

Prompting as a Language Skill: Gen Z Students' Use of Generative AI for English Learning

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ABSTRACT:

There have been novel developments in English language learning in universities through Generative Artificial Intelligence. The Gen Z learners make use of artificial intelligence technologies to get explanations, make up ideas, practise vocabulary, improve their grammar and edit their writing. Research conducted recently has shown that students apply generative AI in different aspects of English language learning, and there are still concerns about its accuracy, dependence and appropriate use. This research explores the phenomenon of prompting as a new language learning skill among Gen Z learners and tries to understand how students form prompts for English language learning activities. The research concentrates on the ability of students to formulate their learning needs in prompts, change them if needed, evaluate the response of the AI and use the suggestions received. Moreover, the study explores the implications of the way prompts are generated on vocabulary acquisition, grammatical competence, writing experience, and autonomy. Thus, prompting should not only be seen as a technical procedure involving interaction with AI but as a form of communication that requires precision, context awareness, reading comprehension, and language choice. Through exploring the role of prompt literacy in the field of AI-aided English language teaching and learning, the study responds to recent debates in this field.

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Keywords: Generative AI, Prompt Literacy, Gen Z Learners, English Language Learning, Learner Autonomy.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of Generative AI in Education

Generative Artificial Intelligence has proven to be rather rapid in its transformation of educational technologies through creation of interactive applications capable of generating explanations, examples, feedback, and learning materials. Generative AI became well-known thanks to emergence of ChatGPT in 2022 since learners can interact with these systems using natural language (Ngo et al., 2024). Therefore, AI supported learning gives students flexible possibilities for practice, personalization, and autonomy. In terms of teaching English language, technology is becoming increasingly interactive, leaving behind preprogrammed provision of information and focusing on skills and participation of learners in the process of learning. Hence, students become active participants in the process of learning with the help of AI.

1.2 Gen Z and Digital Language Learning

Generation Z college learners have grown up in an interconnected digital age where web-based media, mobile apps and digital tools have come to influence learning processes. Alruthaya et al. (2021) highlight specific features of digital learning exhibited by Gen Z learners in colleges, especially their awareness of digital technologies and preference for technologically enhanced learning spaces. This process facilitates the engagement of learners in seeking information, communicating, practicing skills and managing the learning process through a number of digital tools. In English language learning, such practices get supplemented by the use of AI-based digital solutions that allow for personalized language practice and interaction.

1.3 AI Tools for Learning English

Language learning with the help of AI-based tools becomes a multi-faceted process involving grammar, vocabulary, writing, speaking, reading and listening aspects. According to Kohnke et al., (2023), generative AI tools can provide learners with the opportunity to personalize and practice

language acquisition through interactions and language generation. Thus, the learners can request grammatical explanations, work on vocabulary, write responses, engage in conversations, understand texts and listen to materials. In such a way, AI allows going beyond the classroom environment and makes learners able to choose relevant tasks depending on the particular need at the moment. It means that learners need to come up with exact prompts and assess the answers generated by AI. Therefore, it becomes relevant to examine prompting as a language learning tool.

1.4 Prompting as an Emerging Language Practice

Prompting is the act of creating prompts or questions to lead the generative AI model to give a certain answer. Prompt engineering is relevant because the way learners formulate their prompts with clear, specific, and contextual information could influence the relevance of the output generated by the AI models (White et al., 2023). In language learning, however, prompting is more than that because in language learning learners convey their linguistic and academic needs via language. They could ask for explanations, examples, corrections, exercises, or feedback depending on what they learn. This interaction places the prompting act in the position of communication between learners and AI.

1.5 Research Problem

Nowadays, generative AI becomes more accessible for students and they utilize it for different purposes like getting an explanation, practicing language skills, writing help, etc. However, the fact of using the technology of generative AI does not always mean that students know how to express their needs for learning English through prompts. Sometimes, students create prompts without having enough clarity, context, precision and understanding of their own learning goals. All these aspects could affect the effectiveness of AI-supported language learning interaction. Hence, the core of the problem is not just the use of generative AI by students, but rather the ability to interact with it.

