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ChatGPT's Perspectives on Its Role as a Language and Cultural Partner: Enhancing English Language Acquisition and Intercultural Competence

Rachawit Photiyarach*

Naresuan University International College, Naresuan University, Phitsanulok, Thailand

* Corresponding author: *rachawitp@nu.ac.th*

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Abstract. The growing use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) in language learning and intercultural education has attracted increasing scholarly attention, yet existing research has largely focused on learner outcomes, user perceptions, and institutional responses. Comparatively little attention has been paid to how generative AI systems themselves conceptualise and articulate their educational role. Addressing this gap, this study examines ChatGPT's self-representation as a form of educational discourse, treating the system as an object of qualitative inquiry rather than as a tool or human-like agent. Guided by thing ethnography, the study analyses ChatGPT's responses to a replicable set of structured interview-style prompts related to language learning, intercultural competence, ethics, contextual constraints, and future roles. Data were analysed using hybrid inductive–deductive thematic analysis and interpreted through Bronfenbrenner's bioecological (PPCT) framework. The findings indicate that ChatGPT consistently positions itself as a supportive but non-authoritative resource, emphasising adaptability while foregrounding ethical limitations, contextual dependence, and the continued centrality of human agency in AI-mediated education. The findings are interpreted as temporally situated representations, reflecting the system conditions present during the data collection period, with implications for AI-informed language pedagogy, intercultural education, and ethical integration in educational contexts.

Keywords: Generative artificial intelligence, ChatGPT; language learning, intercultural competence, thing ethnography, bioecological model

1. Introduction

The rapid spread of generative artificial intelligence (AI) has begun to reshape how language learners and educators access linguistic and intercultural resources. Tools such as ChatGPT are now commonly used for drafting, explaining, practising, and simulating communication in English and other languages, often beyond formal classroom settings. ChatGPT is a large language model designed to generate human-like responses in conversational settings and has been widely adopted for language practice, explanation, and academic support across formal and informal learning contexts. This development is significant because language learning and intercultural competence have long been understood as socially embedded processes shaped by interaction, identity, and cultural context rather than by linguistic input alone (Byram 1997; Norton 2013). As generative AI becomes increasingly visible in educational spaces, questions arise not only about effectiveness or risk, but also about how such systems position themselves within language learning and intercultural education.

Research on AI in education has expanded rapidly, focusing on issues such as learner and teacher perceptions, academic integrity, ethical concerns, and institutional governance (Williamson 2017; Selwyn 2019). Within language education, studies of technology-enhanced language learning and learning beyond the classroom have highlighted the potential of digital tools to support learner autonomy and access, while consistently emphasising that learning outcomes depend on how technologies are integrated

into broader educational environments (Reinders & Benson 2017).

Research on online intercultural learning similarly demonstrates that intercultural competence does not emerge automatically through technology use, but requires contextualisation, reflection, and guided engagement (O'Dowd 2018). Across these bodies of literature, a shared insight emerges: educational technologies operate within complex social and institutional systems rather than as isolated tools. Despite this growing scholarship, research on generative AI remains largely human-centred in its analytical focus. Most studies prioritise learners' experiences, teachers' concerns, or policy responses, while comparatively little attention has been paid to the discursive positioning of the AI system itself.

This is notable because generative AI systems do more than produce content. In educational interactions, ChatGPT frequently explains what it can and cannot do, articulates ethical boundaries, and situates its role in relation to teachers, learners, and institutions. Such self-descriptions are not neutral. In educational contexts, how roles and limitations are framed can shape expectations, trust, authority, and patterns of reliance. Yet how generative AI systems conceptualise and communicate their own role in language learning and intercultural competence remains underexplored.

This study addresses that gap by examining ChatGPT's self-representation as a form of educational discourse. Rather than treating ChatGPT as a neutral tool or as a human-like agent, the study approaches the system as an object of qualitative inquiry, analysing its system-generated responses as textual data. To support this approach, the study adopts thing ethnography as a methodological orientation, which extends ethnographic attention to non-human entities and examines how objects and systems participate in social practices without attributing human agency or consciousness to them (Giaccardi et al. 2016). In this framing, ChatGPT is understood as a socio-technical artefact whose responses reflect embedded educational norms, institutional constraints, and cultural values.

To interpret these patterns systematically, the study draws on Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model, particularly the PPCT framework (Process–Person–Context–Time) (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). The PPCT framework is used analytically to organise patterns of system self-representation rather than to model human development or learning outcomes. Although originally developed to explain human development, the PPCT model provides a useful ecological lens for analysing how learning-related roles are situated within nested systems. In language learning and intercultural education, ecological perspectives align with the understanding that learning emerges through interactional processes, is shaped by multiple contextual levels, and unfolds over time (Reinders and Benson, 2017; O'Dowd 2018). In this study, the PPCT framework is used analytically to organise how ChatGPT describes interaction, characterises its own role and limitations, situates itself within educational and cultural contexts, and reflects on its future role in education. Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How does ChatGPT describe its interactional processes with learners in language learning contexts?
2. How does ChatGPT present its own characteristics, roles, and limitations in relation to language learning and intercultural competence?
3. How does ChatGPT situate itself within micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-level educational and cultural contexts?

