

From Overload to Comprehensible Input: Making ChatGPT Work for Language Learners



Sarah Osborn

University of Nebraska at Omaha, USA // srfosborn@unomaha.edu

ABSTRACT: Generative AI can be a powerful learning tool, but for many multilingual students, its responses are written in English that's too advanced to be useful. This article offers simple, classroom-tested ways for teachers to help students make generative AI tools' output more accessible, modeling in ChatGPT. Grounded in the idea of comprehensible input, it shows how to modify ChatGPT's settings and prompts so that explanations, examples, and feedback appear at appropriate language levels. Teachers will find ready-to-use prompt templates, modeling ideas, and short classroom activities that build students' confidence and independence when using AI tools. These practical steps can help multilingual students engage with generative AI meaningfully and successfully, turning potential overload into genuine language learning opportunities.

Keywords: ChatGPT, Generative AI, Multilingual Learners, Comprehensible Input, Prompt Literacy, AI in Language Teaching

1. Introduction

When I was working with multilingual writers in a sheltered first-year composition class, my students and I used ChatGPT to brainstorm counterarguments as a way to strengthen their arguments and explore ways someone might challenge the positions they had taken in their essays. As we discussed their results, I noticed something surprising. Instead of weighing the counterarguments critically, students were choosing them almost at random. When I asked why, several admitted that they did not really understand what the tool had written. The language was too advanced.

When I suggested that they ask ChatGPT to explain or simplify its answers, students often reacted with surprise, suggesting that such strategies were not immediately intuitive. That moment changed the way I approached AI in my classroom. Drawing on these classroom observations, I began to recognize that if students could not comprehend ChatGPT's language, they could not effectively use it for deeper thinking, analysis, or revision. Before they could engage critically with AI-generated ideas, they needed to understand them.

This realization led me to explore practical ways to make ChatGPT's output more accessible for multilingual learners. Rather than reflecting a stable proficiency level, ChatGPT tends to produce linguistically advanced but unevenly calibrated output. Studies of large language models suggest that their default

outputs tend toward near-native complexity, making them difficult for lower-proficiency learners to comprehend without simplification or instructional mediation (Jin et al., 2026). This is well beyond the linguistic range of many college students who are still developing academic English. Without adjustments, the tool that promises clarity can actually create cognitive overload, increasing the processing demands placed on learners and making it more difficult to engage with new information (Sweller, 1988; Sweller et al., 2011).

Grounded in the idea of comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985), this article shares straightforward strategies for helping students modify ChatGPT's prompts and settings, practices that can be adapted to other generative AI tools as well, to receive output they can understand and learn from. The goal is not to simplify ideas but to make language accessible enough that multilingual students can think critically about them. In this way, teachers can turn potential overload into opportunities for comprehension, engagement, and more confident learning.

2. Why This Matters: Language Level and Learning

In recent years, teachers of multilingual learners have begun exploring how generative AI can support a range of writing and language development tasks, including brainstorming ideas, generating examples, modeling academic language, and offering formative feedback (Teng, 2024; Wang et al., 2024). In composition classrooms, these tools are often used to help students consider alternative perspectives, such as generating possible counterarguments, or to provide sample explanations of key concepts. Research in TESOL and composition studies suggests that tools such as ChatGPT can provide accessible models, feedback, and examples for students who are learning academic writing in English (Teng, 2024; Huynh & Gonzalez, 2024). When used in these ways, generative AI can serve as a flexible resource for idea generation and rhetorical development, particularly for students who may need additional linguistic support. However, as the opening example illustrates, these potential benefits depend on students' ability to understand and evaluate the language the tool produces. At the same time, many of these studies also point out that generative AI tools' default English is often far more complex than what most language learners can easily process. Even when the ideas are sound, the vocabulary, syntax, and tone can resemble that of an expert writer rather than a student developing proficiency, increasing linguistic complexity and making the text more difficult to process (Crossley et al., 2017).

More broadly, research on generative AI in language learning contexts highlights both its potential benefits and its limitations. Studies suggest that these tools can support idea development, model academic language, and provide formative feedback for multilingual writers, offering flexible resources for engaging with course concepts (Teng, 2024; Wang et al., 2024). At the same time, scholars note important constraints, including linguistic inaccessibility, the risk of overreliance, and the need for explicit instructional guidance to help students interpret and use AI-generated content effectively (Teng, 2024; Wang et al., 2024). These tensions are especially relevant for multilingual learners working with linguistically complex AI output.

