

Potential of ChatGPT as a Substitute for Human Teachers: Insights from Tunisian EFL Learners' Perspectives

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Keywords: Artificial language model, attitudes, foreign language learning, ChatGPT, linguistic capabilities, Tunisian English language learners. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.22437/langue.v4i1.49199 Received: October 18, 2025 Reviewed: January 03, 2026 Accepted: January 06, 2026	Artificial intelligence (AI) has brought about various language robots, with ChatGPT being among the most sophisticated due to its human-like linguistic capabilities and adaptability. This raises the idea of using ChatGPT in foreign language learning. Starting from the premise that positions ChatGPT as a mediator between language and learner, functioning as a “ghost teacher” offering a peaceful and secure learning space, this study explores the attitudes of Tunisian students of English towards ChatGPT as a “Foreign Language Teacher” and digital assistant. Forty-five third-year English students at Tunisian universities completed a Likert-scale questionnaire consisting of thirty-one items covering phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. A scale ranging from 'Strongly Disagree' to 'Strongly Agree' was used to assess their attitudes toward integrating ChatGPT in language learning effectively and meaningfully. Results indicate generally positive attitudes toward using ChatGPT, particularly in aspects like syntax, phonology, and morphology. However, learners show hesitation regarding its usefulness in pragmatics and semantics, where AI may struggle with deeper, context-sensitive language levels and cultural nuances. These attitudes are shaped by several factors, especially students' technological familiarity and the structure of the education system. Learners with regular exposure to digital tools and online environments tend to be more receptive to AI integration. In contrast, those from rural or under-resourced areas often express skepticism due to limited access and training. Moreover, the nature of the academic system, whether teacher-centered or learner-centered, influences perceptions of AI's usefulness in education and its potential role in personalized learning.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the study: Artificial intelligence and foreign language learning

Despite the existence of many artificial language models like GPT-3, Google BERT, YouChat, and Texti.app all are powered by the AI, ChatGPT is the most famous model that has attracted more than 100 million users (Milmo, 2023). and triggered incessant polemics since its appearance in 2022. Numerous research studies have been conducted on ChatGPT, and the way it may convey human needs in various fields such as services, business, and education. Prominent scholars like Chomsky have shown interest in it (Chomsky et al., 2023).

In this vein, this paper seeks to tackle the key attributes that this model has and how they may be used in foreign language learning. Indeed, among various aspects of ChatGPT, the three following features may be significant in foreign learning. Natural Language Processing (NLP)

is the first distinguished aspect of ChatGPT. As an artificial language model, it can be used to improve the natural language processing capabilities of robots, enabling them to better understand and respond to human language. Owing to this aspect, in the realm of FL, ChatGPT, as an artificial language model, allows the learner to better understand a foreign language. Reinforcement Learning is the second major aspect of ChatGPT. It can be used to improve the learning capabilities of robots through reinforcement learning. This involves training robots to make decisions based on feedback from their environment, allowing them to adapt and improve over time foreign language learners can exploit this aspect to boost their knowledge about the new language they are learning. Last but not the least, Collaborative Learning among different robots is a distinctive aspect of ChatGPT. The collaboration involves the sharing of data and insights between robots to enhance their collective intelligence and effectiveness (Ye et al., 2023). In the same way, foreign language learners can derive benefits from the datasets and insights that ChatGPT has about various foreign languages, to extend their knowledge about foreign languages.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The aim of this paper is to address the attitudes of Tunisians English language learners towards the use of ChatGPT, as an artificial language model, in learning a foreign language.

1.3 Research questions

Q1: How do Tunisian students of English perceive the use of CHATGPT, as an artificial language model, in the learning of a foreign language.

Q2: Is there a connection between the aspects of language and learners' attitudes regarding the use of ChatGPT for foreign language learning?

1.4 Research hypotheses

H1: *Even though CHATGPT has human-like linguistic capabilities, the participants in this study are expected to view it negatively, for one reason that ChatGPT cannot effectively replace real teacher due to the complexity of human language which encompasses various rules (phonological, morphological, syntactic, and pragmatic rules).*

H2: *Attitudes towards the use of CHATGPT vary according to the linguistic rules under consideration.*

