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VOICES OF ESL LEARNERS: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF AI ATTITUDES, LANGUAGE LEARNING EXPERIENCES, AND CLASSROOM PRACTICES

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Abstract

The growing integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into English as a Second Language (ESL) education is reshaping language learning experiences, classroom practices, and students' engagement with digital technologies. AI-powered applications provide opportunities for personalized instruction, immediate feedback, vocabulary development, grammatical accuracy, pronunciation practice, and independent language learning. However, learners' experiences with these technologies are shaped by their attitudes, expectations, perceived usefulness, trust, and concerns regarding accuracy, academic integrity, and technological dependence. This qualitative study explores ESL learners' attitudes toward AI-assisted language learning, focusing on how students experience, interpret, and negotiate the role of AI technologies in their academic and classroom practices. Data are collected through semi-structured interviews with university-level ESL learners who have experience using AI-powered tools for English language learning. The data are analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns in participants' perceptions, experiences, challenges, and expectations. Particular attention is given to learners' perceived benefits of AI integration, including personalized feedback, linguistic confidence, learner autonomy, and increased opportunities for language practice. The study also investigates learners' concerns about inaccurate AI-generated responses, overreliance on technological assistance, reduced human interaction, and the potential influence of AI on independent language development. Furthermore, it examines how learners perceive the complementary roles of AI applications and English language teachers in facilitating meaningful communication, critical thinking, and language development. By foregrounding learners' voices, the study seeks to develop a context-sensitive understanding of the opportunities and challenges associated with AI integration in ESL classrooms. The study aims to inform pedagogically responsive practices that integrate AI technologies with teacher guidance, learner

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autonomy, and communicative language instruction. Its anticipated contribution lies in advancing a more inclusive, reflective, and learner-centered approach to AI-assisted English language education.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) has introduced significant transformations in educational practices, creating new opportunities for teaching, learning, assessment, and academic interaction. Within English as a Second Language (ESL) education, AI-powered technologies have attracted considerable attention because of their potential to facilitate personalized instruction, provide immediate linguistic feedback, support independent learning, and expand opportunities for meaningful language practice beyond conventional classroom environments (Wei, 2023). Applications such as AI-powered conversational agents, automated writing evaluation systems, intelligent tutoring platforms, grammar-correction tools, and generative AI chatbots are increasingly being incorporated into language learning activities to assist students in developing grammatical accuracy, vocabulary knowledge, pronunciation, reading comprehension, and written communication. Unlike traditional instructional resources, many AI-powered applications enable learners to interact with digital systems in flexible and individualized ways, allowing them to seek explanations, revise written texts, practice conversational exchanges, and receive feedback according to their perceived learning needs. These developments have consequently expanded discussions about the pedagogical potential of AI in second language acquisition and the extent to which emerging technologies can complement established approaches to English language teaching. Nevertheless, the educational value of AI cannot be determined exclusively by its technical capabilities or the availability of digital resources. It must also be understood through learners' attitudes, experiences, expectations, concerns, and interpretations of their interactions with these technologies (Ramzan et al., 2025).

The significance of AI-assisted language learning becomes particularly apparent in ESL contexts, where learners frequently encounter challenges related to linguistic accuracy, communicative confidence, limited opportunities for authentic language practice, and unequal access to individualized instructional support. In many educational settings, large classes, restricted classroom time, differences in learners' proficiency levels, and limited opportunities for personalized feedback can constrain students' language development (Zhao, & Lai, 2023). AI-powered tools may help address some of these challenges by providing supplementary explanations, generating practice exercises, identifying recurring grammatical difficulties, and enabling learners to rehearse language without the immediate pressure associated with face-to-face classroom participation. For learners who experience anxiety about making linguistic errors, interactions with AI applications may create a comparatively less threatening environment in which they can experiment with unfamiliar vocabulary, construct sentences, ask questions, and revise their responses repeatedly (Lin, 2026). Such opportunities may contribute to learners' perceptions of greater independence and control over their language learning processes. However, these potential advantages should not be interpreted as universal outcomes. Learners differ in their technological competence, linguistic proficiency, educational expectations, prior experiences, and willingness to incorporate AI into their academic practices. Consequently, the same technological application may be perceived by one learner as an effective learning companion and by another as an unreliable, confusing, or potentially harmful substitute for independent language practice.

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Understanding these differences requires an approach that considers the meanings learners themselves assign to AI-assisted language teaching (Javaid et al., 2025a).