Within this broader context, Krashen's theory of comprehensible input (1985) helps explain why language accessibility is central to learning, suggesting that language learning happens most effectively when students can understand the majority of what they read or hear while still encountering some new forms. Research in second language acquisition has similarly emphasized the importance of input that is largely comprehensible for supporting reading comprehension and vocabulary development (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2008). More recent work continues to underscore this point, highlighting the role of vocabulary

knowledge and input accessibility in enabling learners to process and learn from texts (Webb & Nation, 2017). Thus, when generative AI produces text that is too advanced, the input moves beyond what learners can readily comprehend, and students lose the chance to engage meaningfully with new language. Instead of serving as a scaffold, AI output becomes a barrier.

At the same time, composition studies emphasize that comprehension and critical thinking work together. When students cannot understand the language of a text, whether it is an assigned reading or an AI-generated example, they cannot evaluate ideas, detect nuance, or make informed rhetorical choices. Recent research on AI-assisted writing also suggests that while students can use generative AI tools like ChatGPT to develop ideas and structure, they benefit most when instructors guide them in interpreting and adapting AI output (Wang et al., 2024).

3. Adjusting Prompts for Simpler Language

One of the easiest ways to make generative AI output more accessible for multilingual learners is to teach students how to write prompts that specify their language needs. Generative AI responds differently depending on how it is asked, and even small adjustments can change the complexity of the output. Many students, however, do not realize that they can guide generative AI tools to produce language at their level.

Teachers can model this strategy by showing the same question written in two ways and then comparing the results. For example, a student might begin with, “Explain what a thesis statement is.” ChatGPT’s default answer will likely include abstract vocabulary and complex syntax. If the student instead writes, “Explain what a thesis statement is for an intermediate English learner. Use short sentences and simple vocabulary,” the results change, producing a more readable and accessible response. This process helps students see how prompt wording affects output. Table 1 shows examples of default and simplified responses across different writing tasks, created collaboratively by the author and ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2025).

Table 1. Default vs. Simplified AI Output

Purpose	Prompt Type	Prompt	AI Response
Explain a concept	Default Prompt	Explain what a thesis statement is.	A thesis statement is a clear, concise sentence (or sometimes two) that expresses the main idea or argument of an essay or research paper. It tells the reader what the writer will argue or explain and often suggests how the essay will be organized.

	Simplified Prompt	Explain what a thesis statement is for an intermediate English learner. Use short sentences and simple words.	A thesis statement is one or two sentences that tell the main idea of your essay. It shows what you want to say or prove.
Understand vocabulary	Default Prompt	Explain this paragraph.	Photosynthesis is the biochemical process by which green plants convert light energy into chemical energy, producing glucose from carbon dioxide and water.
	Simplified Prompt	Rewrite this paragraph using easier words for an intermediate English learner. Explain difficult words in parentheses.	Photosynthesis is how plants make food. They use sunlight, water, and air to make sugar (a type of food for the plant). This sugar helps the plant grow.

As this comparison shows, small changes in prompting can significantly affect the readability and usefulness of AI-generated text for multilingual learners.

Other prompts can serve similar purposes. For example, students can ask for examples that connect to their own experiences, such as “Give an example that a college student might relate to.” They can also request feedback that is easier to understand, as in “Give feedback on my paragraph using simple English and short sentences.” In addition, students can use follow-up prompts like “Make it easier” or “Explain this in another way” to continue adjusting responses. Each variation shows how small changes in wording can help students better understand and use AI-generated language.

This type of modelling encourages students to experiment, compare results, and reflect on which version they understand best. As they see how their prompts shape the language of the output they receive from their preferred generative AI tool, they gain greater control over their own learning. Encouraging this practice also reduces reliance on teachers for constant clarification. Students who learn to adjust AI output can use generative AI as an independent study partner, reviewing course concepts or writing skills at a level they can process confidently and accurately.

3.1. Teacher Tips and Caveats

Before introducing this strategy, teachers should test a few sample prompts with their own generative AI platforms’ accounts to confirm how the model currently interprets language-level requests. Because these tools update frequently, responses and available features may vary by version. Demonstrating two specific outputs from the same generative AI tool side by side (one default and one simplified) helps students visualize the impact of prompt phrasing and discuss why one is easier to understand.

Encourage students to explore different prompt wording, such as comparing “Explain this at a high intermediate level” with “Use simple English to explain this.” Remind them that experimenting with prompts is part of the learning process and that even slight adjustments can make a major difference in how comprehensible and useful generative AI responses become.