2. Literature Review

2.1 CHATGPT as an artificial language model in foreign language learning

Artificial intelligence (AI), the hallmark feature of this digital era, gave birth to ChatGPT, the artificial language model (Kirmani, 2022). This sophisticated model is approximately identical to natural human language (Wu et al., 2023) thanks to its ability to produce human-like responses, leading to meaningful and engaging conversations with users (Kalla & Smith (2023). Furthermore, as a language robot, ChatGPT is equipped with an unlimited number of software applications, allowing it to be flexible to more than human conversations: it can summarize text (Wang et al., 2023), translate text (Kocmi & Federmann, 2023), answer questions (Omar et al., 2023), provide information (Oranga, 2023). detect and correct grammatical errors (Schmidt-Fajlik, 2023). With these human-like linguistic capabilities and the limitless number of tasks, the potential exploitation of ChatGPT as a tool for foreign language

learning is noteworthy, taking for granted that all the abilities ChatGPT possesses are actually tasks introduced in foreign language teaching literature. Freeman and Anderson (2013) summarized the role of the teacher as follows: "The teacher is like an orchestra leader, director, controller, responsible for providing students with a good model" (p. 45). Following Freeman's view in conjunction with the previously mentioned human-like linguistic capabilities attributed to ChatGPT, the latter can serve as a mediator between the learner and the language, responsible for providing students with a good model and needed information.

More importantly, in my assumption, ChatGPT may be more successful than a human teacher for the reason that learners may feel less anxious than when talking to people (teachers and classmates). In fact, this assumption is grounded in the findings of a previous study conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study, which targeted medical students, revealed that despite the prevailing atmosphere of fear and anxiety caused by the pandemic, anxiety levels decreased significantly. This positive shift is attributed to the absence of direct contact between students and teachers (Amalaraj et al., 2023)

ChatGPT, the 'ghost teacher's and the hidden mediator between the learner and the language, may ensure a peaceful atmosphere for learners to acquire a new language, away from anxiety and fear that hinder the learning process in the real classroom. Going further, Nykon (2025) cites three major reasons why AI may outperform human teachers in teaching a foreign language. Firstly, in a real class where students have diverse learning styles, strategies, and personalities, it seems to be a challenging undertaking for the teacher to find an approach that suits the needs of all students. AI, on the other hand, can fulfill the needs of each individual student. A second reason why ChatGPT is advantageous in foreign language learning is that traditional teaching is time-consuming. While teachers often spend considerable time reading and grading many students' works, resulting in delayed feedback, ChatGPT provides almost instantaneous feedback. This enables students to promptly address and correct their mistakes, avoiding them in the future. The final reason why Nykon (2025) emphasized the role of AI in foreign language learning is because he conceived ChatGPT as personalized textbooks that adapt to learners' needs taking into account differences among learners (personalities, learning styles, strategies...). This stands in contrast to real classes, where expecting different learners with varying personalities to follow the same textbook and achieve equal success is deemed unreasonable.

2.1 The components of natural human language

In various human languages exist five basic elements: speech sounds, words, phrases/sentences, literal meaning of words/phrases and sentences, and contextual meaning of words/phrases and sentences, each element is studied within a linguistic field, correspondingly, there are five sub-linguistic disciplines as presented in the following figure.

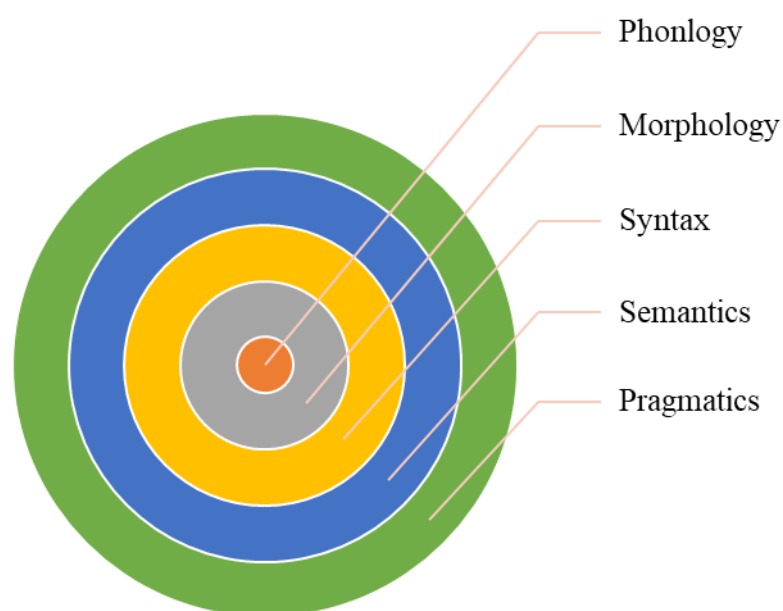


Figure 1. The compounds of languages and the linguistic fields they study

In the initial phase of learning a foreign language, learners investigate the sound system through the study of phonology, a sublinguistic discipline that examines the smallest linguistic units known as phonemes, in order to understand the rules that determine the arrangement, distribution, and development of speech-sound patterns (Raskin, 1987). To foster a sense of security and prevent bullying, during this phase, foreign language learners not only strive for clear and comprehensible communication but to achieve a perfect native-like accent (Scales et al., 2006)

