

FOSTERING INDEPENDENT LEARNING THROUGH AI- SUPPORTED ONLINE COMMUNITIES IN EFL CONTEXT: PRACTICAL INSIGHTS FROM A TUTOR'S EXPERIENCE

Abstract: This study explores the integration of ChatGPT, a generative AI chatbot, into an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom and examines its impact on learner autonomy and social-emotional factors. Adopting a qualitative case-study approach, the research introduced ChatGPT as a writing and communication support tool for secondary-level EFL students during online classes. Data were collected through the teacher's observation notes, transcripts of student–ChatGPT interactions, and students' written reflections. The findings indicate that ChatGPT can serve as a valuable learning aid: students used it to generate ideas, practice writing, and notably as a “confidence booster” to reduce social anxiety before participating in live discussions. This observation suggests that AI tools can help lower communication worry by allowing anxious learners to go over or approve their responses privately. At the same time, the study observed varying degrees of learner autonomy in using ChatGPT, and highlighted the importance of digital literacy in preventing over-reliance on AI. These results have practical implications for incorporating AI in language education to support student confidence and autonomy, and theoretical implications for understanding the social-emotional dimensions of learner–AI interaction. The study acknowledges its small-scale scope and context-specific nature, and calls for further research on the pedagogical strategies and guidelines needed to maximize the benefits of AI tools like ChatGPT in language learning while encouraging potential defects.

Keywords: AI in education, digital literacy, online communities, independent learning, EFL teaching, ChatGPT, learner autonomy.

Introduction

The rise of advanced AI tools is transforming language education. In particular, the introduction of ChatGPT has attracted reasonable attention for its potential to assist English language learners with writing, brainstorming, and practice dialogues. Educators are keen to understand how such tools can be leveraged to enhance learning outcomes while addressing challenges such as student engagement and communication anxiety. Social anxiety can hinder learners' class participation and willingness to communicate in a second language, an issue well documented in applied linguistics (e.g. low willingness to communicate is associated with communication apprehension. At the same time, promoting learner autonomy – students' ability to take charge of their own learning – is a central goal in language education (Benson, 2011). The convergence of these concerns raises important questions: Can AI tools like ChatGPT foster greater learner autonomy, and might they also alleviate some social- emotional barriers to communication? This study aims to explore these questions by examining the use of ChatGPT in an EFL classroom setting. By observing how students interact with ChatGPT and how it affects their confidence and independent learning behaviors, the research seeks to shed light on the practical relevance and original pedagogical implications of integrating AI into language teaching.

Literature review

Learner autonomy has long been recognized as vital for effective language learning. Benson (2011) defines autonomous learners as those who take responsibility for their own learning. Encouraging autonomy often involves providing learners with tools and strategies to self-direct their study, and digital technology can play a key role in this process. The proliferation of online learning platforms and resources has expanded opportunities for autonomous learning, but it also requires sufficient digital literacy on the part of learners. A recent study by Izzati and Kheryadi (2024) investigated EFL students' perceptions of integrating digital technologies into collaborative learning, finding that technology offers substantial support and convenience, such as quick access to information, thereby enhancing the learning experience. However, the same study cautions that easy access to AI-driven solutions may encourage passivity, as some students might rely on immediate answers from technology instead of actively engaging in learning tasks. This highlights the importance of guiding students to use AI tools in ways that *complement* rather than replace their own effort, ensuring that digital literacy includes the ability to critically and ethically use AI in learning.

In parallel with concerns about autonomy and digital skills, the integration of AI in language education is gaining momentum. ChatGPT and similar large language models have been at the forefront of this trend. Early research has begun to document both the possibilities and challenges of using ChatGPT in EFL contexts. For instance, Han et al. (2023) developed an interactive platform called *RECIPE* to incorporate ChatGPT into EFL academic writing instruction. In their study, over two hundred university students engaged with ChatGPT to revise essays, reflecting the growing interest in leveraging AI to enhance writing skills and providing preliminary evidence of improved writing processes and learner engagement. These emerging studies suggest that AI can act as a form of stage or virtual tutor in language learning. However, the social-emotional dimension of AI use – such as how interacting with a chatbot might affect a learner's confidence or anxiety – remains under- explored. This study seeks to contribute to the literature by focusing on that dimension, building on the above research to investigate not only academic outcomes but also how AI tools cross with learners' affective experiences and autonomy in an EFL classroom setting.

Methodology

I designed this research as a qualitative exploratory case study of an EFL class where ChatGPT was introduced as a learning aid. The participants were 15 secondary-school EFL students (ages 14–16) at an intermediate English level. The study was conducted over a four-week period during which regular online classes. Google Meet and Microsoft Teams were used for live class meetings, while a Google Classroom platform supported asynchronous learning activities and material distribution. The teacher integrated ChatGPT as a tool for various tasks: for example, students were encouraged to consult ChatGPT for generating ideas on a writing assignment, practicing conversation prompts, or obtaining feedback on grammar in their drafts. The teacher provided clear guidelines to the students on using ChatGPT ethically – as a support for learning rather than a shortcut for completed work –emphasizing that they should critically evaluate the AI's suggestions.

