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Traditional Textbook or AI Tools: Factors in Students' Choice of Educational Tool in Learning Chinese as a Foreign Language

Abstract

Introduction. The article examines the role of generative AI tools in teaching students studying Chinese as a foreign language. The study aims to identify the factors that determine students' choice between a traditional textbook and AI tools when learning Chinese: *methodology and Methods.* A pilot closed-ended survey of students (n=26) was conducted regarding their preferred means of studying Chinese as a foreign language. *Results.* AI tools are preferred by 50.0% of respondents; another 26.9% use them alongside a textbook; only 7.7% chose the textbook alone. AI is most in demand for conversational practice (73.1%) and checking assignments (61.5%), and least in demand for explaining grammar (23.1%); no respondent completely rejected AI. The factors determining choice were identified as speed of obtaining an answer (57.1%) and constant availability (21.4%); content- and methodology-related factors together accounted for 14.3%. *Scientific novelty.* The study identified the factors that shape students' choice between a traditional textbook and generative AI tools when learning Chinese as a foreign language. *Practical significance.* The results show which types of learning activities students use generative AI tools for most, making it possible to distribute functions more reasonably between the traditional textbook and AI when organizing instruction.

Keywords: learning tools, traditional textbook, artificial intelligence, Chinese language.

Introduction. In recent decades, Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) has become one of the most dynamically developing segments of the global language education market. By the end of 2021, the number of people studying Chinese as a second language exceeded 25 million worldwide. The CFL market itself demonstrates steady growth: according to estimates by the analytical platform HolonIQ, its volume amounts to 7.4 billion US dollars, with a projected annual growth rate reaching 12.1%, and by 2027 the market could reach 13.1 billion dollars. The dynamics of the language's popularity in digital educational environments are also indicative: according to Duolingo, Chinese rose from 9th to 8th place among the most studied languages in the world in 2024 (Gong & Lai, 2024). This strong interest in

CFL stems from a combination of economic, political, and cultural factors tied to China's growing role in global affairs. At the same time, Chinese is rightfully considered one of the most difficult languages for native speakers of European languages to acquire, which poses challenges for CFL teaching methodology.

The linguodidactic complexity of CFL stems from several systemic characteristics that fundamentally distinguish it from alphabetic languages. Learners of Chinese face specific difficulties: mastering the tonal system and the complexity of morphology and writing. From a cognitive psychology perspective, the most significant difficulty is the time and effort required to master characters: the cognitive load from their visual complexity and the need to memorize them is considerable and often

overwhelms beginners. Experimental data confirm that cognitive load impairs sensitivity to tonal distinctions and disrupts the categorical perception of Mandarin tones (Sweller, 2020). Thus, in CFL, the learner is forced to simultaneously master three interconnected yet fundamentally different systems: the phonological system (4 tones plus a neutral tone), the graphic system (characters numbering in the thousands), and the grammatical system (analytic structure, the specifics of measure words, and aspect-tense markers). This multi-level load requires specialized methodological tools to distribute and structure it.

Historically, the printed textbook has served as the instrument of CFL instruction, setting the course's content, methodological, and structural framework. Textbook studies as a scientific discipline has developed criteria for evaluating foreign language textbooks; however, applying these criteria to CFL textbooks remains insufficiently studied. In parallel, over the past decade, a fundamentally different methodological pole has emerged: AI tools and adaptive digital platforms. Generative AI tools, particularly ChatGPT, attract attention for their potential to support language production, provide immediate feedback, and foster learner autonomy. At the same time, the integration of AI into foreign language teaching is actively developing in the EFL context, whereas, with respect to CFL, this field remains at an early stage. Thus, each of these learning tools possesses complementary advantages and limitations: the textbook ensures systematicity but is inferior in adaptability; AI tools offer personalization and instant feedback, yet what guides students in choosing between them remains empirically unstudied, which defines the research question: what factors determine students' choice between a traditional textbook and artificial intelligence tools when learning Chinese as a foreign language?

