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Exploring English Language Learning via ChatGPT: A Case Study from A Self Determination Theory Perspective

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A B S T R A C T

This study aims to explore students' perceptions of using ChatGPT as a tool for learning English grammar, particularly in academic writing. Using a qualitative case study approach, twenty undergraduate students majoring in English education at a state university in North Sumatra were selected through purposive sampling based on their prior experience with ChatGPT, especially in completing assignments for courses like Basic Structure. Data were collected through a Likert-scale questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with four selected participants. The questionnaire data were analyzed quantitatively using frequency counts, while the interview transcripts were analyzed thematically through a three-stage coding process. The findings indicate that ChatGPT supports students' understanding of grammar by providing instant feedback, contextual explanations, and a flexible learning environment, which in turn boosts their confidence in using English. Within the framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), ChatGPT fulfills the needs for competence and autonomy; however, it still falls short in addressing the need for relatedness, which requires meaningful human interaction in the learning process.

1. Introduction

AI in education will continue to evolve, and the formation of interdisciplinary partnerships will be necessary to realize the various benefits it promises (Irianto et al., 2024). Programs, applications, features, and techniques emerge almost every day, many of which seem to offer new opportunities in learning and teaching English for non-native speakers, even though they were initially designed for entirely different purposes, such as automatic text generation or text editing for journalists, advertisers, and other professionals (Rambe & Salminawati, 2019). For example, the use of Chat GPT. The integration of AI in language learning environments offers various possibilities to enhance the four fundamental language skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. AI-based technologies such as

voice recognition systems, chat GPT, virtual tutors, and language learning applications have emerged as innovative tools that can provide learners with interactive and immersive language learning experiences. This technology offers features such as real-time feedback, adaptive assessments, and personalized content, which have the potential to enhance learners' communication skills and accelerate their language acquisition process. The use of AI in language teaching has the potential to enhance learner autonomy, as students can access resources and receive feedback independently, anytime and anywhere. AI can also facilitate individualized learning paths that adapt to learners' progress, preferences, and learning styles. The integration of AI in language learning environments can help address the diverse needs and challenges faced by English language learners, including limited access to native speakers, lack of immediate feedback, and individual attention (Afriyuninda & Oktaviani, 2021).

Several previous studies have examined the use of ChatGPT in English language learning (Annamalai et al., 2023), for instance, developed the Artificial Intelligence Assisted Language Learning (AIALL) model, which identifies five main dimensions through which ChatGPT supports language acquisition. Their study emphasizes that ChatGPT can help enhance language skills, provide feedback, and function as a practice partner that promotes learner autonomy and pedagogical innovation. (Auni & Manan, 2022) also investigated the potential of ChatGPT in the context of higher education. They argue that while this technology is capable of offering authentic materials and generating text-based interactions that resemble human conversation, empirical research on its effectiveness in higher education settings remains very limited. They therefore highlight the need for further evaluation of both the impact and ethical implications of using large language models like ChatGPT in English language learning. In a similar vein, (Hajarudin, 2023) examined the implementation of ChatGPT in English Language Teaching (ELT). The findings suggest that ChatGPT can be a useful tool for conversation practice, grammar correction, writing exercises, and enhancing understanding of cultural and social contexts. Nevertheless, Hajarudin stresses the continued importance of the teacher’s role as a guide and instructional decision-maker, emphasizing that ChatGPT cannot fully replace human interaction in the language learning process.

ChatGPT for English language skills. This study highlights that although ChatGPT assists in language practice, there are still challenges such as a lack of emotional interaction and a high dependence on written text, which can limit the natural development of oral and social skills. Although previous research has focused on the use of Chat GPT in enhancing English language learning, there is still a lack of comprehensive qualitative investigations that deeply explore students' psychological needs, such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness within the framework of Self- Determination Theory. Existing research still lacks consideration of how Chat GPT is used in English language classes and how this integration affects student motivation, particularly in writing grammar in sentences. Additionally, some Chat GPTs are available for free and easily accessible, so research needs to be directed towards understanding the best ways to utilize this important language learning partner in formal education. One of its influences is

how ChatGPT impacts students' socio- emotional cognitive development, which is an aspect of social and emotional development that is part of inherent psychological needs.

