

## Reimagining Beginner-Level Japanese Courses: Generative AI as a Speaking Aid

Bo Zhan

*Carnegie Mellon University*

It was early in the semester of my beginner-level Japanese course when one student completely caught me off guard. He had never visited Japan, never taken a formal class prior to mine, and had no Japanese-speaking friends or family. And yet, he spoke with a fluency and ease that made me pause. During a casual check-in, he responded to my questions not only with accurate vocabulary, but also with honorific expressions, polite forms of speech that even intermediate students tend to avoid.

I remember blinking, caught somewhere between admiration and disbelief. How was this possible? He wasn't faking it; his confidence real. So I asked him how he had been practicing. He shrugged and said, *"Oh, I talk to ChatGPT every night."* I was stunned. Generative AI? Until then, I had thought of it as a writing tool—maybe helpful for grammar, but nothing more. Yet here it was, acting as his speaking partner, night after night. That moment was a turning point: I realized I needed to explore how this technology could reshape both my teaching and my students' learning.

Before AI entered my classroom, I was quietly wrestling with how to help students build confidence and fluency in spoken Japanese. My course culminates in a final conversation test on everyday topics like campus life, class schedules, family, and hometowns. But with only three class meetings a week, meaningful speaking practice was always limited. I often searched, usually without much success, for conversation partners who could offer my students the extra support they needed outside of class.

At the time, our department relied on speaking assistants to support language practice, but their general training didn't meet the specific needs of beginners. Many struggled to simplify grammar or adjust their language for novice learners. Students frequently noted in evaluations that office hours were inconvenient, and the assistants' fluency was intimidating, making it hard to feel comfortable or understood. In the end, one-size-fits-all support often failed to accommodate students' individual pace and goals.

Meanwhile, I was beginning to see the real potential of generative AI in my own classroom. As I read more about its educational uses, I noticed that what researchers were finding echoed many of the hopes and hesitations I felt as a teacher. I came across a study by Okonkwo and Ade-Ibijola (2021), which described how introducing chatbots could make learning feel more exciting, comfortable, and engaging. Another study by Li et al. (2025) caught my attention as well: they found that students who used ChatGPT in their coursework were more motivated than those who didn't. Their research suggested that AI could help students in three important ways: it made learning more efficient by quickly providing solutions, offered

support when they hit roadblocks, and gave them the freedom to personalize their learning journey.

This realization led me to create a customized GPT chatbot named Sato, inspired by a character from our textbook. Although I don't have a strong background in technology, I was able to develop Sato by experimenting with prompt engineering. Through trial and error, I refined the prompts until I settled on a structure that included clear context, a defined role, and sample conversations. The context and role established Sato not only as an approachable and supportive partner, but also as a professional Japanese teacher capable of providing instant feedback on conversational strategies, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and cultural appropriateness, all key elements of our conversation test grading criteria. To ensure Sato's responses matched my students' proficiency level, I incorporated grammar and vocabulary lists, as well as sample dialogues.

Surprisingly, even though ChatGPT's voice feature was already available, most of my students were unfamiliar with how to use it effectively for language learning. Seeing this gap, I decided to devote a speaking class to introducing and integrating this tool into our curriculum. Before bringing in the technology, I first conducted pre-tests with each student using the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) format to establish a baseline for their speaking abilities. I also asked students to complete a survey to capture their initial attitudes toward AI and any questions or concerns they had about using technology for language learning.

In the speaking class, I presented AI not as a shortcut, but as a supportive tool that could supplement genuine effort. We began by reviewing the challenges highlighted in the pre-test and discussing targeted strategies for improvement. I then gave a step-by-step demonstration of how to use our customized chatbot, Sato, for effective speaking practice. Drawing on questions from the pre-survey, I addressed students' concerns and guided them through potential obstacles, helping them understand both the possibilities and limitations of using AI for language learning. After the demonstration, students practiced live conversations with Sato while I circulated the classroom, offering guidance and answering questions. Beyond class, students continued to work with Sato by completing four speaking assignments, each focused on a specific topic from the final conversation test. Approximately two months later, students took the same OPI assessment and filled out a post-survey to reflect on their experiences using Sato.

Adapting to AI, however, was not without its challenges. Many students were initially hesitant to use Sato because they were afraid it might provide incorrect information. Others worried that AI would speak too quickly or not pause long enough for them to respond. To address these anxieties, I introduced a regular "AI reflection" segment in class. This student-centered activity invited everyone to share their concerns, strategies, and discoveries about working with Sato. For instance, when several students found that Sato often spoke too soon, one student suggested using Japanese filler words to signal to the AI that they were not finished speaking—an insight that quickly spread through the group.

Through these regular reflections, students not only developed better strategies for managing AI-based conversations, but also built a stronger sense of community. They began to see AI as a partner in their learning journey without diminishing their own agency or creativity. By openly addressing challenges and encouraging peer support, I found that students gradually develop greater autonomy in their language study.

According to students' post-survey reflection, there are both advantages and disadvantages by using

the chatbot as a speaking assistant. One of the most notable benefits is efficiency and accessibility. AI tools also support self-paced, customizable learning, enabling students to focus on topics or skills that match their interests and proficiency levels. This flexibility leads to increased exposure to authentic language, as AI can introduce vocabulary and phrasing that go beyond the typical classroom experience. Additionally, features like conversation transcripts help learners track their progress and reflect on their development over time. The ability to request immediate feedback further empowers students to identify and address their weaknesses in real time. Repetitive, independent practice with AI allows learners to build confidence and autonomy, while practicing grammar and vocabulary in context fosters deeper understanding compared to rote memorization.

Despite its many benefits, using AI for speaking practice also presents several notable disadvantages. Accessibility can be an issue for some students, as the cost or availability of advanced AI tools may be prohibitive. AI-driven conversations sometimes feel less natural than interactions with human partners, and the technology can struggle to consistently restrict topics to a limited, appropriate range for beginners. Speech recognition errors occasionally cause the AI to misunderstand students, leading to frustration and difficulty sustaining conversations. For those unfamiliar with the technology, there can be a steep learning curve, and some students find the AI speaks too quickly or ends conversations abruptly due to time or token limits.

Looking forward, I believe the key to effective and inclusive language teaching lies in understanding both the strengths and limitations of AI, and in helping students learn how to use it effectively. While AI has often been considered a resource best suited for intermediate or advanced learners, my experience has shown its potential as a powerful tool even for beginners, particularly for building vocabulary and grammar in ways that are contextualized and personally relevant. The ability to practice independently, at one's own pace, fosters both learner autonomy and confidence, benefits that are difficult to achieve through classroom instruction alone.

Moving ahead, I plan to keep AI as a regular part of my courses, especially for foundational practice. However, I also recognize the importance of explicitly teaching students how to use AI effectively and how to remain critical, discerning users of technology. I want to experiment further with combining AI-based practice with more targeted human interaction: for example, by forming small conversation groups led by specialists or by integrating sessions where students reflect on both their AI and human-mediated experiences. Human instructors can offer depth, nuance, and real-life pragmatics that AI cannot yet replicate, such as sharing personal stories or teaching cultural appropriateness.

Ultimately, this experience has reshaped my view of inclusive teaching in a tech-augmented world. Instead of seeing new tools as a threat, I now focus on helping students use AI to enhance—rather than replace—the human side of language learning.

### References

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