In the subsequent stage, learners study morphology, where the focus shifts to the rules governing changes in meaning at the word level, and analysis of the various processes that go into word formation as well as the internal structure of complex words (Lieber, 2005). Next, students are exposed to syntax, they study the principles of word order and how clauses, phrases, and sentences are put together to convey meaning. (Van Valin, & LaPolla, 1997). As learners advance, semantics which defines the principles controlling the meaning and context of particular words or grammatical units (Coseriu & Geckeler, 1974), becomes increasingly important. Beyond semantics, learners explore pragmatics, a crucial dimension that governs language use across diverse communication contexts (Łazarczyk et al., 2009).

From the basic and smallest phonetic unit (phoneme) to the most intricate uses of language in different real-world situations, foreign language learners go through different linguistic levels (phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics) and should master various language rules. This enables them to acquire linguistic competence, communicative competence, and interactional competence. The classification attributed to three scholars includes the theory of linguistic competence proposed by Chomsky (2014), who defined it as the native speakers' ability to formulate 'well-formed sentences'. Hymes (1972) introduced the theory of communicative competence, emphasizing not only the knowledge of a language but also the understanding of what message to communicate, to whom, and how to communicate appropriately in any particular context. This theory also involves socio-cultural knowledge that

enables speakers to use and understand different speech forms. Kramsch (1986) introduced the notion of interactional competence, taking the position that 'abilities, actions, and activities' are not owned by a single individual participating in the communication process but are cooperatively constructed by everyone involved in the conversation.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 3.1 Participants

Forty-five students, in their third year of fundamental English at Tunisian universities and high institutes, completed the questionnaire. Two reasons behind the choice of third-year students: (i) about 81% of those who that responded to the questionnaire are third year students while first and second year students, together, did not exceed 20 % of the participants (ii) a second reason behind this choice, is the fact that in the Tunisian educational system, third year students have studied different aspects of English language. successively. In their first year, they studied phonology and syntax while during the second year, they studied morphology and semantics, and, by the last year, they studied the last aspect of language, pragmatics.

3.2 Questionnaire

The first section of the questionnaire is devoted for the collection of the basic demographic information about the participants namely gender, age, place, academic level, online learning experience. To assess the attitudes of Tunisian English students towards the use of ChatGPT in learning English as a foreign language, a Likert scale questionnaire consisting of 31 items was developed in the second section of the questionnaire. The items cover all aspects of language and distributed as follows: 6 items for phonology, 5 items for morphology, 7 items for syntax, 7 items for semantics, and 6 items for pragmatics. To measure attitude responses, options were categorized as 'Strongly Disagree,' 'Disagree,' 'Undecided,' 'Agree,' and 'Strongly Agree.'

Table 1. Questionnaire Items

Language Components	Items
Phonology	1. I think that by using ChatGPT to learn phonemes and phonological principles, we can improve our pronunciation. 2. We can recognize and classify different phonemes in the English language using ChatGpt. 3. To syllabify words and examine their syllable structure and kinds, we might utilize Chagtp. 4. We can improve our comprehension of speech rhythm and melody by using ChatGPT to examine intonation and stress patterns. 5. I think ChatGPT has the ability to distinguish between minimal pairings and highlight the importance of particular phonemes in word differences. 6. I believe that ChatGPT can assist in analyzing phonological processes, such as assimilation, deletion, insertion, and vowel reduction.

