

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore students' perceptions and experiences of using artificial intelligence (AI) in English language learning, particularly its perceived benefits, limitations, and ethical implications. A qualitative case study was conducted at Politeknik Ganesha Medan in Medan, North Sumatra, Indonesia, involving 15 students selected through purposive sampling based on their experience using AI-powered applications for learning English. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis involving data familiarisation, initial coding, theme development, theme review, and interpretation. The findings revealed four principal themes: AI as an accessible and personalised learning assistant; AI support for vocabulary development, grammar correction, academic writing, translation, speaking practice, and pronunciation; concerns regarding inaccurate information and excessive dependence; and uncertainty surrounding academic integrity, authorship, and acceptable AI use. Students generally perceived AI as beneficial because it provided immediate explanations, language corrections, and opportunities for independent learning. However, they also recognised that uncritical reliance on AI could reduce cognitive engagement and expose learners to inaccurate or contextually inappropriate information. These findings indicate that the educational value of AI is determined not only by its technological capabilities but also by students' AI literacy, agency, and institutional guidance. The study concludes that AI should be integrated as a critical learning scaffold rather than as a substitute for students' independent thinking. English teachers and institutions should therefore provide explicit guidance on evaluating, acknowledging, and ethically using AI-generated content. Further research should examine whether students' perceived benefits correspond to measurable language development.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, English language learning, students' perceptions, AI literacy, qualitative case study

Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) has rapidly transformed educational practices worldwide, particularly following the widespread availability of generative AI applications such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Grammarly, and AI-supported translation tools. In English language learning, these technologies enable learners to generate texts, obtain immediate corrective feedback, translate expressions, practise conversational exchanges, develop vocabulary, and access personalised explanations without being limited by classroom schedules. Consequently, AI is no longer merely an instructional technology introduced by teachers; it has become an everyday learning resource that students can independently access through their personal devices. A global study involving 399 university students found that learners generally welcomed generative AI because it could support personalised learning, brainstorming, writi

ng, research, and analysis, although they simultaneously expressed concerns about accuracy, privacy, ethics, and its possible effects on personal development (Chan & Hu, 2023). Similarly, a systematic review of empirical studies published between 2023 and 2024 indicates that generative AI has created new opportunities for interaction, feedback, and individualised language practice, while also generating pedagogical concerns related to hallucinated information, overreliance, unequal access, and academic integrity (Li et al., 2025). These developments demonstrate that the educational significance of AI cannot be understood solely through its technical capabilities; it must also be examined through the ways learners perceive, interpret, and incorporate the technology into their language-learning practices.

The growing adoption of AI is especially relevant to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, in which students may have limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom or to receive individual feedback from teachers. AI-powered applications can provide low-anxiety spaces in which learners repeatedly ask questions, revise sentences, check grammar, and experiment with unfamiliar linguistic forms. Empirical evidence nevertheless reveals an ambivalent picture. Kohnke (2024) found that English for Academic Purposes students perceived generative AI as more comprehensive and capable of providing contextualised explanations than conventional grammar-checking tools. Likewise, Teng (2024) reported that EFL learners regarded ChatGPT as a “companion” that facilitated idea development, revision, and feedback during writing. However, students did not consider AI output automatically trustworthy and remained concerned about inaccurate suggestions, dependence, and the possible weakening of independent thinking. In a mixed-method study of Korean university students, participants acknowledged the accessibility of machine translation and the error-detection functions of generative AI, but focus-group findings suggested that excessive use could disrupt rather than support the English writing process (Lee et al., 2024). Thus, students’ engagement with AI involves continuing negotiation between convenience and effort, assistance and dependence, as well as linguistic improvement and the preservation of individual authorship.

