Silsilat al-anwār
ISSN 2716-7852 / EISSN 2830-8719
V :16, N° :2 – 2026, P.P :101-109

سلسلة الأنوار
ر د م ك : 7852-2716 / ر ت م د إ: 8719-2830
المجلد 16، العدد 2- 2026 ، ص.ص:101-109

Artificial Intelligence in French as a Foreign Language Learning: Opportunities and Limitations Among Undergraduate Students at the University of Oran 2

الذكاء الاصطناعي في تعلم اللغة الفرنسية كلغة أجنبية: الفرص والمحددات لدى طلبة المرحلة الجامعية في جامعة وهران2

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Received: *11/10/2026* ***Accepted:*** *15/11/2026* ***Published:*** *20/11/20*

Abstract

This article examines how artificial intelligence (AI) tools are shaping the learning of French as a foreign language (FFL) among undergraduate students in Algeria. Drawing on a mixed-methods field study conducted at the University of Oran 2 Mohamed Ben Ahmed, the study combines descriptive and analytical approaches through two separate questionnaires administered to 53 undergraduate students and 12 university instructors. The findings show that AI tools, and generative tools such as ChatGPT in particular, are almost universally adopted by students and are perceived to support vocabulary, grammar, and written expression, while also boosting motivation through immediate feedback. At the same time, both students and instructors voice concerns about technological dependency, reduced critical reflection, and unequal access to digital resources. The article concludes that AI should be positioned as a complementary pedagogical support rather than a substitute for the teacher, and it outlines conditions for a responsible, teacher-mediated integration of AI in university-level FFL instruction.

Keywords :
artificial intelligence, French as a foreign language, higher education, learner autonomy, technological dependency, Algeria

ملخص

يتناول هذا المقال دور أدوات الذكاء الاصطناعي في تشكيل عملية تعلم اللغة الفرنسية كلغة أجنبية لدى طلاب المرحلة الجامعية في الجزائر .واستناداً إلى دراسة ميدانية اعتمدت منهجية مختلطة أُجريت في جامعة وهران 2 "محمد بن أحمد"، تجمع الدراسة بين المنهجين الوصفي والتحليلي من خلال استبيانين منفصلين شَمَلا 53 طالباً جامعياً و12 مدرساً جامعياً .وتُظهر النتائج أن أدوات الذكاء الاصطناعي – ولا سيما الأدوات التوليدية مثل – *"ChatGPT"* تحظى بتبنٍ واسع النطاق وشبه شامل بين الطلاب، حيث يُنظر إليها كعامل داعم لتعلم المفردات والقواعد والتعبير الكتابي، فضلاً عن دورها في تعزيز الدافعية من خلال توفير تغذية راجعة فورية . وفي الوقت نفسه، يُبدي كل من الطلاب والمدرسين مخاوف بشأن الاعتماد المفرط على التكنولوجيا، وتراجع التفكير النقدي، وعدم تكافؤ فرص الوصول إلى الموارد الرقمية .ويخلص المقال إلى ضرورة النظر إلى الذكاء الاصطناعي بوصفه أداة دعم بيداغوجي تكميلية لا بديلاً عن المعلم، كما يحدد شروطاً لدمج الذكاء الاصطناعي بشكل مسؤول وتحت إشراف المعلم في تدريس اللغة الفرنسية كلغة أجنبية على المستوى الجامعي..

الكلمات المفتاحية: الذكاء الاصطناعي، الفرنسية كلغة أجنبية، التعليم العالي، استقلالية المتعلم، التبعية التكنولوجية، الجزائر

1. INTRODUCTION

The use of artificial intelligence is expanding rapidly across many areas of social life, and education is no exception. AI technologies are now capable of simulating cognitive functions once considered uniquely human, such as language comprehension, reasoning, and problem-solving. Alongside AI proper, a related but distinct category of tools has also become widespread in language education: gamified learning applications such as Duolingo or Reverso, which rely on repetition and interactive exercises rather than genuine language generation. Distinguishing between these two categories — generative AI systems such as ChatGPT or Grammarly, capable of producing and analyzing text, and structured learning applications built on repetition and gamification — is a necessary starting point for any serious discussion of AI's role in language pedagogy.