The self-determination theory (SDT) states that individuals have inherent psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which influence their well-being and participation in activities (Kalla & Kuraku, 2023). Autonomy refers to the need for self-determination, competence refers to the need to feel capable, and relatedness refers to the need for connection and social support. The fulfillment of these needs will enhance self-motivation and overall well-being (Hatmanto & Sari, 2023). These needs are universal but may manifest differently in different cultural contexts (Nalipay et al., 2020). Western culture often interprets autonomy as individual freedom, emphasizing personal achievement in competence, and prioritizing mutual understanding in relationships. On the contrary, Eastern cultures align autonomy with societal interests, connect competence with societal roles, and uphold familial bonds in interconnectedness (Farhi et al., 2023). In recent years, researchers have turned their attention to the application of Chat GPT in English language acquisition. However, the majority of research tends to concentrate on how it affects academic development, learning success, and student success, with very few studies taking the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) into account.

Therefore, it is very important to gain a deeper understanding of how AI chat can effectively support students' self-motivation, foster a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, in order to design more personalized and engaging AI chat-based language learning experiences, particularly in grammar writing within sentences. This implies that in-depth qualitative studies and interpretative efforts can deepen our contextual understanding of AI chat. Motivation is important for successful and effective learning (Farhi et al., 2023). Emphasizes that without motivation, it will be difficult to integrate effective pedagogical practices in the use of chatbots and language learning. When students are motivated to learn English through AI chat interactions, they tend to work harder, practice more frequently, and actively seek opportunities to improve their language skills. In addition, they tend to take more responsibility for their learning, set goals, and efficiently utilize AI chat as a tool for self-directed learning.

One of the famous chat AI is Chat GPT, which is part of the Generative Pre-Trained Transformer (GPT) family by OpenAI and highly valued by users. ChatGPT uses large language models (LLMs) built from a vast web data corpus to generate contextually appropriate text, recognizing language variations, genres, and cultural differences. This makes it an effective CALL tool and facilitates its integration into the language teaching and learning process. However, ChatGPT is also viewed as an educational tool that supports or even replaces the role of teachers by monitoring learning progress, evaluating student performance, and providing independent learning (Steele, 2023). This research investigates how students perceive the use of ChatGPT in grammar learning within the context of Self-Determination Theory. It also examines the role of ChatGPT in encouraging grammar mastery and enhancing

students' confidence in learning English, as framed by the principles of Self-Determination Theory.

Therefore, this research aims to explore how the utilization of ChatGPT in English language learning can support students' motivation and independence, particularly in English Education- 1 Class, within the context of Self-Determination Theory. In this way, this tool can effectively support the psychological needs of students and encourage their engagement and motivation sustainably. This research is expected to open new opportunities in English language learning. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) emphasizes the importance of intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and competence in the learning process.

This study aims to explore students' perceptions of using ChatGPT as a tool for learning English grammar, particularly in academic writing. Specifically, it seeks to understand how ChatGPT influences students' grammar learning experiences, the benefits and limitations they perceive, and how these experiences align with the psychological needs outlined in Self-Determination Theory (SDT), namely competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Using a qualitative case study approach, twenty undergraduate students majoring in English education at a state university in North Sumatra were selected through purposive sampling based on their prior experience with ChatGPT, especially in completing assignments for courses like Basic Structure.

2. Methodology

This research employed a qualitative case study approach to explore students' perceptions of using ChatGPT in academic English writing, in line with (Sugiyono, 2021) definition that qualitative case studies allow for in-depth exploration of phenomena within their contexts using multiple data sources. The study was conducted at a state university in North Sumatra, involving 20 undergraduate students majoring in English education who were purposively selected based on their familiarity with ChatGPT, particularly in writing academic papers. Most participants had experience using various digital tools for learning grammar, but they reported a preference for ChatGPT over platforms like Google, YouTube, or Grammarly due to its instant responses, contextual feedback, and flexible use. The duration of ChatGPT use among participants varied, with the majority having used it for more than a year. This widespread usage, especially among second-semester students, reflects its integration into academic activities such as the Basic Structure course, which emphasizes understanding and applying grammar rules accurately.

