

RESEARCH ARTICLE**The Influence of ChatGPT on Learner Autonomy and Self-Directed English Language Learning: A Conceptual Review**

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Abstract:

Learner autonomy and self-directed learning are increasingly important in English language education because effective language development requires learners to continue learning beyond the boundaries of the formal classroom. The emergence of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI), particularly ChatGPT, has created new possibilities for learners to independently practise English, obtain immediate feedback, access explanations, generate learning materials, and engage in interactive communication. This conceptual review examines the influence of ChatGPT on learner autonomy and self-directed English language learning. It explores how ChatGPT can support goal setting, personalized learning, language practice, feedback, reflection, resource generation, and self-assessment. The review argues that ChatGPT can increase learners' control over the learning process by providing on-demand assistance and opportunities for individualized practice. It may also enhance motivation and confidence by creating a low-pressure environment for experimentation and repeated practice. However, excessive dependence on ChatGPT may negatively affect autonomy if learners accept AI-generated information without critical evaluation or use the technology as a substitute for independent thinking. Concerns related to accuracy, academic integrity, privacy, digital literacy, and reduced human interaction must also be considered. The paper proposes a human-AI collaborative model in which learners use ChatGPT as a learning assistant while retaining responsibility for goals, decisions, evaluation, and final language production. The review concludes that ChatGPT can support autonomous English language learning when integrated with metacognitive strategies, teacher guidance, critical AI literacy, and authentic human communication.

Keywords: ChatGPT, learner autonomy, self-directed learning, Artificial Intelligence, English language learning, EFL learners, generative AI, language education

Introduction

Learner autonomy is an important concept in modern language education. It refers broadly to learners' ability to take responsibility for aspects of their own learning, including setting goals, selecting learning strategies, monitoring progress, and evaluating outcomes.

English language development cannot be restricted to classroom instruction. Learners need continuous opportunities to practise vocabulary, grammar, reading, writing, listening, speaking, and pronunciation. However, limited classroom time, large student populations, and differences in proficiency can make individualized learning difficult.

Generative AI has introduced new opportunities for overcoming some of these limitations. ChatGPT

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can interact with learners through natural-language dialogue and provide explanations, examples, exercises, feedback, and simulated conversations. For EFL learners, ChatGPT can function as an accessible learning companion that is available whenever practice is required. The technology therefore has the potential to influence how learners plan, practise, monitor, and evaluate their English learning. This conceptual review examines the relationship between ChatGPT, learner autonomy, and self-directed English language learning.

2. Learner Autonomy in English Language Learning

Learner autonomy involves students taking an active role in their learning rather than depending entirely on teachers.

An autonomous English learner may:

- establish personal learning goals;
- select suitable resources;
- plan learning activities;
- practise independently;
- monitor progress;
- identify weaknesses;
- evaluate performance;
- modify learning strategies.

Autonomy does not mean learning without teachers. Rather, teachers can help learners develop the skills necessary to manage their own learning. ChatGPT can potentially support these processes by providing immediate access to language-learning assistance.

3. ChatGPT as a Personal Learning Assistant

ChatGPT can respond to individual learner questions and generate customized learning materials.

For example, a learner can request:

“Give me ten intermediate-level vocabulary questions about environmental issues.”

The learner can then complete the activity and request explanations for incorrect answers.

Similarly, a student can ask ChatGPT to create a short reading passage followed by comprehension questions. This flexibility allows learners to create learning materials according to their proficiency level, interests, and goals.

4. Supporting Goal Setting

Effective self-directed learning begins with clear goals.

ChatGPT can help learners convert broad goals into specific learning activities.

For example, a learner whose goal is to improve academic English can request a weekly plan involving:

- academic vocabulary;
- grammar revision;
- reading practice;
- paragraph writing;
- speaking practice.

The learner can subsequently adjust the plan according to progress.

However, students should remain responsible for deciding whether proposed goals are realistic and appropriate.

5. Personalized Learning

One important feature of ChatGPT is its ability to respond differently according to learner instructions.

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A beginner can request simple explanations and examples, whereas an advanced learner can request more complex academic language.

Learners can also ask ChatGPT to explain the same concept in different ways.

For example:

“Explain the present perfect tense using simple English and five examples.”

This type of interaction may help learners overcome difficulties without waiting for teacher assistance.

Personalization can therefore increase opportunities for independent learning.

6. Supporting Language Practice

ChatGPT can provide practice across several language skills.

Vocabulary

Learners can request word meanings, examples, synonyms, antonyms, and quizzes.

Grammar

Learners can ask for explanations and practice exercises.

Writing

Students can receive feedback on grammar, organization, and clarity.

Speaking

ChatGPT can simulate conversations and role-play situations.

Reading

It can generate passages and comprehension questions appropriate to different levels.

These functions create an integrated self-directed learning environment.

7. Feedback and Self-Assessment

Feedback is essential for autonomous learning.

ChatGPT can provide immediate responses to learner questions and written work.

A learner can submit a paragraph and ask:

“Identify my grammatical errors and explain the rules without rewriting the entire paragraph.”

