

Between Dependence and Autonomy: Students' Reflections on AI Use in English Language Learning

Andi Ashlihatul Fuada^{1*}, Indri Feybe Barauntu¹, Nuraeni¹

¹*Faculty of Languages and Literature, Universitas Negeri Makassar, Indonesia*

E-mail: andi.fuada@gmail.com*

*Corresponding author

Article Info	Abstract
Received: 11 March 2026 Reviewed: 15 March 2026 – 30 May 2026 Accepted: 15 June 2026 Published: 30 June 2026	Purpose This study explored how English Education students use artificial intelligence (AI) in English language learning and how they negotiate the relationship between AI use and learner autonomy. Methodology The study employed a qualitative design. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine students who regularly used AI tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, and translation applications in academic writing activities. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Results/Findings The findings revealed that participants perceived AI as a mediational and supportive tool rather than a replacement for human thinking. AI was primarily used to improve language accuracy, generate ideas, organize writing, and complete academic tasks more efficiently. However, participants also expressed awareness of the potential risks of excessive AI dependence, particularly regarding critical thinking, deep learning, and independent cognitive engagement. To maintain learner autonomy, students actively regulated their AI use by cross-checking AI-generated responses, limiting dependence on AI, and maintaining ownership of their ideas and writing voice. The study further found that learner autonomy in AI-assisted learning was understood not as the absence of technological support, but as the ability to critically evaluate, manage, and control AI use responsibly. Implications These findings suggest that AI does not necessarily reduce learner autonomy when learners engage with it reflectively and critically. Therefore, educators should guide students toward responsible and reflective AI literacy while encouraging independent thinking and cognitive engagement in language learning.
Keywords: Artificial intelligence; learner autonomy; English language learning; academic writing; qualitative study	

1. Introduction

The rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) has significantly transformed higher education, including English language learning. Generative AI tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, and machine translation systems are increasingly embedded in students' academic practices, offering immediate feedback, linguistic support, and idea generation. These affordances are particularly relevant in productive skills such as writing, which traditionally require sustained cognitive engagement and iterative refinement.

While AI enhances efficiency and accessibility, its integration raises important pedagogical concerns. Writing is not merely a technical activity but a cognitive and reflective process. The availability of AI-generated responses may alter how students engage with language learning, potentially shifting responsibility from the learner to the tool.

From a sociocultural perspective, AI can be conceptualized as a mediational tool that supports learning (Vygotsky, 1978). However, its role is not inherently beneficial. When used uncritically, AI may reduce opportunities for deeper cognitive engagement. This concern is closely linked to the concept of learner autonomy, defined as the ability to take control of one's own learning processes (Holec, 1981; Little, 1991). Existing research has largely emphasized the effectiveness of AI in improving language accuracy and efficiency (Kohnke et al., 2023; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). However, such studies tend to adopt an instrumental perspective, focusing on outcomes rather than learners' reflective experiences. As a result, limited attention has been given to how students interpret, regulate, and position AI within their learning processes. Moreover, current discourse often frames AI in binary terms, as either a threat to academic integrity or a beneficial innovation. This dichotomy overlooks the complexity of students' experiences, which are often characterized by both support and tension.

This study addresses this gap by exploring how students use AI in learning English and how they balance AI use with learner autonomy. Rather than assuming that AI either enhances or reduces autonomy, this study examines how students actively negotiate this relationship in their learning practices.

The rapid integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into educational contexts, particularly in language learning, presents a transformative yet complex landscape. As students increasingly turn to sophisticated AI tools to support their English acquisition, from grammar correction to conversational practice, a critical examination of this interaction becomes imperative. This study, therefore, is driven by a core inquiry into this evolving dynamic, exploring how students navigate the intersection of technological assistance and personal responsibility. Specifically, it seeks to understand the practical application of these technologies by investigating how students use AI tools in learning English. Furthermore, it aims to dissect the critical equilibrium between leveraging AI's capabilities and maintaining the essential skills of learner autonomy by exploring how students balance AI use with their own independent learning. Ultimately, the research delves into the conceptual foundations of this relationship, questioning how students themselves understand and define learner autonomy in the context of widespread AI use. Through these interconnected questions, this study endeavors to provide a nuanced understanding of the modern language learner's experience in an AI-saturated environment.

2. Literature review

2.1 Artificial intelligence in english language learning

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become increasingly integrated into English language learning. AI tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, and machine translation systems provide students with language support, instant feedback, and idea generation. AI technologies help learners improve grammar, vocabulary, writing, and communication skills more efficiently.

According to recent studies, AI can support personalized and autonomous learning by allowing students to learn at their own pace and according to their needs. AI-powered learning environments also encourage flexibility and accessibility in language learning (Sari et al. 2024)

However, researchers also warn that excessive dependence on AI may reduce critical thinking and deeper cognitive engagement. AI should therefore be used as a support tool rather than a replacement for learners' thinking processes (Alm, 2024).