Data for this study were collected through a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire was distributed online via Google Forms and contained closed-ended items using a four-point Likert scale (Strongly agree to Strongly disagree). Interview questions were developed based on participants' questionnaire responses to gain deeper insights. Four students participated in the interviews, which were audio-recorded with consent and later transcribed verbatim. Questionnaire data were analyzed quantitatively through frequency counts, while

interview data underwent thematic content analysis using a three-phase coding process (Rukminingsih, 2020). Initial coding involved identifying key quotes and ideas, followed by grouping them into sentence-level categories, and finally reviewing and refining the themes through iterative analysis to ensure saturation and coherence in answering the research questions.

3. Results and Discussion

This section presents findings from research on students' perceptions and experiences in learning English grammar using ChatGPT, to explore how the use of ChatGPT as a learning aid can support students' intrinsic motivation in language learning. Data collected through questionnaires indicate that ChatGPT plays a significant role in enhancing students' confidence and competence in learning grammar. Additionally, this tool supports independent learning by providing direct feedback and personalized explanations, allowing students to have more control over their learning process.

The classroom atmosphere during the research was generally supportive and conducive to language learning. The school, located in an urban area, provided basic digital facilities, including a computer lab and internet access, which allowed students to engage with ChatGPT under teacher supervision. Students showed curiosity and excitement when introduced to ChatGPT as a learning tool, especially during independent tasks and vocabulary-building exercises. Teachers observed that the integration of this AI tool increased students' engagement, and many learners demonstrated proactive behavior, such as asking more questions and exploring language structures beyond the syllabus. Despite some initial hesitation, most students adapted quickly, displaying a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which are key components of Self-Determination Theory.

Students' Positive Perceptions of ChatGPT in Grammar Learning

The results of the study show that students generally perceive ChatGPT favorably as a tool for learning English grammar. This section summarizes the survey data and highlights the key elements of students' experiences with ChatGPT, including how effectively it helped them understand grammar rules, use language in context, and build confidence in applying their knowledge. As shown in Table 1, both the frequency of ChatGPT usage and the participants' level of competence with digital tools for grammar learning.

Based on data obtained from a survey regarding students' perceptions of using ChatGPT in learning grammar, the majority of students responded positively to the statements provided. The analysis results show that the majority of students agree that ChatGPT helps them understand grammar rules more easily. Of the total participants, 40% strongly agreed and 45% agreed with the statement that ChatGPT makes it easier for them to understand grammar rules, while only 15% gave a negative response. This shows that ChatGPT is considered an effective tool in providing understanding of grammar. Additionally, the second statement, which states that students feel more confident in using grammar after learning with

ChatGPT, also received a positive response. As many as 35% of students strongly agreed and 50% agreed, while the remaining 15% expressed disagreement or strong disagreement. These results indicate that the use of ChatGPT can enhance students' confidence in applying grammar in appropriate contexts.

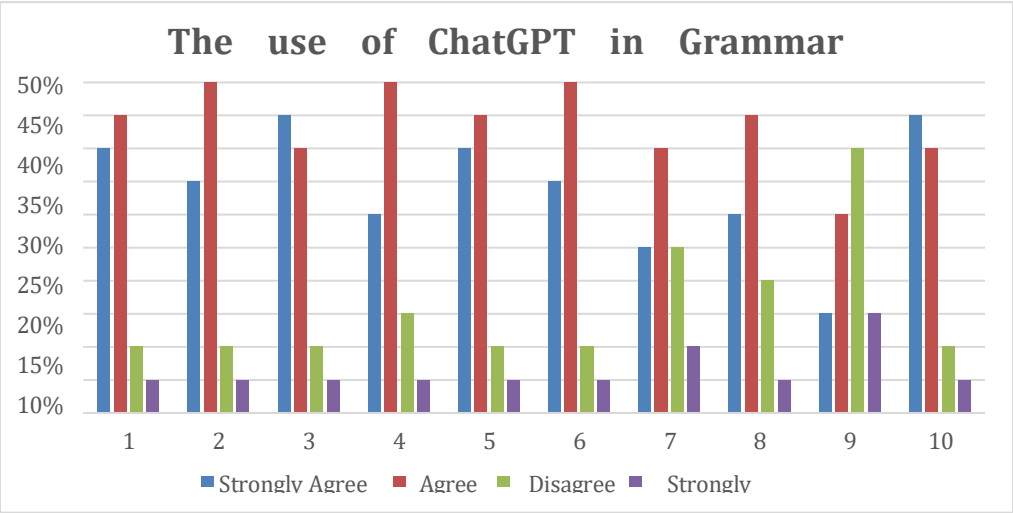

Table 1. Students' Perceptions of Using ChatGPT
Source: The data were analyzed by the author

