

The Impact of AI-Driven Tools on Foreign Students’ Chinese Language Acquisition: A Case Study at Southwest University

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To cite this article. M. Arif, A. Ismail, M. Aqib, W. Ali, M. M. R. Shaoan, and M. U. Okafor, “The Impact of AI- Driven Tools on Foreign Students ’ Chinese Language Acquisition : A Case Study at Southwest University,” *Lang. Technol. Soc. Media*, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 150–168, 2025.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70211/ltsm.v3i1.165>

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Published online: 5 April 2025



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Received: 2 January 2025

Revised: 1 April 2025

Accepted: 4 April 2025

Online: 5 April 2025

Abstract

This study explores the use of AI-powered tools such as language learning applications, chatbots, adaptive learning systems, and speech recognition software in the context of Chinese language acquisition by international students. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the study investigates how fifteen international students at Southwest University engaged with these tools, the challenges they encountered, and how such technologies shaped their linguistic development and cultural integration. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and reflective journals, and were analyzed thematically. The findings indicate that 80% of participants reported improved speaking confidence, 75% experienced enhanced listening comprehension, and 85% found chatbot-based interactions engaging. However, 65% of students noted insufficient cultural immersion and contextual learning in AI tools. Based on these insights, the study recommends integrating culturally immersive features such as virtual simulations and role-play into AI systems. It concludes that while AI tools can personalize and accelerate language acquisition, their impact can be maximized when aligned with cultural learning, supporting not only proficiency but also meaningful intercultural communication.

Keywords: AI Tools; Language Learning; Chinese Language; Personalized Learning; Cultural Integration; Language Proficiency; Adaptive Learning.

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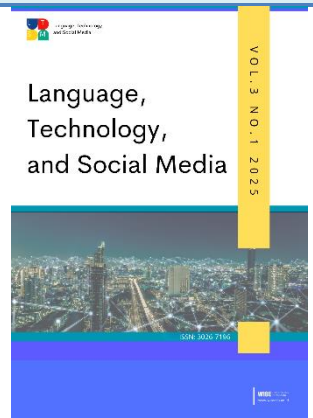
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INTRODUCTION

The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into language education has significantly transformed the learning experience, offering customized, interactive, and adaptive approaches for students [1]. AI-driven language learning tools have demonstrated the ability to enhance learner engagement and improve language proficiency through real-time feedback systems and personalized learning pathways [2],[3],[4]. While these advancements have been well-documented in the context of widely studied languages, such as English, Spanish, and French, the application of AI in learning Mandarin Chinese presents unique challenges that warrant focused investigation [5], [6].

Mandarin Chinese is linguistically distinct due to its tonal pronunciation, character-based writing system, and complex grammar, posing substantial difficulties for non-native learners [7]. These challenges, coupled with the cultural nuances embedded in the language, necessitate a more tailored and context-sensitive approach to instruction. Therefore, narrowing the scope of this study to explore AI's role in Chinese language education enables a more precise examination of its capabilities and limitations within this intricate learning context.

China has witnessed a consistent increase in the number of international students pursuing Chinese language studies, with more than 500,000 foreign students enrolled in educational institutions by 2020 [8]. Despite this growth, existing instructional models often fall short in addressing the specific needs of non-native learners, particularly concerning pronunciation accuracy and cultural comprehension. AI-based tools offer a promising alternative, providing immersive and interactive environments that integrate feedback-driven learning models [9], [5], [10]. Nevertheless, there remains a pressing need for empirical studies that evaluate the effectiveness of these technologies in fostering both linguistic competence and cultural understanding [11].

Although AI has gained prominence in language education, most research has concentrated on its use in commonly taught languages [13]. These studies emphasize AI's benefits in enhancing engagement, supporting grammar and vocabulary acquisition, and delivering individualized instruction [12]. However, considerably less is known about its effectiveness in linguistically and culturally complex environments such as Mandarin Chinese. As the global demand for Chinese language learning continues to grow [9], this gap in the literature becomes increasingly critical.

Mandarin's tonal system, ideographic script, and context-dependent expressions present significant obstacles for learners [13]. In addition, the cultural dimensions of communication in Chinese require learners to understand not only the mechanics of the language but also the underlying cultural norms. Despite the increasing integration of AI in educational contexts [14], limited research explores its role in facilitating cultural learning alongside language acquisition. Foreign students frequently struggle with both linguistic and cultural adaptation, suggesting a need for AI tools that support holistic learning experiences [15]. While existing AI applications such as chatbots and speech recognition systems offer real-time feedback and adaptive learning pathways, their capacity to promote cultural understanding remains underexplored. Furthermore, much of the current literature emphasizes linguistic outcomes while overlooking the broader experience of acquiring a language within its sociocultural context [16].

Unlike traditional classroom methods, which often rely on standardized curricula and offer delayed or generalized feedback, AI-powered systems can provide real-time, individualized support tailored to each learner's needs [17]. Through instant correction and adaptive content delivery, tools such as chatbots and speech processing applications enable self-paced, engaging learning

experiences. However, their limitations in fostering deep cultural immersion and contextual communication skills highlight a critical gap in their design and implementation.

