

Empowering Learner Autonomy through AI-based Tools in English Learning: Students’ Voices

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ABSTRACT

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in education has transformed the way students learn, think, and interact with knowledge. This study aims to explore EFL students' experiences using AI-based tools to enhance their learner autonomy, motivation, and creativity in English learning. This study used a descriptive qualitative approach with data obtained from interviews with 36 students in the English Language Education study program at the University of Bengkulu. The collected data were analyzed thematically framework includes familiarization, coding, theme generation, reviewing, defining, and reporting. The research findings show that AI-based tools function not only as technological aids but also as learning partners, encouraging learner autonomy, self-confidence, and more creative language exploration. Students benefit from the instant feedback and adaptive features that allow them to revise, learn flexibly, and stay motivated. However, the study also identified ethical and pedagogical challenges, such as a tendency to rely on AI, a decline in originality, and the need for digital literacy and reflective mentoring. This study concludes that AI can empower students to become independent and reflective learners when used with the right ethical and pedagogical approach. It also emphasizes the importance of the role of lecturers, institutional policies, and ethical awareness to ensure that AI use remains centered on human values. Thus, empowering learner autonomy through AI is not only about digital innovation, but also about fostering humanity in the era of intelligent technology.

Keywords: *Learner autonomy; AI-based tools; Students’ voices; EFL students.*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital technology over the past decade has transformed the way people interact, work, and learn. This transformation has also reached the world of education, where various digital innovations are starting to be integrated to increase the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process. In the context of language education, particularly English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching, AI now plays a crucial role in creating more personalized, adaptive, and interactive learning experiences. Through various AI-based applications such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, Gemini, etc, students can interact directly with intelligent systems that provide instant feedback, adjust difficulty levels, and offer learning recommendations relevant to their individual needs.

With the advent of this technology, important questions have arisen about how AI can foster students’ learner autonomy and help them become more active, reflective, and responsible learners. According to Benson (2013), learner autonomy

is not simply the ability to learn independently, but rather the awareness and responsibility for planning, monitoring, and evaluating the learning process. With the help of AI, students have the potential to develop these abilities because they have access to a wide and flexible range of learning resources.

However, the integration of AI in language learning not only brings opportunities but also challenges. On the one hand, AI can provide increased motivation and provide empirical support for future practice (Fang, 2025). On the other hand, excessive or undirected use can lead to technology dependence, reduce critical thinking skills, and even raise ethical issues such as plagiarism and lack of originality (Crompton et al., 2024). Therefore, it is important to understand in-depth how students experience, interpret, and evaluate the use of AI in their language learning, not only in terms of academic outcomes but also from a personal and reflective perspective.

Several studies have highlighted the use of AI in the context of English language learning. Mahmud (2023) stated that generative AI tools significantly improved students' vocabulary, grammar, and writing skills in English courses. Meanwhile, Solihat et al. (2024) found that the use of AI has been shown to adapt learning materials to the needs, abilities, and learning styles of each student, allowing each student to learn at the pace and method that is most effective for them. However, most of these studies still focus on quantitative outcomes, such as improvements in speaking or writing scores. Few studies have explored students' experiences and voices qualitatively, especially in the context of higher education in Indonesia. This gap is the primary reason for this research. Indonesia is currently striving to strengthen digital literacy and learning innovation in higher education, yet there is still a lack of research that examines how students directly experience and interpret the use of AI in learning English. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap through a qualitative approach that focuses on students' experiences as active learners in the era of artificial intelligence.

This study aims to explore EFL students' experiences using AI-based tools to learn English, assess how AI can foster learner autonomy, motivation, and creativity, and identify challenges and opportunities in applying AI to language learning. This approach aligns with the spirit of humanistic education, which places students as the primary subjects of learning, individuals who think, reflect, and grow through meaningful learning experiences. From a theoretical perspective, this research is based on the concept of learner autonomy (Benson, 2013; Holec, 1980), which emphasizes the importance of learner responsibility for the learning process, as well as Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which explains that intrinsic motivation grows when the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met. In addition, the humanistic view of education is an important framework for

thinking in this research, because it views technology not as a substitute for humans, but as a means to develop the human potential of learners.