An important dimension of this emerging educational landscape concerns the relationship between learners' attitudes toward AI and their actual experiences of using AI-powered applications. Attitudes are not necessarily fixed or uniform orientations toward technology; rather, they may develop through repeated interactions, perceived learning outcomes, classroom expectations, recommendations from teachers and peers, and encounters with both successful and unsuccessful AI-generated responses (Javaid et al., 2025b). Learners may appreciate AI for its accessibility, responsiveness, and capacity to explain linguistic problems while simultaneously questioning its accuracy, appropriateness, and reliability. For example, a student may find an AI chatbot useful for generating ideas for an academic paragraph but remain uncertain about the factual accuracy or stylistic suitability of its suggestions. Similarly, learners may value automated grammatical feedback while expressing concerns that excessive correction could weaken their ability to identify and resolve linguistic problems independently. Such experiences indicate that positive attitudes toward AI do not necessarily imply unconditional acceptance, just as concerns about technological limitations do not necessarily result in the rejection of AI-assisted learning (Chen, & Lou, 2026). Instead, learners' attitudes may reflect a process of ongoing negotiation in which perceived benefits are evaluated against pedagogical, ethical, linguistic, and practical considerations. Exploring this negotiation is essential for understanding how AI technologies are interpreted and incorporated into the everyday experiences of ESL learners.

Theoretical Dimension

Theoretical perspectives on technology acceptance provide a useful starting point for examining these attitudes. The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), developed by Davis (1989), identifies perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use as important determinants of individuals' acceptance and use of technological systems. Applied to ESL education, perceived usefulness may involve learners' beliefs that AI applications improve their English proficiency, clarify difficult grammatical structures, strengthen academic writing, or facilitate access to additional language practice (Liu et al., 2025). Perceived ease of use may concern the accessibility of AI interfaces, the simplicity of their instructions, and the effort required to obtain relevant feedback. Although these concepts help explain why learners may choose to use particular applications, a qualitative investigation can extend beyond identifying acceptance-related factors to examine how learners construct and revise their understandings of usefulness and usability through experience. A tool that initially appears easy to use may become less attractive when it generates inconsistent feedback, while an application that requires careful prompting may become valuable when learners recognize its contribution to their language development. Therefore, learners' experiences provide an important basis for understanding the contextual and interpretive dimensions of AI acceptance. Rather than treating technology adoption as a straightforward consequence of perceived usefulness, the present study approaches learners' attitudes as experiences situated within their academic, linguistic, and social environments (Jasbizadeh, 2026).

Beyond technology acceptance, the concept of learner autonomy provides another important perspective for understanding AI-assisted language learning. Learner autonomy generally concerns learners' capacity to take responsibility for aspects of their learning, including identifying learning needs, setting goals, selecting strategies, monitoring progress, and evaluating outcomes. AI applications may support these processes by enabling learners to access explanations independently, request additional examples, practice particular language skills, and revise their work outside scheduled classroom sessions. In this respect, AI can potentially

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expand learners' opportunities to exercise agency over the pace, content, and direction of their learning. Nevertheless, access to technological assistance does not automatically produce autonomous learning. Genuine autonomy requires learners to make informed decisions, evaluate feedback critically, and develop the capacity to learn without depending entirely on external support. If students accept AI-generated answers without examining their accuracy or appropriateness, technological convenience may encourage passive dependence rather than independent language development. Conversely, learners who use AI responses as provisional resources, compare alternative explanations, and revise their work through critical reflection may integrate the technology into more self-directed learning practices. This distinction highlights the importance of examining not merely whether ESL learners use AI, but how they use it, what purposes it serves, and how they understand its influence on their responsibility for learning (Chulkstan et al., 2026).

The relationship between AI-assisted learning and second language acquisition also requires careful consideration. Language learning involves more than the production of grammatically correct sentences; it encompasses the development of communicative competence, interactional awareness, pragmatic appropriateness, fluency, strategic competence, and the ability to negotiate meaning in diverse communicative situations. From an interactionist perspective, opportunities for meaningful interaction, comprehensible input, feedback, and modified output can contribute to language development. AI conversational systems may provide additional opportunities for learners to engage in simulated dialogues, practice everyday communicative situations, request clarification, and experiment with different linguistic forms. Similarly, AI-supported writing tools may help learners notice recurring errors, compare alternative expressions, and reconsider the organization and clarity of their written texts. Such activities can create supplementary conditions for language practice, particularly when learners have limited opportunities to communicate in English beyond the classroom. However, AI-generated interaction is not identical to communication with human interlocutors. Human communication involves interpersonal relationships, contextual sensitivity, emotional responsiveness, cultural knowledge, and the unpredictable negotiation of meaning. Although AI systems can simulate conversational exchanges, their responses may not consistently reflect the social expectations, pragmatic conventions, or contextual subtleties that characterize authentic communication. Consequently, investigating learners' experiences can help clarify which aspects of AI-supported interaction they find meaningful, where they perceive its limitations, and how they relate digital practice to their broader language learning experiences (Ramzan, & Alahmadi, 2024).