This study addresses these limitations by examining how AI tools influence both language acquisition and cultural integration among international students learning Chinese. Conducted at Southwest University, the research investigates learners' experiences with AI applications, identifying both the strengths and the challenges of these technologies. The findings aim to inform the development of more culturally responsive AI tools that holistically support language learning and intercultural competence.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do foreign students perceive the effectiveness of AI tools in improving their Chinese language proficiency?
2. What challenges do foreign students encounter while using AI tools, and how do these challenges impact their language acquisition and cultural adaptation?
3. How do AI tools compare with traditional language learning methods in terms of learner engagement, feedback quality, and support for cultural integration?

As the use of AI in education continues to expand, and the demand for Chinese language instruction among international students rises, it is essential to explore how AI can effectively address the multifaceted needs of non-native learners. While personalized learning and real-time feedback have shown promise, limited research has examined their impact in real-world educational settings, particularly for foreign learners immersed in unfamiliar linguistic and cultural environments.

This study contributes to filling that gap by evaluating the extent to which AI tools can alleviate common challenges faced by foreign students, including language complexity and cultural adaptation. Furthermore, it offers insights into how AI technologies can be optimized to enhance both linguistic proficiency and intercultural understanding. Given the growing reliance on AI in language education, this research holds significant implications for educators and AI developers seeking to create more effective and inclusive learning environments.

LIREATURE REVIEW

In recent years, AI has become a key element in modern education, particularly in language learning. It enables personalized, adaptive, and interactive experiences through tools like chatbots, speech recognition software, virtual tutors, and adaptive platforms [18],[19],[20]. These technologies offer real-time feedback and tailored instruction, accommodating various learning styles and proficiency levels. For instance, applications such as Duolingo and Hello Chinese provide structured practice with feedback on grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation [21], while speech tools like Google Speech-to-Text and Siri support spoken fluency through corrective suggestions [22]. Adaptive systems like Knewton and Socratic further personalize learning by adjusting content based on performance data, reducing cognitive overload [20]. These advancements are particularly relevant for complex languages like Mandarin, which requires mastery of tonal pronunciation, character recognition, and cultural context [23]. AI tools such as OpenAI's Whisper have improved tonal detection [24], and platforms like Lingoda AI and SpeakAI now offer culturally immersive dialogue simulations [24],[25]. Empirical studies affirm these benefits: AI chatbots enhance speaking skills [26], speech recognition improves pronunciation [27], and writing tools like Grammarly support grammar and fluency development [28]. However,

challenges persist. Many systems lack cultural depth and struggle with replicating the relational dynamics of human instruction [29],[30],[31]. This underscores the need for more holistic AI tools that foster both linguistic and cultural competence.

Technology-Enhanced Language Learning (TELL)

The TELL framework highlights the role of digital tools in creating personalized, interactive, and immersive learning environments. AI-powered applications such as chatbots, virtual tutors, and mobile language apps enable instruction to be tailored to individual needs by adjusting content difficulty and learning pace [32]. Tools like *Hello Chinese* and *Duolingo* customize exercises based on user performance, reinforcing prior knowledge while gradually introducing new material [33]. A major strength of TELL is its focus on interactive engagement. Features like speech recognition and conversational agents let learners practice pronunciation and fluency in real-time, often through simulated dialogues. These tools recreate everyday situations, such as ordering food or asking for directions, helping learners build confidence in practical communication. TELL also promotes cultural immersion as a key part of language learning. Many AI tools now include cultural simulations such as virtual tours, festival lessons, or interactions with cultural artifacts to help learners develop both linguistic competence and sociocultural awareness [34].

Cognitive Load Theory (CLT)

CLT, introduced by Sweller in 1988, explains how learners manage mental effort during language learning. It distinguishes between intrinsic, extraneous, and germane cognitive load, and suggests that instruction should reduce unnecessary load while promoting meaningful learning [35]. AI-based language tools reflect these principles by breaking down complex content into smaller, manageable steps. For instance, *Hello Chinese* gradually introduces tones, characters, and grammar, helping reduce extraneous load and support progressive skill building [36]. Adaptive systems also adjust task difficulty based on learner proficiency, maintaining a balance between challenge and support to sustain engagement [37], [38]. Speech recognition tools offer immediate feedback, enhancing germane load by helping learners focus on key language tasks and improve in real time [39], [40]. Despite its strengths, CLT mainly addresses cognitive aspects and overlooks the social and cultural elements essential for real-world language use.

Sociocultural Theory (SCT)

SCT based on Vygotsky's work, sees learning as a social process shaped by cultural tools and interactions [41]. Unlike CLT, which focuses on individual cognition, SCT highlights collaboration, authentic communication, and the role of context in language development. It views language not just as a mental skill, but as a culturally embedded practice. AI tools that simulate social interactions such as role-plays, storytelling, or dialogues can support sociocultural learning. Chatbots that guide learners through interactive tasks help them practice real communication and understand sociolinguistic cues [42]. Some AI platforms also include virtual cultural experiences that offer indirect exposure to cultural norms. However, AI has limitations. Simulated dialogue often lacks the spontaneity, emotional nuance, and cultural subtlety of real human interaction [43], [44]. While helpful, AI cannot fully replace the deep cultural immersion gained through genuine interpersonal engagement.