In the third statement regarding ChatGPT's ability to provide examples of word usage in sentences according to correct grammar, the majority of students (45% strongly agree and 40% agree) consider this feature very helpful in learning grammar. Only 15% of students disagreed or strongly disagreed with that statement. This data reinforces that the ChatGPT feature, which provides direct sentence examples, helps students better understand the context of grammar usage. The fourth statement regarding understanding the differences between tenses with the help of ChatGPT also received quite a good response. As many as 30% of students strongly agreed and 50% agreed that ChatGPT helped them understand the differences between tenses, while the remaining 20% disagreed or strongly disagreed. This indicates that although most students feel helped, there are still some students who might have difficulty understanding the concept of tenses even after using ChatGPT.

Furthermore, the majority of students also use ChatGPT to check for grammar mistakes in their writing. As many as 40% strongly agree and 45% agree with this statement, while only 15% feel disagree or strongly disagree. These results indicate that ChatGPT is often used as a tool for correcting writing, which helps students improve their writing skills. In the sixth statement, 35% of students strongly agreed and 50% agreed that ChatGPT helps them understand when to use the correct verb forms. Only 15% of students responded negatively to this statement. These findings indicate that the ChatGPT feature in providing corrections and explanations regarding verb forms is quite effective for students in understanding the proper use of grammar.

However, when compared to traditional learning methods, students' responses to the preference for using ChatGPT over grammar books are quite varied. As many as 25% of students strongly agreed and 40% agreed, but 25% disagreed and 10% strongly disagreed. This shows that although many students prefer ChatGPT, some still feel that grammar books remain important in their learning process. The eighth statement, which states that ChatGPT provides grammar explanations in a way that is easier to understand compared to teachers or books, also received varied responses. As many as 30% strongly agree and 45% agree, but there are still 25% of students who disagree or strongly disagree. This shows that although ChatGPT is considered an effective tool, there are still students who are more comfortable learning with traditional methods.

Meanwhile, in the ninth statement regarding students' dependence on ChatGPT for learning grammar, only 15% of students strongly agreed and 30% agreed, while the remaining 55% stated they disagreed or strongly disagreed. These results indicate that although ChatGPT is considered useful, the majority of students still strive to learn independently without relying too much on this technology. Finally, 45% of students strongly agree and 40% agree that they will continue to use ChatGPT to help learn grammar in the future. Only 15% expressed disagreement or strong disagreement, indicating that the majority of students see ChatGPT as a useful tool in their learning process.

Based on the results of the questionnaire displayed in Table 1, the researchers contacted four participants for in-depth interviews to further explore their perceptions of using ChatGPT in grammar learning. The four individuals were selected based on their responses to the questionnaire, which met the research participant criteria. The interview results will be described based on the main themes and supported by quotes from participants who maintain their anonymity. The results of the data analysis show that students have a positive view of using ChatGPT as an aid in understanding grammar. The researchers identified three main themes related to the benefits of using ChatGPT in grammar learning, namely: (1) enhancing understanding of grammar rules, (2) providing clearer examples of grammar usage in context, and (3) boosting students' confidence in using grammar in both written and spoken communication.

The Role of GPT Chat in Encouraging Grammar Mastery and Increasing Students' Confidence in English Learning

Improving Understanding of Grammar Rules

In order to explore how students experience English language learning through ChatGPT, particularly from the lens of Self-Determination Theory, this study employed a semi-structured interview method. This approach allowed participants to freely express their thoughts while ensuring that the discussion remained focused on key aspects related to autonomy, competence, and relatedness. By framing the questions within these three motivational components, the researcher aimed to uncover not only the students' engagement with ChatGPT but also the underlying factors that influenced their learning motivation and persistence. To provide clarity and

transparency in the research process, the full list of interview questions is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Interview Questions for Students based on Self-Determination Theory

No.	Component (SDT)	Interview Question
1	Autonomy	How do you feel when you can choose your own topics or tasks when learning English with ChatGPT?
2	Autonomy	In what ways does ChatGPT allow you to learn at your own pace or in your own style?
3	Competence	Can you describe a time when ChatGPT helped you understand something you found difficult in English?
4	Competence	How confident do you feel about your English skills after practicing with ChatGPT?
5	Relatedness	Does using ChatGPT make you feel more connected to others in your English learning journey? If yes, how?
6	Relatedness	How do you share or discuss what you learn from ChatGPT with classmates or friends?
7	Mixed (All)	What are the main advantages and disadvantages you experience when using ChatGPT for English learning?
8	Mixed (All)	How has ChatGPT influenced your motivation to learn English overall?

