

Exploring the use of artificial intelligence in English language learning: A qualitative study of English students at Politeknik Negeri Sriwijaya

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ABSTRACT

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This qualitative case study explored how English students at Politeknik Negeri Sriwijaya use artificial intelligence (AI) in learning English, which benefits and challenges they perceive, and how these experiences shape their attitudes toward autonomous and technology-mediated learning. Data were collected through semi-structured online interviews with 12 purposively selected students and analyzed using an interactive qualitative model of data condensation, display and conclusion drawing. Participants chose different AI tools for different language skills and turned to them mostly when tasks or concepts were difficult, while still consulting lecturers, friends, dictionaries and textbooks. They valued fast, detailed explanations, socially easier speaking practice and feedback on mistakes, but reported inaccurate or unnatural output, costly or repetitive features, limited speaking practice and worry about dependence. All participants drew the same boundary: AI is acceptable for understanding, correcting and practicing, but excessive when it replaces their own effort. No participant reported lower confidence, and views on autonomy ranged from independence-leaning to balanced and dependence-leaning. The findings extend technology acceptance and CALL perspectives by showing that the relationship between AI and learner autonomy in vocational EFL settings varies with individual disposition. Lecturers can therefore differentiate their guidance rather than rely on uniform policies.



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1. Introduction

The integration of artificial intelligence into the field of language education is one of the most significant shifts in contemporary applied linguistics and educational technologies. Over the past ten years, AI has moved from the periphery, as a supplementary teaching aid, to the center of how students learn, practice, and receive feedback in a second or foreign language. Systematic reviews show that adaptive tutoring, automated feedback and natural-language-processing systems are

spreading rapidly across disciplines, with language education among the most active fields of application (Bond et al., 2024; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). This shift in paradigm has made researchers reassess AI as not only a classroom aid but a developing pedagogical agency that can be customized, real-time responsive, and change instructional based on the information (Holmes et al., 2022; Hwang et al., 2020). The term Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has been described as the field of applied linguistics that involves the use of computers to teach and learn a second language (Chapelle and Jamieson, 2008), and has since been broadened to include the usage of computers, starting with simple drill-based programs, up to the modern artificial intelligence-based environments (Beatty, 2010). Recent AI uses, such as ChatGPT, Grammarly and voice-based chatbots, build on this trend by offering learners real-time, interactive and personalized linguistic support to a degree that did not exist previously with CALL systems.

This study is framed primarily by technology acceptance and CALL perspectives. The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) posits that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use shape individuals' adoption of a technology (Davis, 1989), and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) adds social influence and facilitating conditions as further determinants (Venkatesh et al., 2003). CALL scholarship, in turn, offers a perspective on how language-learning technologies develop and become specialized for particular language skills (Beatty, 2010; Chapelle & Jamieson, 2008). Because these frameworks originate largely from quantitative traditions, they are used here as sensitizing concepts, namely perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, personalization, and dependency, to guide the interpretation of students' accounts rather than as hypotheses to be tested. Two further concepts complement this framing: learner autonomy, understood as the capacity to take charge of one's own learning (Holec, 1981), and cognitive offloading, whereby reliance on technology may reduce learners' internal engagement with material (Zhai et al., 2024).

One of the most widely researched areas of AI in English learning is writing development. Advanced large language models can produce readable, contextually relevant text and give iterative feedback on grammar, structure, and style in an iterative manner, so ChatGPT is now widely used in writing instruction (Karataş and Yuce, 2024; Warschauer et al., 2023). Empirical studies found that EFL students use ChatGPT at different stages of the writing process (e.g., idea generation, revision, and proofreading) and demonstrate positive attitudes towards its usefulness (Su et al., 2023; Xiao and Zhi, 2023). Repeated exposure to ChatGPT feedback has been found to have a similar effect on how learners revise and self-edit over time, as found in similar longitudinal classroom studies (Yan, 2023), and both comparative reviews have found that AI-generated feedback can be useful alongside teacher feedback to make writing more accurate (Barrot, 2023; Kohnke et al., 2023; Steiss et al., 2024). Our earlier systematic review reviewed of 22 studies of AI integration in language learning at Politeknik Negeri Sriwijaya and found that personalized learning and feedback are reported as the most common positive effect of AI integration (Ma'ruf and Tanjung, 2025).