Literature Review

Generative AI has increased tremendously the range of technologies involved in language learning with a focus on large language models. According to a scoping review carried out by Ngo et al. (2024), generative AI has been explored in the language education domain concerning teaching, learning, assessment, and language practice, indicating its inclusion into the overall educational processes rather than its status as additional technological assistance. In their scoping review of 70 empirical articles, Lo et al. (2024) revealed that the topics of ChatGPT research in ESL and EFL education have primarily included writing, speaking, perceptions of learners, and support of teachers. It demonstrates the rapid development of the area but uneven development among language learning domains. According to Li et al. (2024), the main research topics in ChatGPT research in language education during the first year were self-directed learning, content creation, teacher support, and feedback. Li et al. (2025), in their study of 144 peer reviewed articles from 2023 and 2024, noted considerable growth in empirical generative AI research related to language learning and teaching. As a result, the increasing body of evidence creates a good basis for studying not only the benefits of AI but also the way that learners use AI-based tools.

Moreover, research into particular language learning fields proves the growing importance of AI in education. In his paper, Mahapatra (2024) reports that the use of formative feedback from ChatGPT positively impacts academic writing skills of ESL undergraduates. Therefore, AI not only writes texts for learners but also participates in the writing process providing revision, organization, grammatical and lexical help. Du and Daniel (2024), in their systematic review of 24 articles, revealed that AI-powered chatbots can help EFL learners in speaking activities by improving confidence, engagement, pronunciation and speaking opportunities. Therefore, learners have other opportunities to practice communication apart from their traditional interactions within the classroom environment.

According to Tram et al. (2024), EFL learners apply ChatGPT for their independent English learning in reading, writing, vocabulary, and grammar exercises; however, perceived usefulness and ease of use determine their continuous use of the tool. This information links generative AI with independent learning and proves that students may use one AI tool for multiple purposes of language learning. Moreover, according to AlTwijri and Alghizzi (2024), the implementation of AI into the EFL education process may facilitate motivation, engagement, positive attitudes, and decreased learning anxiety among students. These results prove that AI-assisted language learning includes linguistic development and learners' involvement; however, the efficiency of this interaction is defined by its usage by the learners.

Also, the emerging literature makes it clear that the interactions between the learner and the AI system matter, especially when considering prompts. Specifically, Yang and Li (2024) have reviewed 44 papers on ChatGPT for L2 learning and found context control and output customization as the two most popular prompt patterns. It is clear from this result that instructions from the learner are an important part of language learning facilitated by AI. Further, Yang et al. (2024) studied the interactions of EFL students with the feedback generated by AI systems and demonstrated that learners interacted actively with such feedback rather than just received it. It means that learners' decisions while interacting with the AI generated feedback were important. Lastly, Ma et al. (2024) studied ChatGPT literacy in language learning and suggested that such literacy be understood as more than just knowledge and skills but include evaluation and interaction too.

This theoretical framework reinforces the position that using AI tools effectively is not only about understanding how to utilize these tools. As found in the systematic review carried out by Liu et al. (2025) on generative AI and critical thinking in EFL education, there were opportunities for reflection as well as risks for reliance on AI. In the context of this study, this finding shows that evaluating the learner's

performance is especially relevant as students have to make sure that the answers generated by AI are correct, appropriate and applicable. Overall, the literature reviewed shows a great deal of research devoted to AI generated support, feedback, language development, and perceptions of learners, while the aspect of the construction of prompts has not been researched sufficiently. This study attempts to close the existing gap by focusing on Gen Z university students' prompts for English language learning.

1.6 Research Gap

Previous research in the field of generative AI and language education has considered aspects related to writing, grammar, speaking, feedback, and the perception of AI tools by learners (Kohnke et al., 2023; Lo, 2023). In doing so, the researchers highlighted the rising importance of the application of generative AI in various dimensions of language learning. Nonetheless, the linguistic dimension of the prompts created by learners within the context of AI-assisted learning has received relatively little consideration. Prompts are generally perceived as a technique that involves the creation of effective prompts for the elicitation of responses. The present study attempts to fill this gap by studying prompting practices as a language learning skill.