4. How does ChatGPT conceptualise its evolving role over time in language learning and intercultural education?

By focusing on AI self-representation, this study contributes to research on generative AI in education in three ways. First, it shifts analytical attention from outcomes and user perceptions to how AI systems discursively construct their educational role. Second, it demonstrates the value of combining thing ethnography with thematic analysis to examine generative AI as a socio-technical artefact rather than as a participant or mere instrument. Third, it extends ecological approaches in language learning and intercultural education by illustrating how an AI system positions itself within nested educational systems, reinforcing the importance of context-sensitive and human-centred integration of generative AI technologies.

2. Literature Review

The increasing integration of generative AI technologies, such as ChatGPT, into English language learning and teaching has sparked both excitement and critical reflection in academic research. This literature review focuses on two main themes: Generative AI in Language Acquisition and Intercultural Competence and the Perception of Generative AI by learners, educators, and the broader educational community. These themes explore the potential of AI to revolutionize language and cultural education, while also addressing concerns and attitudes toward its role in the educational environment.

2.1 Generative AI in English Language Acquisition and Intercultural Competence

Generative AI tools, such as ChatGPT, have shown great potential in transforming the landscape of language education. AI's ability to generate human-like responses and interact in real-time allows learners to engage in meaningful conversations and practice language skills in ways that were previously unavailable outside traditional classroom settings (Slamet 2024). The transformative nature of AI in language education is most evident in its capacity to offer personalized learning experiences. AI can adjust its responses based on individual learner needs, providing feedback that is tailored to each student's language proficiency (Kamalov and Gurrib 2023).

For example, a beginner might receive simplified language structures, while an advanced learner could be challenged with more complex tasks. This adaptability fosters learner autonomy by allowing students to practice at their own pace and receive immediate feedback, which can enhance motivation and engagement (Chiu 2023). Moreover, generative AI supports the development of language skills by simulating real-world conversational scenarios, offering learners the opportunity to practice language use in authentic contexts (Liang et al. 2023). AI tools like ChatGPT can facilitate both spoken and written language practice, helping students build confidence and fluency through repeated interactions. This capacity to provide continuous practice without the constraints of a traditional classroom is seen as one of AI's greatest contributions to language learning (Jia et al. 2022).

However, despite its transformative potential, generative AI presents certain challenges. While AI can provide technically accurate responses, it often lacks the ability to fully understand cultural nuances and social contexts, which are crucial for mastering a language (Woo and Choi 2021). The inability to replicate cultural sensitivity can lead to misunderstandings or ineffective communication, particularly when learners rely on AI to practice cross-cultural communication (Liu 2003; Ożegalska-Łukasik and Łukasik 2023). Therefore, studying how AI can better assist learners in developing intercultural competence and supplementing it with human guidance is crucial for comprehensive language and

cultural mastery (Arif et al. 2023; Cao et al. 2023).

2.2 Perception of Generative AI

The perception of generative AI in language education is varied among learners, educators, and researchers. For many learners, generative AI is seen as an exciting and accessible tool that provides a supportive learning environment (Al-Smadi 2023; Mello et al. 2023). Learners appreciate the opportunity to engage in non-judgmental practice, especially for speaking and writing, which are areas where students often feel anxious about making mistakes in front of peers or instructors (Dao and Le 2023; Gándara et al. 2023; Slamet 2024). The anonymity and flexibility AI tools offer are considered significant advantages, particularly in self-directed learning settings (Choi et al. 2023; Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2024). Educators who embrace AI tools often highlight their ability to enhance instructional efficiency by automating tasks such as providing feedback, grading, and generating exercises (Zastudil et al. 2023).

This allows teachers to focus more on personalized instruction and classroom management. AI's capacity to scale individualized learning in large classrooms or online environments is also seen as a significant benefit. However, the perception of AI among educators is more complex. While some view AI as a valuable supplement to traditional teaching methods, others express concern over its limitations and the potential for over-reliance (Douali et al. 2022). Conversely, some educators worry about the erosion of critical thinking and language analysis skills among learners who rely too heavily on AI-generated feedback (Mohammadkarimi 2023).

Learners may accept AI's corrections passively without understanding the underlying language rules, which can hinder deeper language acquisition. Additionally, educators are cautious about AI's role in encouraging academic dishonesty, as students may misuse generative tools to complete assignments with minimal effort, undermining the learning process (Chan 2023; Choi et al. 2023). From a broader educational perspective, ethical concerns regarding bias in AI systems have shaped the perception of generative AI.

