



The Silent Tutor: Generative AI, Learner Autonomy, and the Risk of Dependency in ESL Writing Classrooms

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Abstract

Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) has rapidly transformed English as a Second Language (ESL) writing classrooms by functioning as a silent, ever-present tutor. Acting as a 'silent tutor,' AI tools provide real-time feedback, content generation, and linguistic support, thereby reshaping how learners engage with writing tasks. This paper critically examines the intersection of generative AI, learner autonomy, and the risk of dependency in ESL writing classrooms. While AI technologies enhance accessibility, reduce cognitive load, and support self-directed learning, they also raise concerns regarding over-reliance, diminished critical engagement, and erosion of authentic learner voice. Drawing on theories of learner autonomy, sociocultural learning, and digital pedagogy, this study explores how AI-mediated writing influences both process and product in ESL contexts. The paper argues that although generative AI can foster autonomy when used strategically, unregulated dependence may hinder long-term language acquisition and critical thinking development. The study concludes with pedagogical recommendations aimed at balancing technological affordances with human-centered learning approaches.

Keywords: Dependency, Digital Pedagogy, ESL Writing, Generative AI, Language Learning, Learner Autonomy

Introduction

The emergence of generative artificial intelligence has marked a paradigm shift in language education, particularly in ESL writing classrooms. Tools such as AI-based text generators, grammar assistants, and automated feedback systems have become integral to the contemporary learning environment. These technologies function as silent tutors—ever-present, responsive, and personalized—providing learners with immediate assistance that was previously unavailable outside classroom settings.

For ESL learners, writing often represents one of the most challenging aspects of language acquisition. Issues such as limited vocabulary, grammatical inaccuracies, and lack of confidence frequently hinder their ability to produce coherent and effective texts. Generative AI tools address these challenges by offering scaffolding that enhances both linguistic accuracy and structural coherence. As a result, learners are increasingly relying on these tools not only for correction but also for idea generation and content development.

However, the integration of AI into writing instruction raises critical pedagogical questions. Does AI support genuine learning, or does it merely facilitate task completion? To what extent does reliance on AI undermine learner autonomy? Can students develop independent writing skills in an environment where assistance is constantly available? This paper seeks to address these questions by examining the dual role of generative AI as both an enabler and a potential inhibitor of effective language learning.

Objectives

1. To examine the role of generative AI in ESL writing pedagogy.
 2. To analyze its impact on learner autonomy and self-regulated learning.
 3. To identify the risks associated with over-dependence on AI tools.
 4. To propose strategies for balanced and ethical integration of AI in ESL classrooms.
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Literature Review

The concept of learner autonomy has been central to language education discourse since Holec (1981) ^[2] defined it as the ability of learners to take responsibility for their own learning. This includes setting goals, selecting methods, and evaluating outcomes. Benson (2011) ^[1] further expands this concept by emphasizing the role of technology in facilitating autonomous learning and the digital tools can both enhance and constrain autonomy depending on usage patterns.

The integration of AI into education aligns with sociocultural theory, particularly Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where learners benefit from guided support. AI tools function as mediators, providing assistance that enables learners to perform beyond their current competence level. Studies by Zawacki-Richter *et al.* (2019) ^[4] indicate that AI can significantly enhance personalized learning experiences.

Self-regulated learning theory offers a complementary lens for understanding this shift. Zimmerman (2002) ^[6] conceptualizes self-regulation as a cyclical process comprising forethought, performance, and self-reflection, through which learners plan, monitor, and evaluate their own progress. Generative AI intersects with each phase of this cycle: it can support forethought by helping learners plan structure and content, assist performance through real-time linguistic correction, and, if used reflectively, prompt self-evaluation by exposing learners to alternative phrasings and revisions. Yet the same affordances that support self-regulation can also displace it.

When AI performs the monitoring and evaluative functions that learners would otherwise internalize, such as identifying errors, judging coherence, or deciding when a draft is complete, learners may not develop the self-monitoring strategies that self-regulated learning theory identifies as central to durable competence. This distinction matters for the present analysis: autonomy concerns the learner's capacity to direct their own learning, whereas self-regulation concerns the specific cognitive and metacognitive strategies, including goal-setting, self-monitoring, and self-evaluation, that make such direction possible. AI use in ESL writing classrooms therefore needs to be evaluated not only in terms of whether learners remain autonomous, but whether they continue to exercise these underlying self-regulatory strategies rather than delegating them to the tool.

In ESL writing contexts, research suggests that AI tools improve grammatical accuracy and lexical variety. However, scholars such as Selwyn (2019) ^[3] argue that excessive reliance on technology may lead to deskilling. Similarly, scholars argue that traditional notions of plagiarism are challenged by AI-generated content, necessitating new frameworks for authorship and originality (Cotton *et al.*, 2023) ^[5].

Emerging studies also emphasize the affective dimension of AI use. Learners often report increased confidence and reduced anxiety, yet these benefits may mask underlying dependency. The literature thus reveals a tension between empowerment and erosion of independent skill development.