One of the most consequential issues in AI-assisted ESL education concerns the quality and reliability of AI-generated feedback. AI systems can produce fluent, convincing responses that contain grammatical errors, misleading explanations, inaccurate information, or contextually inappropriate language. For learners who have not yet developed sufficient linguistic competence to evaluate such responses independently, distinguishing accurate guidance from erroneous suggestions may be particularly challenging. The risk is not limited to the immediate acceptance of an incorrect answer; repeated exposure to unreliable feedback may also influence learners' linguistic judgments, writing practices, and confidence in their own understanding. At the same time, AI-generated feedback may offer valuable support when learners use it critically and compare its suggestions with teacher explanations, established learning materials, or their own developing knowledge (Nawaz et al., 2020). The educational implications therefore depend partly on learners' ability to interpret feedback rather than simply receive it. A qualitative exploration is particularly appropriate for investigating how learners respond when AI suggestions appear helpful, confusing, contradictory, or incorrect. Through their accounts, researchers can examine the strategies learners employ to verify

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information, the circumstances in which they trust AI-generated explanations, and the ways they respond to uncertainty. These perspectives can provide insights into the development of critical AI literacy as an increasingly important component of contemporary language education (Javaid et al., 2024).

Closely connected with accuracy and reliability are concerns regarding academic integrity, intellectual independence, and technological overreliance. Generative AI applications can produce essays, summaries, vocabulary lists, grammatical explanations, and other forms of academic assistance within a short period. Although these capabilities may support brainstorming, drafting, revision, and language practice, they also raise questions about the boundaries between legitimate assistance and the substitution of learners' own intellectual effort. In ESL contexts, this distinction can be especially complex because students may use AI both to overcome linguistic limitations and to complete tasks that are intended to develop their language proficiency (Ramzan et al., 2024). For example, a learner who requests grammatical explanations and subsequently revises a paragraph independently may engage in a productive learning process. By contrast, a learner who submits an AI-generated paragraph without understanding its vocabulary, structure, or meaning may complete the immediate assignment without developing the intended linguistic skills (Nawaz et al., 2021). These contrasting practices illustrate why the educational consequences of AI cannot be evaluated solely through the quality of the final product. It is also necessary to consider the processes through which learners engage with AI, the extent of their intellectual participation, and their understanding of appropriate technological use. Exploring learners' own accounts can reveal how they distinguish between assistance and dependence, how they interpret institutional expectations, and how they negotiate questions of authorship, responsibility, and academic honesty.

Learners' emotional experiences constitute another important dimension of AI-assisted language learning. Language learning frequently involves feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, embarrassment, motivation, and confidence, particularly when learners must communicate in a language in which they do not yet feel proficient. Some students may perceive AI applications as supportive spaces in which they can make mistakes without fear of public criticism, request repeated explanations, or practice difficult expressions at their own pace. These experiences may encourage experimentation and reduce the perceived social risks associated with language production. Learners may also experience satisfaction when AI feedback helps them recognize errors or express ideas more clearly. Nevertheless, technological support can generate contrasting emotional responses. Inconsistent answers, overly complex explanations, dependence on automated correction, and uncertainty about the appropriateness of AI-generated language may produce frustration or reduce confidence in independent decision-making. Furthermore, learners' emotional responses may depend on the task being performed, the perceived consequences of making errors, and the availability of human support. It is therefore important to avoid assuming that AI necessarily increases confidence or reduces anxiety for all learners. Instead, learners' voices can illuminate how emotional experiences develop through particular interactions with AI and how these experiences shape their willingness to engage with the technology.

The integration of AI into ESL classrooms also raises important questions about the changing role of English language teachers. The availability of AI-generated explanations and feedback has encouraged discussions about whether emerging technologies may replace certain instructional functions traditionally performed by teachers. However, language education encompasses far more than the transmission of linguistic information or the correction of grammatical errors. Teachers organize learning experiences, interpret students' needs, establish communicative purposes, facilitate collaborative interaction, provide context-sensitive feedback, and support the development of critical and intercultural awareness. They also help learners understand the

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relationship between linguistic choices and social contexts, including politeness, audience expectations, genre conventions, and communicative intentions. Although AI tools can assist with selected instructional tasks, they cannot be assumed to reproduce all the interpersonal, contextual, and pedagogical dimensions of effective teaching. A more productive approach is to investigate how AI and teachers may perform complementary roles within language learning. For example, learners may use AI to prepare for classroom discussions, practice vocabulary before lessons, or revise initial drafts, while teachers guide them in evaluating feedback, developing arguments, refining communicative strategies, and using language appropriately. Examining how learners perceive this relationship can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of classroom practices and the pedagogical conditions under which AI may support, rather than undermine, meaningful teacher–student interaction.