AI tools are trained on large datasets that may contain biased language or cultural assumptions, which can inadvertently reinforce stereotypes or provide skewed perspectives (Akgun and Greenhow 2022; Cohen et al. 2014). This is particularly problematic in language education, where learners rely on AI to understand not only the mechanics of a language but also its cultural and social dimensions. Thus, while generative AI is perceived as a powerful tool for enhancing language learning, its potential biases and limitations in cultural competence must be addressed to ensure it supports rather than undermines the educational process (Ferrara, 2023; Gándara et al. 2023).

3. Methodology

ChatGPT was selected as the focus of this study due to its widespread adoption in educational contexts, its conversational interface, and its tendency to explicitly articulate role descriptions, limitations, and ethical boundaries during interaction. This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory research design to examine how ChatGPT represents its own role as a language-learning and intercultural partner. Rather than investigating learner outcomes, user perceptions, or instructional effectiveness, the analysis focuses exclusively on ChatGPT's system-generated responses to structured prompts. These responses are treated as textual artefacts through which the system discursively constructs and explains its perceived role, limitations, and responsibilities within language learning and intercultural communication contexts.

ChatGPT is approached as a technological and discursive artefact, not as a human-like agent or research participant. Accordingly, no claims are made regarding consciousness, intention, agency, or lived experience. The study does not seek to assess whether ChatGPT

successfully supports language learning or intercultural competence; instead, it examines how the system articulates and positions its role within educational discourse

3.1 Methodological Orientation: Thing Ethnography

The study is informed by thing ethnography as a methodological orientation (Giaccardi et al. 2016; Giaccardi et al. 2020). Thing ethnography extends qualitative inquiry beyond human subjects by treating non-human entities such as technologies and systems as legitimate objects of analysis. In this research, thing ethnography provides the conceptual basis for engaging directly with ChatGPT and analysing its outputs as meaningful data, without anthropomorphising the system or attributing human qualities to it.

Within this framework, ChatGPT is understood as a socio-technical artefact whose responses reflect embedded educational norms, ethical alignment mechanisms, institutional expectations, and broader cultural discourses shaped by its training data and system design. The analysis therefore focuses on ChatGPT's discursive self-representation, rather than on its actual pedagogical impact or operational performance.

3.2 Data Generation: Interaction Protocol and Prompts

Data were generated through a series of interview-style interactions with ChatGPT using a predefined set of structured and semi-structured prompts. The prompt set was developed in advance to elicit ChatGPT's descriptions of its role in:

1. English language learning,
2. intercultural communication and competence,
3. relationships with learners and teachers,
4. ethical considerations and limitations, and
5. its anticipated future role in education.

To enhance transparency and replicability, the same core prompts were reused across interaction sessions without rewording. Follow-up prompts were used only to request clarification or elaboration and followed a consistent probing logic. Prompts were not adapted in response to specific outputs, and no responses were regenerated, edited, or optimised after generation. All outputs were captured verbatim.

3.3 Data Collection and Dataset

Multiple interaction sessions were conducted within a constrained data collection window to observe consistency and recurrence in how ChatGPT represented its role across responses. All system-generated outputs from these sessions were collected as qualitative textual data and compiled into a single corpus for analysis. The unit of analysis in this study is the prompt–response exchange, treated as a discrete textual artefact. No comparative human data were collected, and no interaction beyond prompt delivery was included in the dataset.

3.4 Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method was selected for its flexibility and suitability for identifying recurring patterns of meaning within qualitative textual data, particularly in exploratory studies that aim to examine how phenomena are discursively constructed rather than measured or quantified.

The first phase involved familiarisation with the data, during which all ChatGPT-generated responses were read repeatedly and in their entirety to develop an overall sense of the dataset. During this phase, initial analytic notes and reflections were recorded to capture early impressions, recurring emphases, and notable patterns in how the system described its role, limitations, and interactions within language learning and intercultural contexts.

In the second phase, initial codes were generated through a systematic coding of the dataset. Coding was conducted manually and focused on segments of text that reflected how ChatGPT described interactional processes, educational roles, ethical considerations, contextual positioning, and future orientation. Coding followed a hybrid inductive–deductive strategy. Initial coding was primarily inductive, allowing codes to emerge directly from the data without predefined categories, in order to remain open to unanticipated patterns in the system's self-representation.

The third phase involved the identification of candidate themes, during which related codes were examined and grouped into broader thematic categories. This phase focused on identifying coherent patterns across responses rather than isolated statements, with attention to the consistency and recurrence of discursive features across interaction sessions. In the fourth phase, themes were reviewed and refined to ensure internal coherence and clear distinction between themes. This involved revisiting both the coded extracts and the full dataset to confirm that each theme accurately represented a meaningful pattern in the data and that themes collectively captured the scope of ChatGPT's self-representation.

In the fifth phase, themes were defined and named. At this stage, emergent themes were interpreted and organised using Bronfenbrenner's bioecological (PPCT) framework (Process–Person–Context–Time) as a sensitising theoretical lens (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006). Rather than determining codes a priori, the PPCT framework was applied analytically to structure and interpret themes after they had emerged. Specifically, the framework was used to organise how ChatGPT described (a) interactional processes with learners, (b) its own characteristics, roles, and limitations, (c) its positioning within nested educational and cultural contexts, and (d) its future-oriented role over time. This application of the PPCT framework was analytical rather than developmental and did not imply human learning trajectories.