By combining these perspectives, this research is expected to provide new contributions to the world of language education, particularly in understanding how AI can be used ethically, reflectively, and empower students to become independent, creative, and responsible learners. Practically, the results of this research are expected to provide input for educators, curriculum developers, and also policymakers in designing AI-based English learning strategies that remain centered on human values. Thus, language learning in the digital age is oriented not only toward technological efficiency but also toward empowering individuals as thoughtful, ethical, and creative learners.

METHODS

Subjects of Research

The subject of this study were in total of 36 participants from the third semester of the English language education program at the University of Bengkulu.

Instruments

This study employed a qualitative research to investigate students' lived experiences with using AI-based tools to learn English. The phenomenological approach enables the researcher to gain a deep understanding of how learners perceive, interpret, and make sense of their experiences with AI in their language learning journey (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Rather than focusing on numerical outcomes, this study seeks to uncover the essence of learner autonomy as experienced by students through the integration of AI tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, and Gemini. This design aligns with the purpose of the study to investigate how AI fosters learners' autonomy, motivation, and creativity, while also identifying challenges and opportunities in AI-assisted language learning. Example guiding questions included: 1) How do you use AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT, Grammarly, or Gemini) in your English learning?. 2) In what ways do these tools help you become more independent or motivated to learn?. 3) What challenges or concerns do you face when using AI in your learning?. 4) How do you perceive your role as a learner when interacting with AI?..

Data Collection

Three main techniques were used to collect the data in this research, namely interviews, questionnaires, and light participant observation. The collected data were analyzed thematically following Braun & Clarke (2019) framework, which includes familiarization, coding, theme generation, reviewing, defining, and reporting. Through this process, patterns and key themes were identified that

revealed students' authentic voices about their learning autonomy, motivation, and creativity through AI-assisted learning.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the results of interviews and reflective journals, four main themes were identified that were underlined in describing students' experiences in using AI-based tools for English language learning, namely: (1) increasing learner autonomy, (2) growing motivation and self-confidence, (3) developing creativity in language, and (4) ethical challenges and limitations found in the use of AI.

Increasing Learner Autonomy

Most students stated that using AI-based tools, such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, and Gemini, helped them learn more independently. AI provides instant feedback on grammar, vocabulary, and writing style, allowing students to reflect and improve independently without always relying on lecturers or peers. This allows them to revise their writing, correct mistakes, and evaluate their own progress. Digital technology significantly enables learners to develop self-regulated learning, namely the ability to plan, monitor, and assess the learning process without direct lecturer intervention. AI acts as a "learning mirror," helping students assess their abilities in real time and correct mistakes without fear of error. One student explained:

"I have known AI since high school, and the experience is that AI has been quite helpful in completing these 3 semesters, because I have felt several improvements, for example in pronunciation, grammar, and many more, besides that, it also helps me to understand several things more easily in the context of learning or not, because we can get a lot of new additional information."

These findings suggest that AI encourages students to take control of their learning process, a key characteristic of learner autonomy (Benson, 2013; Reinders & White, 2016). Students also mentioned that AI gives them the freedom to choose learning topics and pace according to their personal needs. This suggests that AI plays a role in fostering learner autonomy, as explained by Holec (1980) and Benson (2013), namely the ability to learn that stems from self-awareness and individual responsibility for the learning process.

However, some students also believe that this independence can only develop if AI is used consciously and critically. Over-reliance on AI results can actually hinder reflective thinking and creativity. The ease of access and speed of answers sometimes makes them more likely to rely on AI to complete tasks without thinking critically. Some research participants admitted to feeling "too lazy to think for themselves" because AI already provides the answers they believe are correct.

Growing Motivation and Self-Confidence

AI-based tools have been proven to contribute to increased student motivation. Interactive features, rapid feedback, and easy access make the learning process more enjoyable and meaningful. AI-generated feedback fosters learners’ emotional resilience by empowering them to handle learning challenges with greater confidence (He et al., 2025). Students in this study reported that using AI made them more willing to try and less afraid of making mistakes. Previously, many felt hesitant to write or speak for fear of criticism. However, with systems like ChatGPT or Grammarly, they felt safer and more confident experimenting with language because the feedback provided was neutral and supportive. They also can practice with AI assistance before presenting in class.