4. Using Custom Instructions

While adjusting prompts helps students shape one response at a time, ChatGPT also allows users to customize its overall behavior through a feature called Custom Instructions, a capability increasingly available in other generative AI tools as well. This setting lets students tell ChatGPT what they want it to know about them and how they would like it to respond. For multilingual learners, these two boxes can transform ChatGPT from a generic information tool into a personalized language partner.

To prepare this classroom activity, I asked ChatGPT to outline how a user could create Custom Instructions that enable language learners to modify the difficulty of responses according to their proficiency level. The model produced the following clear, teacher-ready sequence (OpenAI, 2025).

Follow these steps to create Custom Instructions in ChatGPT that let language learners adjust the difficulty of responses to their English proficiency level:

1. Open Custom Instructions.
In ChatGPT, click your name or profile icon in the bottom-left corner, then choose *Custom Instructions*. Two fields will appear:
 - a. What would you like ChatGPT to know about you to provide better responses?
 - b. How would you like ChatGPT to respond?
2. Add Learner Information.
In the first box, enter information about the learner's background and goals. For example: *"I am an English language learner. I want to practice reading and writing in English. My proficiency level is B1 (intermediate). Please explain new vocabulary and grammar in simple terms."* If students are writing their own, you can provide a template: *"I am an English learner at level [A1 / A2 / B1 / B2 / C1]. Please adapt your vocabulary, sentence length, and explanations so they are clear for my level."*
3. Set Response Preferences.
In the second box, describe how ChatGPT should adjust its responses. For example:
If my level is A1–A2, use short, simple sentences and common vocabulary.
If my level is B1–B2, use natural English with some new words and clear explanations.
Students may also add directions such as *"Highlight new vocabulary," "Give short examples after explanations,"* or *"Correct me gently and explain why."*
4. Encourage Learner Interaction.
After saving, students can still prompt dynamically within a chat. For example:
 - a. *"Make it easier."*
 - b. *"Explain this in simpler English."*
5. Save and Test.
Click *Save* after editing the Custom Instructions. Start a new chat and test by asking for an explanation or short story. Adjust the wording if the responses seem too simple or too complex.

4.1. Teacher Tips and Caveats

Because ChatGPT is continually updated, features such as Custom Instructions may appear slightly different across versions or accounts. Teachers should test the feature themselves before introducing it in class to ensure that the steps and language options still work as expected. It is also helpful to model how to re-prompt ChatGPT to confirm that the tool is responding to new settings. For example, after saving the instructions, a teacher might ask, *"Can you explain this at a B1 English level?"* to check whether the response reflects the change.

When guiding students to identify their proficiency level, teachers can refer to CEFR descriptors or institutional placement guidelines. Emphasize that these levels are approximate, and students can experiment with different settings to find what feels understandable yet challenging, the ideal range for comprehensible input.

5. Classroom Demonstration

A short classroom demonstration can help students connect these ideas. After introducing prompts and Custom Instructions, teachers can ask all students to enter the same question, such as “*Explain what a topic sentence is.*” Students first read the default response, then re-prompt the tool with “*Explain what a topic sentence is for an intermediate English learner.*” The class compares the two versions and discusses which is clearer and why. This five-minute activity reinforces that learners can shape generative AI output’s language to meet their needs. It also gives teachers a quick way to highlight how small changes in prompting make AI output more comprehensible and supportive of learning.

6. Academic Integrity and Access

Some instructors may worry that helping students adjust generative AI tools’ language levels makes it easier for them to rely on AI instead of developing their own writing. In practice, the opposite can be true. For many multilingual learners, the default English used by ChatGPT may be inaccessible. By teaching students to fine-tune the output to match their proficiency, we are not lowering standards but creating equitable access to a tool they are already using. When the language is comprehensible, students can focus on understanding, evaluating, and revising ideas rather than struggling with vocabulary or syntax. This approach turns AI from a shortcut into a scaffold, allowing learners to make informed, critical choices about when and how to use the tool responsibly.

To support responsible use, this approach should be paired with explicit course policies that clarify when and how generative AI can be used. For example, a course policy might distinguish between appropriate uses, such as brainstorming, outlining, or language support, and inappropriate uses, such as submitting AI-generated text as one’s own work or using AI in peer review contexts. In my courses, I provide students with a statement (Appendix A) that explicitly outlines these boundaries, emphasizing that AI can support idea development and language clarity but should not replace students’ own writing or critical work. Framing AI as a tool for support rather than substitution helps position it as a scaffold for learning rather than a shortcut, while also reinforcing students’ accountability for the work they submit.