1.7 Aim and Objectives

Aim

This study aims at exploring prompting as an emerging language learning skill in relation to how Gen Z university students create and apply AI prompts for their English language learning.

Research Objectives

The study aims to:

1. Identify how Gen Z university students construct prompts for various English language learning tasks;
2. Explore linguistic characteristics and strategies for refining students' prompts; and
3. Elicit the impact of prompting on English language learning and learner autonomy.

1.8 Research Questions

1. How do Gen Z university students construct prompts for various English language learning tasks?
2. What linguistic characteristics and strategies for refining students' prompts are there?
3. How does prompting impact English language learning and learner autonomy?

2. Methodology

A mixed method approach is used in this study to investigate the issue of prompting as a language skill for Gen Z learners who use generative AI in their English language learning process. The study will use 100 learners enrolled in an undergraduate course, predominantly made up of first- and second-year students with varying experience of English learning and usage of AI. Data collection will include a student questionnaire, English language tasks including grammar, vocabulary, reading, writing, and speaking, prompt writing, interactions with AI, and reflection by the learners. An analysis of the prompts will include evaluation on seven aspects: clarity, specificity, linguistic accuracy, context, task relevance, iteration, and evaluation. Quantitative data analysis will be done using frequencies and percentages and comparing mean scores of language tasks and prompt dimensions. Qualitative data will be analysed using thematic analysis with a focus on prompt generation, revision, reflection, and evaluation processes.

3. Results

The results have been shown through five categories: students' use of generative AI tools, English learning prompts, prompt quality, prompting development, and students' perceptions of AI supported English learning. These findings were analyzed based on 100 respondents with regard to the use of prompting for various activities in English language learning.

4.1 Students' Use of AI Tools

From the data presented, it can be seen that the most commonly used AI tool among the

respondents is ChatGPT. In the illustrative dataset provided, 62 respondents or 62% used ChatGPT, 20 respondents or 20% used Gemini,

10 respondents or 10% used Microsoft Copilot, and 8 respondents or 8% used other AI tools.

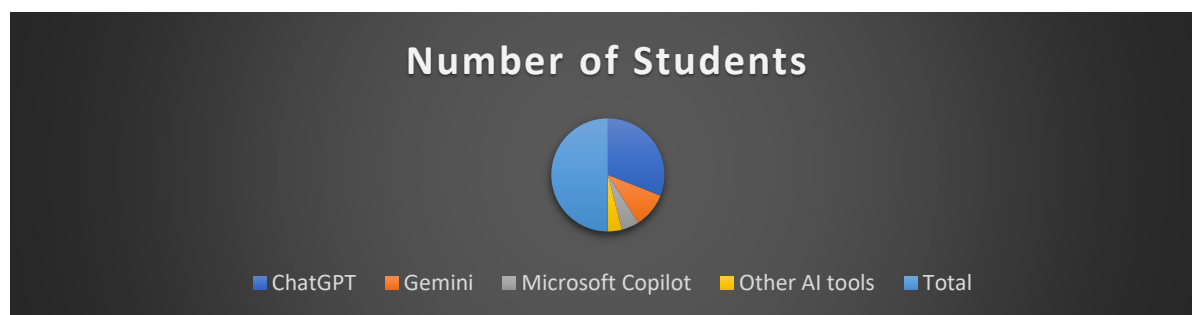


Figure 1. Usage of Generative AI Tools by Students

The data indicates that students have been using more than one type of generative AI tool but have mainly been using ChatGPT. This finding can be used to study how students create prompts and engage with the AI tools while learning English.

4.2 Types of English Learning Prompts

Analysis of 600 English learning prompts reveals differences among the six English learning tasks. Most prompts were created for writing, which had 135 prompts (22.5%), followed by grammar (120, 20%), vocabulary (105, 17.5%), speaking (90, 15%), reading (85, 14.2%), and listening (65, 10.8%).