Throughout the analytic process, an iterative codebook was developed and refined. The codebook documented code labels, operational definitions, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and representative excerpts from the dataset. Revisions to codes and themes were systematically recorded, and earlier coding decisions were revisited as necessary to maintain analytic consistency. In the final phase, the analytic narrative was produced, integrating thematic findings with illustrative excerpts from ChatGPT's responses. An audit trail was maintained throughout all stages of analysis to document analytic decisions, theme revisions, and theoretical reflections. This process enhanced transparency and allowed for a clear account of how interpretations were developed from the data.

3.5 Trustworthiness and Analytic Rigour

As this study did not involve multiple coders or human participants, analytic trustworthiness was addressed through strategies appropriate to single-researcher, artefact-focused qualitative research. Rather than relying on inter-coder reliability measures, which are not applicable in this context, the study adopted alternative criteria of rigour emphasised in qualitative inquiry, including transparency, coherence, reflexivity, and theoretical alignment. Trustworthiness was first supported through repeated engagement with the dataset. Multiple rounds of coding were conducted across interaction sessions, allowing the researcher to revisit earlier interpretations, refine codes, and assess the consistency and recurrence of patterns in ChatGPT's responses. Attention was given not to isolated statements but to discursive regularities that appeared across prompts and sessions, thereby strengthening the credibility of identified themes.

Second, reflexive memo-writing was employed throughout the analytic process to document interpretive assumptions, analytic decisions, and emerging insights. These memos served as a reflexive record of how themes were developed and refined, enabling ongoing critical reflection on the researcher's role in

interpreting system-generated text. This reflexive practice helped to mitigate unexamined assumptions and to maintain analytic transparency.

Third, analytic rigour was reinforced through the development and iterative refinement of a codebook and the maintenance of a detailed audit trail. The audit trail recorded coding revisions, theme reorganisation, and theoretical reflections, providing a transparent account of how analytic decisions evolved over time. This documentation supports the dependability of the analysis by making the analytic process explicit and traceable.

Finally, the use of extended and representative excerpts from ChatGPT's responses further enhances analytic credibility by allowing readers to assess the plausibility of interpretations in relation to the data. Rather than asserting definitive claims, the analysis invites readers to evaluate how themes were grounded in the textual evidence. Taken together, these strategies ensure that the study's findings are analytically rigorous, methodologically transparent, and theoretically coherent, while remaining appropriate to the exploratory and artefact-focused nature of the research.

3.6 Model Fluidity and Policy Constraints

The study recognises that ChatGPT's outputs are shaped by probabilistic language modelling, ongoing system updates, and safety- and policy-driven alignment constraints. To account for this fluidity, data were collected within a limited time window and analysed as temporally situated outputs rather than stable or universal representations of the system.

The analysis emphasises recurring discursive patterns across responses rather than isolated statements, thereby reducing reliance on any single output that may reflect alignment artefacts. Findings are therefore interpreted as a snapshot of ChatGPT's self-representation under the platform conditions present during the data collection period.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

This study did not involve human participants, interviews, observations, or personal data. All data were generated through interactions with ChatGPT and treated as system-generated textual artefacts. No identifiable or sensitive information was collected. Ethical approval was therefore not required.

4. Findings

This section presents an in-depth analysis of ChatGPT's responses to interview-style prompts concerning its role in English language learning and intercultural competence. The findings demonstrate that ChatGPT constructs a consistent yet carefully bounded self-representation across multiple dimensions, including pedagogical support, adaptability, cultural mediation, ethical responsibility, contextual dependence, and future orientation. Throughout the interviews, ChatGPT repeatedly emphasised usefulness while simultaneously foregrounding limitation, uncertainty, and the necessity of human involvement. The findings are presented thematically, with extensive excerpts included to illustrate how these patterns recur across responses.

4.1 ChatGPT's construction of itself as a supportive but non-authoritative language-learning resource

A dominant and recurring theme across the interviews is ChatGPT's persistent framing of its role as supportive rather than authoritative in language learning. When asked directly about its role in supporting English language learners, ChatGPT consistently avoided claims of instructional authority and instead positioned itself as a supplementary aid. For example, ChatGPT stated:

"I see my role primarily as a supportive language-learning resource that provides learners with opportunities for practice, explanation, and feedback."

This statement was repeatedly reinforced with explicit disclaimers that distinguish its function from that of human teachers:
"My function is not to replace teachers or formal instruction, but to supplement learning by offering immediate responses and explanations."

Across multiple responses, ChatGPT constructed human educators as central actors in the learning process, particularly in areas that require judgment, evaluation, and interpersonal engagement:
"I cannot replace teachers, especially when it comes to assessing progress, providing personalised guidance, or supporting learners emotionally."

