLOGICAL STATES

In situations of public scoring, students may feel pressure from teachers and peers, leading to anxiety and tension, which can affect their learning performance. ChatGPT, however, can provide private scoring. This private scoring is visible only to the user and not accessible to others, allowing students to learn and express themselves more relaxedly, reducing the interference of external pressures, and helping to improve learning outcomes. Thus, ChatGPT can offer a private learning environment that helps international students reduce anxiety and tension, allowing them to conduct self-assessment and reflection without external pressure or influence, thereby boosting their confidence in spoken Chinese.

Furthermore, private scoring can help students more objectively evaluate their learning progress, as they do not have to worry about others' judgments or criticism, thereby freely exploring and trying new ways of spoken expression. Through private scoring, students can learn and practice in a safe and relaxed environment, fully utilizing their potential and improving the efficiency and quality of learning.

Additionally, ChatGPT can adjust the rigor of scoring based on students' progress and needs, making the evaluation more aligned with students' actual levels and learning goals, thus more effectively stimulating their interest and motivation to learn. The characteristics of private scoring allow students to fully tap into their potential in a low-pressure and high-efficiency learning environment, thereby better enhancing their confidence and performance in spoken Chinese.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTED SUGGESTIONS

Although utilizing ChatGPT can help international students enhance their spoken Chinese self-efficacy, we must also acknowledge its limitations.

Firstly, ChatGPT's responses are based on its pre-trained datasets, which may lead to outdated or inaccurate information, and knowledge of specific fields or the latest developments may not be updated timely. Especially in a rapidly changing social and technological environment, ChatGPT might not keep up with the latest trends, affecting its accuracy and reliability on certain topics. To address this issue, we need to continually update ChatGPT's dataset and enhance the supplementation and updating of specific domain knowledge to ensure it can

provide accurate and timely information and responses.

Secondly, ChatGPT's responses may be influenced by language and cultural biases. In some cases, ChatGPT may not accurately understand or correctly respond to questions related to specific languages or cultures. Due to differences between languages and cultures, misunderstandings or errors might occur, affecting the understanding of and response to certain topics or expressions. Therefore, we need to be aware of these language and cultural biases when using ChatGPT and avoid relying on it as the sole tool for oral language learning.

Additionally, non-verbal communication plays a crucial role in oral interactions, such as body language, facial expressions, and tone changes. Since ChatGPT is based on text interactions, it cannot handle or respond to non-verbal communication, which may limit the ability to practice the comprehensiveness of spoken interactions. Thus, we need to combine other learning methods and tools, such as oral coaching and role-playing, to comprehensively enhance students' oral communication skills and compensate for ChatGPT's shortcomings in non-verbal communication.

In summary, while ChatGPT has certain advantages in enhancing spoken Chinese self-efficacy, we must also recognize its limitations and take appropriate measures to address and compensate for them, in order to achieve more comprehensive and effective oral language learning goals.

Therefore, international students can enhance their spoken self-efficacy by integrating a variety of other learning resources. For example, they can actively participate in real spoken interaction activities, converse with Chinese people, or join language exchange groups or programs to gain more authentic and extensive Chinese spoken practice experience.

At the same time, when learning spoken Chinese, international students should extensively engage with different linguistic and cultural resources. They can read Chinese literature, watch Chinese movies or documentaries, and participate in cross-cultural exchange activities to enhance their understanding of Chinese civilization from multiple perspectives and avoid the influence of language and cultural biases.

Additionally, although ChatGPT is a useful tool, the importance of human involvement and participation in the oral learning process still needs to be emphasized. The human role is crucial, especially in providing real-time information and discussing topics, where ChatGPT cannot replace human interaction. It is recommended to introduce other resources in oral practice, such as news reports and discussion on social media platforms, so that students can stay informed and discuss current topics and events in a timely manner.

Lastly, international students can utilize video and audio resources to observe and learn non-verbal communication skills. This allows them to directly observe non-verbal elements such as body language, facial expressions, and tone changes, thus enhancing their communication abilities.

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