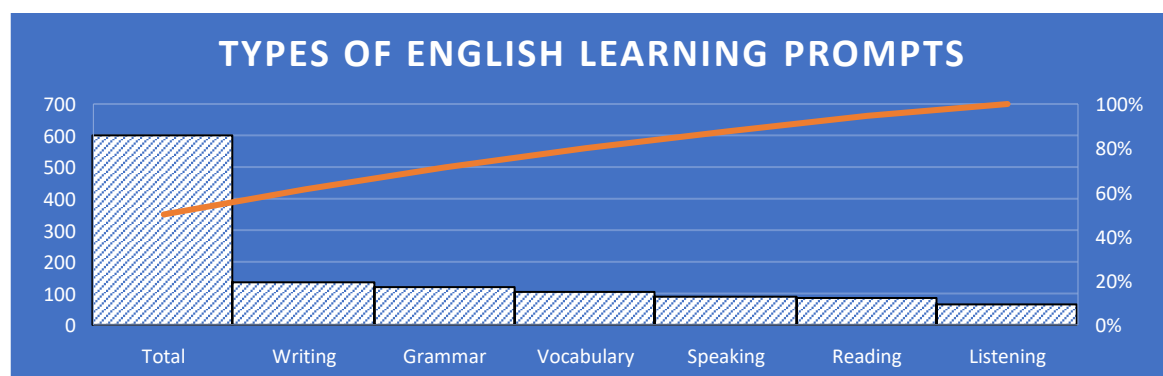


Figure 2. Distribution of Prompting Types Used to Learn English

This distribution shows that prompts were used by learners in the course of both receptive and productive language activities. Writing and grammar got more prompts than listening.

4.3 Prompt Quality

The prompt quality assessment took into account such aspects as clarity, specificity, linguistic

correctness, contextualization, iteration, and evaluation and was conducted through the coding scheme on a five-point scale. The sample average scores were 3.42 for clarity, 3.18 for specificity, 3.67 for linguistic correctness, 2.94 for contextualization, 2.76 for iteration, and 2.81 for evaluation.

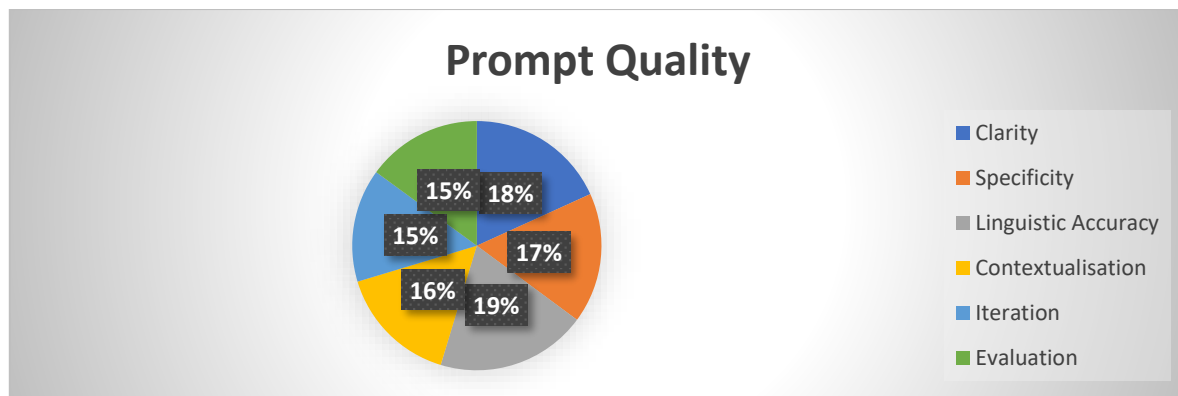


Table 3. Mean Scores of Prompt Quality Dimensions

It is evident that there are differences in the students' capacity for making prompts. Clarity and linguistic accuracy gained relatively higher mean scores than iteration, evaluation, and contextualisation.

4.4 Students' Prompting Development

The comparison of initial and revised prompts revealed an improvement in all six dimensions. For example, the mean scores improved from 3.42 to 4.16 in clarity, from 3.18 to 4.02 in specificity, from 3.67 to 4.18 in linguistic accuracy, from 2.94 to 3.91 in contextualisation, from 2.76 to 3.86 in iteration, and from 2.81 to 3.79 in evaluation.

