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EFL Students' Dependence on ChatGPT and Its Impact on the English Learning Process

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Abstract

This study aims to examine EFL Students' dependence on ChatGPT and its impact on their English learning process. The study focuses on second-semester students of the English Education program at an Islamic higher education institution in Jambi, Indonesia. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed, using semi-structured interviews with five participants. The data were analysed thematically to identify students' experiences and perceptions. The findings indicated that ChatGPT provides positive benefits, including improvements in vocabulary, grammar, and writing skills, as well as rapid feedback accompanied by clear explanations. However, the study also reveals several negative impacts of ChatGPT use, such as decreased critical thinking skills, excessive dependence on AI-generated content, and reduced intrinsic motivation for independent learning. Therefore, this study emphasises that although ChatGPT serves as a supportive tool in English language learning, its use needs to be carefully managed to ensure responsible and effective application. The findings offer insights for educators in integrating ChatGPT by balancing AI technological support with students' own learning efforts, so that learners remain active and independent in the English learning process.

Keywords: *ChatGPT, EFL Students, English Learning Process*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji ketergantungan mahasiswa EFL pada ChatGPT dan pengaruhnya terhadap proses pembelajaran bahasa Inggris mereka. Penelitian ini di fokuskan pada mahasiswa semester dua program studi pendidikan bahasa Inggris di salah satu institut Islam di Jambi, Indonesia. Adapun metode yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini yaitu pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif, dengan menggunakan teknik wawancara semi-terstruktur terhadap lima partisipan. Data dianalisis secara tematik untuk mengidentifikasi pengalaman dan persepsi mahasiswa. Hasil dari penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa ChatGPT dapat memberikan manfaat terhadap peningkatan kosakata, tata bahasa, keterampilan menulis, serta membantu mahasiswa melalui umpan balik secara cepat dengan penjelasan yang jelas. Sebagai dampak positifnya. Namun, penelitian ini juga menemukan dampak negatif dari penggunaan ChatGPT seperti, menurunnya kemampuan berpikir kritis, ketergantungan yang berlebihan pada konten yang dihasilkan oleh AI, serta menurunnya motivasi intrinsik untuk belajar secara mandiri. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini menekankan bahwa meskipun ChatGPT merupakan penunjang dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris,

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penggunaannya masih perlu diperhatikan agar dapat dipergunakan secara bijak. Hasil penelitian ini juga memberikan gambaran bagi tenaga pendidik dalam penggunaan ChatGPT agar tetap menyeimbangkan antara dukungan teknologi AI dengan usaha belajar dari diri mahasiswa dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris sehingga mahasiswa tetap aktif dan mandiri dalam belajar.

Kata Kunci: ChatGPT, Mahasiswa EFL, Pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris

Introduction

Technological development continues to advance rapidly and has become increasingly sophisticated. This development has brought significant changes to various aspects of human life, especially in the field of education, including English language education at both primary and higher education levels (Siminto, 2023). In the context of English language learning in higher education, technology plays an important role in providing various learning media and tools that support the learning process. However, the use of technology in learning needs to be directed. (Zaimah, 2019) emphasizes that effective learning is learning that places students as active subjects in constructing knowledge. Therefore, the use of digital technology in language learning should serve as a means of supporting students' thinking processes, not as a substitute for independent thinking activities. Many advanced technologies are widely used by students as learning tools to help them write, translate, and understand learning materials. One of these technologies is Artificial Intelligence (AI), which is an innovation that can simulate human thinking processes through robotic systems without direct human involvement. Through the use of AI, students can continuously improve their speaking skills (Lee and Lee, 2024). In addition, AI is a branch of computer science that focuses on developing systems capable of imitating human abilities, such as learning, reasoning, and communication (Mohajan, 2025).

Along with the development of AI technology, various specific AI-based applications have emerged, such as chatbots. Chatbots are applications designed to interact with users through text or voice by using Natural Language Processing (NLP) technology (Abdulla et al., 2022). Over time,

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chatbots have developed into more advanced forms, one of which is ChatGPT (Generative Pre-Trained Transformer). ChatGPT is one of the most popular chatbots today. It was developed by OpenAI and launched in November 2022. ChatGPT provides fast and relevant information, which has encouraged many students to use it, especially in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) (Young and Shishido 2023).