In the Algerian university context, students enrolled in French-language degree programs increasingly turn to these digital tools to cope with linguistic difficulties. First-year undergraduates are of particular interest, since this stage marks a critical transition: students are expected to develop academic autonomy while facing persistent challenges in grammar, vocabulary, and written and oral expression. The growing availability of AI tools raises a central pedagogical and ethical question: can AI genuinely improve students' linguistic competence, or does it risk fostering a technological dependency that undermines the human dimension of teaching?

This tension between innovation and pedagogical humanism motivates the present study. Traditional teaching methods do not always meet the needs

of a linguistically and academically heterogeneous student population, and AI's promise of personalized, interactive learning is counterbalanced by legitimate concerns about equity of access and the erosion of critical thinking.

Against this background, the study set out to answer the following research question: How can artificial intelligence optimize French language learning among first-year Algerian undergraduate students while avoiding the risks of dependency and the dehumanization of teaching?

Three working hypotheses guided the inquiry:

1. AI can make French language learning more interactive and personalized.
2. Excessive use of AI may reduce learner autonomy and critical reflection.
3. The teacher's role remains essential in framing and supervising the use of these tools.

The study pursued three specific objectives: to document how students and instructors actually use AI and language-learning applications; to identify the advantages and limitations of these tools in the learning process; and to propose recommendations for a responsible and balanced integration of AI into FFL instruction.

2. Methodology (Brief Overview)

The study was conducted at the University of Oran 2 Mohamed Ben Ahmed among students enrolled in the French Bachelor's program (Years 1 through 3). Two separate online questionnaires were distributed: one addressed to students, aiming to capture their AI usage patterns, motivations, and perceptions of benefits and limitations; and one addressed to instructors,

aiming to capture their degree of integration of digital tools, their views on AI's effects on students, and the risks they associate with its use. Data were analyzed using a combined descriptive and analytical approach, presenting response frequencies before interpreting them in light of the study's hypotheses.

The student sample comprised 53 respondents (65.4% female, 34.6% male), drawn mainly from Year 1 (45.3%) and Year 3 (39.6%), with Year 2 students less represented (15.1%). Nearly half of respondents (49.1%) were over 20 years old. The teacher sample comprised 12 respondents, predominantly female (91.7%) and highly experienced, with 75% reporting more than ten years in the profession.

3. Results

3.1 AI Adoption Among Students

AI adoption among students proved to be nearly universal: 98.1% (52 of 53 respondents) reported having already used an AI tool in their French learning. ChatGPT was by far the most widely used tool (94.2%), followed by Duolingo (38.5%) and Grammarly (17.3%), with smaller shares reporting tools such as Reverso, Gemini, or Poe. This pattern points to a clear student preference for generative AI over structured, gamified learning applications, likely reflecting the speed and personalization that generative tools offer.

3.2 Skills Most Improved Through AI Use

When asked which linguistic competencies they felt AI had helped them improve, students most frequently cited vocabulary (71.2%) and grammar (65.4%), followed by written expression (48.1%). Reading comprehension (32.7%) and oral expression (28.8%) were mentioned less often, and listening comprehension was the least-cited skill (13.5%). Only a small minority reported no use of AI (1.9%) or a marginal use limited to general research (1.9%). Taken together, these results suggest that AI is used primarily to support written competencies that call for correction and reformulation, while oral skills remain comparatively underserved — plausibly because most tools offer limited opportunities for authentic oral interaction.

3.3 Perceived Impact on Learning and Motivation

A large majority of students (79.2%) reported that AI improves their French learning, while 20.8% remained more reserved. In open-ended responses, students most often credited AI with helping them expand vocabulary, correct errors instantly, organize their ideas, and find synonyms; some also valued the ability to interact with the tool without fear of being judged. A minority, however, flagged the risk of receiving incorrect answers or becoming dependent on the tool, and some expressed a continued preference for traditional learning methods such as reading, film, or podcasts.