Within Asian higher education, including Indonesia, the expansion of AI-assisted English learning has occurred alongside differences in digital literacy, language proficiency, institutional regulation, and access to technological resources. Research in Thai higher education suggests that students generally accept generative AI and associate it with increased engagement and improved English-learning outcomes, although its educational benefits depend on learners’ readiness and teachers’ ability to integrate it appropriately (Waluyo & Kusumastuti, 2024). In Indonesia, Slamet’s (2024) cross-sectional study involving 80 EFL teachers and 46 students in East Java found that participants recognised ChatGPT’s potential to improve language competence, learning motivation, access to materials, and personalised learning. At the same time, they raised concerns about linguistic accuracy, technological dependence, and the need for pedagogical guidance and training. These findings suggest that AI adoption in Indonesia is not simply a process of accepting a new learning tool. It is situated within a broader educational and sociocultural environment in which students must negotiate teacher expectations, academic norms, English proficiency demands, digital inequalities, and uncertain institutional rules concerning acceptable AI use. Investigating these perceptions is therefore important because students’ interpretations can determine whether AI is used as a scaffold for meaningful learning, an instrument for completing assignments efficiently, or a substitute for the cognitive and linguistic effort required in language development.

Students’ perceptions are pedagogically important because perceptions influence how learners approach learning tasks, select strategies, evaluate feedback, and regulate their behaviour. From a sociocultural and constructivist perspective, learning does not occur through the passive reception of information but through interaction with tools, other people, and the social environment in which meaning is constructed. In this sense, AI can function as a mediational tool that supports language production, reflection, and self-regulation; nevertheless, its value depends on how students interpret its affordances and exercise agency when accepting, questioning, modifying, or rejecting its responses. Students who view AI as a source of provisional feedback may compare its suggestions with other sources and remain cognitively engaged, whereas those who perceive it as an unquestionable authority may reproduce inaccurate or inappropriate content. This distinction is particularly important because generative AI produces fluent language that can

appear credible even when it contains factual, contextual, or linguistic errors. Students' perceptions consequently have social, ethical, and educational implications: they affect learner autonomy, confidence, authorship, critical thinking, academic integrity, and the relationship between students and teachers. Understanding these subjective interpretations is necessary for designing AI literacy and language-learning practices that promote critical and responsible engagement rather than either unregulated dependence or the complete prohibition of AI.

Although research on AI in language education has expanded considerably, several limitations remain. Much of the existing scholarship has used cross-sectional surveys, acceptance models, experimental comparisons, or mixed-method designs in which qualitative evidence plays a secondary role. These approaches have successfully identified levels of perceived usefulness, ease of use, behavioural intention, and general concerns, but they provide limited explanations of how such perceptions are constructed through everyday experiences. For example, the Indonesian study by Slamet (2024) offered valuable evidence regarding teachers' and students' preferences, yet its survey design primarily presented a snapshot of their views. International studies have also frequently focused on a particular application, especially ChatGPT, or on a specific skill such as academic writing (Kohnke, 2024; Lee et al., 2024; Teng, 2024). Consequently, insufficient attention has been paid to how students describe their broader experiences of using different AI tools across English-learning activities; how proficiency, previous technological experience, classroom expectations, and institutional norms shape those experiences; and how students negotiate tensions among usefulness, trust, dependence, authorship, and ethical responsibility. This methodological and contextual gap calls for qualitative inquiry that prioritises students' voices and interprets perception as a situated meaning-making process rather than merely a measurable attitude toward technology.

Accordingly, this study aims to explore students' perceptions of artificial intelligence in English language learning, with particular attention to how they understand, experience, and evaluate the opportunities and challenges associated with AI-assisted learning. It focuses on students' reasons for using AI, the language-learning activities in which it is employed, its perceived contributions to linguistic competence and learner autonomy, and their concerns regarding accuracy, dependence, critical thinking, and academic integrity. Through a qualitative approach, the study seeks to reveal not only what students think about AI but also how their perceptions are formed and negotiated within their educational and sociocultural context. Theoretically, the study is expected to enrich discussions of AI-mediated language learning by conceptualising students as active meaning-makers who exercise agency in their interactions with digital tools. Practically, its findings can inform English teachers in designing guided AI-supported activities, assist institutions in developing context-sensitive policies and AI-literacy programmes, and help students adopt critical, ethical, and reflective strategies when using AI. In this way, the study contributes to the development of an approach to AI integration that preserves human judgement and meaningful language practice while benefiting from the accessibility and responsiveness of emerging technologies.