The role of AI in the development of spoken language has also been given similar academic consideration especially its potential to reduce foreign language speaking anxiety. The anxiety of speaking a foreign language has been established as a formidable barrier to oral performance with particularly the fear of being judged negatively in the interactive and real-time speech production (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994). It has been argued that AI conversational agents can reduce this barrier by offering a practice space free from peer or teacher evaluation. This argument has been empirically supported in various settings: voice-based AI chatbots have been recorded to positively impact speaking competence and affective engagement in Korean EFL learners (Han, 2020; Jeon, 2024), and web-based systems of speaking practice have shown similar effects of reducing anxiety (Bashori et al., 2020) and increasing willingness to communicate through chatbots (Du and Daniel, 2024; Kim and Su, 2024; Huang et al., 2022; Tai and Chen, 2023). However, the data does not seem so uniform: speaking practice, which is mediated by AI, has not always been shown to be more beneficial than peer interaction in terms of reducing anxiety levels at the population level (Ballıdağ and Aydin, 2025), and oral practice mediated by AI has been tested in relation to its capacity to understand and react to learners with accented speech, which also raises

further questions about equity and access in the context of AI-mediated oral practice (Zou et al., 2023; Moussalli and Cardoso, 2020).

Reviews also report harms, mainly over-dependence, weakened academic integrity and critical thinking, and privacy and ethical concerns (Ma'ruf and Tanjung., 2025; Kasneci et al., 2023; Lo 2023). The earliest first-hand records of how students themselves mediate such tensions, emerged recently at Politeknik Negeri Sriwijaya. A qualitative study of Electrical Engineering students found that students regarded unreviewed copy-pasting and submitting AI-generated text without reading it as unethical, whereas using AI for brainstorming, idea generation, and language refinement was seen as acceptable (Al Ghani et al., 2026). Similarly, a qualitative study of Electronics Engineering students at the same university has discovered that despite the students having a tendency to believe that AI was a positive tool that increased their productivity and helped them to comprehend the course material better, they also admitted that there were risks of becoming addicted, losing the motivation to study on their own, and having problems with maintaining ethics in academic writing (Daradespa et al., 2026). All these sources are pointing to the fact that AI and its influence on student learning is not necessarily good or bad, but it is being negotiated by students themselves in the context and task.

In higher education, particularly in Indonesia, AI tools such as ChatGPT are increasingly used by university students in their academic work, and technology acceptance models show that ease of use, content quality, and system stability strongly influence students' readiness to adopt AI in learning (Ninghardjanti et al., 2026). Within Indonesian EFL contexts, research increasingly documents how students perceive and use AI in learning English, with surveys of English Language Teaching students in Southeast Asia reporting high awareness of ChatGPT as a writing aid and largely positive attitudes toward it (Mohamed, 2024; Nguyen & Dieu, 2024). Indonesian-specific studies have reflected these findings; one study that investigated the use of AI-based tools by EFL Indonesian senior high school students revealed that they used AI tools actively in writing but did not always evaluate AI suggestions accurately (Utami et al., 2023). Other Indonesian studies have examined how AI supports English writing (Kaharuddin et al., 2024; Marzuki et al., 2023). Furthermore, research on Indonesian university students' general perceptions of AI shows that convenience, accessibility and immediate feedback are the most valued features, while reduced critical thinking is a recurring concern (Muslimin, 2024).

The role of AI in the learning of English is especially urgent in vocational and poly-technical education, where pragmatical communicative competence and employability are directly dependent on the level of English proficiency but not necessarily on academic results. Studies on vocational high school students in Indonesia show that AI is perceived as a supportive tool that helps to better master the material, expand the pool of vocabulary and generate a feeling of independence in the learner, but the danger of over-reliance and information quality are also noted (Yuniarti & Pebriani, 2026). In other working environments, there are also complimentary reports that tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly and Google Translators are popular and are perceived to work well in grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, listening and writing competencies, but also indicate that a lack of internet connectivity and the absence of a human experience with AI-mediated learning are a persistent concern (Rokhayani, 2025). The nearest to the present study, recent research at Politeknik Negeri Sriwijaya itself has found out that vocational first-year students actively utilized digital technologies, including AI tools, mobile applications, and online resources, to assist them in learning English, where it positively impacted learner autonomy and language development and negatively affected internet access and more instructor guidance (Wijaya et al., 2026).