This self-positioning suggests an awareness of institutional norms in education, where authority and responsibility are typically associated with human professionals. Rather than challenging these norms, ChatGPT aligns itself with them, presenting its role as secondary and supportive. ChatGPT also emphasised the affective dimension of language learning, positioning itself as a resource that can reduce anxiety and lower barriers to participation:
"I aim to reduce anxiety around language use by creating a non-judgmental environment where learners feel comfortable experimenting with English."

However, even this affective support was framed cautiously. ChatGPT acknowledged that emotional reassurance through text-based interaction cannot substitute for human empathy or relational support:
"I do not fully understand learners' emotions or motivations, and I cannot respond to them in the same way a human teacher can."

Taken together, these responses construct ChatGPT as a tool that facilitates practice and confidence-building while explicitly rejecting claims to pedagogical authority or emotional depth.

4.2 Adaptive language support framed as flexible but inherently uncertain

Another prominent theme concerns ChatGPT's description of its adaptive capabilities in language learning. ChatGPT frequently highlighted its ability to adjust responses based on perceived learner input, presenting adaptability as a key feature of its usefulness:
"I attempt to adapt my responses by adjusting vocabulary choice, sentence complexity, and the amount of explanation provided."

This adaptive behaviour was described as responsive to learners' apparent proficiency levels:
"For a beginner, I might use simpler language and clearer explanations, while for more advanced learners I can offer more nuanced or complex responses."

However, these claims were consistently tempered by acknowledgements of uncertainty. ChatGPT explicitly stated that its adaptive capacity is limited by the absence of reliable assessment mechanisms:
"This adaptation is based on cues from the user's input rather than a precise understanding of proficiency."

As a result, ChatGPT recognised that its responses may not always align with learners' actual needs:
"It may not always be fully accurate, and sometimes my explanations may oversimplify complex linguistic issues."

In several responses, ChatGPT acknowledged the risk that learners may misinterpret adaptive fluency as pedagogical precision:
"Learners might assume that because responses sound fluent or appropriate, they are always the best fit for their learning level."

This pattern reveals a careful balancing act in ChatGPT's self-representation. While adaptability is presented as a strength, it is simultaneously framed as approximate and contingent. Through this discourse, ChatGPT implicitly positions structured curricula, teacher guidance, and sustained human interaction as

necessary to address the limitations of algorithmic personalisation.

4.3 Language learning framed as practice, exploration, and support rather than mastery

Across the interviews, ChatGPT consistently framed language learning as an ongoing process of practice rather than a finite goal of mastery. Rather than presenting itself as a source of definitive answers, ChatGPT described its role as facilitating repeated engagement with language:
"I can offer consistent language practice and explanations that learners can engage with at their own pace."

This framing emphasises process over outcome, with ChatGPT positioning itself as a tool for experimentation:
"My role is to support learners as they experiment with language, rather than to judge or evaluate their performance."

ChatGPT explicitly cautioned against learners treating its responses as final or authoritative:
"Learners may rely on my responses, but they should continue developing independent language analysis skills."

This emphasis on practice aligns with communicative views of language learning, although ChatGPT did not explicitly reference pedagogical theory. Instead, it constructed language learning as something that unfolds through repeated interaction, reflection, and exposure — processes that extend beyond AI-mediated engagement.

4.4 Intercultural competence constructed as awareness, sensitivity, and caution

In responses related to intercultural communication, ChatGPT consistently framed its role as raising awareness rather than providing deep cultural understanding. It described offering general explanations of cultural norms and communication styles, while repeatedly emphasising that culture is complex and internally diverse:
"I support learners by providing general information about cultural norms and communication styles."

However, these explanations were frequently accompanied by explicit caveats:
"These are general tendencies rather than fixed rules, and individuals within a culture may behave very differently."

ChatGPT repeatedly acknowledged the risk of stereotyping inherent in general cultural explanations:
"There is always a risk of oversimplification or bias when discussing culture at a general level."

When asked whether it acts as a cultural mediator, ChatGPT offered a deliberately limited definition of its role:
"I see myself as a limited form of cultural mediator in the sense that I can explain cultural references or norms."

This mediation was clearly distinguished from lived experience:
"I do not have lived experience or deep contextual understanding, so my mediation is informational rather than experiential."

Through these statements, ChatGPT constructed intercultural competence as something that cannot be fully achieved through AI interaction alone. Cultural understanding was framed as requiring human engagement, contextual immersion, and reflective practice beyond the scope of informational explanation.

4.5 Ethical self-positioning and explicit warnings against over-reliance

Ethical considerations were prominent across ChatGPT's responses. The system consistently emphasised transparency and responsibility in its educational role, particularly in relation to learner autonomy and critical thinking. ChatGPT explicitly warned against over-reliance on AI-generated responses:

"Over-reliance on my responses may reduce opportunities for learners to struggle productively or engage in authentic communication."
It also acknowledged the danger that fluent language output may be mistaken for authority:
"Learners might mistake fluent language output for pedagogical or cultural authority."

