

# The Experiences Of Chinese University Students Using Chatgpt For English Speaking Practice: Focus On Anxiety And Proficiency

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## **Abstract**

*This study investigates the role of ChatGPT in alleviating language anxiety and improving English-speaking proficiency among Chinese university students. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the research explores students' subjective experiences, emotional changes, and behavioral feedback during ChatGPT-enabled English-speaking practice. Grounded in the Foreign Language Anxiety Theory and Technology Acceptance Model, the study examines how ChatGPT's non-judgmental and interactive features influence learners' communication apprehension, confidence, and language performance. Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews and diary records from 10-15 participants with intermediate or above English proficiency. Thematic analysis will identify key insights into anxiety reduction, language proficiency enhancement, and technology usage. Findings will contribute to theoretical advancements in AI-assisted language learning and provide practical guidance for optimizing AI tools in educational settings.*

**Keywords:** CHATGPT, English Speaking, Anxiety, Proficiency

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## **1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

English is a critical tool for Chinese university students to access international educational resources and career opportunities. However, improving speaking proficiency has always been a significant challenge. Many students experience language anxiety due to a lack of opportunities to practice with native speakers, fear of making mistakes, and low self-confidence, which prevents them from making effective progress in English learning (Yu, 2021).

In Gan's study, two groups of Chinese university students (from mainland China and Hong Kong) were surveyed regarding their difficulties in English speaking. Among mainland Chinese students, 93.9%, and among Hong Kong students, 90.3%, reported frequent grammatical errors when speaking English. Additionally, 93.7% of mainland students and 82.6% of Hong Kong students faced challenges in expressing complex language and structures (Gan, 2013). Most students also reported issues with pronunciation. Deficiencies in grammar, vocabulary, and phonetics significantly impacted their speaking fluency and accuracy. Students also encountered difficulties in oral processes such as attention allocation, language planning, and pronunciation encoding. Furthermore, many found academic speaking activities, such as classroom discussions, presentations, and whole-class dialogues, particularly challenging. Survey results indicated that they lacked confidence even in conversations on everyday topics (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021). With the development of artificial intelligence technology, tools like ChatGPT provide university students with new opportunities for language practice. By offering readily accessible and non-judgmental conversations, ChatGPT creates a positive learning environment, providing ample practice opportunities such as role-playing and interactive games. These tools help learners improve conversational skills, increase their confidence in using English, and offer personalized support through customized learning resources and interactive activities tailored to the learners' needs and proficiency levels. This can alleviate language anxiety to some extent and enhance speaking proficiency (Kostka & Toncelli, 2023). Some

Researches have shown that ChatGPT can improve students' overall English proficiency and language skills, particularly in grammar and vocabulary. It can also boost students' learning motivation and engagement, enhance autonomous learning, provide personalized learning opportunities, and deliver instant feedback(Meniado,2023).

Therefore, this study focuses on the specific group of Chinese university students and aims to systematically explore the actual effects of ChatGPT in English-speaking practice, particularly its role in alleviating language anxiety and improving speaking proficiency. Additionally, the study will analyze students' emotional changes and behavioral feedback when using ChatGPT, providing theoretical and practical support for optimizing the application of AI technology in language education.

## **2 PROBLEM STATEMENT**

First, language anxiety is a widespread issue. Due to limited opportunities to communicate with native speakers, fear of making mistakes, and a lack of self-confidence, many students feel nervous, uneasy, or even avoid practicing speaking. Research has shown that language anxiety significantly affects students' learning efficiency and performance, hindering improvements in speaking fluency, grammatical accuracy, and vocabulary usage. This anxiety is particularly pronounced when students express complex language structures or participate in formal speaking activities, further affecting their engagement and motivation(Hashemi, 2011).

Second, traditional language learning methods have limitations. While classroom teaching and after-class practice remain the primary learning approaches, they often fail to provide sufficient opportunities for speaking practice, particularly in terms of personalized, immediate feedback and a stress-free interactive environment. Classroom activities are typically constrained by time, teacher resources, and the quality of peer interactions, making it difficult to meet the individual needs of every student. As a result, many students experience stagnant language expression abilities over time(El Shazly, 2021).

ChatGPT, as an innovative tool, has the potential to help learners engage in personalized speaking practice. However, research on Chinese university students using ChatGPT for English speaking practice is still in its early stages. Existing literature primarily focuses on the general application of AI technology in language learning, with limited in-depth exploration into the real experiences and emotional changes of specific learner groups, such as Chinese university students. In particular, while anxiety is a key emotional factor, most studies focus on anxiety in traditional classroom or face-to-face communication settings, lacking systematic analyses of how virtual environments affect language anxiety and their underlying mechanisms. Furthermore, most current research adopts quantitative methods to evaluate the impact of technology on language learning, with insufficient qualitative studies to uncover learners' subjective experiences, emotional changes, and behavioral feedback when using ChatGPT.

Thus, this study aims to deeply explore the role of ChatGPT in alleviating anxiety and improving speaking proficiency among Chinese university students in English-speaking practice. By doing so, it seeks to address the existing research gaps and provide valuable theoretical and practical insights for optimizing the application of AI technology in education.