“AI makes learning more interesting and interactive because I can practice anytime and get quick feedback. Since it’s easy to ask questions and get explanations, I feel less afraid of making mistakes and more excited to try new things in English.”

“AI gives me fast and clear feedback, so I can make better decisions about what to study next. It also helps me evaluate my progress and gives me confidence when I understand a topic better.”

These findings align with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which explains that autonomy, competence, and social relationships are three basic psychological needs that support intrinsic motivation. The use of AI fulfills two of these needs, they are autonomy and competence, as students feel more capable and free to determine learning methods that suit their styles. However, this motivation is sometimes situational. Some students admitted that they used AI primarily to complete assignments, rather than out of an intrinsic drive to learn more deeply. This highlights the need for lecturer guidance so that AI is used not only as an aid but also as a means of developing self-directed learning awareness.

Developing creativity in language

Beyond assisting with technical aspects, students expressed that AI stimulated their linguistic creativity. In the context of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), creativity is not limited only to writing or speaking, but also includes how students interpret messages, adapt to context, and utilize resources to construct meaning. By exploring various language styles and sentence structures suggested by AI, students felt more confident in experimenting with their English writing and speaking. AI was also seen as a source of inspiration for developing ideas, enriching vocabulary, and understanding cultural contexts in English communication.

“I often interact with AI in writing and grammar. usually I choose the topic that i will write with the help of gpt chat for brainstorming, because sometimes I got confused to choose what topic.”

AI not only enhances technical language skills but also expands users'

imagination and creativity. However, some students recognized that true creativity still stems from human thought. AI can only be a facilitator, not a substitute for critical thinking and personal expression in language learning because it is feared that students may put less effort into the creative process as a result of this simple access to content creation (Baek & Wilson, 2024).

Ethical Challenges and Limitations Found in The Use of AI

Despite its significant benefits, students also face several challenges and limitations. These include difficulty distinguishing between truly accurate information and concerns about plagiarism and the authenticity of written work. One of the most prominent ethical issues surrounding the use of AI among students is the decline in academic integrity. Many students admit they are sometimes tempted to use ChatGPT or similar applications to complete assignments without much thought or writing.

While AI is capable of producing high-quality text in a short time, its use without critical reflection can blur the line between learning assistance and plagiarism. Students highlighted the need for digital literacy and ethical awareness in using AI.

“Use AI as a help, not as a shortcut practice what it teaches you.”

“We must always compare with books or trusted sources and don't just copy the information from AI tools.”

“I would advise other students to use AI as a guide, not a replacement. Get ideas, check grammar, and practice with it, but always think and write in your own words. Don't rely on AI too much, and try to be creative.”

This kind of awareness shows the emergence of digital ethical literacy, where students begin to understand moral responsibility in the use of technology. This aligns with the views of Marín et al. (2025), who emphasize that the importance of ethical use of AI in educational contexts, AI should complement, not replace, the human role in learning so that technology not only improves learning efficiency but also fosters academic responsibility and integrity

CONCLUSION

This research confirms that the use of artificial intelligence (AI)-based tools like ChatGPT, Grammarly, and Gemini has significantly changed the way students learn English. AI acts not only as a technological aid but also as a learning partner, encouraging independence, motivation, and creativity in the learning process. Students feel more confident in writing and speaking English because AI provides rapid feedback, contextual suggestions, and the opportunity to learn without the fear of mistakes. This fosters learner autonomy, the ability to control, reflect on, and direct their own learning process. Furthermore, the use of AI also increases student

motivation and engagement in learning. Interactive features and immediate results encourage them to practice more consistently, both in and outside of class. Furthermore, AI opens up opportunities for linguistic creativity, as students are encouraged to experiment with new ideas and language structures. However, this research also reveals a critical side to AI use. Over-reliance, declining originality, and a lack of digital ethical literacy are real challenges that need to be addressed. Some students realized that when they rely too much on AI, their critical thinking and self-reflection skills actually diminish. This awareness indicates the emergence of a new form of ethical literacy, namely the awareness to use technology responsibly and ethically. Overall, the results of this study demonstrate that AI has great potential to empower language learners, provided it is used with guidance, reflective awareness, and strong ethical principles. AI-based learning is not solely about efficiency or results, but about how technology can help students become more conscious, independent, and human learners.

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