3.2 Learning autonomy

Learner autonomy is an important concept in language learning. learner autonomy is the ability to take charge of one's own learning (Alm, 2024). This means learners are responsible for making decisions about their learning objectives, methods, and evaluation.

Autonomy involves critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action in learning (Alm, 2024). In digital learning environments, autonomy does not mean learning alone without support. Instead, learners need to critically evaluate and regulate technological tools used in learning. In the context of AI, learner autonomy can be seen in how students decide when to use AI, how much they rely on it, and how they maintain their own learning efforts and personal voice.

3.3 Sociocultural theory

This study is also informed by the sociocultural theory proposed by (Vygotsky, 1978) . Sociocultural theory emphasizes that learning is mediated by tools, social interaction, and cultural artifacts. Learning does not occur individually but develops through interaction with mediational tools and the surrounding environment (Ai, 2015).

According to (Vygotsky, 1978) tools and symbols help learners develop higher cognitive processes. One important concept in sociocultural theory is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which refers to the difference between what learners can do independently and what they can achieve with support or mediation (Ai, 2015).

In the context of language learning, technology can function as a mediational tool that supports students' learning processes. AI tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, and translation applications provide assistance through feedback, explanations, vocabulary suggestions, and idea development. These tools help learners perform tasks that may be difficult to accomplish independently (Pham & Huong, 2025).

Recent studies have shown that AI-assisted learning environments can support learner agency, engagement, and autonomy when students use AI critically and reflectively. Antonie Alm explains that autonomy in AI-mediated learning appears through learners' ability to maintain critical awareness and personal agency while interacting with AI tools (Alm, 2024).

However, sociocultural theory also highlights that mediation does not automatically lead to meaningful learning. Since AI lacks human pedagogical awareness and emotional understanding, learners still need to regulate and evaluate AI output critically. Overreliance on AI may reduce opportunities for deeper cognitive engagement and independent problem-solving.

Therefore, AI should not only be viewed as a technological innovation but also as a mediational tool that shapes students' learning experiences, cognitive engagement, and learner autonomy in English language learning.

3.4 Self-regulated learning

In AI-assisted learning, self-regulation becomes important because students need to decide when and how AI tools should be used effectively. AI tools such as ChatGPT and Grammarly can help students improve grammar, generate ideas, and receive instant feedback. However, students still need to think critically and avoid relying too much on AI tools (Laguna, 2023).

Research shows that AI can support learning and learner autonomy when students use it responsibly and critically. Students who can regulate their AI use are more likely to remain active and independent learners in the learning process.

3.4 Previous study

Previous studies have explored the role of AI in language learning. Many studies focus on the effectiveness of AI tools in improving language accuracy, writing quality, and learning motivation (Zhen, 2025).

Recent studies also discuss the relationship between AI and learner autonomy. Autonomy in AI-mediated learning appears through learners' ability to maintain critical awareness while using AI productively (Alm, 2024). Another study found that AI-assisted learning environments can strengthen self-regulation and learner autonomy when learners actively manage their learning processes.

However, most previous studies focus on quantitative measurements of AI effectiveness and autonomy. Limited research explores students' reflective experiences and how they negotiate the balance between dependence on AI and independent learning. Therefore, this study aims to explore students' reflections on AI use and learner autonomy in English language learning.

3.5 Theoretical framework

This study integrates sociocultural theory, learner autonomy, and self-regulated learning. From a sociocultural perspective, learning is mediated by tools and artifacts (Vygotsky, 1978). AI functions as a mediational tool that supports learners in performing tasks beyond their current ability. However, unlike human mediation, AI lacks pedagogical intentionality, making learner regulation essential.

Learner autonomy is defined as the capacity to take control of one's learning (Holec, 1981; Benson, 2011). In digital contexts, autonomy involves the ability to critically manage and evaluate technological tools rather than avoiding them.

This aligns with self-regulated learning theory (Zimmerman, 2002), which emphasizes learners' ability to monitor and control their cognitive processes. In AI-mediated environments, autonomy is enacted through reflective decision-making regarding when and how to use AI.

Thus, this study conceptualizes AI use as a negotiated and regulated practice, where autonomy is expressed through control, evaluation, and responsibility.