The majority of students concur that ChatGPT makes it easier for them to comprehend grammatical rules, per the study's conclusions. According to the survey, 85% of participants said they "strongly agree" or "agree" that ChatGPT makes it simpler to comprehend grammatical rules, and 80% said it aids in their comprehension of the variations in English word forms, especially when it comes to identifying sentence tenses. With the help of ChatGPT, the explanations will be clearer and easier to comprehend, and ChatGPT can consistently respond to all enquiries, giving users the confidence to write grammatically correct sentences. One of the interviewees provided the following quote to bolster this claim:

"In the past, I frequently struggled to understand grammatical rules, particularly when deciding between the simple past and present perfect. Because book explanations are sometimes too short and don't include clear examples, I have trouble understanding when to use each tense. But with ChatGPT, I can enquire directly and receive a more straightforward and understandable response. For instance, when I enquire about the distinction between "I have eaten" and "I ate," ChatGPT not only clarifies the usage difference but also offers instances of how to use each in a variety of real-world contexts, such narrating experiences or previous occurrences. I may also ask for sample sentences in other settings, which helps me better grasp the distinctions. I feel more comfortable speaking and writing with it now. (P1, Interview)."

According to P1, using ChatGPT is useful as a grammar learning tool in and of itself, but it also serves as a learning aid that encourages students to improve their proficiency in English. providing a more interactive and personal learning experience, especially in understanding the language that is still being used. ChatGPT can answer long-form questions, provide clear explanations, and provide example kalimat according to the context that is desired. This does more than only

improve students' understanding of grammar; it also encourages them to be more active in their studies and to independently explore the use of language.

Providing Examples of Grammar Usage in a Clearer Context

One of ChatGPT's primary benefits, according to the students in the study with English education students, is its capacity to offer a variety of examples of word usage or grammatical structures in sentences until the students fully comprehend the distinctions in a more understandable context. According to up to 85% of responders, ChatGPT offers suitable instances of contextual grammar usage. Compared to merely reading theory in books, the students believe that these instances aid in their understanding of grammar principles. in order for the pupils to utilise it with assurance in their everyday lives.

"I find it easier to understand grammar when I see direct examples rather than just reading the rules in a book." In addition to offering a single sample sentence, ChatGPT can explain it in its whole and in a variety of situations that are pertinent to daily life. For instance, when I enquired about the usage of "since" and "for," ChatGPT not only gave definitions but also showed me a number of sample phrases in a variety of contexts, including casual discussions. I now have a better understanding of the distinctions and feel more comfortable utilising them appropriately in both writing and conversation thanks to this explanation. (Interview, P2).

P2 claims that ChatGPT's function is to explain grammar in a way that is not only theoretical but also useful and usable. Students can gain a more tangible understanding of the purpose and application of grammatical structures by being given a variety of sentence examples in diverse circumstances. Their ability to discern subtleties of meaning and acceptable usage in everyday settings is greatly enhanced by this. Students are encouraged to experiment and attempt to build sentences on their own with greater confidence thanks to ChatGPT's examples. As a result, ChatGPT offers pertinent context, which enhances the learning process by enabling students to immediately connect the content to real-world situations.

Increasing Self-Belief in Grammar Use

Students' confidence in utilising grammar in writing and conversation is increased by

ChatGPT, which also helps them comprehend grammar rules and gives clear examples. It can allay concerns about grammatical errors in sentence construction, prepositions, and tenses. Up to 85% of respondents said that after using ChatGPT, they feel more comfortable using grammar. They can identify grammatical mistakes in their writing or speech when ChatGPT is present. Because they know there is a tool that can check, fix, and explain errors in a comprehensible manner, this feature gives them the confidence to try new things when writing and speaking. therefore they feel much more comfortable speaking English.