## **3 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

### **3.1 THEORETICAL SIGNIFICANCE**

This study focuses on the subjective experiences, emotional changes, and behavioral feedback of Chinese university students when using ChatGPT for English-speaking practice, addressing the research gap regarding the application of artificial intelligence technology in language learning for specific learner groups. By adopting the Foreign Language Anxiety Theory and the Technology Acceptance Model as its theoretical framework, the study deepens the understanding of emotional factors in virtual language learning environments and explores the mechanisms by which changes in anxiety levels influence language proficiency improvement. The findings will enrich the theoretical research at the intersection of

artificial intelligence technology and foreign language learning, providing theoretical support for optimizing language learning environments and teaching models.

### **3.2 PRACTICAL SIGNIFICANCE**

On a practical level, this study offers valuable insights for improving English-speaking skills among Chinese university students. The findings can help educators and technology developers better understand students' actual needs and experiences when using AI tools such as ChatGPT, enabling the design of more targeted and practical teaching strategies and technological tools. The analysis of challenges and suggestions during the usage process will provide valuable empirical evidence for the future promotion and optimization of AI technology in education, contributing to the effectiveness and user satisfaction of AI tools in practical teaching applications

## **4 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

1. To explore the subjective experiences of Chinese university students using ChatGPT for English speaking practice.
2. To analyze whether ChatGPT can alleviate language anxiety among university students.
3. To examine the impact of changes in language anxiety on students' speaking proficiency.
4. To identify challenges and opportunities in using ChatGPT for English speaking practice.

## **5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. What are the subjective experiences of Chinese university students using ChatGPT for English speaking practice?
2. Can ChatGPT effectively alleviate language anxiety during English speaking practice?
3. How do changes in anxiety influence the improvement of students' speaking proficiency?
4. What challenges and suggestions for improvement do students encounter while using ChatGPT for speaking practice?

## **6 RESEARCH DESIGN**

This study adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach to deeply explore the real experiences of Chinese university students using ChatGPT for English speaking practice, with a particular focus on the impact of their anxiety changes and speaking proficiency. The core of the phenomenological approach is to capture participants' subjective feelings, thoughts, and emotions, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of their unique experiences.

### **6.1 Theoretical framework**

#### **6.1.1 Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is a philosophical and research method focusing on individuals' subjective experiences and consciousness, introduced by Edmund Husserl in the early 20th century. Its core goal is to understand how a phenomenon is perceived and experienced in human consciousness rather than merely studying external, objective facts. It emphasizes the "essence" of phenomena, exploring how individuals perceive the world through their unique perspectives, thereby uncovering the deeper meanings behind specific experiences (Qutoshi, 2018). In this study, phenomenology is used to investigate the real experiences of Chinese university students using ChatGPT for English speaking practice, including their anxiety, proficiency improvement, and technology usage experiences. This approach provides researchers with a deeper understanding of learners' psychological states and behaviors, helping to reveal the potential value of technology in educational settings.

#### **6.1.2 Foreign Language Anxiety Theory**

In 1986, Horwitz et al. proposed the "Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Theory," which identifies language anxiety as a significant emotional factor in foreign language learning with a notable impact on learning outcomes. Language anxiety mainly originates from three dimensions: Communication

Apprehension, Test Anxiety, Fear of Negative Evaluation. According to Horwitz et al., language anxiety not only affects learners' efficiency and fluency but can also weaken their motivation for learning. However, moderate levels of anxiety can stimulate motivation, making it essential to understand and alleviate language anxiety to improve foreign language learning outcomes (Fattahi Marnani & Cuocci, 2022).

In this study, the Foreign Language Anxiety Theory is used to explore whether ChatGPT, with its non-judgmental conversational environment, can alleviate learners' communication apprehension and fear of making mistakes. It also examines the specific changes in learners' anxiety levels before and after interacting with ChatGPT. Additionally, the study investigates whether the reduction of anxiety can indirectly enhance learners' speaking proficiency, including fluency, vocabulary, and grammatical accuracy, thus fostering more confident practice.

### **6.1.3 Technology Acceptance Model (Tam)**

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), proposed by Fred Davis in 1989, is a theory used to predict and explain users' acceptance of new technologies. Its core factors are Perceived Usefulness (PU) and Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU). PU refers to the extent to which users believe that the technology can improve efficiency or solve problems, while PEOU refers to how simple and easy the technology is to operate without adding extra burdens. These two factors jointly influence users' attitudes, behavioral intentions, and actual usage behaviors (Chuttur, 2009).

In this study, TAM is used to analyze learners' acceptance of ChatGPT, including whether they perceive it as helpful in improving their English-speaking skills and whether they find its usage convenient. This provides insights into how technology influences learning behaviors.

## **6.2 Participants**

**Target Population :** Chinese university students, including undergraduates and postgraduates. **Sample Size:** 10-15 participants, with the exact number determined by the principle of data saturation (i.e., when no new information emerges from additional participants).