Literature Review

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Artificial intelligence in language education refers to computer-based technologies capable of processing language, recognising patterns, generating content, providing feedback, and adapting responses to learners' inputs. These technologies include machine-translation systems, automated writing evaluation, intelligent tutoring systems, speech-recognition applications, and generative AI tools such as ChatGPT. Son et al. (2023) explain that AI applications can support language teaching and learning through automated feedback, conversational practice, content generation, translation, and personalised learning assistance. Unlike conventional digital resources, generative AI responds interactively to prompts and produces new texts, explanations, exercises, or dialogues according to learners' requests. In the present study, *AI in English language learning* is operationally defined as students' use of AI-powered tools to support activities such as developing vocabulary, checking grammar, translating texts, generating and organising ideas,

practising communication, revising writing, and obtaining explanations or feedback. Nevertheless, AI-generated responses are probabilistic rather than inherently accurate; therefore, their educational value depends on students' purposes, prompting practices, language proficiency, critical judgement, and awareness of academic and ethical boundaries.

The concept of *student perception* constitutes the central analytical construct of this qualitative study. Perception is not understood simply as a favourable or unfavourable attitude but as the process through which students select, interpret, and assign meaning to their experiences with AI. Students may perceive the same technological feature differently because their interpretations are shaped by previous learning experiences, English proficiency, digital competence, expectations, academic tasks, teacher guidance, and institutional norms. Chan and Hu (2023) demonstrate that students' perceptions of generative AI simultaneously involve cognitive, affective, practical, and ethical dimensions. Cognitively, students evaluate the accuracy and relevance of AI-generated information; affectively, they may experience confidence, enjoyment, anxiety, or uncertainty; practically, they consider accessibility, speed, usefulness, and ease of use; and ethically, they evaluate issues of authorship, privacy, plagiarism, and responsible use. Accordingly, *students' perceptions* are operationally defined in this research as the meanings, judgements, feelings, and evaluations expressed by students regarding the benefits, limitations, learning processes, and ethical implications of using AI for learning English. This multidimensional definition enables the study to move beyond measuring technology acceptance and explore how students make sense of AI within their actual educational experiences.

This study combines sociocultural theory, the concept of technological affordances, and AI literacy as its theoretical foundation. From a sociocultural perspective, language learning is mediated by cultural tools and social interaction; thus, AI can function as a mediational resource that assists students in completing tasks that may initially be difficult to perform independently. Through explanations, examples, prompts, and corrective feedback, AI may operate as temporary scaffolding for vocabulary development, writing, and language practice. However, mediation does not automatically result in learning because students must actively examine, internalise, and transform the assistance they receive. The concept of affordance further explains that a technological function becomes educationally meaningful only when learners recognise and act upon the possibility it offers. Immediate feedback, for example, may afford revision for a reflective learner but encourage passive answer copying for another. This relationship is influenced by AI literacy, which Ng et al. (2021) conceptualise through four interconnected dimensions: knowing and understanding AI, using and applying AI, evaluating and creating with AI, and addressing ethical issues. Consequently, students' perceptions are theoretically positioned between technological possibilities and situated learner action: AI provides potential affordances, while students' AI literacy, agency, and learning context determine how those affordances are interpreted and used.

Three recent studies provide important empirical foundations for the present investigation. First, Sumakul et al. (2022) conducted semi-structured interviews with eight Indonesian EFL students who used an AI application in a writing class. Participants generally perceived the application positively because it supported their understanding of theoretical concepts, writing processes, grammar, and vocabulary and made learning more enjoyable. The qualitative design gave students opportunities to articulate their experiences, but the study examined only one writing application, involved a small group, and was conducted before generative conversational AI became widely available. Second, Chan and Hu (2023) surveyed 399 undergraduate and postgraduate students in Hong Kong and found that they valued generative AI for personalised support, brainstorming, writing, research, and analysis. At the same time, participants expressed concerns about information accuracy, privacy, ethics, personal development, and future employment. Although this study demonstrated the multidimensional nature of student perceptions, its cross-disciplinary survey design did not specifically explain how EFL students experience AI in different English-learning activities. It mainly produced an aggregated representation of attitudes rather than an in-depth interpretation of the meanings underlying individual practices.