Despite this increasing literature, some gaps, nonetheless, exist. A significant part of the existing research on AI in English language learning is quantitative or mixed-methods in nature, and aimed at the measurement of some outcome (e.g., writing accuracy, reduction in the feeling of anxiety when speaking, technology-acceptance scores, and others), but not at the lived experiences of the learners. Interestingly, qualitative research on student interaction with AI has actually been conducted so far only in Electrical and Electronics Engineering students on the overall behavior of academic assignments and academic writing ethics across the board (Al Ghani et al., 2026; Daradespa et al., 2026) but not in English language learning. In the meantime, the studies that have explicitly

examined the use of technology or AI to learn English among students of Politeknik Negeri Sriwijaya have been based on quantitative survey designs rather than qualitative inquiry (Aditya et al., 2026; Wijaya et al., 2026). This introduces a seeming and distinct gap: no qualitative study to date has addressed how students of English Department at Politeknik Negeri Sriwijaya perceive, assess and make sense of AI as an element of their language learning experience, rather than as a component of general academic work, which is conceptually significant because quantitative patterns of use and score of acceptance provide a valuable source of information, but alone cannot give complete insight into the logic, expectations and concerns which underlie the everyday decisions that students make about whether to use AI in language learning in particular and not in general academic work. This research paper fills that gap by taking a qualitative approach that is well-suited to the depth, richness, and context of perspectives of participants concerning emerging educational technologies (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The novelty of this study lies in its qualitative focus on how English students at a vocational higher education institution perceive and make sense of AI as part of their language learning itself, bringing together their patterns of use, the benefits and challenges they perceive, and their attitudes toward autonomous learning in a single account.

This study is significant for three reasons. First, preliminary observation showed that English Department students actively use AI tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, and translation tools in coursework while ambivalent about how far to rely on them, requiring evidence grounded in their accounts. Second, in vocational and polytechnic education, English proficiency is tied to communicative competence and employability, making the quality of AI-mediated learning practices a practical concern. Third, understanding how students use AI and weigh its benefits against its risks is essential for helping lecturers guide learners toward critical, independent use rather than passive reliance. Accordingly, this study explores how English students at Politeknik Negeri Sriwijaya use AI in learning English by (1) describing their AI use, (2) identifying perceived benefits and challenges of AI integration in language learning, and (3) exploring how these perceptions shape their attitudes toward autonomous and technology-mediated learning within a vocational higher education context. Therefore, this study theoretically extends technology acceptance and CALL perspectives with a qualitative account showing that students' AI relationships and autonomy in a vocational EFL setting vary with individual disposition rather than forming a uniform attitude. Practically, the findings may help lecturers tailor guidance on AI use to confident students and those uneasy about dependence, rather than uniform policies.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

The research design used in this study was a qualitative case study since the research aimed to learn how the students of the English Department at Politeknik Negeri Sriwijaya perceive and experience the application of artificial intelligence in their real-life academic and language-learning practices. A case study is reasonable to use whenever researchers examine a contemporary phenomenon that is not only embedded in a narrow institutional setting but the spheres of the phenomenon and the context cannot be disaggregated (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). The limited scope of this study is the student body of the English Department of one vocational polytechnic, where AI-mediated English learning practices are affected by shared curricular requirements, shared digital infrastructure, and shared organizational culture of using technology. The qualitative orientation also helped the research to elicit subjective meanings and daily learning behaviors of the participants, as well as the rationales concerning their AI-related decisions which cannot be well explained using numerical measure alone (Braun and Clarke, 2019; Miles et al., 2014).

2.2. Research Setting and Participants

The research was conducted in 2026 in the English Department of Politeknik Negeri Sriwijaya in Palembang, South Sumatra. The site was selected because of a preliminary observation that AI tools like ChatGPT, Grammarly, and translation tools were actively used in coursework (speaking practice, writing tasks, and vocabulary work) by students and that students were apparently ambivalent about the extent of their use of these tools. The sample size was comprised of students

who were pursuing English Study Program and had at least two semesters of documented experience in using AI tools in performing English learning activities. After a purposive sampling strategy, sample size was chosen on the basis that the participants were able to provide information rich descriptions of the phenomenon being studied and not based on the fact that they were statistically representative of the entire student population (Patton, 2002). The following criteria were applied to select the participants: (1) the students needed to be enrolled in the English Department to participate in using AI tools and learn English during the current or previous semester, (2) the participants needed to voluntarily participate in the interview, and (3) the participants needed to be able to describe their learning experience of using AI tools in detail. The purposive sampling was used to pick out 12 students who had to be the respondents as well as the process continued until responses began to have repeated patterns within the primary themes of use, benefit and concern, which would indicate adequate depth of a small-scale qualitative study.

2.3. Research Instruments

The data in this study were collected solely through semi-structured interviews. This format was chosen because it allowed the researchers to follow a consistent set of guiding questions while giving participants room to elaborate on their own experiences and to raise issues the researchers had not anticipated. The interview guide covered the routine practices participants followed when using AI tools in learning English, the language skills in which they relied most on AI support (speaking, writing, vocabulary, or grammar), their reasons for favoring AI assistance over other tools, their perceptions of the accuracy and reliability of AI, their interpretation of reasonable and unreasonable dependence on AI, and how they believed AI use had affected their confidence and independence as English learners.