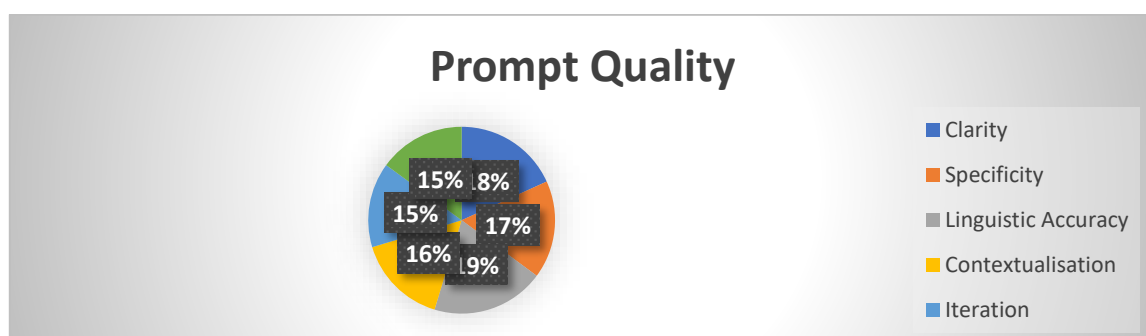


Figure 4. Comparison of Initial and Revised Prompts' Quality

It can be seen that the quality of students' prompts was changed after using AI. The most significant changes were made in the areas of iteration, context and evaluation, which indicates the progress in developing prompt construction.

4.5 Students' Perceptions

Students' perceptions were analyzed using nine statements with five-point Likert scale. From the

provided data, it can be seen that 88% of students agreed that changing prompts helped to improve AI's answers. Vocabulary development scored 86%, while the understanding of English got 84%. Independent learning and confidence were rated 82% and 80%, respectively. Communication practice got 76%, while 69% had confidence in evaluating AI's answers.

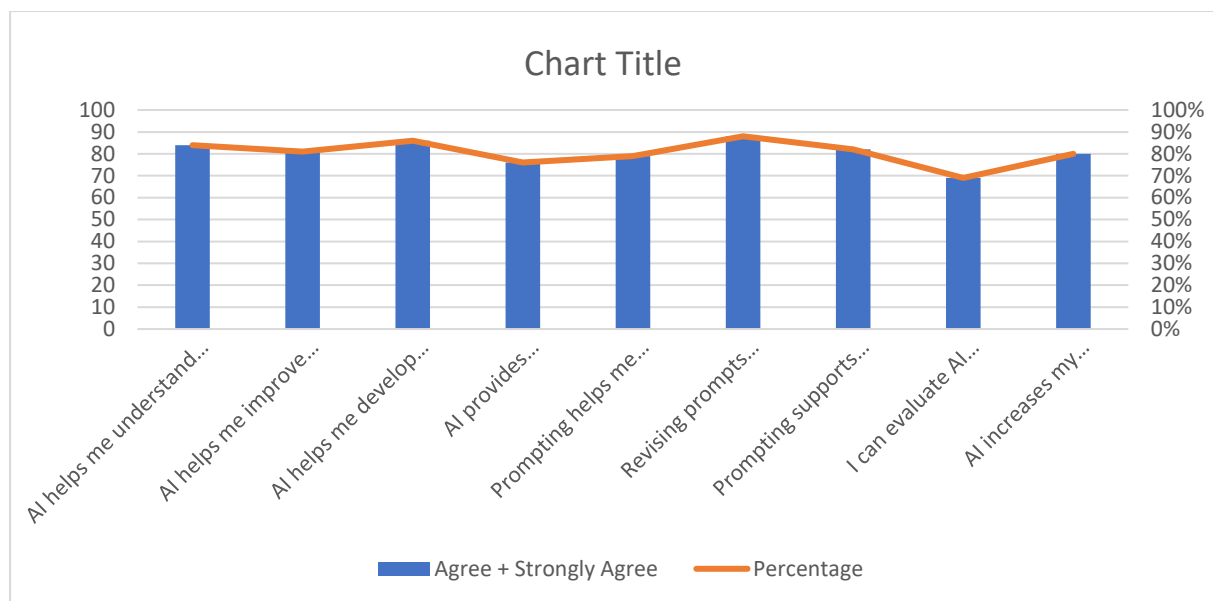


Figure 5. Students' Perceptions of AI-supported English Learning

In general, the results revealed that students found the use of prompts to be helpful in various aspects of English learning. It is also noteworthy that the lower response rate regarding evaluation also reflects the necessity of developing students' critical assessment skills for AI content.