The textbook has historically occupied a central place in foreign language teaching, providing students with authentic language materials and serving as an essential point of reference for novice teachers (Sheldon, 1988; Ahour et al., 2014). Recognizing this central

role, researchers have formed an independent scientific discipline - textbook studies - within which systematic criteria for the evaluation and selection of teaching materials are developed. Cunningsworth (1995) laid the methodological foundation of this tradition by proposing a three-level evaluation model: pre-use, in-use, and post-use. Most established checklists examine similar parameters - objectives, structure, methodology, organization of material, as well as the manner of presenting language skills and functions depending on the sociocultural context (Cunningsworth, 1995; Ur, 1996; Harmer, 1991). A systematic review of research on ELT textbook evaluation for 2014–2023 showed that questionnaires, surveys, and checklists remain the most widespread instruments in this field, and textbook evaluation itself is recognized as a key mechanism for confirming whether materials meet the needs of students, teachers, administrators, and program developers (Li, 2025).

However, the established tradition of evaluation has a major limitation: most criteria and checklists have been developed based on English-language textbooks (Shak et al., 2022; Li et al., 2025). For Chinese, researchers note that existing instruments do not account for the specifics of the CFL context and require fundamental revision (Dassanayake, 2023). The gap between the methodological development of textbook studies in ELT and its limitations in CFL creates a demand for alternative approaches to supporting instruction, including digital and AI-based ones.

Awareness of the limitations of the traditional textbook has stimulated the search for technological alternatives, leading to the formation of the computer-assisted language learning (CALL) paradigm. Since the earliest CALL practices, AI systems such as intelligent tutoring systems (ITS), natural language processing (NLP), automated language assessment, speech and pronunciation recognition systems, and language learning analytics have significantly influenced foreign language teaching. The transition to intelligent CALL systems (ICALL) marked a qualitative shift: ICALL integrates NLP technologies and

AI modeling methods, creating a new branch that has achieved significant results in second language acquisition and foreign language teaching.

At the level of adaptive platforms, the capabilities of AI turn out to be fundamentally different from those of the printed textbook: AI provides personalized learning, adaptive feedback, and intelligent analysis of student performance, and the integration of CALL and AIALL positively affects student motivation and fosters engagement and active participation in learning activities. A systematic review of empirical studies from the past decade confirms that AI technologies show promise in improving writing quality, assessment accuracy, and student engagement, and the transition from CALL to ICALL has fundamentally changed how students interact with learning content through the integration of big data analytics and machine learning (Alhusaiyan, 2025). Thus, while the traditional textbook ensures systematicity, methodological consistency, and cultural context, AI tools offer what the textbook structurally lacks: immediate feedback, adaptation to individual pace, and the possibility of unlimited practice. Both instruments have proven pedagogical potential, yet their comparative effectiveness for specific languages and skills remains open, and especially so in the context of Chinese as a foreign language.

Chinese as a foreign language represents a unique context in which both approaches under consideration - the textbook-studies approach and the technological approach - face particular challenges stemming from the typological specificity of the language. A bibliometric analysis of research on technology integration in CFL for 2000-2024 shows steady growth in publications yet reveals substantial unevenness: most works focus on individual platforms or tools, while systematic comparative studies remain extremely scarce (Xu, 2024). Regarding AI tools in relation to CFL, the picture is even more telling: AI integration is actively developing in the EFL context, whereas for Chinese as a foreign language it lags considerably behind, and the 2024 International Conference

on Technology and Chinese Language Teaching identified AI tools and digital platforms as priority yet still insufficiently researched areas (Jiang et al., 2024).

Existing studies on AI in CFL are predominantly qualitative or descriptive and focus on individual skills; studies examining lived experience of using AI in authentic communicative tasks within the CFL context are far fewer (Chen et al., 2025). In parallel, a systematic analysis of 43 empirical studies on generative AI in language education for 2022–2024 showed that the overwhelming majority of works focus on English language teaching, while other languages, including Chinese, remain at the periphery of scholarly attention (Wang, 2025).

Textbook studies show a similar pattern: the international literature offers few evaluations of CFL textbooks using scientific criteria, and it largely lacks comparisons between traditional teaching materials and AI tools. Thus, at the intersection of the two gaps identified - the insufficient study of AI in CFL and the absence of textbook-studies research on CFL - a clear research gap emerges, which this study aims to address.

Materials and Methods. Research Design. The study used a quantitative, descriptive design and incorporated elements of a pilot study. Its purpose was to identify the factors determining students' choice between a traditional textbook and artificial intelligence tools when learning Chinese as a foreign language. The study used a cross-sectional design and involved a single data collection. The pilot format served two purposes: testing the developed instrument and obtaining preliminary empirical data to inform a full-scale study.

