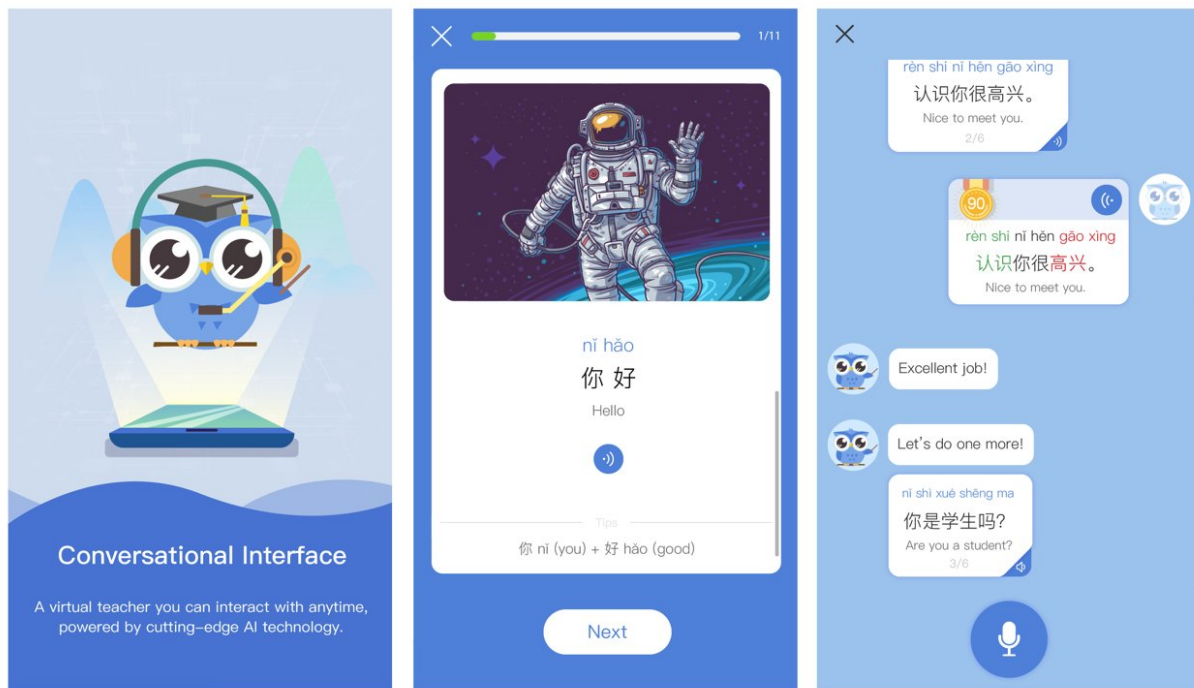# Microsoft Learn Chinese for iOS helps beginners, intermediates

November 29 2017, by Nancy Owano

Credit: Microsoft

(Tech Xplore)—What would you say to learning Chinese with the focus on speaking it—and having fun doing so?

A new app makes Chinese learning fun. And it's free. Microsoft Learn Chinese app beckons you to pick up the language with the help of an AI

assistant.

The features list includes speech recognition for a grading system's instant feedback; course material designed by professional teachers; and a conversational interface powered by AI technology.

By Chinese, Microsoft apparently is referring to Mandarin: "By exploring a wide variety of everyday scenarios, you become exposed to essential vocabulary and grammar structures, helping you to speak Mandarin the way natives do," said the app wording on the iTunes page.

Gary Ng, founder and editor-in-chief of *iPhoneinCanada.ca*, made note likewise: "Microsoft has launched 'Learn Chinese' for iOS, its new AI-powered app to help users learn Mandarin Chinese."

Microsoft Research released this iOS app, and it requires iOS 9.0 or later. It is compatible with iPhone, iPad, and iPod touch. The app has two modes available, one for beginners and one for intermediate learners.

JC Torres in *SlashGear* said, "learning is one thing, practicing with an actual native speaker is another. Since the latter isn't exactly convenient or always available, Microsoft Research has decided to leverage the hottest new trend to make it a bit easier: using an AI-powered chatbot."

The technique involves phrases and sentences in everyday scenarios. You learn essential vocabulary and grammar structures.

A key topic for those covering the launch in various sites was the conversational interface: You are provided with a virtual teacher with whom you can interact any time. "What this app plans to do, is to have users practice real-world conversations to learn the language with an AI assistant, instead of the traditional classroom model of flashcards and

memorization," said Ng.

An advanced grading system can help to improve your pronunciation. Pradeep Viswanathan, editor at *MSPoweruser.com*, said the advanced grading system "provides instant feedback. Along with scores, it highlights words that need improvement and links to sample audio to hear the proper pronunciation."

Yvette Tan in *Mashable* said that after you speak, the app grades you on a response's structure and pronunciation.

Viswanathan, meanwhile, put the app into realistic perspective: "Microsoft is clear that this app is not a replacement for language teachers. Instead this app will act as an assistant to the learner when the human teacher is not available."

A posting on the Microsoft Research Lab-Asia, by John Roach on Nov. 26, explained further.

"The challenge is to find someone with the time, patience and skill to help you practice pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. For people learning Chinese, Microsoft is aiming to fill that void with a new smartphone app that can act as an always available, artificially intelligent language learning assistant."

"What this app plans to do, is to have users practice real-world conversations to learn the language with an AI assistant, instead of the traditional classroom model of flashcards and memorization," said Ng.

Roach, meanwhile, quoted Frank Soong, principal researcher and research manager of the Beijing lab's speech group. Soong said, "Our application isn't a replacement for good human teachers," but it is able to assist "by being available any time an individual has the desire or the

time to practice."

Roach said the technology relies on AI tools tuned to recognize what the language learners are trying to say and evaluate the speakers' pronunciation. For beginners: "The lessons for beginners mainly help users to learn short words and sentences, and then provide lessons with read-after-me and dialogue to practice Chinese that users have just learned." For intermediates: interactive lessons that help users learn how to navigate real-world scenarios such as renting an apartment and ordering food in a restaurant.

More information: [www.microsoft.com/en-us/resear … -help-learn-chinese/](www.microsoft.com/en-us/resear)

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