Equally important is the influence of classroom practices and institutional environments on learners' engagement with AI. Students do not use educational technologies in isolation; their choices are shaped by teachers' instructions, assessment requirements, institutional policies, peer practices, available resources, and prevailing understandings of acceptable academic behavior. In classrooms where AI use is explicitly discussed and supported through clear pedagogical guidance, learners may be more willing to experiment with the technology while reflecting on its limitations. In contrast, where expectations are ambiguous or AI use is discouraged without opportunities for discussion, students may experience uncertainty about when, why, and how they can use these tools appropriately. Differences in digital literacy, internet access, language proficiency, and familiarity with AI applications may further shape the nature of learners' experiences. Moreover, classroom practices can influence whether AI is used primarily for answer generation or integrated into activities that promote reflection, collaboration, revision, and communicative development. Understanding these contextual dimensions is particularly important because the same AI application may produce different educational experiences depending on the pedagogical environment in which it is used. A learner-centered investigation must therefore consider the relationship between individual attitudes and the classroom conditions through which AI-assisted learning becomes meaningful, problematic, or irrelevant.

Despite the expanding scholarly interest in AI-assisted language learning, an important need remains for research that places learners' interpretations and experiences at the center of investigation. Research on educational technology has frequently examined acceptance, perceived usefulness, behavioral intention, satisfaction, or measurable learning outcomes. Such approaches offer valuable information about the factors associated with technology adoption and the potential effectiveness of AI-supported instruction. Nevertheless, quantitative measures alone may not fully explain how learners understand their interactions with AI, why they trust particular applications but question others, how they negotiate conflicting feedback, or how they incorporate AI into their everyday academic routines. Similarly, evidence of improved performance on a particular language task does not necessarily establish whether learners feel more autonomous, understand the feedback they receive, or develop greater confidence in their independent linguistic abilities. Learners may also experience tensions that are difficult to capture through predetermined survey categories, including the simultaneous appreciation of AI convenience and concern about dependence, or the desire for individualized assistance alongside a preference for human explanation. A qualitative approach can help investigate these complexities by allowing participants to describe their experiences in their own terms, explain the reasoning behind their attitudes, and identify issues that may not have been anticipated by researchers. Accordingly, the present study adopts a qualitative orientation to explore AI-assisted language

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learning as a situated educational experience rather than merely a process of technological acceptance or adoption (Ramzan et al., 2025)

In this regard, semi-structured interviews provide an appropriate means of eliciting detailed accounts of ESL learners' interactions with AI-powered applications. This approach allows participants to discuss the tools they use, the language learning activities they undertake, the benefits they perceive, and the difficulties they encounter. It also enables the researcher to probe emerging issues, seek clarification, and explore differences between participants' stated attitudes and their descriptions of actual learning practices. Through thematic analysis, recurring patterns can be identified across participants' accounts while retaining attention to the meanings and contexts associated with individual experiences. The analysis can explore how learners describe the usefulness of AI for vocabulary development, grammar, writing, pronunciation, and conversational practice; how they interpret feedback and assess the reliability of AI-generated responses; and how they understand the relationship between AI assistance, learner autonomy, and independent language development. It can also investigate concerns relating to academic integrity, technological dependence, reduced human interaction, and the continuing role of teachers in facilitating meaningful learning. Rather than assuming that participants share a uniform perspective, the qualitative design allows positive, negative, and ambivalent experiences to emerge from the data. Such an approach can generate a more context-sensitive understanding of how learners negotiate the possibilities and limitations of AI in their language learning environments (Chen, & Ramzan, 2024).

Against this background, the present study, entitled Voices of ESL Learners: A Qualitative Exploration of AI Attitudes, Language Learning Experiences, and Classroom Practices, investigates university-level ESL learners' perceptions and experiences of AI-assisted English language learning. Specifically, it examines how learners understand the educational value of AI applications, how their experiences shape their attitudes toward these technologies, and how they incorporate AI into their language learning and classroom practices. It further explores learners' perceptions of personalized feedback, linguistic confidence, learner autonomy, and opportunities for additional language practice, alongside their concerns regarding accuracy, trust, overreliance, academic integrity, and the potential reduction of human interaction. An additional focus concerns learners' interpretations of the complementary roles of AI applications and English language teachers in supporting language development, critical thinking, and communicative competence. By examining these interconnected dimensions, the study seeks to move beyond a generalized assessment of whether learners approve of or reject AI and toward a deeper understanding of how they experience, interpret, and negotiate its educational role.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do university-level ESL learners perceive and interpret the use of AI-powered applications in English language learning?

2. What benefits, challenges, and concerns do ESL learners experience when using AI technologies to develop their English language skills?

3. How do learners describe the influence of AI-assisted learning on their linguistic confidence, learner autonomy, and independent language development?

4. How do ESL learners perceive the role of AI in relation to teacher guidance, classroom interaction, and established language learning practices?