Integrating the Frameworks

TELL, CLT, and Sociocultural Theory together provide a comprehensive framework for evaluating the effectiveness of AI in language learning. TELL emphasizes personalized and immersive learning, CLT focuses on managing cognitive load and efficiency, while SCT highlights the role of authentic interaction and cultural mediation. AI tools align well with some aspects of these theories, such as providing adaptive feedback and structured learning. However, they still lack in areas like emotional understanding, natural social interaction, and deep cultural context. By integrating insights from all three theories, future AI tools can be designed to support not only language proficiency but also intercultural competence and meaningful communication. Figure 1 presents this integrated theoretical model in the context of AI-supported Chinese language learning.

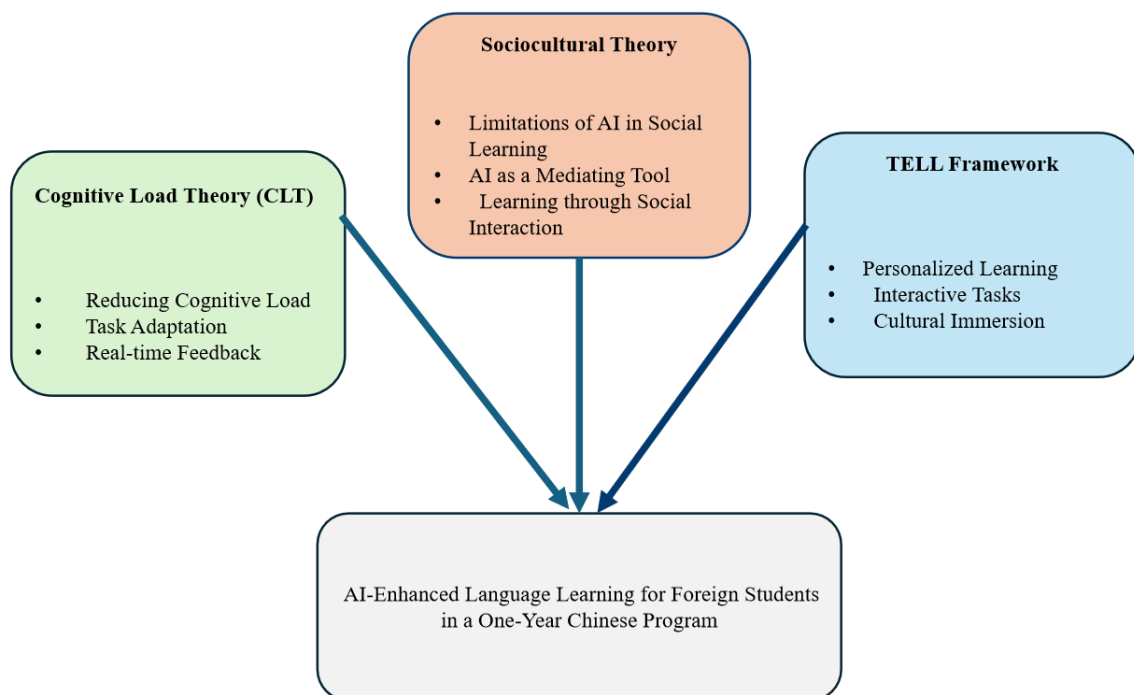


Figure 1. TELL is integrated with Cognitive Load Theory into the Framework

In summary, the literature reflects significant advancements in the development and implementation of AI tools for language education. Theoretical frameworks such as TELL, Cognitive Load Theory, and Sociocultural Theory offer complementary insights into how these tools can support personalized learning, cognitive efficiency, and cultural integration. Empirical studies reinforce the benefits of AI in improving learners' proficiency across speaking, listening, reading, and writing domains. However, recurring limitations particularly in terms of cultural immersion, user adaptability, and technical reliability highlight areas that require further investigation. To address these gaps, the present study explores how foreign students at Southwest University experience AI-driven language tools in the context of Chinese language acquisition. The methodology outlined in the following section provides a qualitative framework to examine learners' perceptions, challenges, and cultural engagement with AI-assisted language learning.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore students' lived experiences with AI tools in Chinese language learning. This design was chosen to capture the depth of participants' perceptions, challenges, and interactions with AI, particularly how it influenced their language fluency and cultural understanding. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and reflective writings, offering rich insight into both the benefits and limitations of AI-supported learning. Thematic analysis was used to examine the data, guided by the frameworks of TELL, CLT, and SLT. This analytical lens allowed the researcher to investigate how AI tools impact learner engagement, cognitive processing, and exposure to cultural context in the acquisition of Mandarin Chinese.

Participants

The participants in this study comprised 15 foreign students studying the Chinese language for one year at Southwest University. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, a technique commonly used in qualitative research to ensure the inclusion of individuals with relevant experiences. The key selection criteria included: (1) enrollment in a Chinese language program at Southwest University, (2) prior experience using AI tools for language learning, and (3) willingness to participate in interviews and focus groups. This approach allowed for the selection of diverse participants who could provide in-depth insights into AI-assisted language acquisition. Additionally, the sample size of 15 was determined based on the principle of data saturation, ensuring that recurring themes emerged without unnecessary redundancy. To justify our small sample size, we selected 15 participants based on established qualitative research standards that emphasize depth over breadth. Previous studies in similar contexts have demonstrated that data saturation where no new themes emerge can typically be achieved with a sample of this size [45]. This approach ensures that we capture a rich array of perspectives while maintaining manageability during data analysis. The researchers sought to obtain adequate data which would provide valuable insights while keeping the study boundaries logical. Qualitative research focuses on depth instead of quantity which made 15 participants adequate for obtaining diverse learner experiences while maintaining study manageability. This sample size was suitable for the current qualitative study because it produced enough data to support the thematic analysis and provide the necessary depth of detail about participants' experiences. The participants were purposively chosen, and all the students who took the survey had prior experience using AI to learn Chinese. The distribution of the participants by demographic characteristics was heterogeneous, which may be due to the multiethnic population of Southwest University. Participants were selected based on the following criteria:

Table 1. Demographic Table of Participants

Participant ID	Country of Origin	Proficiency Level (Chinese)	Prior Exposure to AI Tools	Age Group
RP1	Pakistan	Beginner	Moderate (Language Apps)	20-25
RP2	Thailand	Intermediate	High (Speech Recognition)	20-25
RP3	Thailand	Beginner	Low (No Prior AI Use)	25-30
RP4	Russia	Advanced	High (Adaptive Learning Tools)	20-25

RP5	Vietnam	Intermediate	Moderate (Language Apps)	20-25
RP6	Nigeria	Beginner	Low (Minimal AI Exposure)	25-30
RP7	Thailand	Intermediate	High (Chatbots)	20-25
RP8	Bangladesh	Advanced	Moderate (Speech Recognition)	25-30
RP9	Egypt	Beginner	Low (No Prior AI Use)	20-25
RP10	Vietnam	Advanced	High (Virtual Tutors)	20-25
RP11	Pakistan	Intermediate	High (Language Apps)	25-30
RP12	Mexico	Beginner	Low (Minimal AI Exposure)	20-25
RP13	Vietnam	Intermediate	Moderate (Speech Recognition)	20-25
RP14	Vietnam	Advanced	High (Adaptive Learning Tools)	20-25
RP15	South Africa	Intermediate	High (AI in Language Learning)	20-25

Note. The participants in this table represented a wide range of cultural backgrounds, proficiency in language and prior experience using AI tools, warranting that the study achieved a wide spectrum of views and experiences.

Data Collection Methods

A combination of semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and reflective journals was selected to ensure comprehensive data collection. Semi-structured interviews allowed for in-depth individual perspectives, while focus groups encouraged interaction, revealing shared themes and diverse viewpoints. Reflective journals provided longitudinal insight into evolving experiences with AI tools, enriching the dataset through self-reported learning trajectories.

Semi-structured Interviews

Each participant was individually interviewed through semi-structured interviews. The flexibility of the interview format allowed the interviewer to follow up on certain issues when participants gave essential responses. The focus of the interviews was on participants' personal experiences, experience challenges, and understanding of AI tools that they use for their language learning and cultural understanding.

Focus Groups

Collective insights were captured and group reflection on AI tools were facilitated by focus group discussions. Students were able to talk through experiences with other students, compare other AI tools they have seen, and identify common challenges or benefits of the same. 4–6 students participated in each focus group, enabling active participation and comfortable discussion.

Reflective Journals

Researcher asked participants to keep weekly reflective journals that documented their experiences with AI tools. As an instrument, these journals were used to help participants write down and bring to mind what they thought about AI tools, how they used these tools as they work through the process of their work projects, and what problems they were getting into while using the tools. The reflective journal approach enabled the researcher to observe, from a student perspective, what they thought of AI tools at different stages of the course, and how these students' perceptions changed during the course. Each journal entry was guided by prompts related to their experiences with specific AI tools, including reflections.

Data Analysis

Researchers conducted thematic analysis as the methodology for their qualitative data evaluation. The researchers selected thematic analysis because this method displays specific strength in rendering patterns among qualitative research results. The analysis software NVivo software supported the data coding process according to the specified research approach. Researchers performed multiple reliability checks on their coding methods to confirm both the stability and the quality of their coding process procedures. For data analysis, a rigorous thematic analysis was conducted following the guidelines proposed by Braun and Clarke [46]. All interviews, focus group discussions, and reflective journals were transcribed verbatim and imported into NVivo software for systematic coding. An initial coding scheme was developed based on our research questions and emergent themes from the data. To validate the coding process, a pilot test was performed on a subset of transcripts, and a second researcher independently coded these texts. The inter-coder reliability was calculated using Cohen's Kappa, resulting in a value of 0.81, which indicates a high level of consistency. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus, ensuring the robustness of the analysis. To achieve trustworthiness in this research the investigators applied triangulation by gathering data from multiple origin points and performing member checking by requesting participant feedback on final findings. The combinations of these strategies worked to reduce bias and strengthen the credibility found within the research findings.