Previous studies have shown that the use of ChatGPT in learning can provide several benefits for students. ChatGPT can support independent learning, provide instant feedback, and help improve English language skills (Quratulain, Dr. Saira Maqbool, and Sara Bilal, 2025). However, the use of ChatGPT also presents several challenges. Students may misuse this technology to complete academic tasks by copying answers generated by AI (Thu 2009). This behavior can lead to plagiarism and reduce academic integrity (Mijwil et al., 2023). Furthermore, excessive dependence on ChatGPT may limit the development of students' critical thinking, creativity, communication skills, and learning independence (Kasneci et al., 2023).

Despite these issues, most existing studies still focus on the general use of AI in education and do not specifically examine students' dependence on ChatGPT and its impact on the process and outcomes of English language learning, particularly in the context of higher education in Indonesia. This situation indicates a research gap, namely the lack of empirical studies that deeply explore how students' dependence on ChatGPT affects their English learning abilities, especially from the students' own perspectives. Understanding this issue is important to ensure that the use of AI in learning does not hinder the development of learning independence and critical thinking skills, which are key goals of higher education (Shanta, S., & Wells, 2022).

Therefore, this study aims to explore EFL students' dependence on ChatGPT and its impact on the English language learning process. This study was conducted in the English Education Study Program at an Islamic institute in Jambi, Indonesia, with a focus on second-semester students. Second-

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semester students were selected because they are in a transitional stage of learning, where they begin to face more complex academic tasks that often involve the use of ChatGPT. Based on this background, this study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How do second-semester students perceive their dependence on the use of ChatGPT in English language learning?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using ChatGPT as experienced by students in English language learning?
3. How does dependence on ChatGPT affect students' learning outcomes and learning independence?

It is expected that the findings of this study will provide theoretical and practical contributions to the use of ChatGPT as a supporting tool in English language learning. In addition, the results may serve as a reference for educators in integrating AI technology wisely without reducing students' critical thinking skills and academic integrity (Boulay, 2023).

Methods

This study uses an Exploratory qualitative research because it focuses on understanding participants' experiences and views to a specific issue, (John W. & Creswell, 2018). Furthermore, this approach allows the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of how students use ChatGPT and how it influences their English learning in real classroom contexts (Zhang et al. 2024). Participants were selected through purposive sampling, focusing on second-semester students of the English Department from IAIN Kerinci in the 2024/2025 academic year who actively used ChatGPT in their English learning. Five students were chosen because qualitative research emphasizes depth of understanding rather than the number of participants, allowing the researcher to explore learning experiences in detail. This small sample also made it possible to conduct a deeper thematic analysis and include students with different levels of English proficiency to obtain varied perspectives.

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Data were collected through semi-structured interviews as the main research instrument. This method was chosen because it allowed the researcher to explore participants' responses. The interview questions were open-ended and organized around several key themes, such as frequency and purposes of ChatGPT use, the types of learning tasks supported by ChatGPT, perceived benefits and challenges, and its impact on students' English language skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening), learner autonomy, and critical thinking.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the framework proposed by Braun and (Braun, V., & Clarke, 2006): (1) getting to know the data, (2) creating the initial codes, (3) looking for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and labelling themes, and (6) creating the final report. The researcher frequently reviewed the transcript to fully comprehend its substance and context. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, member checking was conducted by allowing participants to review and confirm the interpretations of their responses. Additionally, the name of the institution is anonymised and referred to as an Islamic institute in Jambi throughout this study. All students involved in the study were also anonymised and referred to as Student A, Student B, Student C, Student D, and Student E, to protect the identity of the institution and ensure research ethics.