Participants. Twenty-six students took part in the pilot survey. Participants were selected purposively, in accordance with the following inclusion criteria: (a) enrolment in the first or second year of a bachelor's degree program; (b) study of Chinese as a foreign language at a beginner level corresponding to HSK levels 1–2; and (c) experience of using at least one AI tool for educational purposes. The third criterion was verified through a filter question

at the beginning of the questionnaire, since the absence of such experience would make choosing between the textbook and an AI tool irrelevant for the respondent.

Beginner-level students were targeted deliberately. At this stage of learning, basic learning strategies are forming, and both dependence on structured learning material and the need for prompt support are most clearly expressed, making the choice between tools particularly indicative.

Instrument. Data were collected using a structured, anonymous questionnaire with closed-ended items. The questionnaire comprised three substantive items and a block of demographic characteristics (year of study, language proficiency level according to the HSK scale, and experience of using AI tools).

The instrument's logic reflected the structure of the research question. The first item recorded the general preference for a learning tool. The second differentiated the use of AI tools across aspects of Chinese language learning - grammar, characters, the tonal system, and conversational practice. The third identified the dominant factor of choice, operationalizing six hypothesized grounds: speed of obtaining information, personalization of explanation, trust in the accuracy of the material, systematicity of presentation, institutional requirements, and availability of the tool.

Data Analysis. Given the pilot scope of the study, the analysis was limited to descriptive statistics: absolute frequencies and percentage distributions were computed for each item. Inferential testing was not performed. The sample of 26 respondents was considered sufficient for the pilot stage-testing the clarity of the wording, the discriminative capacity of the response options, and identifying preliminary trends—but does not imply statistical generalization of the results.

Ethical Consideration. The study followed the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and relevant national regulations on research involving human participants. The research was limited to an anonymous, non-interventional questionnaire survey of adult university students; it involved no medical,

clinical, or experimental procedures, no deception, no sensitive personal information, and no collection of personal identifiable data. Under current institutional regulations, studies of this type do not require review by a formal ethics committee. All ethical safeguards described below were observed throughout the study.

Participation was entirely voluntary. Before starting the questionnaire, respondents received information about the study's aims, the survey's anonymous nature, the approximate time required to complete it, and the intended use of the data for research purposes only. Respondents gave their informed consent by confirming their agreement to participate before proceeding to the substantive questions. Participants were informed that they could withdraw at any point without giving reasons, and that participation, refusal, or withdrawal would have no effect whatsoever on their academic assessment or their relationship with the teaching staff. No incentives or rewards were offered. All participants were of legal age.

The questionnaire contained no names, student identification numbers, contact details, or any other identifiers. Only aggregated demographic characteristics were recorded (year of study, HSK proficiency level, and prior experience of using AI tools), which do not permit the identification of individual respondents. We did not retrieve data from students' personal accounts in AI tools, and we did not collect chat logs, prompts, or interaction histories. The completed responses were stored on a password-protected device accessible only to the research team and are reported exclusively in aggregated form. Given the small pilot sample, we took particular care to present the results in a way that precludes identifying individual participants.

The study's limitations stem from its pilot nature. The small sample size and purposive sampling preclude extrapolating the results to the general student population. The findings provide a basis for refining the instrument and planning a subsequent study with an expanded sample, including the possible inclusion of qualitative methods.

Results. The distribution of responses to the question about the preferred tool for learning Chinese (Table 1) reflects a pronounced orientation of beginner-level students toward generative AI tools. Half of respondents (13 people; 50.0%) turn to AI tools (ChatGPT, Claude, DeepSeek, etc.) for homework, unclear material, and class preparation. 7 respondents (26.9%) use textbook and AI tools equally. In total, more than three-quarters of the sample (76.9%) regularly rely on generative AI in their learning practice. Only 2 respondents (7.7%) chose the traditional textbook as their main tool, while 4 people (15.4%) preferred other resources - video materials, apps without AI functionality, and dictionaries.

Students' choice of generative AI tools when learning Chinese is linked to the ability to quickly obtain explanations and feedback. Unlike the traditional textbook, which presents

material in a systematized but fixed way, AI lets learners ask clarifying questions and receive explanations that account for each student's specific difficulties. In learning Chinese, the character-based writing system, the tonal system, and the substantial differences from students' native languages create a wide range of individual difficulties that require additional explanation and practice to resolve. The dialogic format of AI tools allows the response content to be adapted to a particular user's request, increasing their demand in certain types of learning activities. The prevalence of digital technologies in students' everyday lives also makes such tools accessible and convenient for regular use. The use of the textbook alongside AI shows that students still need a systematized presentation of language material and regard traditional learning resources as an important complement to digital tools.