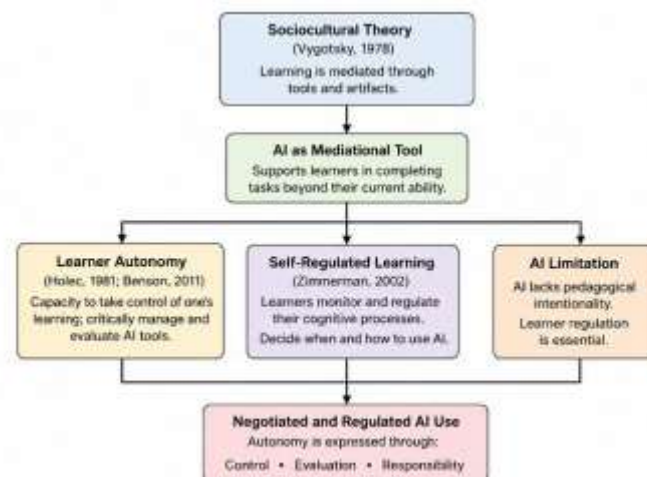


Figure 1: Theoretical framework (design by authors)

3. Research method

3.1. Research design

The study uses a qualitative interpretivist design to explore how the participants make sense of their experiences. This approach is based on the interpretivist paradigm which believes that reality is socially constructed and subjective in nature. As (Weber, 1949) proposed, social action has to be understood through *verstehen*, which is the interpretation of individuals subjective meanings. Likewise, (Wilhelm, 2002) believed that human experiences need to be interpreted and not only explained and that the context plays a role in the understanding of social phenomena. Moreover, this study is built upon hermeneutic theory, particularly the work of (Gadamer, 2014), who put forward the concept of the “fusion of horizons,” where meanings are created through the dialogue between the researcher’s perspective and the participants’ experiences. According to the constructivist perspective (Vygotsky, 1978) knowledge is viewed as actively created through experience and social interaction. The study thus views meaning as dynamic and subject to interpretation in particular social and educational contexts. Based on these theoretical foundations, the interpretive design enables the researcher to gain a deep understanding of the participants’ perceptions and experiences, rather than describing them.

3.2. Research participants

Nine English Education students participated in this study, consisting of undergraduate student and postgraduate students. Participants were chosen because they actively participated in English academic writing and had experience with using artificial intelligence tools in learning settings. All participants regularly utilized AI-based applications such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, and various translation tools in their writing process for tasks such as idea generation, grammar check, paraphrasing, and text coherence enhancement.

Their constant exposure to these technologies made them suitable informants to investigate how AI tools shape writing practices and learning experiences in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. In addition, the inclusion of undergraduate and postgraduate students brought different academic perspectives, enabling the study to explore a wider range of experiences and perceptions regarding the integration of AI in academic writing.

3.3. Research instruments

The primary research instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview guide. The interview guide was designed to explore participants’ experiences, perceptions, and reflections regarding the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in English language learning, particularly in academic writing activities. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they allow flexibility in exploring participants’ responses while still maintaining focus on the research objectives.

The interview questions were developed based on the theoretical framework of sociocultural theory, learner autonomy, and self-regulated learning. The questions focused on several major areas, including:

- students’ experiences in using AI tools in English learning,
- perceived benefits and challenges of AI use,

- students' strategies in regulating AI use,
- the relationship between AI use and learner autonomy,
- the influence of AI on critical thinking and classroom participation.

The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions that encouraged participants to provide detailed explanations and personal reflections. Follow-up questions were also used to clarify responses and explore emerging issues during the interviews.

The interview instrument was designed to support rich and in-depth data collection by allowing participants to express their experiences freely. Since the study employed a qualitative interpretivist approach, the researcher also functioned as an important instrument in interpreting participants' meanings, experiences, and perspectives throughout the research process.

To ensure the relevance and clarity of the interview questions, the instrument was reviewed and refined before data collection. During the interviews, the researcher maintained flexibility in adjusting the sequence and wording of questions based on participants' responses and the flow of conversation.

3.4. Technique of data analysis

A deeper understanding of participants' experiences and perceptions of using artificial intelligence in academic writing was achieved through semi-structured interviews where data were collected. The interview questions were flexible but focused, allowing participants to express freely their ideas, but still addressing the core issues of the study.

- AI use practices
- perceived benefits and risks
- strategies for regulating AI use

In order to promote open communication, all interviews were conducted in a relaxed and informal setting. To guarantee accuracy of data, all interviews were recorded with the participants' consent. Transcripts of recorded interviews were made verbatim to keep the original meaning and expressions of the participants. The researcher was able to perform a more detailed analysis of the data to ensure that no important information was lost in the interpretation through this transcription process.

3.5. Technique of data analysis

The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis proposed by (Braun & Clarke 2006). This approach was selected because it allows the researcher to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns of meaning across participants' experiences while recognizing the active role of the researcher in the interpretation process.

The analysis began with data familiarization, in which the researcher repeatedly read the interview transcripts to gain a deep understanding of the participants' experiences and perspectives regarding AI use and learner autonomy. During this stage, important statements and recurring ideas were noted.

The second stage involved generating initial codes. Relevant segments of the interview data were systematically coded based on meaningful patterns related to AI use, learner autonomy, self-regulation, cognitive engagement, and classroom participation. Coding was conducted reflexively, meaning that the researcher actively interpreted the data rather than treating coding as a purely objective process.