Language Components	Items
Morphology	7. I think ChatGPT is useful for comprehending word building procedures like compounding and affixation. 8. In my opinion, CHatGpt is helpful for analyzing and comprehending the internal structure and lexical morphology of words. 9. I think ChatGPT can help with understanding the creation and inflection of words as well as classifying them into several grammatical classes. 10. I think ChatGPT is an excellent resource for researching supplementation and a typical morphological changes. 11. ChatGPT can help with the analysis of the hierarchical structure of English words and the construction of morphological trees.
Syntax	12. ChatGPT can be used in the study of syntax and sentence structure. 13. ChatGPT can assist in analyzing the internal structure of sentence and its constituents. 14. ChatGPT can be useful to identify grammatical relationships in sentences. 15. We can rely on ChatGPT to classify words into grammatical categories. 16. We can use chatGPT to study of syntactic rules and their variations across languages. 17. We can use chatGPT to understand different grammatical categories (e.g., tense, aspect, mood) and their impact on sentence structure. 18. ChatGPT can can help in disambiguating sentence structures and multiple valid interpretations.
Semantics	19. I believe that we can use ChatGPT to study of word meaning, including denotative and connotative meanings 20. ChatGPTis useful to explore the distinction between the sense and reference of words. 21. ChatGPT can be used to study lexicon semantics , including synonymy and antonymy. 22. chatGPT can be used to understandhyponymy-hypernymy relationships between words. 23. chatGPT can be used to undertand the semantic roles in sentence structure. 24. ChatGPT can help in understanding the truth conditions of sentences and statements. 25. ChatGPTcan address various types of ambiguity in language.

Language Components	Items
Pragmatics	26. ChatGPT can identify and analyze different logical connectors like implicatures, both conversational and conventional.presupposition, entailment....
	27. ChatGPT can contribute to interpret the indirect meaning of logical connectors implicatures, both conversational and conventional.presupposition, entailment
	28. I believe chaGPT can assist in the study of deixis and how context affects the interpretation of deictic expressions.
	29. ChatGPT can study politeness strategies and their impact on maintaining social harmony in conversation.
	30. ChatGpt can help in understanding conversation pair and how conversational partners cooperate to achieve effective communication.
	31. ChatGPT can analyze how context affects the interpretation of language and how listeners make inferences about meaning.

4. Findings

4.1 4.1.1. General attitudes towards the use of AI and ChatGPT in learning a foreign language

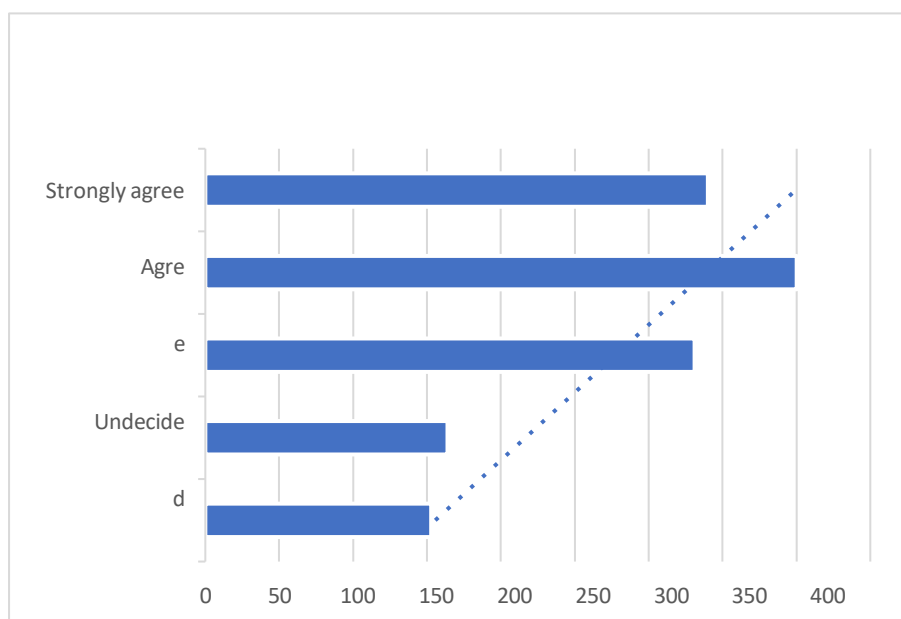


Figure 2: General attitudes towards ChatGPT and AI in learning English as a foreign language

The Figure (2) above provides a response to the first research question: *How do Tunisian students of English perceived CHATGPT as an artificial language model in foreign language learning? The figure also rejects the first hypothesis, which stated : even though ChatGPT demonstrates human-like linguistic capabilities, participants in this study are expected to regard ChatGPT negatively, because of a belief that a real teacher cannot be substituted due to the complicating factors surrounding the nature of human language and its many rules - phonological, morphological, syntactic, and pragmatic.*

Most learners favored positive choices 'agree' and 'strongly agree,' followed by the neutral option 'undecided,' while the negative alternatives 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree' rank lowest. In fact, the mixed responses, positive and negative, suggest that learners are decisive and certain in their opinions. This certitude reveals that Tunisian English language learners are either confident in the applicability of ChatGPT as an artificial language model for learning English or are cognizant and aware of its limitations, both cases prove that students are familiar with ChatGPT and stay up with technological advancements.