On motivation specifically, 73.6% of students reported feeling more motivated when using AI, attributing this to the ease, speed, and interactivity of the tools. A smaller but notable group of students pushed back against this narrative, arguing that AI use can in fact reduce motivation and foster

dependency by making learners more passive, and insisting that motivation ultimately depends on the learner rather than on the tool.

3.4 Can AI Replace the Teacher? Student Perceptions

Students' views on whether AI could replace the teacher were notably split: 35.8% said no, 32.1% said yes, and 32.1% considered AI only a partial substitute. Qualitative responses clarified this ambivalence: students overwhelmingly framed AI as a support tool for information retrieval, error correction, or clarifying specific points of language, while insisting that the teacher's role in personalized explanation, pronunciation correction, and motivation cannot be replicated by a machine. Several students explicitly noted that AI lacks the human understanding and emotional connection needed to sustain genuine motivation for learning.

3.5 Teacher Adoption and Perceptions

Among instructors, adoption was far more divided: exactly half (50%) reported using or recommending AI tools, while the other half did not. Those who use AI tend to frame it as a resource to be handled “with caution,” useful for tasks such as comparing student work with AI-generated responses or detecting potential misuse, while insisting that its use must remain deliberate and limited. Those who do not use AI expressed concerns centered on dependency, loss of student autonomy, diminished cognitive effort, and the technology's relative novelty — several instructors noted that its long-term pedagogical impact is not yet well understood.

Regarding specific tools, Duolingo was the most commonly used by teachers (50%), followed by ChatGPT (41.7%) and Grammarly (16.7%) — a pattern

that contrasts with students' strong preference for ChatGPT, and suggests that instructors gravitate toward more structured, pedagogically controlled applications rather than open generative tools.

Asked which language competencies AI serves best, teachers most frequently pointed to grammar and vocabulary (66.7% each), followed by reading comprehension and oral expression (58.3% each), listening comprehension (41.7%), and written expression (33.3% — the lowest-ranked skill). This suggests that teachers see AI as well suited to tasks governed by fixed linguistic rules, but less suited to tasks requiring creativity, personal organization of ideas, and complex written production.

Finally, when asked whether AI could complement or replace the teacher's role, two-thirds of instructors (66.7%) agreed that it could complement their role, while one-third (33.3%) rejected the idea altogether. Open-ended comments reinforced this pattern: instructors consistently described AI as useful for assistance, correction, or research, while insisting that it cannot understand each student's specific needs or reproduce the human interaction and communication central to the classroom.

3.6 Synthesis

Taken together, the results reveal a consistent asymmetry between students and instructors. Students display near-universal, enthusiastic adoption of generative AI, associating it with tangible gains in vocabulary, grammar, written expression, and motivation. Instructors, by contrast, adopt a markedly more cautious stance, favoring structured learning applications over generative tools and repeatedly foregrounding the risks of dependency,

passive use, and diminished critical thinking. Both groups converge, however, on one point: AI is seen as a valuable pedagogical support, but not as a substitute for the teacher, whose role in guidance, personalization, and human interaction remains, in the words of several respondents, simply irreplaceable.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

These findings support the three hypotheses that framed the study. AI clearly makes French language learning more interactive and personalized for the students surveyed, primarily by offering instant feedback on vocabulary and grammar. At the same time, the data lend support to the concern that unregulated use may erode learner autonomy and critical reflection, a risk articulated by both students and — more forcefully — by instructors. Finally, the near-unanimous insistence, across both groups, on the teacher's continued centrality confirms that technology alone cannot substitute for pedagogical mediation.

For higher education institutions and language departments, these results point toward a specific integration strategy: rather than either banning or passively tolerating AI use, instructors should actively frame it through structured activities — for example, having students critique and revise AI-generated text, compare AI output against reliable sources, or use AI selectively for narrowly defined tasks while producing core work independently. Such an approach would allow institutions to capture AI's demonstrated benefits for vocabulary and grammar acquisition while addressing the dependency and equity concerns that both students and teachers already recognize.

Future research should extend this inquiry to oral expression, an area where AI's current contribution appears comparatively limited, and should examine the longer-term effects of sustained AI use on students' autonomous writing and critical thinking abilities.

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