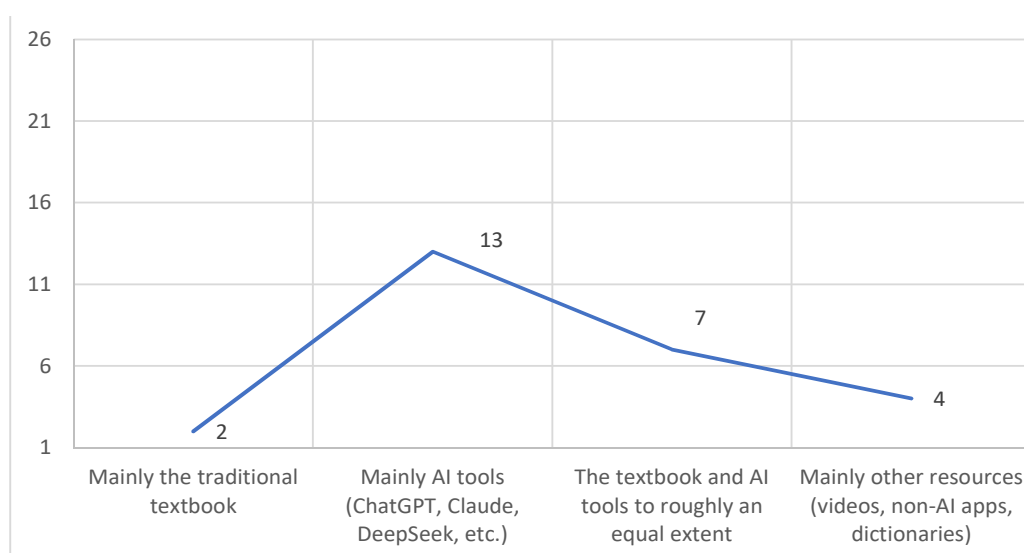
Table1

Students' Preferred Learning Tool in Self-Directed CFL Study

Option	frequency	%
Mainly the traditional textbook	2	7.7
Mainly AI tools (ChatGPT, Claude, DeepSeek, etc.)	13	50.0
The textbook and AI tools to roughly an equal extent	7	26.9
Mainly other resources (videos, non-AI apps, dictionaries)	4	15.4
Total	26	100.0

Figure 1

Students' Preferred Learning Tool in Self-Directed CFL Study (n=26)



Responses to the question about the tasks for which students turn to AI tools (Table 2; up to three options could be selected, percentages calculated from the number of respondents) reveal a distinct functional selectivity. Students most often turn to AI for conversational practice and constructing dialogues - this option was noted by 19 people (73.1%) - and for checking completed assignments (16 people; 61.5%). Memorizing and analyzing characters (11 people; 42.3%) and working on pronunciation and tones (9 people; 34.6%) rank in the middle. AI is used least often for translating and analyzing texts (7 people; 26.9%) and for explaining grammar (6 people; 23.1%). Notably, no respondent selected the option "I do not use AI tools for learning Chinese"; generative AI, in one function or another, is part of all respondents' independent practice. We obtained 68 responses from 26 respondents, for an average of about 2.6 options per person, indicating multifunctional use of AI among most students.