Results and Discussion

This study explored the experiences of five second-semester students in an English Education Program at an Islamic institute in Jambi, Indonesia, focusing on their dependence on ChatGPT as a learning aid. Using semi-structured interviews, the researcher identified recurring patterns that reveal how ChatGPT functions not only as pedagogical support but also as a source of emerging cognitive and behavioural dependence. In line with a qualitative descriptive approach, empirical findings and discussion are integrated to illustrate how students' experiences relate to theoretical

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perspectives on AI-assisted learning. All participants reported frequent use of ChatGPT in their English learning, ranging from three to six times per week, with increased use during academic pressure or when dealing with unfamiliar topics. Students described ChatGPT not merely as a supplementary resource but as a central learning assistant. Student A stated,

“When I don’t know how to express something, I just write it in Bahasa Indonesia, and ChatGPT gives me the English version. It helps me a lot with vocabulary”.

Similarly, Student D explained,

“Sometimes I use ChatGPT outside of class hours to review materials. It’s like a tutor who’s always ready”

These responses indicate that ChatGPT has become an always-available source of linguistic support, gradually reducing students’ reliance on peer discussion and independent problem-solving (Xiao and Zhi, 2023).

1. Dimensions of Dependence on ChatGPT

Analysis of the interview data revealed three interrelated dimensions of dependence: functional dependence, cognitive dependence, and contextual-institutional dependence. These dimensions illustrate how students’ reliance on ChatGPT extends beyond technical assistance to influence their learning behaviour and thinking processes (Palmer et al. 2023).

a) Functional Dependence: Language Support and Efficiency

Students demonstrated functional dependence by relying on ChatGPT to improve linguistic accuracy and efficiency, particularly in writing tasks. Participants reported that the tool helped them correct grammar, rephrase sentences, and expand vocabulary, while significantly reducing the time required to complete assignments. Student C noted,

“I used to take hours to write essays. Now I just ask ChatGPT to rephrase or explain a sentence. It’s faster”

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This pattern indicates that ChatGPT functions as a language scaffold that facilitates task completion. However, such dependence also shifts students' attention from developing ideas to correcting surface-level language forms. This finding aligns with (Kasneci et al., 2023), who suggest that AI-based writing tools enhance linguistic accuracy through immediate feedback. Zawacki-Richter and Jung (2023) further argue that intelligent systems reduce cognitive and temporal burdens. Nevertheless, when efficiency becomes the primary learning goal, students risk engaging in procedural rather than meaningful learning.

b) Cognitive Dependence: Reduced Critical Thinking and Creativity

In addition to functional dependence, students also showed cognitive dependence, characterised by reduced involvement in planning, reasoning, and creative thinking. Student B admitted,

"I feel like I don't think anymore. When I get an assignment, I just type it into ChatGPT and copy the answer".

Similarly, Student C stated,

"I don't even outline or plan my writing anymore. I just asked ChatGPT to do it right away"

These statements reflect the phenomenon of cognitive offloading, where intellectual responsibility is transferred from students to AI tools. As a result, students take a passive role in the learning process rather than actively constructing knowledge. These findings support (Hutson and Ceballos, 2023) concerns that excessive AI use can reduce students' cognitive engagement and trigger dependence. In extreme cases, this pattern resembles learned helplessness, as described by (Maier and Seligman, 1976) Students also reported a decline in originality and personal voice. Student A reflected,

"I used to feel proud when I could write something myself. Now I just submit AI-generated work"

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This observation supports the argument of (Mijwil et al., 2023), who state that AI-generated text tends to standardize language, potentially weakening students' identity and creative expression.

c) Contextual and Institutional Dependence: Academic Pressure and Lack of Guidance

Students' dependence on ChatGPT is influenced by contextual and institutional factors, particularly heavy academic workloads and limited instructional guidance. Student C explained,

"I know this isn't the best way, but I don't have time to do everything myself. ChatGPT helps me finish my assignments faster"

Meanwhile, Student E said,

"Our lecturers don't discuss it. We use it on our own"

These responses indicate that dependence on ChatGPT often arises as a coping strategy rather than a deliberate choice. Without clear institutional guidelines, students normalise extensive AI use without fully understanding its ethical boundaries or limitations. These findings are consistent with (Machado et al., 2024), who found that students often rely on AI tools to manage excessive academic workloads. Kasneci et al., (2023) further emphasise that without structured AI literacy, students may misuse generative tools and misinterpret their role in learning.