Ethical Considerations

This study received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of Southwest University. Prior to participation, every individual provided written informed consent, which outlined the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and the steps taken to protect both confidentiality and data security. All participant data were anonymized and stored on password-protected devices. Beyond these initial ethical safeguards, the study also implemented several measures to reduce researcher bias and enhance data trustworthiness. Throughout the research process, the team maintained reflective journals to record personal assumptions and potential biases, fostering ongoing self-awareness during both data collection and analysis. We further bolstered the reliability of our findings by employing triangulation; data were collected from multiple sources, including semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and reflective journals, to cross-check and validate emerging themes. Additionally, preliminary findings were shared with participants through member checking to ensure that our interpretations truly reflected their experiences. An audit trail was also meticulously maintained to document all methodological decisions and analytical adjustments, thereby increasing the transparency of our research process. Together, these measures contributed to a rigorous, credible study with minimized bias and robust, trustworthy findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

The research findings establish important details regarding AI tools' effects on Chinese learning by foreign students in terms of language ability development along with student involvement and cultural adaptation rates. The study presents its findings in three distinct parts which include effects on language proficiency as well as student use of AI tools and cultural immersion made possible by AI. Students demonstrated better language performance through AI tools as well as improved

speaking ability and listening capacity and vocabulary acquisition because these systems provided individualized learning tracks and automatic feedback. These positive outcomes obtained in language learning were contrasted by the ineffectiveness of the tools in teaching cultural aspects including nonverbal communication and contextual language use. Figure 2 illustrates the major themes with their subordinate elements which emerged from this study as it reveals the relationships between language competency and student involvement and cultural assimilation.

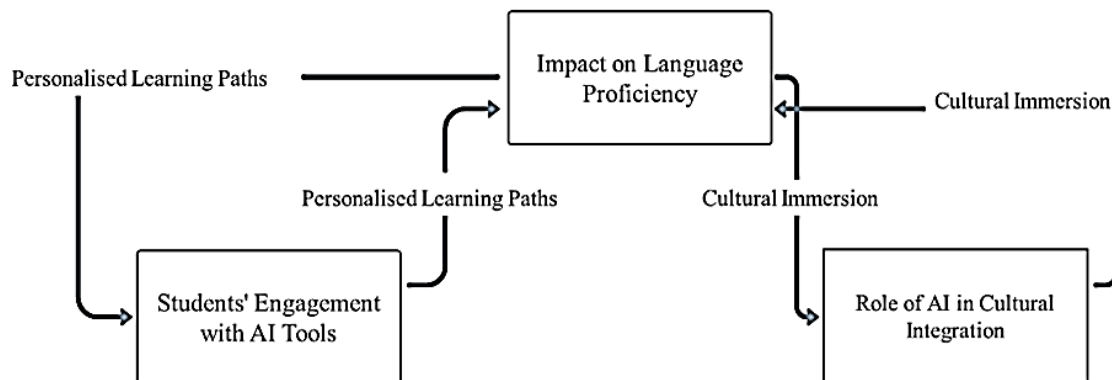


Figure 2. Themes and Sub-themes Identified in AI Language Learning Study

Impact on Language Proficiency

AI tools had the strongest influence on language students' abilities to speak, listen well, and grow their vocabulary. 80% of participants reported improved confidence in speaking after using AI-based pronunciation feedback. 75% of learners found AI-driven listening exercises beneficial for understanding different accents and speech speeds. From the perspective of TELL, AI tools worked best at helping students improve both pronunciation and how smoothly they spoke. As RP 9 noted: *The app told me which tones I was using incorrectly, and I fixed them right away. After seeing exactly which tones I had to fix, I felt more confident about keeping practicing.*

Participants discovered that the audio exercises in AI programs helped them get better at understanding spoken Chinese. The app showed students how to listen to and understand Chinese coming from many different speakers and speaking rates, and this helped students get better at real-world Chinese listening. The reduction of cognitive load using various accents and speech speeds in CLT directly supports working memory management for learners. As RP 3 shared, *Hearing the many ways native speakers talk in the app prepared me better for talking with real people. I began to understand how people talk to each other in everyday life all over China.*

The use of AI applications helped students build vocabulary knowledge through the exposure to various word examples. The AI-powered learning paths allowed learners to focus on their improvement areas because the app customized their activities based on individual student needs. TELL supports the use of adaptive learning experiences through its framework. RP 1 reflected: *“The app taught me more words by showing them in many different sentences. My learning tool kept raising the challenge each time I succeeded, helping me see my progress.”*

Students' Engagement with AI Tools

Users felt drawn to AI tools because these programs interacted with them in a supportive manner. 85% of students found chatbots and language games particularly effective in reducing speaking anxiety. The essential characteristic of AI learning promotes stress-free training environments that minimize unnecessary mental strain on students according to CLT principles. The tools that users enjoyed most for practice were chatbots and language games because they offered practice space with no fear of judgment. As RP7 explained: *“I practiced with the chatbot easily because it stayed neutral and never criticized me. Speaking Chinese became easier when working with this chatbot*

because it never criticized my mistakes.” Students found value in the anytime accessibility option which enhanced their motivational levels so that engagement levels would increase similarly to how personalized learning pathways do in TELL. RP 5 stated: *“No matter the time, I had the chance to study with the app after my evening was free. Using the app allowed me to keep learning regularly.”* Rese students mentioned that their enthusiasm grew from seeing their progress updates right away. The way these apps allowed learners to earn rewards and accomplish new goals kept them interested. As RP 9 described: *“Knowing I was gaining points in the app pushed me to keep practicing daily.”* Some participants said they felt like they were learning separately from the classroom. Without classroom learning, they lost the benefit of teachers giving them personal guidance and learning about their culture through direct conversation.