**Sample Criteria:** Age: 18-25 years old ; English Learning Background: Intermediate or above English proficiency (e.g., passing CET-4 or an equivalent proficiency test) ; ChatGPT Usage Experience: At least three months of using ChatGPT for English speaking practice, with a minimum frequency of two practice sessions per week. ; Voluntary Participation: Willing to participate and provide informed consent while adhering to the ethical requirements of the study.

## **6.3 Research Design Process**

**Phase 1 Preparation Stage:** Develop the research outline and interview guidelines; Obtain ethical approval and design the participant recruitment process (through university communities, announcements, and online platforms). **Phase 2 Data Collection Stage:** Utilize a combination of semi-structured interviews and diary records to comprehensively capture participants' experiences and perceptions; Conduct one-on-one interviews either in person or online, and collect students' diary records. **Phase 3 Data Analysis Stage:** Transcribe, code, and conduct thematic analysis on the collected data; Use NVivo software to manage the data and ensure a systematic analysis process. **Phase 4 Report Writing and Result Validation :** Compile the research findings and share them with some participants to confirm that the interpretations align with their experiences ; Write the final report and propose recommendations for improvement.

# **7 DATA COLLECTION METHODS**

## **7.1 Semi-structured interviews**

**Interview Tools:** Conduct interviews in person or via online video conferencing tools (e.g., Tencent Meeting). Record the entire interview process with the participants' consent.

**Interview Questions Design:** A. Background Information: What is your English learning experience and current speaking proficiency? Why did you choose ChatGPT as a tool for speaking practice? B. Usage

Experience: What emotional changes (e.g., nervousness or relaxation) did you experience during your interactions with ChatGPT? Did ChatGPT's feedback help with your learning? If so, in what specific ways?

C. Anxiety Changes: Have your language anxiety levels changed before and after using ChatGPT? How does practicing with ChatGPT differ from communicating with real people? D. Challenges and Suggestions: What major difficulties have you encountered while using ChatGPT? Do you have any suggestions for improvement?

**Interview Process:** Each interview lasts approximately 45-60 minutes, guided by the researcher. Follow-up questions are adjusted flexibly based on participants' responses.

## 7.2 DIARY RECORDS

**Purpose:** Capture participants' genuine feelings and reflections during their daily use of ChatGPT, supplementing the interview data. **Record Contents:** Specific time and duration of each ChatGPT session ; The content and themes of practice (e.g., daily conversations, topic discussions, answering questions) ; Emotional experiences after each session (e.g., changes in anxiety or confidence) ; Feedback and suggestions for ChatGPT. **Recording Tools:** Provide electronic forms or handwritten templates for participants to choose from based on their preferences.

## 8 DATA ANALYSIS METHODS

### 8.1 Thematic Analysis

**Data Analysis Tools:** NVivo software will be used for coding and theme management, ensuring the analysis process is efficient and traceable.

Data will be analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2012): A. Familiarization with Data: Repeatedly read interview transcripts and diary records to gain a comprehensive understanding and note initial observations. B. Generating Initial Codes: Extract key sentences or paragraphs related to the research questions and conduct open coding; Example codes include "reduced anxiety," "willingness to try," and "limitations of feedback." C. Searching for Themes: Group similar codes to identify preliminary key themes (e.g., "anxiety changes," "ease of technology use," "language proficiency improvement"). D. Reviewing Themes: Ensure themes align with the data and avoid overlapping or missing critical themes. E. Defining and Naming Themes: Clearly define and name each theme, ensuring they effectively address the research questions. F. Producing the Research Report: Combine themes with representative quotes to provide detailed descriptions of the research findings and analyses.

### 8.2 KEY AREAS OF ANALYSIS

**Anxiety Changes:** Analyze the reasons and manifestations of participants' reduced or increased anxiety. **Language Proficiency Improvement:** Focus on how participants perceive changes in their speaking fluency, vocabulary, and grammar usage. **Technology Usage Experience:** Extract participants' evaluations of ChatGPT's ease of use and feedback mechanisms, as well as their suggestions for improvement. **Cross-Verification:** Triangulate interview and diary data to ensure comprehensive and consistent analysis results. Refine theme categorization to deeply explore participants' authentic experiences.

## 9 VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

This study employs multiple strategies to ensure the reliability and consistency of the research process and findings. First, a double-coding method will be used during data analysis, where two researchers independently code a portion of the data to ensure consistency, with any discrepancies resolved through discussion. Additionally, a detailed audit trail will be maintained to document every step of data collection, analysis, and results generation, allowing future researchers to replicate the process. To minimize researcher bias, a reflexive journal will be used to record the researcher's subjective feelings and potential biases, ensuring objectivity during the analysis phase.

The validity of this study is ensured through content, construct, and external validations. The semi-

structured interview and diary questions have been reviewed by experts to confirm that they effectively address the core concepts of the research, such as anxiety changes and improvements in language proficiency. Triangulation of data sources (cross-verifying interviews and diary records) further enhances the comprehensiveness and authenticity of the findings. Additionally, the results will be validated through member checking, where a portion of the findings will be shared with participants to confirm whether the interpretations align with their real experiences, thus improving both the credibility and authenticity of the research.

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