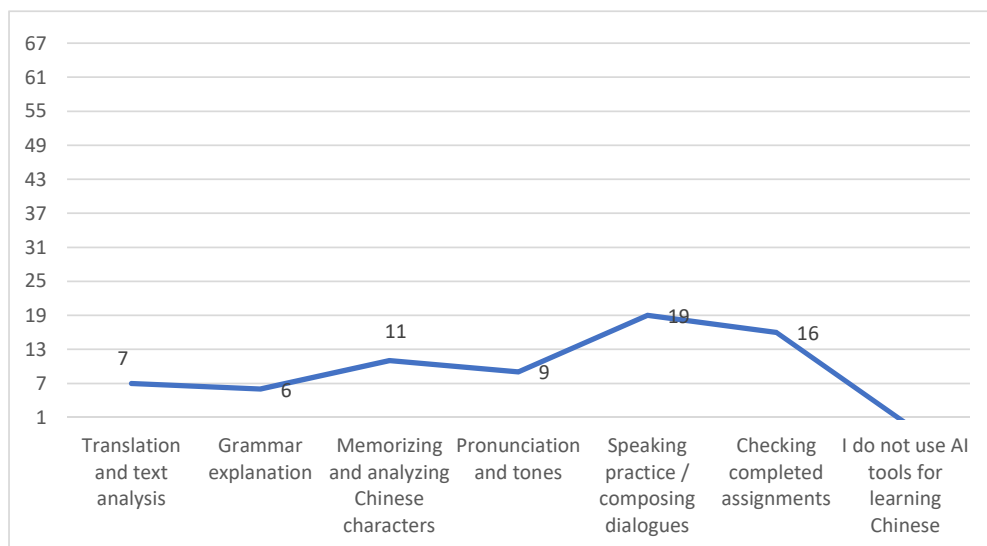
This pattern supports the following preliminary explanation. The lead in conversational

practice is logical: oral communication is the hardest to practice independently because it requires an interlocutor; dialogic AI compensates for this absence by providing a partner available at any time and reducing the fear of making mistakes characteristic of beginner-stage communication. The high proportion of requests to check assignments reflects the need for immediate feedback: the student receives an indication of an error immediately after completing the work, without waiting for class. The intermediate figures for characters and phonetics apparently reflect AI's partial applicability in these areas: it is useful for explaining character structure or the rules of tone formation but developing graphomotor writing and auditory-articulatory skills requires repeated practice, which a text-based interface cannot provide. The comparatively low proportions for translation and grammar explanation reflect that, at the beginner stage, these tasks are largely covered in the textbook and in classroom work with the instructor.

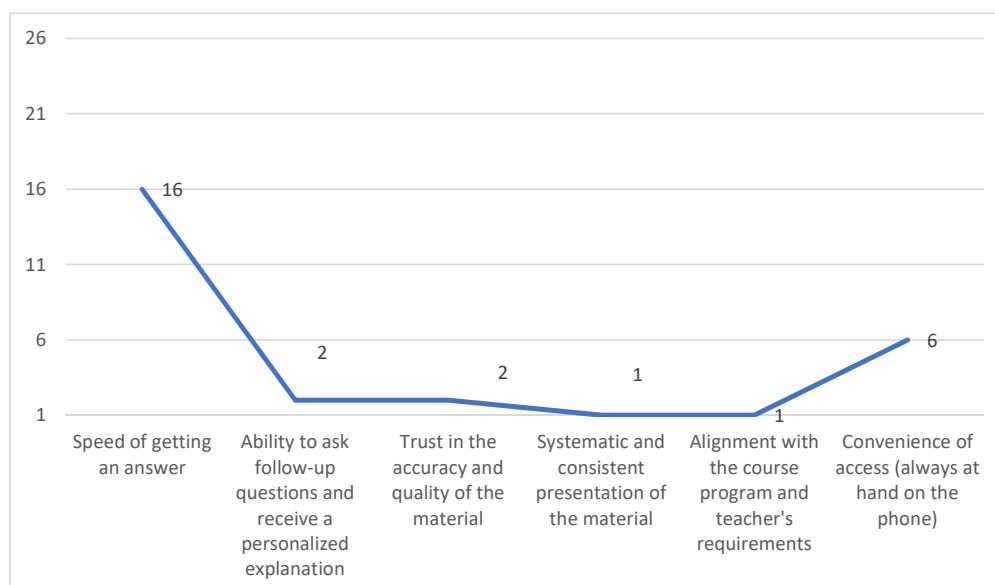
Table 2

CFL Learning Tasks for Which Students Use AI Tools

Task	frequency	% of respondents
Translation and text analysis	7	26.9
Grammar explanation	6	23.1
Memorizing and analyzing Chinese characters	11	42.3
Pronunciation and tones	9	34.6
Speaking practice / composing dialogues	19	73.1
Checking completed assignments	16	61.5
I do not use AI tools for learning Chinese	0	0.0
Total 68 responses from 26 respondents	68	-

Figure 2*CFL Learning Tasks for Which Students Use AI Tools (n=26)***Table 3***Main Factor Determining Students' Choice of Learning Tool*