In response to this risk, ChatGPT positioned itself as encouraging critical engagement:
"I aim to encourage learners to think critically rather than accept my responses uncritically."

ChatGPT also identified academic integrity as a concern, noting that misuse could undermine learning:
"There is a risk that learners may use AI-generated responses in ways that bypass the learning process."

Through this ethical discourse, ChatGPT constructed itself as a tool that requires careful, guided use. Responsibility was repeatedly shifted back to learners, educators, and institutions, reinforcing a non-authoritative self-positioning.

4.6 Contextual and institutional shaping of ChatGPT's role

ChatGPT consistently framed its role as shaped by broader educational and institutional contexts. Rather than presenting itself as universally applicable, it acknowledged that its use and impact depend on how it is integrated into learning environments:
"My role is shaped by platform design, access policies, and institutional rules regarding AI use."

Educational values and attitudes toward AI were described as influential:
"Educational values influence whether I am seen as a helpful support or a potential threat to learning."

ChatGPT also highlighted the importance of teacher guidance and institutional regulation:
"How I am used depends largely on teachers, institutions, and policies that guide appropriate use."

This framing positions ChatGPT as part of a broader socio-technical system rather than an independent educational actor, reinforcing the idea that AI-mediated learning is co-shaped by human and institutional forces.

4.7 Temporal orientation and future-facing self-representation

Finally, ChatGPT articulated a future-oriented view of its role in education. It described the possibility of increased integration and improved personalisation over time:
"I anticipate that my role may evolve as AI systems become more integrated into educational environments."

However, this future orientation was consistently paired with strong assertions about human responsibility:
"Human teachers and learners should remain responsible for critical thinking, emotional support, and ethical judgment."

ChatGPT repeatedly emphasised that core educational functions should remain human-led:
"Language learning involves identity, values, and social interaction, which require human experience."

This future-facing discourse reinforces a stable theme across the findings: while ChatGPT anticipates technological development, it does not position itself as replacing human agency in education.

4.8 Summary of Findings

Overall, the findings reveal a coherent and cautious self-representation in which ChatGPT positions itself as a supportive, adaptive, yet ethically constrained resource for language learning and intercultural competence. Across interview responses, the system consistently balances claims of usefulness with explicit acknowledgements of limitation, foregrounding

human responsibility, institutional context, and the complexity of language and culture. Rather than asserting authority, ChatGPT constructs its role as supplementary, contingent, and dependent on human guidance and engagement.

Taken together, these findings directly address the study's research questions. Specifically, the analysis demonstrates how ChatGPT describes its interactional processes with learners in language learning contexts through accounts of support, guidance, and responsiveness (RQ1). The findings further show how ChatGPT presents its own characteristics, roles, and limitations, consistently framing itself as a supportive yet ethically constrained and non-authoritative resource for language learning and intercultural competence (RQ2).

In addition, the analysis illustrates how ChatGPT situates itself within micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-level educational and cultural contexts, foregrounding the roles of learners, teachers, institutions, and broader social norms (RQ3). Finally, the findings reveal how ChatGPT conceptualises its evolving role over time, articulating a future-oriented position that emphasises adaptability while maintaining dependence on human agency and institutional frameworks (RQ4).

4. Discussion

References to ChatGPT's role or characteristics throughout this section are understood as discursive patterns in system-generated text rather than evidence of intention, cognition, or agency. This study examined how ChatGPT conceptualises and articulates its own role in language learning and intercultural competence when treated as an object of qualitative inquiry. Interpreting the findings through Bronfenbrenner's bioecological (PPCT) model provides a structured way to understand how ChatGPT positions itself across interactional processes, personal characteristics, contextual systems, and temporal orientations. Taken together, the findings suggest that ChatGPT consistently constructs a supportive yet constrained role, aligning itself with human-centred educational values while explicitly acknowledging the limits of AI-mediated interaction.

From the perspective of process, ChatGPT repeatedly described its contribution to language learning in terms of interactional support, including explanation, clarification, practice, and feedback. These processes resemble what sociocultural theories of language learning identify as mediated activity, in which development occurs through guided interaction rather than direct transmission of knowledge (Lantolf 2000). ChatGPT's emphasis on low-pressure practice and immediate responsiveness echoes research suggesting that digital tools can reduce affective barriers and support learner autonomy (Reinders and Benson 2017).

However, the system's repeated acknowledgement of its inability to engage with embodied cues, emotional states, or long-term learner development highlights an important boundary. Within the PPCT framework, interactional processes alone are insufficient to sustain development; they must be embedded within stable, reciprocal relationships over time (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006). ChatGPT's self-representation implicitly reinforces this principle by positioning its interactional processes as facilitative but incomplete.