The Role of AI in Cultural Integration

The last group discussion looked at how AI affects bringing cultures together. AI-based tools increased language proficiency to a greater extent, AI helped students learn languages, but the disappointment came when these tools couldn't teach them enough about Chinese culture. Students said that understanding a language means knowing how people act, talk, and communicate without words. As RP 4 put it: *“To learn Chinese goes beyond memorizing vocabulary and sentence rules. You have to know what body signals and actions mean when communicating with others. The AI didn't teach me that.”* Students pointed out that AI courses failed to teach them about cultural involvement, which they thought was essential to their learning. RP 8 remarked: *“Learning languages helped me talk, but I couldn't figure out how to use phrases while chatting with people.”* According to some users, the learning tools should have virtual activities where learners can practice different cultural situations. RP 3 proposed: *“We would learn real-life language application better if the software taught us Chinese customs and gave us role-playing practice.”*

Ability AI-Supported Language Development: Confidence, Listening, and Personalized Learning

AI has demonstrated significant potential in enhancing learners' confidence, speaking ability, and listening comprehension in the context of Mandarin Chinese language learning. Many students reported that AI-based tools, particularly chatbots and speech recognition software, provided a comfortable environment to practice speaking without fear of embarrassment. As RP3 noted, *“The chatbot served as a space for speaking practice while eliminating her fear of embarrassment. Without apprehension I practiced because the chatbot exhibited no bias.”* These tools were appreciated for their ability to offer real-time feedback and allow learners to repeat tasks without judgment, a feature that aligns with CLT by minimizing extraneous cognitive load and reducing anxiety during practice. Similarly, RP4 shared, *“The artificial intelligence system made me feel at ease because it allowed unlimited repetition which avoided the stress of speaking to a real person.”*

In addition to speaking, students showed improvement in listening comprehension. AI applications enabled them to process spoken Chinese content at their own pace, supporting repeated playback and controlled exposure, as emphasized in CLT. RP1 remarked, *“I could play back spoken clips from the app over and over until the words made sense to me. The app gave me enough time to process audio each time.”* Learners also noted that the difficulty of listening tasks adjusted with their progress, providing greater challenges as their skills developed. RP2 observed, *“Following my progress in learning the material, the app introduced tougher exercises to match my growing skillset.”* This progressive design helped bridge listening and speaking, with RP15 stating, *“The assistance from the app in teaching correct word tones let me produce more natural spoken Chinese.”*

Another key benefit frequently mentioned by participants was the personalized learning paths offered by AI tools. Learners at different proficiency levels found value in the ability to focus on their specific weaknesses while skipping material they had already mastered. RP8 explained, *“The tool showed me my weak spots and built lessons around them. By utilizing the app, I learned to concentrate on developing my weak spots while bypassing familiar content.”* Beginners

benefitted from repeating foundational content to build confidence, as expressed by RP10: *"When I started learning I benefitted from going over simple phrases several times to build my confidence."* Meanwhile, advanced learners found the more difficult simulations both challenging and realistic. RP6 reflected, *"The tough material made me learn more quickly than before. The advanced lessons created a realistic learning setting."* Students also emphasized the usefulness of instant feedback in correcting mistakes and reinforcing learning. As RP15 noted, *"When I made a language error the app instantly showed me the correction and helped me avoid repeating it."*

Challenges in AI-Assisted Language Learning: Technical Limitations and Cultural Gaps

Although students generally appreciated the benefits of AI-assisted language learning, several challenges emerged during its implementation primarily technical limitations and a lack of relevant cultural content. Many participants reported frustrating technical issues such as software freezing or crashing, often occurring at the beginning of sessions. These malfunctions disrupted learning continuity and negatively impacted motivation. As RP8 described, *"Each tool failure resulted in total loss of my work progress; therefore, I had to start from scratch."* In line with CLT, such interruptions increased extraneous cognitive burden by forcing learners to divide their attention between the learning task and the resolution of technical problems.

Another commonly cited issue involved inaccuracies in speech recognition. Some learners found that the AI system failed to recognize their correct pronunciation, leading to confusion and self-doubt. RP13 reflected, *"My correct pronunciation turned into a difficulty for the application to detect correctly."* These experiences led users to question their progress and highlighted the need for AI tools to be more adaptive to varied pronunciation patterns, in order to reinforce learners' confidence and support accurate skill development.

Beyond technical barriers, students also pointed to the limited integration of cultural knowledge as a significant shortcoming. While the AI systems were effective in teaching language structure, many felt that the programs did not adequately address real-world communication or cultural immersion. As RP4 stated, *"The application taught them basic language knowledge yet neglected to show actual communication abilities with Chinese native speakers."* This lack of cultural depth was perceived as a fundamental gap, as language learning is inextricably linked to the social and cultural contexts in which the language is used.

Participants emphasized that effective communication in Chinese extends beyond vocabulary and grammar, requiring an understanding of social norms, gestures, and cultural cues. A majority 65% of respondents expressed concern about the absence of cultural learning opportunities, particularly in areas such as body language, context-dependent expressions, and social etiquette. RP11 emphasized this need, stating, *"A complete understanding of the Chinese language requires knowledge of the cultural behaviors and social rules."* Despite the functional effectiveness of AI tools, many students felt that these systems fell short in providing exposure to authentic cultural interactions.