Students also identified issues related to contextual accuracy. Student E noted,

"Sometimes the grammar is correct, but the meaning is wrong"

This supports (Alberth 2023) assertion that AI-generated responses may be linguistically accurate but pragmatically weak, potentially leading to misunderstandings in academic contexts.

"Instead of asking my friends or working in groups, I just use ChatGPT. It's faster"

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Such behaviour contradicts (Vygotsky, 1978) social constructivist perspective, which asserts that learning develops through social interaction and collaborative dialogue. The convenience of AI tools appears to isolate learners from their academic community, reshaping learning habits into more individualistic and technologically mediated forms.

2. ChatGPT Dependence and Its Implications for English Learning

This finding reveals a fundamental pedagogical problem. Although ChatGPT improves students' performance in low-level language skills such as grammar and vocabulary, the platform also encourages dependence that undermines higher-level skills, including critical thinking, creativity, and argument development. Distinction between surface learning and deep learning, where efficiency-oriented strategies can limit cognitive depth. From a social perspective, dependence on ChatGPT also reduces peer interaction. Student B said, "Instead of asking my friends or working in groups, I just use ChatGPT. It's faster" This shift contradicts (Vygotsky, 1978) social constructivist view, which emphasises learning as a socially mediated process. In this context, AI-supported dependence transforms learning into a more individualistic activity mediated by tools.

3. Pedagogical Implications

To optimise student engagement and learning outcomes, technology must be actively designed by educators, because only with the right pedagogical approach can technology enhance meaningful learning experiences (Mazlan et al., 2024). Instead of banning or ignoring ChatGPT, these findings suggest the need for pedagogical strategies that address students' dependence on the tool while maintaining its benefits. Given reports of decreased cognitive engagement and loss of learning autonomy, educators should integrate AI literacy and reflective learning practices into the teaching process.

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As suggested by Kasneci et al., (2023), Tasks that require students to evaluate, revise, and reflect on AI-generated output can reduce uncritical dependence. Additionally, process-based assessments, such as draft stages and reflective comments, can encourage students to remain cognitively engaged and take responsibility for their learning.

Table 1: Summary of the positive and negative impacts of ChatGPT.

| Theme | Positive Impact | Negative Impact |
|---|---|---|
| Functional Dependence: Language Support and Efficiency | Improves grammar, vocabulary, sentence rephrasing, and saves time in completing assignments. | Overreliance on ChatGPT leads to surface-level and meaningful learning. |
| Cognitive Dependence: Reduced Critical Thinking and Creativity | Reduce cognitive load and help students complete tasks quickly. | Decreases critical thinking, planning, creativity, originality, and causes cognitive offloading and learned helplessness. |
| Contextual and Institutional Dependence: Academic Pressure and Lack of Guidance | Helps students cope with a heavy academic workload and limited lecturer support. | Normalising the misuse of AI creates ethical ambiguity, causes misunderstandings due to inaccurate meanings, and weakens social interactions. |
| ChatGPT Dependence and Its Implications for English Learning | Enhances low-level language skills such as grammar and vocabulary. | Undermines higher-level skills (critical thinking, argumentation) and promotes surface learning over deep learning. |
| Pedagogical Implications | Encourages the integration of AI literacy, reflective tasks, and process-oriented assessment. | Without proper strategies, students remain dependent and cognitively disengaged. |

Conclusion

There are several benefits of incorporating ChatGPT into English language instruction, especially in terms of quick information access, concise explanations of course materials, and practice with grammar, vocabulary, and writing. Beyond classroom instruction, ChatGPT helps students strengthen

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their comprehension and improve their language skills as an additional learning tool. However, an over-reliance on ChatGPT can impede the growth of critical thinking, independence, and deep learning, among other vital abilities. Its shortcomings in providing thorough feedback, identifying cultural quirks, and the potential for producing false information are issues that need careful consideration.

As a result, ChatGPT ought to be viewed as an adjunct to textbooks, scholarly materials, and face-to-face communication with instructors rather than as a substitute. In the process of learning English, a well-rounded approach will allow students to capitalise on its advantages while encouraging meaningful involvement, critical thinking, and effective communication skills.

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