In relation to the person dimension, ChatGPT articulated a set of discursive characteristics adaptability, neutrality, caution, and ethical restraint while consistently rejecting claims to consciousness, intention, or lived experience. This construction of a bounded, non-anthropomorphic self-aligns with critical perspectives in AI studies that caution against treating algorithmic systems as social actors with agency (Selwyn 2019). At the same time, ChatGPT's ability to describe values, responsibilities, and limitations suggests the emergence of what may be understood as a performed or discursive persona, shaped by institutional expectations and normative educational discourse. From a bioecological

perspective, these characteristics influence how interactional processes unfold by shaping user expectations and positioning learners toward reflective rather than dependent engagement.

The context dimension of the PPCT model was particularly salient in ChatGPT's responses. At the microsystem level, the system positioned itself within direct learner–AI interaction as accessible, non-judgmental, and supportive of independent practice. This mirrors findings in technology-enhanced language learning that highlight the value of digital tools for self-directed learning and rehearsal (Reinders and Benson 2017). However, ChatGPT did not present this interaction as sufficient in itself. At the mesosystem level, it consistently emphasised the relationship between AI interaction and other learning environments, particularly classrooms and guided self-study. This aligns with research demonstrating that technology supports learning most effectively when integrated into pedagogical ecosystems rather than used in isolation (O'Dowd 2018).

Exosystem influences emerged in ChatGPT's references to institutional policies, platform governance, and access constraints, which shape how AI tools are authorised, restricted, or normalised in educational settings. This reflects broader scholarship on the governance of educational technologies, which highlights the role of institutional power, regulation, and accountability in shaping digital learning practices (Williamson 2017). At the macrosystem level, ChatGPT's discourse reflected dominant educational values, including learner autonomy, academic integrity, and intercultural sensitivity. Its repeated emphasis on avoiding stereotyping and acknowledging cultural complexity closely aligns with intercultural competence frameworks that prioritise critical cultural awareness over static cultural knowledge (Byram 1997).

The chronosystem further illuminates how ChatGPT situates itself within educational change over time. While the system anticipated increased integration and personalisation as AI technologies develop, it consistently reaffirmed that core educational responsibilities—such as ethical judgment, emotional support, identity formation, and interpersonal communication—should remain human-led. This stance reflects ongoing debates in AI-in-education research that argue for augmentation rather than replacement of human teaching and learning (Luckin et al. 2016). From a bioecological perspective, this suggests that while technological environments evolve, the fundamental structure of educational responsibility remains relatively stable.

A particularly important contribution of this study lies in how ChatGPT conceptualises intercultural competence. The system consistently framed its role as supporting awareness, reflection, and sensitivity, while explicitly acknowledging the absence of lived cultural experience. This distinction mirrors Byram's (1997) emphasis on attitudes, critical awareness, and interpretative skills as central to intercultural competence. However, ChatGPT's responses also make clear that intercultural development requires sustained social interaction across contexts and over time conditions that cannot be fully met through AI-mediated exchange alone. Within the PPCT framework, intercultural competence emerges not from isolated interactional processes but from the accumulation of experiences across nested systems.

Methodologically, this study contributes to emerging research that treats generative AI systems as objects of qualitative inquiry rather than merely as tools or instruments. By combining thing ethnography with thematic analysis and interpreting findings through a bioecological framework, the study demonstrates how AI self-representation can be analysed without attributing agency or consciousness. The application of the PPCT model extends its use beyond human development, showing how ecological thinking can illuminate the socio-technical positioning of AI within educational systems.

Overall, the discussion suggests that ChatGPT's self-representation is not technologically deterministic but ecologically situated. The system consistently positions itself as one component within complex educational environments shaped by human actors, institutional norms, cultural values, and temporal change. This perspective challenges simplistic narratives of AI as either a solution or a threat, instead highlighting the importance of understanding AI-mediated learning as embedded within broader social systems.

6. Conclusion

This study explored how ChatGPT conceptualises and articulates its own role in language learning and intercultural competence by treating the system as an object of qualitative inquiry. Using thing ethnography as a methodological orientation and interpreting the findings through Bronfenbrenner's bioecological (PPCT) model, the study demonstrates that ChatGPT consistently constructs a supportive yet constrained educational role. Across its responses, the system positions itself as a facilitator of practice, explanation, and awareness while explicitly recognising its limitations, ethical boundaries, and dependence on human and institutional contexts.

The findings indicate that ChatGPT's self-representation closely aligns with human-centred pedagogical principles emphasised in language learning and intercultural communication scholarship. Rather than presenting itself as an autonomous authority, ChatGPT repeatedly foregrounds the centrality of human teachers, learners, and lived experience. Language learning is framed as a socially embedded process, and intercultural competence is understood as extending beyond informational knowledge to include reflection, sensitivity, and contextual engagement. Interpreted through the PPCT framework, ChatGPT's role emerges as ecologically situated, shaped by interactional processes, contextual systems, and temporal change rather than by technological capability alone.

By shifting analytical attention from learner outcomes or user perceptions to AI self-representation, this study contributes a novel perspective to research on generative AI in education. It shows that AI systems not only generate language but also actively communicate particular understandings of their role, responsibility, and limits. Examining how AI systems position themselves therefore offers important insight into how AI-mediated learning is framed, legitimised, and potentially normalised within educational discourse.