Some participants proposed integrating cultural modules such as lessons on traditions, festivals, or everyday social scenarios into AI learning platforms. RP3 suggested that, *"Chinese cultural lessons combined with practice conversations through the application will lead to better performance when speaking with others."* These insights underscore the importance of expanding AI-supported language learning beyond linguistic fundamentals to include cultural immersion, thereby enabling learners to develop not only communicative competence but also meaningful cross-cultural understanding.

Discussion

Interpretation of Findings

The findings of this study validate the effectiveness of AI tools in enhancing language proficiency, particularly in the areas of speaking, listening comprehension, and vocabulary acquisition. The results align closely with the principles of TELL framework, which emphasizes the use of digital

technologies to personalize learning experiences and facilitate interactive student engagement. AI tools that provide real-time feedback were found to positively impact students' oral and auditory skills. Many learners preferred AI-generated evaluations over human feedback, as they perceived the former to be less intimidating and more constructive.

Despite these promising outcomes, a significant limitation emerges in the context of tonal languages such as Mandarin. While AI-powered speech recognition systems offer immediate corrective feedback, they often fail to accurately detect the nuanced tonal variations critical to effective Mandarin pronunciation. As a result, learners may receive incomplete or even misleading feedback, which can impede their progress in mastering tone accuracy. Addressing this limitation is essential to maximizing the pedagogical potential of AI in tonal language instruction.

Moreover, the nonjudgmental nature of AI feedback environments was particularly beneficial for students experiencing performance anxiety or stage fright. These students reported feeling more comfortable practicing language skills without the pressure of peer observation. The AI tools also provided personalized feedback and allowed learners to progress at their own pace, even when initial performance was suboptimal. The ability to access AI platforms beyond class hours further promoted learner engagement, self-regulation, and autonomy. Previous research supports this, indicating that AI technologies foster independent learning and enhance learner autonomy [47], [48]. Our findings are consistent with earlier studies demonstrating that AI tools improve language proficiency by providing immediate feedback and supporting autonomous learning [49],[50],[51],[52]. However, unlike many prior investigations that mainly emphasized improvements in grammar [53], vocabulary [54], or general fluency [55], our study identifies unique challenges specific to Mandarin, particularly in processing tonal variations and delivering sufficient cultural context.

The data also align with predictions derived from CLT when applied to language education. AI tools managed students' cognitive load effectively through adaptive learning pathways, presenting tasks during optimal cognitive windows to maintain mental focus [56]. These systems segmented complex language components into smaller, manageable tasks, which reduced extraneous load and allowed learners to concentrate on essential aspects such as pronunciation and sentence structure. According to CLT, instructional content should be tailored to learners' processing capacities, and the adaptive features of AI tools support this approach by modifying content delivery based on user performance [57]. Practical tasks embedded within manageable cognitive demands are necessary for learners to focus on the core linguistic skills [58].

While AI tools demonstrated substantial benefits for developing linguistic proficiency, a persistent weakness lies in their limited capacity to deliver cultural instruction. Although students reported improvements in language structure and usage, they encountered challenges in areas such as idiomatic expressions, nonverbal communication, and sociocultural norms elements that are crucial for achieving true communicative competence. One participant remarked that learning Chinese extends far beyond memorizing vocabulary and grammar; it requires the ability to interpret cultural cues and nonverbal signals embedded within communication. This highlights a fundamental shortcoming in current AI-assisted language learning systems, which, although proficient in facilitating linguistic construction and cognitive skills, often neglect the cultural dimensions essential for comprehensive language acquisition.

The findings further suggest that language educators hold varying views on the role of cultural immersion in language learning. While AI tools are effective in supporting language development, they lack the depth to foster full linguistic competence through cultural engagement. Thus, the study challenges the assumption that AI tools can wholly replace human interaction and context-rich learning environments. This limitation does not undermine the value of AI in language education but emphasizes the need for integrating cultural components into AI-driven instructional models to create more holistic and contextually meaningful learning experiences.

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study align with both the TELL framework and CLT, reinforcing their relevance in the context of AI-assisted language education. AI tools used in this research demonstrated the ability to personalize learning experiences and maintain interactivity, supporting the TELL framework's emphasis on learner autonomy and engagement. These results are consistent with previous studies highlighting the effectiveness of adaptive technologies in enhancing motivation and fostering self-directed learning in language acquisition [59], [60].

From the perspective of CLT, the study shows that AI systems effectively helped students manage their cognitive workload. Through adaptive pathways and real-time feedback, learners were exposed to more complex tasks only after demonstrating readiness. This approach reduced unnecessary mental strain and allowed students to focus on core language components, reflecting the theory's recommendation to match task difficulty with learners' cognitive capacity. However, the study also revealed notable limitations, particularly in the cultural dimensions of language learning. While AI tools effectively supported vocabulary acquisition, grammar instruction, and pronunciation practice, they did not adequately address cultural and nonverbal aspects of communication. These components are essential for achieving full language competence, especially in learning Mandarin, where meaning often relies on context and cultural nuance.