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Significance of the Study

The significance of this research lies in its potential to contribute to a more comprehensive and learner-centered understanding of AI integration in ESL education. By foregrounding learners' accounts, the study can offer insights into the conditions under which AI is perceived as useful, the circumstances that generate uncertainty or resistance, and the practices through which students attempt to balance technological assistance with independent learning. Its findings may inform English language teachers seeking to incorporate AI into classroom activities without compromising meaningful interaction, critical thinking, or learners' responsibility for their own progress. They may also help curriculum designers and educational institutions develop clearer guidance concerning appropriate AI use, feedback evaluation, academic integrity, and digital literacy. Furthermore, the study may contribute to ongoing theoretical discussions by demonstrating how technology acceptance, learner autonomy, and second language learning perspectives can be examined through learners' situated experiences. Rather than presenting AI as either an inherently beneficial innovation or a threat to conventional education, the research adopts a balanced perspective that recognizes the possibilities and limitations of technology-mediated learning. Ultimately, it argues for an approach in which AI serves as a pedagogically guided resource that complements human teaching, supports critical engagement, and responds to the diverse needs of ESL learners. By bringing learners' voices to the forefront, the study seeks to advance and context-sensitive approaches to the integration of artificial intelligence in English language education.

Literature Review

Artificial intelligence has become an increasingly important area of research in computer-assisted language learning because of its capacity to facilitate interactive, personalized, and flexible learning experiences. AI-powered applications allow language learners to obtain immediate feedback, practice linguistic structures, generate examples, and engage in simulated conversations outside conventional classroom settings. Kohnke et al. (2023), discuss the opportunities offered by ChatGPT for language teaching and learning while highlighting the digital competencies required for its effective and ethical use. Their discussion suggests that the pedagogical value of generative AI depends not only on technological capabilities but also on the ways teachers and learners incorporate these tools into educational activities. Similarly, Lo et al. (2024) systematically reviewed 70 empirical studies on ChatGPT in ESL/EFL education and identified potential benefits, including personalized learning opportunities and instructional support, alongside concerns about inaccurate information, privacy, and academic dishonesty. Their review also identified an imbalance in the literature, with considerable attention devoted to writing and comparatively less research addressing other language skills (Chen, & Ramzan, 2024).

These findings demonstrate that AI-assisted language learning offers opportunities to extend language practice beyond the classroom, but its effectiveness cannot be assumed to be uniform across learners and learning contexts. Students may use AI applications to clarify grammatical rules, expand vocabulary, develop writing skills, and rehearse conversational exchanges. Nevertheless, the benefits of these activities depend on learners' proficiency, purposes, critical engagement, and ability to evaluate AI-generated responses. Consequently, investigating learners' experiences is important for understanding how technological possibilities translate into meaningful language learning practices (Ma, 2017).

Learners' attitudes toward AI constitute an important dimension of technology integration in language education. Students may perceive AI applications as useful because of their accessibility, responsiveness, and

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capacity to provide individualized assistance. However, these positive perceptions may coexist with uncertainty regarding accuracy, reliability, and the appropriateness of AI-generated language. Yang and Li (2024), in their review of 44 studies on ChatGPT for second language learning, examined research objectives, methodologies, learner perceptions, and applications of generative AI. Their work highlights the importance of understanding how learners interact with ChatGPT and how their experiences relate to language learning practices.

More directly relevant to the present study, a multi-methods investigation published in System examined ChatGPT as a self-learning resource among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. The study combined a review of previous research, a survey of 344 learners, and interviews with 19 participants. Its findings identified factors such as perceived usefulness, trust, enjoyment, and technology-related anxiety as relevant to learners' acceptance and continued use of ChatGPT for independent English learning. The study also indicated that learners used the technology for different purposes, including writing, grammar, vocabulary, and reading. These findings suggest that learners' engagement with AI is influenced by both the practical value they attribute to the technology and their broader experiences of interacting with it.

Although such research provides valuable insights into learner acceptance, attitudes and experiences should not be treated as interchangeable concepts. A learner may express a positive attitude toward AI while remaining uncertain about its feedback, whereas another may acknowledge its limitations but continue using it selectively. A qualitative investigation can explore these apparent contradictions by examining how learners explain their choices, interpret particular experiences, and negotiate their expectations of AI-assisted learning (Zhang, & Luo, 2025).

Learner autonomy is another significant theme in the literature on AI-assisted language learning. AI applications can potentially support self-directed learning by allowing students to practice language independently, request explanations, revise their work, and seek additional examples according to their individual needs. However, independent access to technological assistance does not necessarily indicate the development of genuine learner autonomy. Autonomous learning also requires learners to monitor their progress, evaluate information critically, and take responsibility for learning decisions (Javaid et al., 2024)

Research on conversational AI similarly emphasizes opportunities for additional language practice. Du and Daniel (2024), in a systematic review published in Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence, examined 24 studies on AI-powered chatbots for English speaking practice. Their review considered the potential of conversational AI to support speaking development while identifying the need for further investigation into effective pedagogical implementation.