After the coding process, related codes were grouped into broader categories to develop potential themes. These themes were then reviewed and refined by comparing them continuously with the interview data to ensure consistency and coherence. Through this process, six major themes were identified, including AI as a mediational tool, changes in learning habits, negotiation between efficiency and cognitive depth, differences between AI and human feedback, self-regulation in AI use, and the influence of AI on classroom interaction.

Finally, the themes were interpreted in relation to sociocultural theory, learner autonomy, and self-regulated learning to construct a deeper understanding of how students negotiate AI use in English language learning contexts.

3.6. Trustworthiness of the data

Credibility in this study was ensured through several strategies to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings.

3.6.1. The use of direct excerpts

Data from the interviews with the participants was used to reinforce the interpretation of themes. The verbatim quotations let the readers see the connection between the raw data and the researcher's analysis directly, and thus increase the transparency and authenticity of the findings.

3.6.2. Iterative analysis

Analysis was ongoing and iterative throughout the research process. The researcher revisited the interview transcripts, codes and emerging themes several times to refine interpretations and to verify that the analysis captured the intended meanings of the participants. This ongoing process of comparison and re-evaluation assisted in the minimisation of misinterpretation as well as improving the consistency of the analytical process.

3.6.3. Alignment between data and interpretation

By the correspondence of data and the interpretation. The researcher was very careful to make sure that all interpretations were based on the actual data and not on personal assumptions. The development of each theme was informed by evidence from the transcripts to ensure that the findings were grounded in the experiences and perspectives of the participants. The strategies were used to create a believable and trustworthy representation of the data in the study.

4. Results

The analysis of interviews with nine English Education students from undergraduate, master's, and doctoral levels reveals that students' experiences with artificial intelligence (AI) in English language learning are highly complex, reflective, and negotiated. Rather than functioning solely as a technological shortcut, AI became deeply integrated into students' academic routines, learning habits, writing practices, and classroom participation. The findings show that students continuously negotiated the balance between support and dependency, efficiency and deep learning, as well as autonomy and technological mediation.

The participants used various AI tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, DeepL, QuillBot, Canva, and translation applications for different academic purposes. Across the interviews, six major themes emerged; AI as a mediational tool for language learning and academic writing, AI and the transformation of learning habits, negotiating efficiency and cognitive depth, differences between AI feedback and human feedback, learner autonomy through self-regulation and boundary-making, and the influence of AI on classroom interaction and social participation.

4.1. AI as a mediational tool for language learning and academic writing

One of the strongest findings in this study is that students consistently positioned AI as a mediational tool that supported their learning process rather than replacing their intellectual work entirely. Participants described AI as an assistant, brainstorming partner, tutor, collaborator, or support system that helped them organize ideas, improve language accuracy, and complete academic tasks more effectively.

Most participants stated that they primarily used AI for academic writing purposes, especially in generating ideas, organizing arguments, checking grammar, paraphrasing sentences, translating expressions, and improving academic vocabulary. Participant A explained that AI became useful when she already had ideas but struggled to begin writing:

"Saya gunakan ChatGPT itu sebagai alat pendukung untuk menyusun tugas kuliah saja. Karena biasanya itu saya pakai kalau misalkan saya sudah punya idenya tapi saya tidak tahu harus mulai dari mana untuk penyusunan."

("I use ChatGPT as a supporting tool to complete my academic assignments. Usually, I use it when I already have an idea but do not know where to start in organizing it.")

This finding suggests that students did not rely on AI to fully produce ideas from nothing. Instead, AI functioned as a scaffolding tool that helped students develop and organize thoughts that had already existed cognitively. Similarly, Participant B emphasized that AI did not replace her thinking process but supported it:

"AI ini membantu saya untuk naik ke satu tingkat, tapi tentu saja tidak mengambil alih proses berpikir."

("AI helps me move to the next level, but it certainly does not take over the thinking process.")

This indicates that students perceived themselves as the primary owners of ideas while AI functioned as a supporting mechanism. The role of AI in this context aligns closely with sociocultural theory, particularly Vygotsky's concept of mediation, in which tools assist learners in performing tasks beyond their immediate abilities.

Participant C also described AI as both a discussion partner and tutor because it created a non-judgmental learning environment:

"AI seperti teman diskusi sekaligus tutor. Jadi AI itu tidak membuat saya merasa takut salah."

("AI is like a discussion partner as well as a tutor. Therefore, AI does not make me feel afraid of making mistakes.")

This finding highlights an important emotional dimension of AI-assisted learning. Students felt psychologically safer when interacting with AI because AI did not criticize or judge mistakes in the same way humans sometimes do. Consequently, students became more confident in experimenting with language structures, vocabulary choices, and academic expressions.

Meanwhile, Participant D, a doctoral student, highlighted the practical necessity of AI within demanding academic environments. According to him, AI became extremely important due to the overwhelming number of assignments and limited time available:

“Tanpa AI ini kami tidak bisa menyelesaikannya.”
 (“Without AI, we would not be able to complete it.”)