Third, Rafida et al. (2024) used semi-structured interviews to investigate the experiences of 20 EFL students in Indonesia and Taiwan who employed AI in academic writing. Their findings revealed perceived improvements in grammar, sentence structure, paraphrasing, vocabulary, and

idea generation, alongside concerns about excessive dependence, diminished creativity, plagiarism, and textual authenticity. This comparative qualitative research is highly relevant because it demonstrates that students understand AI as both supportive and potentially disruptive. Nevertheless, its concentration on academic writing leaves other aspects of English learning—such as vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, speaking practice, translation, autonomous learning, and interaction with AI-generated feedback—relatively unexplored. Related Indonesian research has also frequently organised perceptions around usefulness and ease of use. For example, Silalahi (2025) found that university students considered ChatGPT useful for locating materials, checking vocabulary and sentence structures, generating ideas, and translating Indonesian sentences, but also encountered irrelevant or unclear responses. Such findings identify important benefits and limitations, yet they do not fully reveal how perceptions are constructed through students' broader learning histories, classroom expectations, proficiency differences, and ethical negotiations.

The empirical and theoretical gap therefore concerns the limited integration of technological affordances, sociocultural mediation, and AI literacy in explaining students' perceptions of AI-assisted English learning. Previous studies have commonly treated perceptions as measurable acceptance, focused on a particular AI application, or restricted analysis to English writing. They have provided insufficient accounts of why students interpret AI assistance differently, how they decide whether to accept or reject its output, and when AI functions as scaffolding rather than a shortcut that reduces meaningful language engagement. To address this gap, the present study employs a qualitative conceptual framework in which students' accounts are examined through four interrelated analytical domains: (1) perceived AI affordances, including accessibility, personalisation, interaction, feedback, and efficiency; (2) language-learning practices, including writing, vocabulary, grammar, reading, speaking, and translation; (3) mediating learner and contextual factors, including proficiency, AI literacy, agency, teacher guidance, and institutional expectations; and (4) perceived risks, including inaccuracy, overdependence, reduced creativity, plagiarism, and loss of authorship. This framework assumes neither that AI is inherently beneficial nor inherently harmful. Instead, it positions learning outcomes as dependent on the relationship among the characteristics of AI tools, students' interpretations and actions, and the sociocultural context in which AI use occurs.

Research Method

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore students' perceptions and experiences of using artificial intelligence in English language learning. A case study was selected because the phenomenon was examined within a bounded educational setting, namely students participating in English learning at Polytechnic of Ganesha Medan. This design enabled the researcher to investigate not only students' opinions about AI but also how those opinions were shaped by their learning practices, English proficiency, technological experiences, and institutional context. The qualitative orientation was appropriate because the study did not seek to measure causal relationships or statistically generalise its findings. Instead, it sought an in-depth and context-sensitive understanding of the meanings that students attributed to AI-assisted language learning. The case was bounded by one educational institution, a specified research period, and participants who had direct experience using AI tools for learning English.

The research was conducted at Polytechnic of Ganesha Medan, Medan, Indonesia] from [April 2026 to July 2026. The institution was selected because its students had used AI-powered applications, such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Grammarly, QuillBot, machine-translation applications, or other AI-supported platforms, in formal or informal English-learning activities. The fieldwork was planned in three stages: participant recruitment and instrument preparation, data collection, and data analysis and validation. Before data collection, the researcher obtained permission from the relevant institutional authority and ethical approval from **the Research Ethics Committee** of Polytechnic of Ganesha Medan. All prospective participants received an information sheet explaining the objectives, procedures, benefits, potential risks, confidentiality measures, and voluntary nature of participation. Written informed consent was obtained, and participants were

informed that they could refuse to answer particular questions or withdraw from the study without academic consequences.

The participants comprised approximately **12–15 students** selected through purposive sampling. The final number should be reported according to the participants actually recruited and the adequacy of the information generated. To ensure that participants could provide relevant and experience-based accounts, they were required to meet four inclusion criteria: (1) being actively enrolled at [Polytechnic of Ganesha Medan]; (2) having studied English during the research period; (3) having used at least one AI-powered tool for English-learning purposes on more than one occasion; and (4) being willing to describe and reflect on that experience. Maximum-variation considerations were applied to include students with different levels of English proficiency, frequencies of AI use, academic programmes, and patterns of technology use. Students without direct experience of using AI for learning English were excluded. Recruitment began through classroom announcements and invitations distributed by the researcher. If information-rich participants were difficult to identify, limited snowball sampling was used by asking initial participants to recommend peers who satisfied the inclusion criteria. However, every recommended student was independently screened, and participation remained voluntary.

