

OpenAI: ChatGPT

Adrian Ciupe

ChatGPT has recently taken the world by storm, with major implications for society in general and for working and learning in particular. These implications have given rise to considerable controversy over existing ethical standards, especially in academia and other education establishments – while this is an extremely pertinent issue that has polarised educators around the world, the sole purpose of this short review is to look at ChatGPT as a tool that can hold the promise of facilitating language teaching and learning.

ChatGPT; grammar; speaking; vocabulary; writing.

ChatGPT, standing for ‘Chat Generative Pre-trained Transformer’ (OpenAI, n.d.), is a chat-based software application made available to the public at large in November 2022 as a *freemium* service: its version 3.5 is free to use, while the more advanced version 4 is available based on a paid subscription plan. The software is minimalistic in design, providing a straightforward interface suited for continuous conversation between users and a chatbot. Users can interact with the software by using prompts apt to elicit more or less exact answers to a variety of queries, which has led to the controversy mentioned above – the main fears being that such an app can subvert human intelligence, encourage plagiarism and spread misinformation. The software is available on all major platforms, Windows, iOS and Android and integrated into the most popular browsers – Chrome, Opera, Edge etc.

Most of the controversy surrounding ChatGPT regards its use to generate *content* (hence the issue of potential plagiarism in academia and not only); however, the app could be successfully used for language teaching and learning, as I will be showing further on. From this point of view, its effectiveness lies in adequate *prompt-engineering*: users’ ability to phrase their queries in such a way as to obtain the desired results according to the parameters required.

In what follows, I will be offering a series of example prompts that teachers and students could use in order to be able to refine their search queries (*prompts*) concerning grammar, vocabulary, speaking and writing. It should be noted that due to space constraints, only examples of *prompts* (queries) are given, not the search results *per se*. Comments are included wherever appropriate.

Grammar

Most areas of grammar can be explored in great detail. Here are a few examples of possibly useful prompts:

1. *'Explain the differences between present perfect and past simple, with examples.'*
2. *'Write a story to illustrate the main uses of different past tenses.'*
3. *'What is the difference in usage between conditional 1 and conditional 2?'*
4. *'How to use 'must'?''*
5. *'What is the difference between 'ought to' and 'should'? Are they perfect synonyms?'*

Vocabulary

Vocabulary queries can also return very detailed information. For example:

6. *'Explain the difference between 'economic' and 'economical', with a few example sentences.'* (confusables).
7. *'Give example sentences using common collocations with the adjectives 'economic' and 'economical' to illustrate differences in usage.'* (confusables, collocations).
8. *'Illustrate all meanings of the phrasal verb 'pick up' in example sentences.'* (any kind of phraseology: phrasal verbs, idioms, collocations, prepositional phrases).
9. *'Give random example sentences illustrating the language used in marketing and advertising.'* (general topic vocabulary).
10. *'Give one example sentence for each of the following words and expressions, to illustrate how they are used to talk about marketing and advertising: 'field research', 'market research', 'market test', 'market-oriented', 'launch', 'growth', 'maturity'.'* (very detailed topic vocabulary).

Speaking

Dialogues and conversations can be generated on the topics desired; functional language can also be explored. Examples:

11. *'Write a conversation between two friends discussing holiday plans.'* (conversations on various topics).
12. *'Write a dialogue between a shop assistant and a customer who wants to buy shoes.'* (situational dialogues).
13. *'Give example sentences of how to apologise when talking to a friend.'* (language functions).

Writing

Different texts can be produced for different purposes, on a variety of topics, in various formats and language registers. For instance:

14. *'Write a semiformal email to your boss, apologising for not being able to meet a deadline'.* (general email).
15. *'Write a formal email to a group of colleagues working in one of your company's branches in New York, to invite them to a celebratory event organised by your branch in Cluj-Napoca, Romania; include details on how they could travel from the US to Romania.'* (very specific email).
16. *'Give example sentences to illustrate different ways of apologising in formal, written business English.'* (language functions).
17. *'Write an essay in response to the following question: is it better to have a male or a female boss?'* (argumentative essay).

Teachers may find it useful to edit some of the search results, as some inconsistencies can arise; for example, even if the prompt requested an answer in British English, American English spellings might be provided. One obvious difficulty regards level-grading, especially for speaking and writing output. For instance, ChatGPT cannot produce 'exact' B1 / B2 / C1 / C2 etc. responses in terms of CEFR levels. However, a workaround strategy can be applied. Consider example (17) above; as such, ChatGPT would usually generate a B2-C1 level essay. If users wanted an A2-B1 level essay for example, they could *prompt: 'Simplify the essay above.'* On the other hand, for a C1-C2 level essay, users could *prompt: 'Rewrite the above essay by using more complex language, in terms of grammar and vocabulary.'* The same holds true for speaking purposes (conversations, dialogues etc.).

To sum up, ChatGPT can offer very detailed accurate language explanations and illustrations depending on how finely-tuned the prompts are – *prompt-engineering* is a skill that comes gradually, by trial and error and with experience in using such a service. If not satisfied with the answers provided, users can click a button to *regenerate* the answers or, within the same chat, they can keep rephrasing their query (prompt) until they obtain the desired results.

In conclusion, despite the apprehension and controversy engendered, mostly of an ethical nature, ChatGPT can be considered an extremely valuable tool in language learning; while fears of plagiarism are legitimate in a context in which students or other types of users would want to produce *content*, learning a language is very much a question of *form* – any possible content being used to illustrate the accuracy of the linguistic structures used / assessed / acquired. As a language educator, I would find ChatGPT a particularly welcome instrument in adapting teaching to exact curricular requirements (most curricula are topic-based) as well as allowing students to take control of their own

learning endeavours by arousing their curiosity and encouraging language exploration and analysis.

The (early) adoption of any new technology, such as this, can at first be fraught with suspicion and apprehension; nevertheless, time will certainly tell if a tool like ChatGPT can suitably serve society for the better or worse, including in education in general and language acquisition in particular.

References

OpenAI. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://openai.com>

Lecturer Adrian Ciupe, PhD. He is a member of the Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication within the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration of Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. He has been teaching business and general English, business communication, advanced writing and speaking skills to BA and MA students and also preparation courses for the TOEFL test and the Cambridge Exams Suite in a variety of systems and formats. His main areas of interest include ESP, ELT, course and syllabus writing / design, online English teaching, computer-assisted language learning (CALL), the Lexical Approach, lexicology / lexicography, language proficiency testing, corpora concordancers and language learning apps for Android, iOS and Windows. (adrian.ciupe@econ.ubbcluj.ro)