This response reflects how AI is not merely perceived as optional assistance but sometimes as a survival strategy in highly demanding academic contexts. Particularly at postgraduate and doctoral levels, students often experience intense workloads involving article writing, research projects, presentations, and academic publications. AI therefore becomes integrated into productivity management and academic efficiency.

However, despite acknowledging AI's usefulness, nearly all participants emphasized that AI should not fully replace human thinking. Students repeatedly stated that the final decisions, interpretations, and arguments should remain their own responsibility. This indicates that students still maintained awareness of authorship, originality, and academic ownership even while using AI extensively.

4.2. AI changes learning habits and academic practices

Another major finding concerns the transformation of students' learning habits after the emergence of AI tools. Participants consistently described significant shifts in how they study English, complete assignments, and access information.

Before using AI, students reported relying heavily on traditional learning practices such as dictionaries, grammar books, physical books, Google searches, manual translation, and independent vocabulary exploration. However, these practices gradually changed because AI provided faster and more contextually relevant responses.

Participant B explained:

“Sekarang kurang lengkap kalau belum dicek pakai AI dulu.”
 (“Nowadays, it feels incomplete if it has not been checked using AI first.”)

This statement demonstrates how AI has become normalized within students' academic routines. AI checking became part of the final revision process before assignment submission, almost functioning as an academic ritual.

Similarly, Participant C described how her previous habits of manually analyzing grammar and vocabulary while reading English novels had decreased significantly:

“AI ini menggantikan proses eksplorasi manual yang dulu biasa saya lakukan.”
 (“AI has replaced the manual exploration process that I used to do.”)

This finding suggests that AI changes not only learning strategies but also the pace and structure of learning itself. Previously, students engaged in slower exploratory learning processes that required patience, dictionary consultation, and repeated exposure to language forms. With AI, students can now obtain instant explanations, examples, and corrections within seconds.

Participant D also acknowledged a dramatic reduction in physical book reading habits:

“Semenjak ada AI tidak pernah mi baca-baca buku yang bentuknya fisik.”
 (“Since the emergence of AI, I have no longer read physical books.”)

This reflects the broader digital transformation of academic literacy practices. AI has shifted students' learning orientation from manual searching and exploration toward immediate information retrieval. Learning becomes more efficient, but also more dependent on instant access to technological assistance.

Despite these changes, some students expressed ambivalent feelings toward this transformation. While AI made learning easier and less time-consuming, participants also admitted that older learning methods sometimes created deeper understanding and stronger memory retention. This demonstrates that students were aware of both the advantages and limitations of AI-assisted learning.

4.3. Negotiating efficiency and cognitive depth

The third major theme emerging from the interviews concerns the tension between efficiency and cognitive depth. Participants repeatedly acknowledged that AI significantly improved efficiency, particularly in completing assignments under time pressure. However, they simultaneously expressed concerns that excessive dependence on AI could reduce critical thinking, analytical engagement, and independent learning.

Participant A stated:

"Lebih cepat dan lebih responsif, tapi harus di cross-check dulu."

("It is faster and more responsive, but it still needs to be cross-checked first.")

This reflects students' awareness that speed and convenience do not automatically guarantee accuracy or meaningful understanding. AI may simplify academic work, but students still recognize the necessity of critical evaluation.

Participant C also reflected on how traditional learning processes, although slower, often produced deeper understanding:

"Cara itu terkesan lebih lambat, tapi dulu saya merasa lebih memberi pemahaman yang lebih."

("That method seemed slower, but I used to feel that it provided deeper understanding.")

This statement highlights an important cognitive concern. AI may accelerate task completion, but speed can sometimes reduce opportunities for reflection, struggle, and deeper conceptual engagement that are traditionally important in language learning.

Participant D expressed the strongest criticism regarding AI dependency. According to him, AI has begun influencing students' critical engagement during classroom discussions:

"Critical thinking hilang mi. Tidak kritis maki menanggapi pernyataan-pernyataan teman karena semuanya sudah diambil dari AI."

("Critical thinking has diminished. We are no longer critical in responding to our friends' statements because everything has already been taken from AI.")

He further explained that classroom discussions often felt "robotic" because students prepared AI-generated questions and responses rather than engaging in spontaneous intellectual exchange. This finding suggests that AI may influence not only individual cognition but also collective classroom dynamics.

These findings reveal that students are not blindly optimistic about AI. Instead, they actively recognize the tension between productivity and intellectual depth. On one hand, AI helps students complete tasks more efficiently. On the other hand, overreliance on AI may weaken opportunities for independent exploration, sustained reflection, and authentic critical thinking.

4.4. Differences between AI feedback and human feedback

Another important finding concerns how students differentiate between AI-generated feedback and feedback from lecturers or peers. Participants consistently described AI feedback as fast, technical, structured, and language-oriented, while human feedback was viewed as more contextual, conceptual, interpretive, and emotionally meaningful.