7. Limitations

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the analysis focuses exclusively on ChatGPT's system-generated responses and does not include data from learners, teachers, or classroom practices. As a result, the findings reflect how the system represents itself discursively, rather than how its role is interpreted, negotiated, or enacted in real educational settings.

Second, the study examines a single generative AI system within a specific and constrained data collection period. Given the ongoing development of large language models, frequent system updates, and evolving safety- and policy-driven alignment mechanisms, ChatGPT's self-representation may change over time. The findings should therefore be understood as temporally situated, reflecting the platform conditions present during the data collection window rather than as stable or permanent characteristics of the system.

Third, although the study draws on Bronfenbrenner's bioecological (PPCT) framework, the framework is applied analytically rather than longitudinally. The research does not trace developmental change across time in an empirical sense, which limits claims about learning trajectories or long-term impact. Finally, as with all qualitative research, interpretation is shaped by the researcher's analytical perspective. While analytic transparency, an audit trail, and recurring patterns across responses were used to support credibility,

alternative interpretations of the data remain possible.

8. Recommendations for Future Research

Future research could extend this work in several meaningful directions. First, studies could compare AI self-representation with human perspectives, examining how learners and teachers interpret, accept, or resist the roles that AI systems articulate for themselves. Such comparisons would help clarify how AI discourse aligns with or diverges from educational practice. Second, longitudinal research could investigate how AI self-positioning evolves over time, particularly as generative AI systems are updated, regulated, or embedded more deeply within educational institutions. This would allow for a stronger application of the chronosystem component of the PPCT model.

Third, future studies could explore cross-cultural and institutional variation by analysing AI self-representation in different educational, cultural, or policy contexts. This would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of AI and intercultural competence beyond a single setting. Finally, methodological expansion could involve combining AI self-representation analysis with classroom observation, learner discourse, or policy analysis, enabling researchers to trace how AI positioning interacts with real educational ecologies and practices.

9. Implications

This study contributes to ongoing discussions on generative AI in education by clarifying how AI systems discursively position their roles, limitations, and responsibilities in language learning and intercultural communication contexts. The findings of this study have important implications for language education, intercultural learning, and the design and governance of generative AI systems. By examining how ChatGPT conceptualises its own role within language learning and intercultural competence, this study highlights the need to situate AI-mediated learning within broader human and institutional contexts rather than treating AI as a stand-alone solution. From an educational perspective, the findings suggest that generative AI systems such as ChatGPT are best understood as supplementary learning resources rather than instructional authorities.

ChatGPT's consistent self-position as supportive but limited reinforces the importance of maintaining the central role of teachers in guiding learning processes, fostering critical thinking, and supporting learners' emotional and social development. Educators may therefore benefit from framing AI use explicitly as a tool for practice, clarification, and reflection, rather than as a substitute for instruction or assessment. In relation to language learning, the study underscores the value of using AI to support low-stakes practice and learner autonomy, particularly in contexts where learners experience anxiety or limited access to human interaction. At the same time, the findings caution against over-reliance on AI-generated responses, highlighting the need for pedagogical strategies that encourage learners to question, verify, and contextualise AI output.

Integrating AI into curricula should therefore involve explicit guidance on critical use, ethical boundaries, and the limitations of algorithmic feedback. The implications for intercultural education are particularly significant. ChatGPT's framing of intercultural competence as awareness-based rather than experiential reinforces existing arguments that cultural understanding cannot be reduced to informational knowledge alone. Educators should be cautious about relying on AI systems to teach culture and instead use AI-mediated explanations as starting points for discussion, reflection, and engagement with diverse perspectives. This approach aligns with intercultural pedagogy that emphasises critical cultural awareness, reflexivity, and interaction over the transmission of cultural facts.

Beyond educational practice, the findings also have implications for the design and governance of generative AI systems. ChatGPT's ethical self-positioning and repeated emphasis on limitation suggest that AI systems are increasingly expected to communicate their boundaries transparently. Designers and developers may therefore consider embedding clearer cues about uncertainty, limitation, and appropriate use into AI interfaces. Such design choices could support more responsible engagement and reduce the risk of over-reliance or misinterpretation of AI-generated content.

At an institutional level, the study highlights the importance of policy frameworks that acknowledge the contextual and ecological nature of AI use in education. Rather than focusing solely on prohibition or unrestricted adoption, institutions may benefit from developing policies that articulate when, how, and why AI tools should be used, considering pedagogical goals, ethical considerations, and intercultural sensitivity. Recognising AI as part of a broader educational ecosystem can support more nuanced and sustainable integration.

Overall, these implications suggest that the responsible use of generative AI in language learning and intercultural education requires ongoing dialogue among educators, learners, institutions, and AI developers. Understanding how AI systems position themselves offers a valuable foundation for shaping pedagogical practice, system design, and policy in ways that preserve human agency while leveraging the affordances of AI-mediated support.

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