Semi-structured individual interviews constituted the primary data-collection method because they combined consistency across participants with sufficient flexibility to pursue unexpected meanings and experiences (Ruslin et al., 2022). An interview guide was developed from the research questions and conceptual framework, covering students' initial encounters with AI, frequently used applications, English-learning activities, perceived benefits, limitations, accuracy of responses, changes in learning strategies, dependence, authorship, academic integrity, and expectations regarding teacher guidance. Open-ended questions included, for example, "How do you usually use AI when learning English?", "Can you describe an occasion when AI helped or failed to help you?", and "How do you decide whether an AI-generated response is reliable?" Probing questions were used to request examples, explanations, and clarification. Each interview lasted approximately 40–60 minutes, was conducted in Indonesian or English according to the participant's preference, and took place face-to-face or through a secure online platform. With consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Indonesian excerpts selected for publication were translated into English and checked against the original meanings.

To provide contextual evidence and methodological triangulation, the interviews were complemented by a focus-group discussion and document elicitation. One focus group involving approximately six to eight participants was conducted after the individual interviews to discuss preliminary issues, examine similarities and differences among experiences, and clarify contested interpretations. The discussion lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and did not replace the confidential individual accounts. Participants were also invited—not required—to show anonymised examples of prompts, AI-generated responses, revised English texts, reflective notes, or learning tasks demonstrating how they used AI. Identifying information was removed before analysis, and no private account credentials or unrelated digital records were collected. The researcher additionally maintained field notes documenting the interview setting, participants' relevant non-verbal expressions, contextual circumstances, and methodological reflections. Combining individual narratives, group interaction, learning artefacts, and field notes allowed claims to be compared across sources rather than being based on a single type of evidence.

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, which was selected because it supports the systematic interpretation of recurring patterns while acknowledging the researcher's active role in producing meaning from qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Byrne, 2022). Analysis proceeded through six recursive phases: (1) becoming familiar with the data through transcription, repeated reading, and analytic note-taking; (2) producing initial semantic and latent codes; (3) grouping related codes into candidate themes; (4) reviewing themes against coded extracts and the complete dataset; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) constructing an analytical narrative supported by representative quotations. Coding was primarily inductive so that unanticipated experiences could emerge, although the concepts of perceived affordances, AI literacy, sociocultural mediation, and perceived risks sensitised the analysis. Examples of possible initial codes included "instant clarification," "fear of incorrect answers," "AI as a private tutor," "copying without understanding," and "teacher rules are unclear." Microsoft Excel was used to

systematically organise the interview transcripts, initial codes, analytical categories, emerging themes, and supporting excerpts. The interpretation and development of themes were conducted manually by the researcher. Themes were treated as interpretative patterns connected to the research question rather than simple summaries of interview topics.

Trustworthiness was established through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Ahmed, 2024; Johnson et al., 2020). Credibility was strengthened through source and method triangulation by comparing individual interviews, the focus-group discussion, participant-provided artefacts, and field notes. Member checking was conducted by returning concise interview summaries or preliminary thematic interpretations to participants, allowing them to clarify meaning, correct factual inaccuracies, or indicate disagreement. Peer debriefing with a researcher experienced in qualitative inquiry was used to challenge unsupported interpretations and examine alternative explanations, while final interpretative responsibility remained with the research team. Transferability was supported by providing a detailed account of the institutional setting, participant characteristics, AI-use context, and research procedures. Dependability and confirmability were addressed through an audit trail containing recruitment records, instrument versions, consent documentation, anonymised transcripts, coding decisions, theme revisions, reflexive memos, and records of member-checking responses. Pseudonyms or participant codes were used in all reports, recordings and identifying files were securely stored, and access was restricted to the research team.

Results and Discussion

Results and

The thematic analysis of the interview, observation, and documentation data identified several interconnected patterns concerning students' perceptions of artificial intelligence in English language learning. These patterns can be organised into four principal themes: (1) AI as an accessible and personalised learning assistant, (2) AI as linguistic support for English-language development, (3) concerns regarding accuracy and excessive dependence, and (4) the need for ethical awareness and teacher guidance. Although students generally perceived AI positively, their accounts also revealed ambivalence. AI was understood as a useful learning resource, but its educational value depended on how critically and responsibly it was used. These themes demonstrate that students' perceptions were neither entirely positive nor negative; instead, they were shaped by their learning needs, English proficiency, experience with technology, and understanding of appropriate AI use.