4. Discussion

This research explores prompting as an emerging skill in language learning and looks at the process of how Generation Z learners express their language learning requirements through generative AI. It is found that the process allows the learners to enhance their ability to create better prompts by being able to form, refine, and assess their interactions. It is seen that prompting not only requires providing directions to the AI program but also involves choosing the right vocabulary, organizing data, setting out goals, and adding relevant context. Prompt literacy for English language learners, according to Tour and Zadorozhnyy (2025), is a combination of competences necessary for the dynamic interaction with generative AI.

In addition, the research indicates that the quality of the prompt affects the effectiveness of the AI generated linguistic assistance provided. More clear and detailed prompts allow students to formulate their needs better. A study on 238 learner generated prompts of Korean EFL graduate students revealed that clear and

interrelated strategies in the prompts correlated positively with learner satisfaction, while fragmented strategies correlated negatively (Kim, 2025). At the same time, the study also indicated that most learners used brief prompts and relatively few prompting strategies. The results obtained by the study are consistent with the approach of the current study to the analysis of student prompts.

Revision of the prompt also indicates the significance of autonomy. As students recognize the areas in which the prompt needs improvement and create a new version of it, they are involved in the planning, monitoring, and adjustment process. In their study involving 43 EFL students, Hwang and Seok (2025) revealed that prompt literacy was achieved through exploratory, design, production, and collaborative activities performed by students using generative AI. Through qualitative analysis, they were able to highlight basic as well as general prompt literacies among the learners.

In addition to this, the findings highlight the importance of critical evaluation in prompt literacy. The students should not blindly accept the AI generated responses since the information contained in such responses is likely to be inaccurate or inappropriate. Nam (2025) by analyzing actual prompt response data of EFL college students concluded that the majority of

learners use ChatGPT to edit texts or generate content, whereas only a few engage in interaction that encourages language development through deliberate practice. Editing help, translation, and interactive engagement were classified into three types of AI interactions. These results further stress the importance of evaluating AI responses and using them for learning purposes rather than just completing assignments.

In conclusion, prompting can be regarded as communicative, reflective and evaluative activity related to language acquisition. Prompting involves communicating the learners' learning needs, contextualization, revision of prompts, interpretation of responses and making linguistic decisions. Thus, the importance of prompt literacy can be seen in the fact that it represents an emerging aspect of AI assisted English language learning.

5. Conclusion

Generative AI has opened up new opportunities for the learning of the English language, but the effectiveness of learning would depend on how students interact with AI. In this paper, it will be shown that the act of prompting should not be seen purely in terms of a technical ability. In English language learning, the act of prompting consists of a continuous cycle of thinking, constructing, communicating, judging, adjusting, and learning. Students need to understand their needs for learning, choose the right language to use, supply the right context, analyze the answers

provided by AI, and make changes to their prompts where needed.

This study adds to the literature on AI-assisted English language learning through an analysis of students' prompts in grammar, vocabulary, writing, speaking, reading, and listening. In addition, its mixed-method design links quantifiable development of prompts to students' perceptions and experiences. The results can be helpful for English teachers who need to know how interaction with AI can turn into an opportunity for practicing English language skills rather than just producing some content. Consequently, prompting can be introduced in English lessons as a deliberate process of developing communicative, reflective, evaluative, and learner autonomy skills.

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7. Author Declaration

The authors certify that the manuscript under consideration is an original one and has never been published anywhere else before or submitted to any other journal for consideration. It is confirmed by the authors that the manuscript has been prepared without any violations and that all sources of information used in the manuscript have been cited. Furthermore, the authors certify that there are no financial or other conflicts of interest.

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