This approach can encourage learners to analyse their own errors.

Students can also use ChatGPT to generate quizzes and evaluate their knowledge.

However, AI-generated evaluation should not be considered equivalent to formal assessment. Learners need to compare AI feedback with reliable educational resources and teacher guidance.

8. Metacognitive Learning

Autonomous learning requires metacognitive awareness—the ability to think about one's own learning.

ChatGPT can support reflection by asking learners questions such as:

- What did you learn today?
- Which errors did you make repeatedly?
- Which vocabulary items are difficult?
- Which learning strategy was effective?
- What should you practise next?

Such reflective activities can help learners monitor their development.

Therefore, ChatGPT can potentially function not only as a source of information but also as a tool for encouraging metacognitive reflection.

9. Motivation and Confidence

Learners may be reluctant to practise English because they fear making mistakes in front of teachers or peers.

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ChatGPT provides a relatively low-pressure environment for experimentation.

Students can repeat questions, ask for clarification, and practise conversations without embarrassment.

This may increase confidence and willingness to practise.

However, genuine communicative confidence ultimately requires interaction with real people. ChatGPT should therefore supplement rather than replace peer and teacher communication.

10. Risks of Excessive Dependence

Although ChatGPT can support autonomy, excessive dependence may have the opposite effect.

If students ask ChatGPT to write essays, answer assignments, translate everything, or solve language exercises without attempting them independently, their learning responsibility decreases.

This creates a distinction between **AI-supported autonomy** and **AI-dependent learning**.

AI-supported autonomy occurs when learners use ChatGPT to strengthen their own abilities.

AI-dependent learning occurs when learners allow the technology to perform most learning tasks on their behalf.

Educational practice should encourage the first model.

11. Accuracy and Critical AI Literacy

ChatGPT can produce inaccurate or misleading information.

Language learners may not always possess sufficient knowledge to recognize such errors.

Therefore, autonomous learners need critical AI literacy.

Students should learn to:

- verify important information;
- compare AI responses with reliable sources;
- question generated explanations;
- identify uncertainty;
- avoid copying responses without evaluation.

Critical use of AI is therefore an important component of modern learner autonomy.

12. Academic Integrity and Ethical Issues

ChatGPT creates challenges concerning academic integrity.

Students may use AI to generate assignments, essays, reports, or examination responses without demonstrating their own knowledge.

Institutions should therefore establish clear policies concerning acceptable AI use.

Students should be encouraged to use ChatGPT for brainstorming, practice, feedback, and revision while maintaining responsibility for their own academic work.

Transparency about AI use can also promote responsible learning practices

13. Role of Teachers

The availability of ChatGPT does not eliminate the need for teachers.

Teachers remain important for:

- establishing learning objectives;
- evaluating learner progress;
- providing contextual explanations;
- developing communication skills;
- teaching critical thinking;
- monitoring responsible AI use;

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- providing emotional and motivational support.

Teachers can teach students how to formulate effective prompts, evaluate AI responses, and use AI as a learning resource.

14. A Human-AI Model for Autonomous Learning

A practical model can involve five stages:

Goal Setting → AI-Supported Practice → Self-Monitoring → Critical Evaluation → Teacher/Peer Interaction

First, learners establish personal objectives. Second, ChatGPT provides practice and resources. Third, learners monitor their performance. Fourth, they critically evaluate AI-generated feedback. Finally, they apply their learning through authentic interaction with teachers and peers.

This model balances independence with human support.

15. Future Research

Future empirical research should investigate how ChatGPT affects different dimensions of learner autonomy.

Research could measure:

- self-regulation;
- motivation;
- learning engagement;
- confidence;
- independent study time;
- language proficiency;
- vocabulary development;
- writing performance;
- speaking ability.

Longitudinal research is particularly important for determining whether increased dependence on AI eventually strengthens or weakens independent learning skills.

Comparative research involving traditional instruction, AI-supported instruction, and blended human-AI instruction could provide valuable evidence.

16. Conclusion

ChatGPT has significant potential to support learner autonomy and self-directed English language learning. Its interactive nature allows learners to access explanations, personalized practice, feedback, learning materials, and conversational opportunities according to their individual needs.

The technology can support goal setting, self-assessment, metacognitive reflection, vocabulary learning, grammar practice, writing development, reading comprehension, and speaking practice. These possibilities can extend English learning beyond the classroom and encourage learners to take greater responsibility for their development.

However, ChatGPT does not automatically create autonomous learners. Excessive dependence, uncritical acceptance of AI responses, academic integrity problems, and reduced human interaction may undermine genuine autonomy.

The most productive approach is therefore a **human-AI collaborative model**. Learners should remain responsible for setting goals, making decisions, evaluating information, and producing their own

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work. ChatGPT can function as an intelligent learning assistant that provides support whenever needed, while teachers and peers provide authentic communication and pedagogical guidance. Ultimately, the educational value of ChatGPT depends not simply on what the technology can produce but on how learners use it. When combined with self-regulation, critical AI literacy, reflective learning, and teacher support, ChatGPT can become a powerful resource for developing independent and lifelong English language learners.

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