Analysis

Generative AI transforms the writing process by intervening at multiple stages, including brainstorming, drafting, and editing. This intervention reduces cognitive load, allowing

learners to focus on higher-order concerns such as organization and argumentation. However, this advantage also introduces the risk of bypassing essential learning processes.

However, cognitive offloading—the delegation of mental effort to external tools—raises critical concerns. While it enables efficiency, it may also weaken internalized language competence. Learners who rely heavily on AI may struggle to perform independently in contexts where such tools are unavailable.

Another dimension is the transformation of authorship. When AI contributes significantly to content generation, the boundary between learner-produced and machine-generated text becomes blurred. This challenges the notion of ownership and raises questions about the authenticity of student work.

One of the key benefits of AI is its ability to provide immediate feedback. Unlike traditional classroom settings, where feedback is delayed, AI enables iterative learning. Students can revise their work multiple times, leading to improved outcomes. Nevertheless, this convenience may discourage independent problem-solving.

Dependency becomes evident when learners rely on AI not only for correction but also for content generation. In such cases, the learner's role shifts from creator to editor, limiting opportunities for cognitive engagement. This raises concerns about long-term skill development and authenticity in writing. Furthermore, dependency manifests in behavioural patterns. Students may default to AI assistance even for tasks within their capability, thereby limiting opportunities for productive struggle—a key component of learning. Over time, this may result in superficial proficiency rather than deep competence.

Despite these concerns, AI also offers significant pedagogical advantages. It democratizes access to high-quality feedback, particularly in resource-constrained environments. It supports iterative learning and encourages experimentation with language. The challenge lies in ensuring that these benefits do not come at the cost of autonomy.

Discussion

The challenge for educators lies in integrating AI in a manner that enhances learning without fostering dependency. One approach is to design tasks that require critical engagement with AI-generated content. For example, students can be asked to evaluate, revise, and justify changes to AI outputs. Another strategy involves emphasizing process-oriented assessment. By focusing on drafts, revisions, and reflections, educators can ensure that learners actively engage with the writing process. Additionally, clear guidelines on ethical AI use are essential to maintain academic integrity. Teacher training also plays a crucial role. Educators must be equipped with the knowledge and skills to effectively incorporate AI into their teaching practices. This includes understanding both the capabilities and limitations of AI tools.

One effective strategy is the incorporation of AI literacy into the curriculum. Students should be trained not only in using AI tools but also in critically evaluating their outputs. This fosters metacognitive awareness and reduces passive reliance. Process-oriented assessment models are particularly relevant in this context. By evaluating drafts, revisions, and

reflective commentary, educators can ensure that learning remains central to writing tasks. AI can be positioned as a support tool rather than a substitute for effort.

Collaborative activities that involve comparing human and AI-generated texts can also enhance critical thinking. Such exercises encourage learners to identify strengths, limitations, and biases in AI outputs. Institutional policies play a crucial role in guiding ethical AI use. Clear guidelines on acceptable practices, citation norms, and academic integrity must be established. These policies should be flexible enough to accommodate technological advancements while maintaining academic standards. Teacher preparedness is equally important. Professional development programs should equip educators with the skills to integrate AI effectively, interpret its outputs, and design meaningful learning experiences.

Conclusion

Generative AI, a silent tutor, represents both an opportunity and a challenge for ESL writing classrooms. As a silent tutor, it offers instant, personalized support has redefined the boundaries of language learning enabling learners to overcome linguistic barriers and improve writing quality. However, its integration is not without challenges.

Returning to the objectives set out at the beginning of this paper, the discussion above addresses each in turn. The role of generative AI in ESL writing pedagogy was examined through its functions in brainstorming, drafting, feedback, and revision, showing AI to operate as a scaffolding presence across the writing process. Its impact on learner autonomy and self-regulated learning was analyzed by distinguishing autonomy, the learner's broader capacity to direct their own learning, from self-regulation, the specific cycle of forethought, performance, and self-reflection through which that direction is exercised; the analysis indicates that AI can support both when used deliberately, but risks displacing the self-monitoring and self-evaluation components of self-regulation when learners default to it uncritically. The risks associated with over-dependence, including cognitive offloading, blurred authorship, and the erosion of productive struggle, were identified as the paper's central concern. Finally, strategies for balanced and ethical integration, among them AI-literacy instruction, process-oriented assessment, human-AI comparison exercises, institutional policy, and teacher training, were proposed as means of addressing these risks without forfeiting AI's pedagogical benefits.

A balanced approach is essential—one that leverages AI's strengths while preserving the integrity of the learning process. By promoting critical engagement, ethical use, and process-oriented learning, educators can ensure that AI serves as a tool for empowerment rather than a source of dependency. This paper has demonstrated that while AI can enhance learner autonomy under guided conditions, unchecked usage may lead to dependency, reduced cognitive engagement, and compromised authorship. The key lies in achieving a balance that preserves the integrity of the learning process.

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