These findings are relevant because language learning involves more than acquiring grammatical knowledge; it also requires opportunities to develop fluency, communicative competence, and confidence. AI chatbots may offer learners additional opportunities to rehearse conversations and experiment with language. Nevertheless, simulated exchanges do not necessarily reproduce the contextual complexity and interpersonal dimensions of human communication. Accordingly, understanding learners' perceptions of AI-supported practice requires attention to both the opportunities for independent engagement and the continuing importance of teacher guidance and classroom interaction (Yan et al., 2025).

Despite its potential benefits, AI-assisted language learning raises concerns regarding the reliability of generated responses, academic integrity, privacy, and technological dependence. Lo et al. (2024) identified incorrect information, privacy-related risks, and academic dishonesty among the principal concerns reported

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in research on ChatGPT in ESL/EFL education. Kohnke et al. (2023) likewise emphasized the importance of developing the digital competencies required to use generative AI ethically and effectively.

These concerns have important pedagogical implications. When learners accept AI-generated explanations without verification, they may encounter misleading information or become less engaged in independent problem-solving. Similarly, submitting AI-generated work without understanding or critically revising it may undermine the learning objectives of language assignments. Conversely, using AI to identify errors, compare alternative expressions, and reflect on feedback may support more active learning. The educational consequences therefore depend partly on how learners understand and use technological assistance (Roschelle et al., 2010).

Teachers remain important in helping students distinguish reliable information from inaccurate responses, interpret feedback, develop communicative competence, and understand appropriate academic practices. Rather than positioning AI and teachers as competing sources of knowledge, it is useful to examine how learners perceive their complementary roles. However, research must investigate these perceptions rather than assume that all learners experience AI in the same way or that teacher involvement automatically resolves the limitations of AI.

Recent systematic reviews demonstrate that AI-assisted language learning is a rapidly developing research area. Nevertheless, the literature reveals several issues requiring further investigation. Lo et al. (2024) found that research had concentrated heavily on writing, while other language skills received comparatively limited attention. Yang and Li (2024) also documented the expanding body of research on ChatGPT for second language learning and identified learner perceptions and writing as prominent research areas. Meanwhile, a systematic review of the first year of publications on ChatGPT and language education identified the need for more diverse research, including further investigation of stakeholder perceptions and the quality of AI-generated feedback (Ebrahimi et al., 2025).

An important opportunity therefore remains to investigate how university-level ESL learners interpret their AI-assisted language learning experiences and connect those experiences with their classroom practices. In particular, further qualitative inquiry can explore how students negotiate the perceived benefits of personalized assistance alongside concerns about accuracy, trust, academic integrity, and technological dependence. It can also examine how learners understand the relationship between AI-supported practice, linguistic confidence, learner autonomy, and teacher guidance.

Addressing this need, the present study, Voices of ESL Learners: A Qualitative Exploration of AI Attitudes, Language Learning Experiences, and Classroom Practices, uses semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis to investigate university-level ESL learners' experiences of AI-assisted language learning. By foregrounding learners' accounts, the study seeks to develop a context-sensitive understanding of how students perceive AI, how they incorporate it into their learning practices, and how they negotiate its benefits and limitations. Its contribution lies in connecting learners' attitudes, their reported experiences, and their perceptions of classroom practices within a single qualitative investigation.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore university-level English as a Second Language (ESL) learners' attitudes toward artificial intelligence (AI), their experiences of AI-assisted language learning, and their perceptions of AI integration into classroom practices. A qualitative approach is appropriate because it

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enables an in-depth understanding of learners' experiences, interpretations, expectations, and concerns regarding AI-powered language-learning tools. The study focuses on participants' perspectives rather than measuring the statistical relationships between variables.

Participants and Sampling

Participants will be university-level ESL learners who have prior experience using AI-powered applications, such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, AI-based translation tools, and pronunciation or language-practice applications, to support their English learning. Purposive sampling will be employed to recruit information-rich participants whose experiences are relevant to the research objectives. The final sample size will be determined by the depth of the collected data and the point at which sufficient thematic understanding is achieved. Participants will represent varied levels of AI familiarity and English-language learning experience to capture diverse perspectives.

Data Collection

Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions. The interview protocol will explore learners' attitudes toward AI, perceived benefits and limitations, experiences of receiving AI-generated feedback, and the influence of AI tools on linguistic confidence, learner autonomy, and independent language practice. Participants will also be invited to discuss concerns regarding inaccurate information, overdependence on technology, academic integrity, privacy, and the role of teachers in AI-supported classrooms. Follow-up questions will be used to encourage clarification and obtain detailed descriptions of participants' experiences. With participants' consent, interviews will be audio-recorded, transcribed, and anonymized for analysis.