I frequently wondered if my writing was grammatically correct before I started using ChatGPT. I worry about errors in sentence construction, prepositions, or tenses, but I'm not always sure how to correct them. I can now examine my own errors, get explanations on why something is incorrect, and figure out how to repair it thanks to ChatGPT. I can also get feedback on how to improve the naturalness and contextual fit of my statements. For instance, ChatGPT indicated that the verb form I had used in the sentence "She went to the market yesterday" was not appropriate for a past tense sentence and recommended changing it to "She went to the market yesterday." In addition to fixing it, ChatGPT also gave users comparable example phrases and an explanation of the simple past tense usage guidelines so they could fully grasp the idea. I feel like I have a tool that helps me study and develop on my own, which boosts my confidence when I write and talk in English. (P3, Interview).

P3 claims that when students are allowed the freedom to assess and fix their own grammar errors, ChatGPT's contribution to enhancing their self-esteem is evident. Students learn to recognise errors in their own phrases and comprehend the causes of those errors through direct and responsive interactions. Students feel better led in their learning process when they receive methodical explanations and pertinent examples. Because they have access to immediate, instructive, and nonjudgmental help, students who participate in this Chat GPT become more brave in their writing and speaking without worrying about making mistakes. This demonstrates that ChatGPT serves as a learning tool that encourages students' independence and self-assurance in actively and contextually using English in addition to serving as a technical aid.

By introducing the concepts of competence, autonomy, and relatedness it strengthens Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Theory of Self-Determination (SDT) is a theory of human motivation in which each person is proactive (Kalla & Kuraku, 2023). The meta-theory that underpins SDT is that all people are born with the ability to grow, communicate, and integrate new experiences in a way that is engaging. This development, however, does not function in a terpisah manner and requires a surrounding environment that will support them (Songsiengchai, 2025). However, in many social contexts, such as schools, this tendency is observed, which results in a decrease in compliance, oppositional behavior, and disengagement. According to(Hai, 2023), many schoolchildren are motivated to improve their school every year because they believe that it is a learning environment or because they are not yet proficient.

In According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT), students' psychological growth in language learning is driven by the fulfillment of three key needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. This study found that ChatGPT effectively enhances learners' sense of competence by offering a safe, supportive environment for grammar practice. Participants appreciated how ChatGPT provides real-time corrections, contextual examples, and concise explanations that help them understand grammar concepts more clearly. As a result, students reported increased confidence in applying grammar both in writing and speaking. These findings align with previous studies (Franciscu, 2023; Hatmanto & Sari, 2023) that emphasize the importance of clear, accessible, and interactive learning support. Moreover,

ChatGPT's trial-and-error format allows students to explore language freely, reducing fear of mistakes and promoting deeper engagement. Trust in the tool also plays a significant role, as many participants indicated that they were more willing to practice grammar using ChatGPT compared to other platforms like YouTube or Grammarly.

In terms of autonomy, ChatGPT enables students to take control of their learning by offering flexibility in time, location, and pace. Many participants felt empowered by the ability to ask questions anytime and receive immediate feedback tailored to their needs. However, 45% of students also expressed concern over becoming too dependent on the tool, which could limit the development of independent learning strategies. As for relatedness, while ChatGPT lacks the emotional and social interaction of human peers or instructors, it still contributes to meaningful learning by showing how grammar works in real-world communication. This relevance makes learning more engaging and helps students connect with the material on a practical level. Overall, ChatGPT acts as a personalized learning companion supporting competence and autonomy effectively though still requiring human interaction to fully meet learners' social-emotional needs

4. Conclusion

This study reveals that students perceive ChatGPT as a helpful tool for learning English grammar. It enhances their understanding and confidence by offering clear explanations, contextual examples, and instant feedback. Based on Self-Determination Theory (SDT), ChatGPT fulfills the needs for competence and autonomy, as it allows students to learn independently and at their own pace. However, it does not fully address the need for relatedness, as it lacks emotional and social interaction. Therefore, ChatGPT is effective as a supplementary tool but cannot replace the value of direct human interaction in learning.

Educators are encouraged to integrate ChatGPT as a support tool to promote independent learning and deeper grammar comprehension. Educational institutions should also provide clear guidelines to prevent overdependence on AI and foster students' critical thinking skills. Developers are advised to incorporate more human-centered interactive features, and curriculum designers should balance AI-based tools with traditional methods that emphasize social interaction. Future research should adopt quantitative and longitudinal approaches to better understand the long-term impact of ChatGPT on language learning motivation and achievement.

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