The first theme concerned students' perception of AI as an accessible and personalised learning assistant. Participants reported that applications ChatGPT could be used whenever they encountered difficulties with English-learning tasks. Unlike classroom assistance, which depended on teachers' availability, AI provided immediate responses outside formal learning hours. One participant stated, "I can use ChatGPT whenever I do not understand an English word or sentence, even when I study at night" (P3). Another participant explained, "For me, AI is like a personal tutor because I can ask the same question several times without feeling embarrassed" (P7). These accounts indicate that accessibility was not perceived merely as technological convenience. For students, it created opportunities to ask questions without embarrassment, repeat requests, and obtain explanations adjusted to their immediate needs. This finding reflects the idea of technological affordance: an AI function becomes educationally meaningful when students recognise and use it to address a specific learning difficulty.

The second theme showed that students used AI to support several linguistic aspects of English learning. The most frequently mentioned functions were checking grammar, finding appropriate vocabulary, translating Indonesian sentences into English, generating ideas, and revising written assignments. Participant 5 explained, "I usually use ChatGPT to check my grammar and find suitable vocabulary. It also shows me how to revise sentences that sound unnatural" (P5). Students perceived immediate corrections and examples as particularly helpful because these features enabled them to identify errors and revise their work independently.

However, the data should distinguish between students' perceived improvement and objectively measured language development. Statements that AI "improved" grammar or vocabulary represent participants' perceptions unless they are supported by test scores or comparisons of written work. Nevertheless, these perceptions are educationally important because perceived usefulness can influence students' willingness to engage with a learning tool and incorporate it into their learning strategies.

Discussion

This finding is consistent with previous research. Sumakul et al. (2022) found that Indonesian EFL students perceived AI as helpful for understanding theoretical concepts, completing writing processes, and addressing grammar and vocabulary problems. Rafida et al. (2024) similarly reported that Indonesian and Taiwanese students associated AI use with improvements in grammar, sentence construction, paraphrasing, vocabulary enrichment, and idea generation. Moreover, Silalahi (2025) found that Indonesian university students considered ChatGPT useful for generating ideas, checking vocabulary and sentence structures, translating sentences, and locating relevant materials. The present findings extend these studies, as participants described using AI to support speaking practice, reading comprehension, academic writing, vocabulary development, grammar correction, and translation, rather than limiting its use to academic writing. This suggests that students may perceive AI as a multifunctional learning environment capable of supporting several stages of English learning.

The third theme involved concerns about the accuracy and reliability of AI-generated information. Although participants appreciated rapid responses, some reported receiving answers that were irrelevant, unclear, linguistically inappropriate, or inconsistent with information provided by teachers and other sources. Participant 6 remarked, "Sometimes ChatGPT gives me an answer that looks convincing, but when I compare it with the explanation from my lecturer, the meaning is different. Therefore, I cannot immediately trust the answer" (P6). This experience encouraged some students to verify AI output by consulting dictionaries, textbooks, websites, classmates, or teachers. Other participants, however, may have accepted AI-generated answers because the language appeared fluent and authoritative. Such differences indicate variations in students' AI literacy. According to Ng et al. (2021), AI literacy involves not only knowing how to operate AI applications but also critically evaluating their output and recognising their technical and ethical limitations. Therefore, the capacity to formulate prompts does not necessarily demonstrate that students can judge the reliability of the responses they receive.

A related concern was the possibility of excessive dependence. Several participants acknowledged that AI made assignments easier but reduced the effort required to generate ideas, construct sentences, or solve language problems independently. As one participant stated, "Since I started using ChatGPT, I sometimes become too dependent on it. When I receive a writing assignment, I ask ChatGPT to generate the ideas before trying to think about them myself" (P8). From a sociocultural perspective, AI can function as scaffolding when it helps learners perform tasks before they can complete them independently. However, scaffolding should gradually support greater learner control. When students copy AI-generated content without understanding or revising it, AI ceases to function as a mediational learning tool and becomes a substitute for cognitive and linguistic engagement. This finding supports Lee et al. (2024), who found that students appreciated the accessibility and error-checking functions of AI-based writing tools but recognised that excessive use could interfere with the English writing process.