Participant B explained:

"AI fokus pada bahasa serta kejelasan pernyataan. Sedangkan dosen fokus pada logika argumen, teori, dan kedalaman analisis."

("AI focuses on language and clarity of statements, whereas lecturers focus on the logic of arguments, theories, and depth of analysis.")

This distinction demonstrates that students viewed AI primarily as a technical assistant rather than a complete replacement for human mentorship. AI was considered highly useful for grammar correction, sentence clarity, vocabulary choice, and structural organization. However, deeper intellectual dimensions such as argument quality, theoretical relevance, and conceptual interpretation were still associated with human feedback.

Participant C similarly emphasized that lecturer and peer feedback remained essential:

"Umpan balik dari dosen dan teman tetap sangat saya butuhkan."

("I still really need feedback from lecturers and peers.")

This suggests that students still valued human interaction within academic learning environments despite increasing AI integration. Human feedback was perceived as more capable of understanding context, intention, and nuanced meaning.

Participant A also emphasized the importance of critically evaluating AI responses:

"Kalau dari AI, bagusnya di cross-check dulu ya, tidak bisa langsung diterima."

("When using AI, it is better to cross-check the information first because it cannot be accepted immediately.")

Interestingly, Participant D described AI feedback as more satisfying than peer feedback because of its comprehensiveness and immediate availability. However, he simultaneously admitted that AI occasionally generated inaccurate or fictitious references:

"Terkadang saya mendapatkan sumber yang memang tidak ada."

("Sometimes, I get sources that actually do not exist.")

This demonstrates that students were aware of AI hallucinations and misinformation risks. Consequently, students developed evaluative strategies such as verifying references independently, comparing AI responses with lecturer explanations, and consulting external academic sources.

These findings indicate that students did not completely trust AI outputs uncritically. Instead, they engaged in reflective evaluation processes that involved comparison, verification, and selective acceptance of AI-generated information.

4.5. Boundary-making and self-regulation as forms of learner autonomy

One of the central findings of this study is that students actively attempted to regulate and limit their AI use. Rather than defining learner autonomy as complete independence from technology, participants understood autonomy as the ability to control, evaluate, and manage AI responsibly.

Participant B explained:

"Kalau AI ini sudah mulai menggantikan proses berpikir saya, maka di situlah mungkin rasanya saya perlu berhenti." ("If AI has started to replace my thinking process, then that is probably when I need to stop.")

Similarly, Participant C emphasized that AI should only function as a supporting tool:

"AI digunakan hanya untuk memperjelas, memperbaiki, dan memberikan alternatif."

("AI is used only to clarify, improve, and provide alternatives.")

Participant A also described how she intentionally stopped using AI when she felt that interactions with ChatGPT became excessive or distracting:

"Biasanya saya berhenti kalau sudah sadar kalau saya sudah terbawa sejauh itu sama AI."

("Usually, I stop once I realize that I have become too dependent on AI.")

These responses indicate that students actively created personal boundaries regarding AI use. Students did not reject AI completely, but they attempted to prevent themselves from becoming overly dependent on technological assistance.

Participant D also acknowledged the danger of long-term dependency:

"Kalau dilakukan secara terus-menerus kemungkinan besar bisa menyebabkan ketergantungan."

("If it is used continuously, it is highly likely to cause dependency.")

This demonstrates that students recognized autonomy not as technological avoidance but as self-regulation. Learner autonomy in AI-assisted learning therefore appears through reflective decision-making, critical evaluation, and conscious limitation of AI involvement.

This finding aligns closely with theories of self-regulated learning, which emphasize learners' ability to monitor, evaluate, and control their own learning processes. Students demonstrated metacognitive awareness regarding when AI was helpful and when it became excessive.

5.6. AI reshapes social interaction and classroom participation

The final theme concerns AI's influence on social interaction and classroom participation. Interestingly, participants expressed contrasting perspectives regarding this issue.

Some participants argued that AI actually improved classroom participation because it helped students prepare ideas before discussions. Participant A stated:

“AI malah membuat cara berpartisipasi di kelas lebih aktif.”
 (“AI actually makes classroom participation more active.”)

Participant B similarly explained that AI made her feel more prepared and confident during discussions with lecturers and classmates. By using AI beforehand, students entered classrooms with clearer understanding and stronger conceptual preparation.

However, Participant D presented a contrasting view. According to him, AI reduced authentic interaction among students because learners increasingly preferred asking AI rather than discussing problems collaboratively with peers:

“Jarang maki bertanya-bertanya tentang apa yang tidak ditahu. Bertanya mami ke AI.”
 (“We rarely ask others about things we do not know anymore. Instead, we ask AI.”)

He also argued that AI reduced natural classroom debate and spontaneous intellectual engagement. Discussions became more rehearsed, artificial, and less exploratory because students relied heavily on pre-generated AI responses.