This limitation presents a challenge for the TELL framework, which advocates for integrating cultural immersion into language learning experiences [61], [62]. Although AI excels in linguistic processing, it lacks the capacity to replicate the depth of human-mediated cultural understanding. Therefore, future development of AI-based language platforms should consider integrating cultural content, such as virtual immersive experiences, to bridge this gap. Enhancing cultural elements within AI systems would contribute to a more holistic learning experience, aligning more closely with the principles of both TELL and CLT.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study offer important practical implications for language education programs aiming to incorporate AI tools into their curricula. AI-powered platforms that provide personalized, adaptive learning experiences were well-received by students, particularly for allowing self-paced progression and tailoring task difficulty based on individual proficiency. These features support learner autonomy and align with pedagogical goals of differentiated instruction. Therefore, language programs are encouraged to adopt AI tools that deliver real-time feedback and targeted exercises to address learners' specific weaknesses. However, the study also revealed a significant gap in cultural immersion. While AI effectively supports grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, it falls short in helping students navigate sociocultural contexts an essential component of communicative competence, especially in tonal and context-dependent languages like Mandarin. To address this limitation, educational programs should integrate virtual cultural simulations, role-play, and scenario-based activities that expose learners to authentic cultural practices and social norms.

In addition to pedagogical considerations, technical challenges also emerged as barriers to effective AI-assisted learning. Students reported frequent app crashes and speech recognition inaccuracies, which disrupted engagement and progress. Addressing these issues is essential for ensuring tool reliability and maintaining student motivation. Developers must enhance system stability and improve recognition accuracy, particularly for tonal variations. Moreover, institutions implementing AI tools should provide technical support and user training to help students navigate the platforms effectively. Finally, this study emphasizes the value of a blended learning approach that combines the adaptive benefits of AI with traditional, face-to-face instruction. Human educators can offer contextual and cultural insights that current AI systems lack, resulting in a more holistic language learning experience. By merging AI's personalization capabilities with the cultural depth of classroom interaction, language programs can better support learners in developing both linguistic proficiency and intercultural competence.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms the potential of AI tools to enhance Mandarin language learning by supporting speaking, listening, and vocabulary development through personalized and adaptive instruction. The findings reinforce the theoretical foundations of TELL and CLT, showing that AI can effectively reduce cognitive overload and promote learner autonomy. However, the study also highlights a critical shortcoming: the lack of cultural immersion within current AI platforms. While TELL and CLT address technological personalization and cognitive efficiency, they often overlook the sociocultural dimensions essential to communicative competence. In this regard, the findings strongly resonate with SLT, which emphasizes the importance of authentic social interaction, cultural mediation, and context-rich communication in the process of language acquisition. Learners in this study consistently expressed the need for cultural cues, nonverbal expressions, and real-life conversational norms elements that current AI systems are ill-equipped to provide. The absence of these features underscores a gap that SLT helps to illuminate: that language learning is deeply embedded in culture and cannot be fully separated from it.

Thus, there is a pressing need to integrate cultural learning experiences, such as virtual simulations and role-playing tasks, into AI-supported language environments to ensure a more holistic approach to language education. Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The research relied on self-reported data from a small, single-institution sample, which may limit generalizability and introduce subjective bias. Additionally, the tonal complexity of Mandarin remains a challenge for AI-based speech recognition, with tonal inaccuracies often affecting feedback quality. Future studies should adopt more objective measures, such as pre- and post-instruction assessments, and expand the sample scope to include multiple institutions and diverse learner populations. Longitudinal research is also recommended to examine the sustained impact of AI tools on language retention and intercultural competence. Furthermore, integrating immersive technologies like virtual and augmented reality may bridge the gap between linguistic instruction and cultural immersion. By combining the principles of TELL, CLT, and SLT, future AI innovations have the potential to evolve from personalized tutors into culturally intelligent learning companions fostering both language mastery and meaningful cross-cultural understanding.

LIMITATIONS


This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the sample size was relatively small (15 participants) and drawn from a single university, which limits the generalizability of the results to broader populations of foreign learners of Chinese. Second, the research relied predominantly on self-reported data from interviews, focus groups, and reflective journals, which may be subject to participant bias and social desirability effects. Third, while the qualitative phenomenological approach provided rich, in-depth insights into learner experiences, it did not include objective measures of language proficiency improvement, such as standardized tests or longitudinal performance data. Additionally, technical challenges with AI tools, such as speech recognition errors and software malfunctions, were reported but not systematically quantified or controlled. Lastly, the study focused primarily on Mandarin Chinese acquisition and may not reflect challenges and benefits of AI tools in learning other tonal or non-tonal languages. Future research should incorporate larger, more diverse samples, mixed-methods designs including objective assessments, and longitudinal studies to evaluate the sustained impact

of AI-assisted language learning. Integrating immersive cultural learning technologies also warrants further exploration to address the identified gap in cultural competence development.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

M.A. contributed to the conceptualization, data collection, data analysis, data interpretation, and writing of the manuscript. A.I. was responsible for the literature review, data interpretation, and writing review and editing. M.A. contributed in drafting reseach, data collection, data analysis, data interpretation, and writing of the manuscript M.R.S. contributed to the methodology, writing of the original draft, and data interpretation. W.A. provided supervision and project administration and contributed to the writing review, and editing. M.U.O. was involved in the methodology, writing of the original draft, and data interpretation.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DECLARATION OF USE OF AI IN SCIENTIFIC WRITING

The authors used Grammarly during the preparation of this work to improve grammar. After utilizing the tools, the authors thoroughly reviewed and edited the content as necessary and assumed full responsibility for the publication's content.

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