Data collection focused on appropriating both the process and the students' perceptions of using ChatGPT. Observation notes were kept by the researcher during each live session, documenting how and when students advantaged ChatGPT and any notable changes in participation or behavior.

Additionally, I gathered select student–ChatGPT interaction logs: for instance, students shared screenshots or transcripts of their chatbot conversations when they used ChatGPT to prepare for class activities. These interaction examples provided insight into the ways students engaged with the AI (e.g., asking for translations, brainstorming ideas, practicing responses). Finally, at the end of the four weeks, students submitted written reflections responding to open-ended prompts about their experience with ChatGPT. In these reflections, they discussed how they felt about using the AI, whether it affected their confidence or learning habits, and any concerns or benefits they perceived.

All qualitative data – observations, interaction samples, and reflections – were analyzed using thematic analysis. The researcher coded the data for recurring themes related to learner autonomy (e.g. instances of independent problem-solving or over-reliance on the AI), social-emotional factors (e.g. expressions of confidence or anxiety), and general attitudes toward the technology. Triangulation of these data sources helped ensure that the multiple forms of evidence accepted the findings.

Findings

The analysis revealed several key findings regarding the role of ChatGPT in the EFL class. First, in terms of learner autonomy, most students used ChatGPT as a supplementary resource rather than a crutch. Many participants demonstrated agency in deciding *when* and *how* to use the tool. For example, students often consulted ChatGPT to check vocabulary usage or to get ideas for rephrasing a sentence, and then proceeded to revise their work independently. This behavior suggests that, with proper guidance, students can incorporate AI assistance in a way that supports their own decision-making and learning processes. There were noted that a few cases of over-reliance – such as one student who copied large portions of ChatGPT-generated text into an assignment without much modification – indicating that a minority of learners might lean towards letting the AI do the work.

This aligns with the caution from Izzati and Kheryadi (2024) about the risk of passivity when students opt for quick AI solutions. However, overall class performance on writing tasks did not decline; in fact, the teacher observed improvements in complexity and accuracy in many students' drafts, which the students partly attributed to iterative help from ChatGPT (e.g. getting grammar suggestions and then learning from those corrections).

Secondly, and most notably, the study found that ChatGPT functioned as a confidence booster for socially anxious students. Several students who were normally shy during live discussions became more visibly engaged after having the opportunity to practice or formulate their thoughts with ChatGPT beforehand. In their reflections, these students explained that interacting with the AI tutor helped them “rehearse” their answers in a low-pressure setting. One student wrote that using ChatGPT to try out an English response to a discussion question reduced the fear of “*saying something wrong in front of everyone.*” Another student described ChatGPT as a “*safety net*” for checking grammar or wording before volunteering to speak. This use of the AI as a preparatory dialogue partner appeared to ease social anxiety, thereby indirectly increasing the learners' willingness to communicate in the class. The researcher's observation notes corroborated this trend: previously quiet students started to respond more frequently during the video conferences, and their spoken contributions were often more extended and confident than before. This finding is particularly novel because it points to an emotional-social benefit of AI integration that has not been widely reported in the literature so far. It suggests that beyond academic assistance, AI tools might play a role in the affective domain – for instance, by

providing a form of non-judgmental practice space that can empower students who struggle with language anxiety.

Finally, the students' attitudes toward ChatGPT were generally positive, with some sign. In their reflective feedback, most participants expressed enthusiasm about having an AI "assistant" accessible at any time. They appreciated the immediate answers and examples ChatGPT could provide, which supported their learning outside of teacher contact hours. However, a few students also raised concerns about accuracy and academic integrity. They noticed that ChatGPT's suggestions were not always correct or appropriate for the context, highlighting the necessity of critical thinking and digital literacy when using such tools. Students further noted that excessive reliance on AI-generated responses could potentially hinder meaningful learning, highlighting the ongoing need to prioritize the development of authentic language competencies. These nuanced perspectives suggest that students are aware of both the benefits and the pitfalls of ChatGPT in learning. Importantly, the class discussions around proper use seem to have instilled a reflective approach in the learners, where they value ChatGPT as a helpful resource but remain cautious about overusing it or bypassing their own effort.

Conclusion

Looking back on this experience, I believe that AI-supported online communities have real potential to help students become more independent and engaged language learners. These tools can open up new opportunities for practice, collaboration, and exploration outside of the classroom.

At the same time, my experience also showed that these tools are not a "magic solution." Teachers still play a key role in helping students develop the digital literacy skills they need to use AI effectively. It's important to guide students in questioning, reflecting, and making thoughtful use of the technology available to them.

One unexpected insight from my practice is the potential for AI to play a social-emotional role in learning, helping students build confidence before interacting with real people. This could open new opportunities for research into how AI can support not only linguistic but also emotional aspects of learner development.

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