These contrasting perspectives demonstrate that AI's social influence is not experienced uniformly. For some students, AI increased confidence and participation. For others, AI weakened authentic communication, collaboration, and critical social interaction within academic environments.

Overall, the findings reveal that AI is not simply a neutral technological tool. Instead, AI functions as a mediational presence that reshapes students' learning routines, writing practices, critical engagement, classroom interaction, and perceptions of autonomy in English language learning.

5. Discussions

The analysis of interviews with nine English Education students revealed that artificial intelligence (AI) has become deeply integrated into students' English language learning practices, particularly in academic writing activities. Participants reported using AI tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, DeepL, QuillBot, and translation applications for various purposes, including grammar checking, idea generation, paraphrasing, translation, and organizing academic writing. Most participants perceived AI as a supportive and mediational tool rather than a replacement for human thinking. Students explained that AI helped them complete assignments more efficiently, especially when they experienced difficulties in developing ideas or organizing their writing. Several participants also described AI as a discussion partner and learning assistant that increased their confidence in using English because AI provided immediate responses without judgment. These findings indicate that AI functions as a mediational artifact that supports students' language learning processes and academic productivity.

The findings also revealed that AI has significantly transformed students' learning habits and academic practices. Participants explained that traditional learning activities such as dictionary consultation, manual grammar analysis, and independent vocabulary exploration had gradually been replaced by AI-assisted learning practices. Many students admitted that AI simplified their learning process because it provided fast access to explanations, corrections, and information. However, participants also expressed concerns regarding excessive dependence on AI. Several students believed that overreliance on AI might reduce critical thinking, reflective learning, and deeper cognitive engagement. One participant explained that classroom discussions sometimes became less authentic because students relied heavily on AI-generated responses rather than engaging in spontaneous critical interaction. These findings suggest that students continuously negotiated the balance between efficiency and meaningful learning while using AI in academic contexts.

Another important finding concerns how students understood learner autonomy in the context of AI use. Participants generally defined learner autonomy not as learning without technology, but as the ability to regulate, evaluate, and limit AI use responsibly. Students described several strategies for maintaining autonomy, such as cross-checking AI-generated information, revising AI responses critically, and ensuring that final ideas and arguments remained their own. Participants emphasized that AI should function only as a support tool rather than replacing independent thinking entirely. Some students also consciously limited AI use when they felt overly dependent on technological assistance. These findings demonstrate that students actively negotiated boundaries between technological support and independent learning. Therefore, learner autonomy in AI-assisted learning appears through reflective self-regulation, critical awareness, and students' ability to maintain ownership of their learning processes despite the increasing presence of AI technologies.

6. Conclusions and suggestions

6.1. Conclusions

This study explored how English Education students use artificial intelligence in English language learning and how they negotiate the relationship between AI use and learner autonomy. Based on interviews with nine participants from undergraduate, master's, and doctoral levels, the findings reveal that AI has become deeply integrated into students' academic lives, particularly in writing, brainstorming, grammar checking, translation, paraphrasing, idea development, and academic revision practices.

The findings demonstrate that students generally position AI as a support tool rather than a replacement for intellectual work. AI functions as a mediational tool that assists students in organizing ideas, improving language accuracy, and managing demanding academic workloads more efficiently. Students viewed AI as an assistant, brainstorming partner, tutor, and support system that facilitated academic productivity and language learning.

At the same time, participants were also highly aware of the risks associated with excessive AI dependence. Students recognized that overreliance on AI may reduce critical thinking, independent exploration, deep cognitive engagement, and authentic classroom interaction. Several participants admitted that AI had already transformed their learning habits significantly, replacing slower traditional learning methods such as manual dictionary use, physical book reading, and independent language exploration.

Importantly, this study demonstrates that learner autonomy in AI-assisted learning should not be understood as complete independence from technology. Instead, autonomy appears through students' ability to regulate, evaluate, and limit AI use critically. Participants actively negotiated boundaries by cross-checking AI outputs, maintaining ownership of ideas, and recognizing when AI use became excessive. In this context, learner autonomy becomes a form of reflective self-regulation rather than technological avoidance.

The findings also reveal that AI influences social participation and classroom interaction in complex ways. Some students experienced greater confidence and preparedness during classroom discussions, while others observed reduced peer interaction and declining critical engagement because students increasingly relied on AI-generated responses instead of authentic collaborative inquiry.

From a sociocultural perspective, AI can therefore be understood as a mediational artifact that simultaneously supports and reshapes learning practices. AI mediates students' academic activities, cognitive processes, and social interaction. However, meaningful learning still depends on students' critical awareness, ethical responsibility, and ability to maintain independent thinking while using technological assistance.