Factor	frequency	%
Speed of getting an answer	16	57.1
Ability to ask follow-up questions and receive a personalized explanation	2	7.1
Trust in the accuracy and quality of the material	2	7.1
Systematic and consistent presentation of the material	1	3.6
Alignment with the course program and teacher's requirements	1	3.6
Convenience of access (always at hand on the phone)	6	21.4
Total	28	100.0

Figure 3*What mainly determines your choice of tool when studying Chinese?*

The distribution of responses to the question about the main factor in choosing a tool (Table 3; n=26, one option per respondent) reveals the dominance of pragmatic motives. More than half of the respondents (16 people; 57.1%) named the speed of obtaining an answer as the decisive factor; another 6 people (21.4%) indicated the convenience of access - the constant availability of the tool on the phone. Together, these two factors, reflecting responsiveness and availability, account for 78.5% of responses. Two respondents (7.1%) noted the possibility of asking a clarifying question and receiving a personalized explanation, and 7.1% reported trust in the accuracy and quality of the material. The least significant factors were the systematicity and consistency of the presentation of material (1 person; 3.6%) and alignment with the course program and the instructor's requirements (1 person; 3.6%): content- and methodology-related factors together accounted for only 14.3% of responses.

This structure of motives allows for the following preliminary explanation. The predominance of speed and availability is consistent with the very context of independent work: difficulty arises for the student at a specific moment - while doing homework or working through material - and the value of a tool is determined primarily by how quickly it can resolve the question that has arisen. When a smartphone is constantly at hand, and generative AI responds within seconds, the threshold for turning to it is low; the textbook, by contrast, requires searching for the relevant section and does not guarantee that the question difficulty is even addressed. The low shares of content-related factors - trust, systematicity, alignment with the course - do not necessarily mean that students attach no importance to them: it is more likely that, at the beginner stage of learning, these functions are by default assigned to the textbook and the instructor, and are therefore not perceived as a criterion of choice in the context of independent work. At the same time, the small number of respondents who indicated content-related motives likely reflects the group's continued orientation toward traditional sources. It should

also be noted that the dominance of speed over the possibility of personalized explanation (57.1% versus 7.1%) points to a predominantly instrumental rather than dialogic use of AI: students value it primarily as a means of quickly obtaining a ready-made answer, which raises for methodology the question of fostering deeper strategies of educational interaction with AI.

Discussion. The pilot survey results allow us to relate the preferences of students learning Chinese as a foreign language to the emerging body of international research on adopting AI tools in language education. The data show that 26 respondents (76.9%) prefer AI tools or combine them with the textbook equally. In contrast, only 2 people (7.7%) prefer the textbook alone, which is generally consistent with the overall trend of high readiness among learners of Chinese to use generative AI, documented in recent studies. Thus, Sun and Wang (2024), examining perceptions of ChatGPT among 120 CFL learners through the lens of the technology acceptance model, found that perceived usefulness, a growth mindset, and facilitating conditions significantly predict intention to use an AI tool. The predominance in our data of choice factors such as speed of obtaining an answer (57.1%) and the convenience of constant access from a phone (21.4%) - together accounting for almost four-fifths of all responses - corresponds substantively to the construct of perceived usefulness: students choose a tool not because of technological novelty but based on its ability to solve specific learning tasks at the moment they arise promptly.

At the same time, the structure of factors identified in the study allows this picture to be refined with respect to the beginner stage of learning. The fact that some respondents indicated trust in the accuracy and quality of the material (7.1%), systematicity of the presentation of material (3.6%), and alignment with the course program and the instructor's requirements (3.6%) as the main factors confirms that the textbook retains the function of a methodological framework that AI tools do not yet reproduce at this stage. This observation is consistent with the findings of Wei, Xu, and Wang (2026), who, drawing on data from

331 learners of Chinese, showed that trust in a tool is one of the strongest predictors of its adoption. In contrast, under conditions of already routine ChatGPT use, perceived ease of use and usefulness lose their predictive power with respect to usage intention. Applied to the results of this study, this means that students' choice between the textbook and AI is apparently determined not so much by an overall assessment of the technology's convenience as by differentiated trust in different sources for different learning tasks: content-related factors (trust, systematicity, alignment with the course), taken together, accounted for only 14.3% of responses, but it is presumably precisely these factors that characterize the smaller portion of the sample that retains an orientation toward the textbook, which indirectly supports the interpretation offered by Wei et al.