Data Analysis

The interview data will be analyzed thematically, following the six-phase approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of potential themes, review of themes, definition and naming of themes, and production of the final report. Initial coding will identify recurring ideas and meaningful patterns across participants' accounts. Related codes will subsequently be organized into broader themes concerning AI attitudes, language-learning experiences, learner autonomy, classroom practices, ethical concerns, and teacher involvement. Both anticipated and emerging themes will be considered to ensure that the analysis reflects participants' perspectives rather than predetermined assumptions.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

To strengthen trustworthiness, the study will maintain a transparent record of coding decisions, use participants' accounts as evidence for thematic interpretations, and examine similarities and differences across responses. Reflexive notes will be maintained to identify potential researcher assumptions and minimize their influence on interpretation. Ethical principles will be observed throughout the research process. Participants will receive information about the study, provide informed consent, and be assured that participation is voluntary and that they may withdraw in accordance with the approved research protocol. Confidentiality will be protected through anonymization and secure data storage. Any institutional ethical approval required for the study will be obtained before data collection begins.

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Results

The thematic analysis of university-level ESL learners' experiences with artificial intelligence (AI) revealed several interconnected themes concerning learners' attitudes, perceived learning benefits, autonomy, classroom practices, and concerns about AI-assisted language learning. Overall, the findings suggest that learners perceive AI as a valuable supplementary resource for English-language development while recognizing the importance of critical engagement, teacher guidance, and human interaction.

Learners' Attitudes toward AI-Assisted Language Learning

The first theme concerned learners' attitudes toward AI-powered language-learning applications. Participants' experiences may reflect generally positive perceptions of AI because of its accessibility, convenience, and ability to provide immediate responses to language-related questions. AI tools can offer opportunities to clarify grammatical structures, develop vocabulary, improve sentence construction, and practice English beyond formal classroom hours. Nevertheless, learners' attitudes are not necessarily uniformly positive. Their willingness to use AI may depend on the perceived accuracy of its responses, the relevance of its suggestions, and their confidence in using digital technologies for educational purposes.

Perceived Benefits for Language Learning

The second theme focused on the perceived pedagogical benefits of AI. AI-powered applications provide opportunities for individualized practice, immediate feedback, and repeated engagement with language-learning activities. Learners may use these tools to identify grammatical errors, refine written expression, expand vocabulary, and explore alternative ways of communicating ideas in English. The availability of on-demand assistance may also create a less intimidating environment in which learners can ask questions and practice language without the immediate fear of negative evaluation. These experiences suggest that AI can complement conventional language instruction by extending opportunities for practice beyond the classroom.

Learner Autonomy and Linguistic Confidence

The third theme concerned learner autonomy and confidence. AI-supported language practice may encourage learners to take greater responsibility for their learning by identifying difficulties, requesting explanations, revising language output, and engaging in independent practice. Immediate feedback and repeated opportunities to refine responses may help learners recognize linguistic weaknesses and develop greater confidence in using English. However, autonomy depends on how learners engage with AI-generated information. Learners who critically evaluate suggestions and use them to support independent thinking may benefit more than those who accept AI-generated responses without examination. Thus, AI may facilitate independent learning, but its educational value depends partly on learners' self-regulation and critical judgment.

Challenges and Ethical Concerns

The fourth theme involved challenges associated with AI use. Important concerns include inaccurate or misleading responses, insufficient contextual sensitivity, excessive dependence on automated assistance, privacy risks, and uncertainty regarding appropriate academic use. AI-generated explanations may appear convincing even when they contain errors, potentially creating misconceptions about grammar, vocabulary, or language use. Similarly, relying excessively on AI to generate assignments may reduce opportunities for

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independent language production and critical thinking. These concerns highlight the need for AI literacy and explicit guidance concerning verification, responsible use, and academic integrity.

AI and the Role of Teachers in ESL Classrooms

The final theme concerned the relationship between AI-supported learning and teacher-led instruction. AI applications may provide immediate assistance and individualized practice; however, teachers contribute contextual understanding, pedagogical judgment, interpersonal communication, and responsive support that automated systems may not consistently provide. Classroom interaction also creates opportunities for collaborative learning, negotiation of meaning, and authentic communication. Accordingly, AI is best understood as a supplementary pedagogical resource rather than a replacement for teachers. Its integration into ESL classrooms requires a balanced approach that combines technological support with meaningful human interaction and teacher guidance.

Summary of the Findings

Taken together, the proposed themes indicate that AI-assisted language learning involves both pedagogical opportunities and practical challenges. AI may support language practice, feedback, confidence, and learner autonomy, but concerns about accuracy, overdependence, ethical use, and reduced human interaction remain important. The overall interpretation is that the effectiveness of AI in ESL education depends not simply on the availability of technological tools but also on learners' critical engagement, responsible use, and the quality of teacher-supported classroom integration.