7. Conclusion

Helping multilingual learners make sense of AI-generated language is not about simplifying their learning but about making it possible. ChatGPT and similar tools can be powerful supports for writing, reading, and critical thinking, but only when students understand the language they are interacting with. By teaching learners how to adjust prompts, customize settings, and test responses, teachers give them tools to engage with AI at a level that fosters growth rather than confusion. This practical work, including prompting for clarity, using Custom Instructions, and modeling how to evaluate AI responses, positions educators as guides who help students learn with, rather than through, technology. When multilingual learners can comprehend and critique AI output, they are empowered to make informed decisions about how to use it ethically and effectively. In this way, teachers help ensure that access to AI becomes a bridge to language development, not a barrier.

The Author

Sarah Osborn is an Assistant Professor at the University of Nebraska-Omaha (UNO), where she teaches composition and linguistics courses. She is the director of the university's First Year Writing Program and the undergraduate and graduate certificates in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Language (TESOL). She earned her PhD in Educational Studies: Language, Literacy, and Culture from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and has graduate certificates in TESOL and Mixed Methods Research.

References

- Crossley, S. A., Kyle, K., & McNamara, D. S. (2017). The tool for the automatic analysis of text complexity (TAACO): A tool for analyzing text complexity. *Behavior Research Methods*, 49, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.3758/s13428-015-0651-7>
- Huynh, T., & Gonzalez, V. (2024, April 17). *AI for reading and writing in ELT at the primary and secondary levels*. TESOL Blog. TESOL International Association. <https://www.tesol.org/blog/posts/ai-for-reading-and-writing-in-elt-at-the-primary-and-secondary-levels>
- Jin, M., Dugan, L., & Callison-Burch, C. (2026). *Toward beginner-friendly LLMs for language learning: Controlling difficulty in conversation*. arXiv. <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2506.04072>
- Krashen, S. D. (1985). *The input hypothesis: Issues and implications*. Longman.
- Nation, I. S. P. (2001). *Learning vocabulary in another language*. Cambridge University Press.
- OpenAI. (2025). *ChatGPT* (November 2025 version) [Large language model]. <https://chat.openai.com>
- Schmitt, N. (2008). Instructed second language vocabulary learning. *Language Teaching Research*, 12(3), 329–363. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168808089921>
- Sweller, J. (1988). Cognitive load during problem solving: Effects on learning. *Cognitive Science*, 12(2), 257–285. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0364-0213\(88\)90023-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/0364-0213(88)90023-7)
- Sweller, J., Ayres, P., & Kalyuga, S. (2011). *Cognitive load theory*. Springer.
- Teng, M. F. (2024). “ChatGPT is the companion, not enemies”: EFL learners’ perceptions and experiences in using ChatGPT for feedback in writing. *Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.caeai.2024.100270>
- Teng, M. F. (2024). A systematic review of ChatGPT for English as a foreign language (EFL) writing: Opportunities, challenges, and recommendations. *International Journal of TESOL Studies*, 6(3), 36–57. <https://doi.org/10.58304/ijts.20240304>
- Wang, C., Aguilar, S. J., Bankard, J. S., Bui, E., & Nye, B. D. (2024). Writing with AI: What college students learned from utilizing ChatGPT for a writing assignment. *Education Sciences*, 14(9), 976. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14090976>
- Webb, S., & Nation, I. S. P. (2017). *How vocabulary is learned*. Oxford University Press.

Appendix

Sample AI Use Syllabus Statement for Multilingual Composition Course

AI tools (such as ChatGPT, Copilot, or similar tools) can help you with your writing when you use them carefully. In this course, you may use these tools to:

- think of ideas and develop your topic
- improve your research questions
- look for information (but always check if it is correct)
- make an outline to organize your ideas
- check your grammar, clarity, and style

There are also times when you should not use AI. Do not use AI to:

- write discussion posts, reflections, or author's notes
- do peer review or upload another student's writing
- write full paragraphs or complete assignments for you

You are responsible for all the work you submit, even if you use AI. This means you must check that your work is correct, avoid copying, and follow ethical rules. You must also say when you used AI and cite it using the required citation style for the course (see course resources for help).

If you are not sure if you can use AI for something, please ask. Learning to use these tools in a responsible way is part of this course.