Overall, this study suggests that AI does not inherently diminish learner autonomy. Rather, the impact of AI depends on how learners interpret, regulate, and integrate the technology into their academic practices. When used critically, reflectively, and responsibly, AI can coexist with autonomous learning and even support students' development as reflective English language learners.

Building upon the core inquiries of this study, several critical implications emerge for both educational practice and student agency. Primarily, the findings underscore a profound responsibility for educators, who must move beyond merely permitting or prohibiting AI tools to actively cultivating students' critical and ethical engagement with them. This pedagogical role involves designing instructional strategies that guide learners to evaluate AI-generated content discerningly, recognize its inherent limitations, and deploy it in ways that genuinely augment—rather than supplant—the fundamental cognitive and linguistic processes essential to language acquisition. Concurrently, students themselves are entrusted with a complementary duty: to position AI strictly as a facilitative scaffold for their learning journey, rather than as a cognitive crutch. This necessitates a deliberate and sustained effort to preserve independent critical thinking, rigorously interrogate AI-generated suggestions, and maintain unequivocal ownership over their own ideas and outputs. Ultimately, the sustainable and effective integration of AI into English language learning hinges upon this synergistic balance, wherein technological support empowers and enriches the learner's intellectual growth without ever diminishing their autonomous agency or personal voice.

6.2. Suggestions

Based on the findings of this study, several suggestions are proposed for educators, students, and future researchers. First, educators should guide students to use artificial intelligence (AI) critically, ethically, and responsibly in English language learning. Instead of completely restricting AI use, teachers and lecturers should help students develop critical AI literacy by encouraging them to evaluate AI-generated responses, verify information, and maintain independent thinking during academic activities. Classroom practices should also emphasize discussion, reflection, and analytical engagement so that AI functions as a support tool rather than a replacement for cognitive processes.

Second, students should use AI as a complementary learning tool while maintaining ownership of their ideas, arguments, and learning processes. Learners need to develop self-regulation strategies in order to avoid excessive

dependence on AI technologies. Students are encouraged to use AI for support in brainstorming, grammar checking, and idea development while continuing to engage critically with academic content and preserving their own writing voice and creativity. In this way, AI can support learning without reducing learner autonomy and critical thinking.

Finally, future researchers are encouraged to explore AI-assisted learning in broader educational contexts and with more diverse participants. Since this study involved only nine students from one academic context, future studies may include participants from different educational levels, disciplines, and institutions to gain richer perspectives on AI use and learner autonomy. Further research may also investigate the long-term effects of AI on critical thinking, writing development, classroom interaction, and self-regulated learning using longitudinal or mixed-method approaches.

Declaration of conflicting interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in this work.

Funding acknowledgment

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and publication of the article.

References

- Ai, H. (2015). Providing graduated corrective feedback in an intelligent computer-assisted language learning environment. *ReCALL*, 27(3), 313–334. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S095834401500012X>
- Alm, A. (2024). Exploring autonomy in the AI wilderness: Learner challenges and choices. *Language Learning & Technology*, 28(1), 1–15.
- Benson, P. (2011). *Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. Sage.
- Dilthey, W. (2002). *The formation of the historical world in the human sciences* (R. A. Makkreel & F. Rodi, Eds.). Princeton University Press.
- Gadamer, H.-G. (2014). *Truth and method* (J. Weinsheimer & D. G. Marshall, Trans.). Bloomsbury Academic. (Original work published 1960)
- Holec, H. (1981). *Autonomy and foreign language learning*. Pergamon.
- Kohnke, L., Moorhouse, B. L., & Zou, D. (2023). ChatGPT for language teaching and learning. *RELC Journal*, 54(2), 537–550. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00336882231162868>
- Laguna, L. (2023). Self-regulated learning in AI-assisted educational environments. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 71(4), 1567–1584.
- Little, D. (1991). *Learner autonomy 1: Definitions, issues and problems*. Authentik.
- Pham, L., & Huong, H. (2025). EFL students' agency in self-study of English language with AI-powered learning applications. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, 22(7), 68–89.
- Sari, A., Rachmajanti, S., & Anugerahwati, M. (2024). Artificial intelligence in English language learning: Opportunities and challenges for autonomous learning. *Journal of English Education and Linguistics Studies*, 11(2), 405–427.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
- Weber, M. (1949). *The methodology of the social sciences* (E. A. Shils & H. A. Finch, Trans.). Free Press.
- Zawacki-Richter, O., Marín, V. I., Bond, M., & Gouverneur, F. (2019). Systematic review of research on artificial intelligence applications in higher education—Where are the educators? *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, 16(39), 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-019-0171-0>
- Zimmerman, B. J. (2002). Becoming a self-regulated learner: An overview. *Theory Into Practice*, 41(2), 64–70. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15430421tip4102_2
- Zhen, X. (2025). Application of artificial intelligence in English learning: The interactive effects of teacher support, learning motivation, and autonomous learning ability. *Acta Psychologica*, 261, Article 105006. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2025.105006>