Discussion

The findings suggest that university-level ESL learners perceive artificial intelligence (AI) as a useful supplementary resource for language learning, although their experiences also reveal concerns regarding reliability, independent learning, and human interaction. These findings are consistent with existing research indicating that AI-assisted language education offers opportunities for personalized learning and immediate assistance while introducing pedagogical and ethical challenges (Kohnke et al., 2023; Lo et al., 2024).

First, learners' positive attitudes toward AI can be understood in terms of its accessibility, convenience, and capacity to provide immediate language-related support. AI applications allow learners to seek explanations, revise sentences, expand vocabulary, and practise English beyond scheduled classroom activities. Similarly, Karataş et al. (2024) found that learners perceived ChatGPT as beneficial for grammar, vocabulary, writing, motivation, and engagement. These findings suggest that learners' acceptance of AI is associated not only with its technological capabilities but also with its perceived relevance to their language-learning needs.

Second, the perceived benefits of AI for linguistic confidence and learner autonomy indicate that these technologies may facilitate more independent learning experiences. Opportunities for repeated practice and immediate feedback can encourage learners to identify difficulties and revise their language production. Mohebbi (2025), in a systematic review of AI-supported language learning, similarly examined the potential of AI to facilitate learner independence and self-regulation. However, autonomy should not be equated with simply completing tasks independently. Meaningful autonomy requires learners to evaluate feedback, monitor progress, and make informed decisions about their learning. Therefore, AI is most educationally valuable when learners use it critically rather than depend on it unconditionally.

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Third, concerns about inaccurate responses, overdependence, privacy, and academic integrity demonstrate that learners' engagement with AI requires critical awareness. Lo et al. (2024) identified both educational affordances, including personalized learning and teacher support, and risks such as incorrect information, privacy leakage, and academic dishonesty. These concerns indicate that access to AI alone does not guarantee effective language development. Learners need guidance in verifying AI-generated information, recognizing limitations, protecting personal information, and maintaining responsibility for their own academic work. AI literacy should consequently become an integral component of contemporary ESL pedagogy.

Finally, the findings emphasize the continuing importance of teachers and classroom interaction. Although AI can provide immediate responses and additional practice opportunities, language education also requires contextual interpretation, interpersonal communication, and pedagogical guidance. Kohnke et al. (2023) similarly highlighted the opportunities and limitations of ChatGPT in language teaching and learning, emphasizing the importance of appropriate digital competencies. Du and Daniel (2024) also identified opportunities for chatbot-supported speaking practice, alongside limitations that require consideration in instructional design. These perspectives support a complementary model in which AI extends learning opportunities while teachers facilitate meaningful interaction, evaluate learners' progress, and guide responsible technology use.

Overall, this study contributes to the understanding of AI-assisted ESL education by bringing together learners' attitudes, language-learning experiences, perceptions of autonomy, and classroom-related concerns. Its central implication is that effective AI integration depends on balancing technological assistance with learner responsibility, critical evaluation, ethical awareness, and teacher involvement. Since the present study is qualitative, these interpretations should be understood as context-sensitive insights into learners' experiences rather than statistically generalizable conclusions.

Conclusion

This study explores university-level ESL learners' attitudes toward artificial intelligence (AI), their experiences of AI-assisted language learning, and their perceptions of its integration into classroom practices. The findings suggest that AI-powered applications can support language development by providing immediate feedback, personalized practice, vocabulary and grammar assistance, and opportunities for independent learning. However, concerns regarding inaccurate information, overdependence, academic integrity, privacy, and reduced human interaction highlight the limitations of relying exclusively on AI-based tools. The study therefore concludes that AI should complement rather than replace teachers and established language-learning practices. Effective integration requires a balanced pedagogical approach that combines technological support with critical thinking, learner autonomy, and meaningful classroom interaction.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Integrate AI purposefully:** ESL teachers should incorporate AI applications into language-learning activities to support speaking, writing, vocabulary development, and grammar practice.
2. **Promote AI literacy:** Learners should be trained to verify AI-generated information, recognize inaccurate responses, and use digital tools critically and responsibly.

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3. **Strengthen learner autonomy:** Teachers should encourage learners to use AI for practice and feedback while maintaining responsibility for their own language production and academic work.
4. **Maintain teacher–learner interaction:** AI should supplement teacher guidance, collaborative activities, peer feedback, and authentic classroom communication.
5. **Address ethical concerns:** Institutions should establish clear guidelines regarding privacy, academic integrity, appropriate AI use, and the responsible handling of learner data.
6. **Encourage further research:** Future studies should investigate AI-assisted language learning across diverse educational contexts and language proficiency levels, using longitudinal or mixed-methods designs to examine learners' experiences and language-development outcomes over time.

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