The fourth theme concerned academic integrity, authorship, and the continuing role of teachers. Participants' interpretations of acceptable AI use differed according to the type of task and the guidance provided by their institution. Some students considered grammar checking and vocabulary assistance legitimate, while regarding the generation of complete assignments as academically inappropriate. Participant 6 explained, "I think using AI to check grammar or find vocabulary is acceptable, but asking it to write the entire assignment and submitting the answer without revision is a form of academic dishonesty" (P6). Uncertainty arose when teachers allowed AI for some purposes but prohibited it for others without providing explicit guidelines. This ambiguity led students to establish their own boundaries of acceptable use. The findings therefore

suggest that responsible AI use cannot depend solely on students' personal judgement. Educational institutions need clear, context-sensitive policies specifying whether and how AI may be used, acknowledged, and cited in English-language assignments.

Overall, the findings position AI as a conditional learning resource rather than an inherently beneficial or harmful technology. Its affordances—immediate feedback, accessibility, personalisation, and language generation—can promote autonomy when students actively evaluate and transform the assistance provided. Conversely, the same affordances can encourage dependence, superficial task completion, and questionable authorship when students accept AI-generated content uncritically. Theoretically, this finding connects technological affordances with AI literacy and sociocultural mediation: the effects of AI are produced through interactions among technological features, learner agency, proficiency, teacher guidance, and institutional expectations. Practically, English teachers should design activities requiring students to compare AI responses with reliable sources, explain the revisions they make, record their prompts, identify errors, and reflect on what they learn from AI-assisted tasks.

Further research should investigate whether students' perceived benefits correspond with measurable development in English proficiency. Longitudinal studies could examine how students' perceptions and practices change as their experience and AI literacy develop. Future studies should also compare learners with different proficiency levels, academic disciplines, and levels of digital access. In the Indonesian context, research involving multiple institutions may reveal how geographical location, institutional policy, teacher competence, and digital inequality influence AI-assisted English learning. Most importantly, future research should distinguish between using AI to facilitate learning and using it merely to produce academic outputs, because these practices may have substantially different implications for autonomy, critical thinking, and language development.

Conclusion

This study explored students' perceptions of artificial intelligence in English language learning within the context of Politeknik Ganesha Medan. The findings indicate that students generally perceived AI as an accessible and personalised learning assistant that supported vocabulary development, grammar correction, writing, translation, speaking practice, reading comprehension, and pronunciation. Immediate responses, explanations, and corrective feedback enabled students to address linguistic difficulties and learn more independently. Nevertheless, their perceptions were not entirely positive. Participants also expressed concerns about inaccurate or contextually inappropriate information, excessive dependence, reduced cognitive engagement, academic integrity, and uncertainty regarding acceptable AI use. These findings demonstrate that AI should not be regarded as inherently beneficial or harmful; its educational value depends on students' AI literacy, agency, learning purposes, and ability to critically evaluate and revise AI-generated content.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature by explaining students' perceptions through the interconnected concepts of technological affordances, sociocultural mediation, and AI literacy. AI functions as an effective learning scaffold when it assists students in completing tasks while preserving their active participation and independent judgement. Conversely, it becomes a substitute for learning when students copy AI-generated responses without understanding, evaluating, or transforming them. Practically, English teachers should design AI-assisted activities that require students to verify information, explain revisions, compare AI output with reliable sources, and maintain ownership of their work. At the policy level, educational institutions should establish clear and context-sensitive guidelines concerning permitted AI use, disclosure requirements, authorship, privacy, and academic integrity.

Further research should involve participants from different institutions, academic disciplines, proficiency levels, and sociocultural backgrounds to examine the transferability of these findings. Longitudinal and mixed-method studies are also recommended to investigate changes in students' perceptions and determine whether the perceived benefits correspond with measurable development in English proficiency. Overall, this study reinforces the importance of

integrating AI into English language education as a critically evaluated learning scaffold rather than a replacement for teachers, learner agency, or meaningful linguistic engagement.

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