In fact, these findings coincide with those derived from research conducted in other contexts.

Study One: Phosa (2024) targeted Thai third-year undergraduate students from the Educational Technology and Communications program at Naresuan University. The findings indicated that EFL students strongly agreed that ChatGPT was easy to use and convenient. They also reported that ChatGPT helped boost their interest and motivation in English language learning and encouraged them to invest time and effort into improving their English proficiency.

Study Two: Chen (2024), conducted in China, found that students exhibited high acceptance and diverse usage patterns of ChatGPT. The study revealed that widespread use of ChatGPT contributed to substantially lower levels of foreign language learning anxiety.

4.2 Attitudes of Tunisian English language learners towards the use of ChatGPT in learning different aspects of language

Table 2. Language aspects and learners' attitudes towards ChatGPT

Language Components	Mean	St.deviation
Phonology	9.5143	2.0251
Morphology	9.0286	≈ 2.1685
Syntax	9.8571	3.1298
Semantics	9.04767	5.5483
Pragmatics	7.6857	6.0229

The table displays results pertaining to the second research question: *Is there a relationship between the various aspects of language and learners' attitudes towards using ChatGPT in foreign language learning? also, the findings confirm the second hypothesis (H2), which claims that learners' attitudes towards using ChatGPT depend on which parts of the*

language they're working on

Considering various aspects of language, the mean and standard deviation of Tunisian English language learners' attitudes toward the utilization of ChatGPT as an artificial language model, are presented in the table above as an answer to the second research question about the relation between the aspects of language and learners' attitudes regarding the use of ChatGPT in learning. Pragmatics has a lower mean score (7.6857), indicating a less favorable opinion about the exploit of ChatGPT in studying pragmatics. In contrast, syntax, semantics, morphology, and phonology have the highest mean attitude score between 9.02 and 9.8, indicating that learners generally have a positive opinion about the use of ChatGPT as artificial language model in learning these aspects of language. While the standard deviations for pragmatics (6.0229) and semantics (5.5483) are higher, they indicate that learners have a wider range of attitudes and opinions regarding the use of ChatGPT in learning pragmatics and semantics, the standard deviations for syntax (3.1298), phonology (2.0251), and morphology (2.1865) are relatively low, suggesting that learners' attitudes towards the use of ChatGPT in learning syntax, phonology, and morphology are generally consistent and less variable. These findings partially support Fang and Han's (2025) claim that the use of ChatGPT leads to improvements in grammatical accuracy, lexical variety, and structural clarity in learner writing.

5. Discussion

5.1 Factors influencing Tunisian students' attitudes towards AI in foreign language learning: Educational culture & technological access

As the findings reveal, attitudes gradually vary ranging from positivity to skepticism to negativity. The following paragraph outlines factors underlying reasons behind positive, skeptical, and negative attitudes among Tunisian English learners toward ChatGPT.

Positivity may be attributed to the fact that Tunisian foreign language learners are already accustomed to technology use in learning, especially during the corona period (distance learning, online learning), also, in years past Tunisia's Ministry of Education launched its digital school program "Solution Numerique Pour Tous" in May 2015, as part of its wider program of reform is promoting the use of digital tools in the learning process, expanding access to digital resources for all students and using digital technology to support academic success, pedagogical innovation and citizenship. Meanwhile, negativity is the consequence of many factors mainly the limited exposure to technology considering that participants come from different places of Tunisia where rural and peripheral regions suffer from the shortage of internet (Magouri, 2018). These disparities in technological access and experiences can significantly contribute to the formation of negative attitudes towards ChatGPT and AI for the students dwelling in the deprived areas. Skeptical attitudes, indicated by the 'undecided' option, may be explained by a lack of knowledge about ChatGPT as an artificial language model, which is a relatively new innovation. In this vein, it is important to remember that internet emerged in the USA in 1967 and became a trend in learning only in the 1990s, and nowadays it shapes the landscape of modern education (Peters, 2002), online learning, also, in Tunisia appeared as a trend in the early 21st century with the foundation of Virtual University, and it became mainstream after the pandemic. Furthermore, students' positive perceptions of AI technologies, such as ChatGPT, in the Tunisian context may be explained by the prevailing educational values that underscore learner-centered education. The educational culture in Tunisia, which places the learner at

the center of the learning process, encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning and to place trust in non-human knowledge sources.