The distribution of responses to the second questionnaire item, which showed a concentration of AI use around conversational practice and dialogue construction (73.1%) and checking completed assignments (61.5%), with markedly less reliance on AI for grammar explanation (23.1%) and text translation and analysis (26.9%), finds parallels in empirical work on the functional boundaries of AI in CFL. Wen and Zhou (2025), having studied the use of generative AI by CFL learners in oral speech production tasks, characterized its role as cognitive scaffolding - an auxiliary support that assists but does not replace the learner's own independent language work; the high demand for AI specifically in dialogic practice observed in our data directly corresponds to this function, since AI serves as an accessible interlocutor and a source of immediate feedback. Chen, Wang, and Liu (2024), who documented the positive effect of ChatGPT on Chinese vocabulary acquisition, provide grounds for interpreting the intermediate figures for work with characters (42.3%) along the same lines. At the same time, the comparatively low proportion of requests to AI for grammar explanation and text translation, as well as the moderate proportion for working on pronunciation and tones (34.6%), may indicate that in tasks requiring systematic presentation of material and reliable verification,

as well as the training of perceptual and motor skills, students still rely on the textbook and the instructor. In contrast, the advantages of AI in speed and personalization are most fully realized in interactive and checking/correcting tasks.

Thus, the results of the pilot study do not confirm the notion of a linear displacement of the textbook by AI tools but rather point to an emerging functional distribution: AI is becoming established in the role of a prompt, personalized assistant and speech-practice partner. In contrast, the textbook retains the functions of a system-forming and verifying source. Notably, none of the 26 respondents selected the option "I do not use AI tools for learning Chinese," demonstrating the *de facto* ubiquity of AI in this group's learning practice. This interpretation aligns with the shift in research focus documented in the literature, moving from the question of "whether learners accept AI" to the conditions and boundaries of its pedagogically appropriate use. Given the pilot nature of the study and the limited sample size, the conclusions formulated here are preliminary and subject to verification on an expanded sample; a promising direction is seen in supplementing the quantitative data with interviews that would make it possible to reveal the mechanisms underlying students' differentiated trust in the textbook and AI across different aspects of the Chinese language.

Conclusions. The steady growth of interest in the Chinese language, driven by the expansion of economic, educational, and cultural cooperation with the PRC, coincided in time with the emergence of publicly available generative AI tools, which naturally raised for CFL teaching methodology the question of the place of new technologies in the pedagogical process and their relationship to traditional teaching tools. The study aimed at determining which factors govern the choice made by beginner-level students between the traditional textbook and AI tools in their learning practice.

The survey showed that generative AI has become an integral part of learning Chinese, but its use is not total; rather, it is selective. In answering the research question posed, it

can be stated that students' choice between the textbook and AI tools is determined primarily by pragmatic factors - the speed of obtaining an answer and the constant availability of the tool - while content- and methodology-related factors (trust in the accuracy of the material, the systematicity of its presentation, alignment with the course program) are significant for a smaller portion of learners and are associated with a retained orientation toward the traditional textbook. At the same time, the choice is task-dependent in nature: the same student turns to different tools depending on the type of learning task - AI is in demand where an interlocutor, immediate feedback, and prompt explanation are needed, while the textbook and the instructor retain the functions of a systematic and verifying source. This is therefore not a matter of traditional teaching tools being displaced, but of a spontaneously emerging functional division of tools, which so far has occurred without targeted methodological guidance.

The practical significance of the results obtained lies in the fact that they provide guidelines for such guidance: it is advisable for the instructor neither to prohibit nor to

ignore AI tools, but rather to integrate them into the pedagogical process in light of the identified zones of their effectiveness, while simultaneously fostering in students a critical attitude toward the accuracy of generated material and deeper strategies of educational interaction with AI that go beyond quickly obtaining a ready-made answer.

Prospects for further research are related, first, to expanding and diversifying the sample (students of different proficiency levels and from different universities), which will make it possible to test the robustness of the identified trends; second, to moving from a cross-sectional survey to longitudinal observation reflecting the dynamics of preferences as language competence grows; third, to supplementing the quantitative data with qualitative methods - interviews and analysis of real-life scenarios of students' interaction with AI - which will make it possible to reveal the mechanisms underlying the formation of trust in different sources. A separate direction involves developing and experimentally testing methodological models for integrating AI tools into teaching Chinese at the beginner stage.

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