However, the skepticism observed among Tunisian English students is comprehensible given the newness of ChatGPT and AI. Actually, it is premature and too early to form decisive viewpoints, as the integration of these technologies like internet, online services in foreign language learning have taken time to become widespread and then evaluated.

Meanwhile, negative attitudes may be attributed to the fact the Tunisian educational system is still largely exam-driven, where a successful student is always assessed based on standardized tests or the ability to recall facts in rote fashion. In this way, the context may not lend itself well to AI tools that emphasize indefinite exploration or that demonstrate multiple pathways to problem-solving.

5.2 ChatGPT in foreign language learning: Effective for form, insufficient for function

Due to the intricate nature of different linguistic components, diverse opinions are expected regarding the efficacy of ChatGPT as an artificial language model for learning various language aspects. While syntax, phonology, morphology are concerned with the superficial level of language and concerned with *how* language is used (how sounds are articulated (phonology), how words are formed (morphology) and how sentence is constructed (syntax)), pragmatics in a first degree and semantics in second degree delves into the depth of language, why we use language, the speaker's intention, the audience interpretation which are governed by contextual factors shaping the meaning). Thus, ChatGPT may excel at teaching learners the surface-level of language but do not possess a deep understanding and falls short in delving into the deep level of language. In other words, ChatGPT can help learner in boosting his linguistic competence, it can substitute for the human teacher and assist in teaching how language should be used, particularly in terms of formulating well-structured sentences, correct spelling, correct use of grammar, word derivations, word order, eloquence, and punctuation. Nevertheless, ChatGPT might not be able to completely comprehend the more contextual and facets of language, such as critical thinking, reading between the lines, recognizing subtle social signs, or deciphering complex cultural subtleties, which are concerns within the realm of pragmatics. This goes against Nykon's (2025) attitudes mentioned in the theoretical section above, favoring AI in foreign language learning over human teachers. This preference may be explained by the fact that Nykon realized the ChatGPT's proficiency at the surface level of language and neglected the essence and the deep level of language. On this basis, Nykon's assumption is partially correct in the sense while ChatGPT may substitute for an instructor teaching some aspects of language (phonology, morphology, syntax) and in teaching various school subjects, it may fall short in effectively replacing human educators when it comes to language teaching as an intricate system due to the unique nature of foreign language teaching/ learning which differ from school subjects such as math, physics, and chemistry, in which teachers serve a single task of providing and correcting information. In contrast, foreign language teachers, as Firth and Wagner, (2007), argued, serve several tasks such as communicating ideas, developing understanding, cementing social interaction, and so on, encompassing human knowledge.

6. Conclusion

This study explored Tunisian English language learners' attitudes toward the use of ChatGPT as an artificial language model in foreign language learning, with particular attention to their perceptions across different linguistic components, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. The findings reveal a spectrum of attitudes, ranging from highly positive to skeptical and negative, shaped by a variety of educational, technological, and cultural factors.

One of the main contributions of this study lies in its focus on learners' differentiated attitudes across specific language domains. It confirms that while ChatGPT is perceived as an effective tool for enhancing formal language aspects, such as syntax, phonology, and morphology, it is less effective in supporting deeper, functional dimensions of language like pragmatics and semantics. These findings partially support previous claims about AI's capacity to enhance grammatical accuracy and lexical development. Another significant contribution is the study's contextual relevance, it highlighted how local factors, such as Tunisia's exam-driven system, uneven digital access, and ongoing educational reforms, can shape learners' openness or resistance to AI integration in foreign language learning. However, the study is not without limitations. The sample size was relatively small and limited to third-year English students, which may not represent the broader student population.

The findings yield several important implications. For educators and policymakers, the results suggest that while AI tools like ChatGPT can support certain aspects of language learning, their integration must be guided and complemented by human teaching particularly in areas involving pragmatic competence, intercultural communication, and real-time social interaction. Furthermore, for instructional designers and developers of AI tools, these results point to the need for AI systems to evolve beyond surface-level language processing, incorporating more sophisticated models of context, intention, and interaction if they are to truly assist in developing communicative and interactional competence.

Ultimately, ChatGPT offers valuable opportunities for language learners, particularly in mastering the form and structure of language. However, its role remains supplementary, not a substitute—for the human teacher, especially in fostering the deeper, human-centred dimensions of language learning that remain irreplaceable by machines.

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