2.4. Data Collection

The data collection process was carried out in two phases. First, the researchers liaised with the Head of the English Department and course lecturers to identify which classes actively used AI tools, and then consulted the lecturers to screen students who met the inclusion criteria. Second, because the data were collected during the semester break, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted online via Zoom, which allowed participants to take part from a place where they felt relaxed and comfortable. With participants' permission, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview transcripts were then compiled into a single qualitative database for analysis.

2.5. Data Analysis

The interactive model suggested by Miles et al. (2014) comprised of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification, and was used to analyze the data. The coding was deductive and inductive: deductive code was coded using the constructs of technology acceptance and CALL-related (perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, personalization and dependency), and the inductive code was coded using the words that participants used and their own experiences.

The analysis proceeded in four steps. First, the interview transcripts were read repeatedly to gain familiarity with the data. Second, in the data condensation stage, the transcripts were segmented and coded using an initial codebook built from the deductive constructs, while inductive codes were added from the participants' own expressions, and similar codes were then grouped into categories and themes. Third, in the data display stage, the themes were organized into participant-by-theme matrices and summary tables (see Tables 1 and Table 2) so that patterns within and across participants could be compared. Fourth, conclusions were drawn and verified by returning to the raw transcripts and searching for cases that did not fit the emerging patterns. Interview excerpts in Indonesian were translated into English by the researchers.

2.6. Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Several strategies were used to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. Member checking, in which participants reviewed a summary of their interview responses, was used to confirm the

accuracy of the data. Peer debriefing with departmental colleagues and an audit trail documenting the coding decisions made during analysis were also employed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical protection was ensured in several ways. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection, including consent for the audio recording of the Zoom interviews. Participants' identities were anonymized through pseudonyms, access to the raw data was restricted to the research team, and participants' personal information and statements were not reproduced in any public place without their direct consent.

3. Findings and Discussion

The findings are organized around the three research aims: how students use AI in learning English, which benefits and challenges they perceive, and how these experiences shape their attitudes toward autonomous and technology-mediated learning. They are based on semi-structured interviews with 12 students of the English Study Program (nine female, three male), referred to as P1–P12. Table 1 summarizes their profiles. Participants had used AI tools for English learning for between about one year and four years; six had started in senior high school and two when they entered university. Interview quotations were translated from Indonesian by the researchers.

Table 1. Participant profiles and AI use as reported in the interviews

Code	Gender	AI Usage Duration	AI Tools Reported	Self-Reported Frequency	Skills said to be most helped
P1	F	Senior high school (about 4 years)	Duolingo, Grammarly, ChatGPT, Gemini, Google Translate	"50-50" with other methods; prefers asking more knowledgeable friends	Writing, speaking
P2	M	Senior high school	ChatGPT (all skills)	Mainly when he does not follow what lecturers explain	Grammar
P3	F	Senior high school	Gemini	Frequent; prefers chatting with AI to interacting with people	Grammar
P4	F	1.5–2 years	ChatGPT (incl. Voice), Gemini, Grammarly, Elsa Speak, YouTube AI Summary	About 70% AI, 30% manual sources	Writing, grammar
P5	F	3–4 years (since senior high school)	Duolingo, QuillBot, Google Translate, DeepL, BBC AI, Stimuler	"Quite often", comparable to other methods	Grammar
P6	F	About 1 year	Duolingo, Gemini, Google Translate, Spotify AI	Quite often, on tasks she finds difficult	Reading, speaking
P7	F	2–3 years (mid Grade 11)	ChatGPT, Grammarly	Quite often, especially on tasks not understood	Vocabulary, grammar
P8	F	About 1 year (since semester 1)	ChatGPT, Grammarly, Elsa Speak	Almost daily, depending on task difficulty	Writing, grammar
P9	F	Start of university	ChatGPT (Voice), Gemini, Grammarly, Google Translate	Quite often on difficult tasks; still asks lecturers and friends	Writing, grammar
P10	M	Senior high school	Gemini, Duolingo, Google Translate, Spotify AI	Quite often for tasks, but not daily	Vocabulary, speaking
P11	M	Just over 1 year	ChatGPT (Voice), Gemini, Duolingo, QuillBot, Grammarly, Google Translate	Quite often on difficult tasks, not in every learning process	Writing, grammar

Code	Gender	AI Usage Duration	AI Tools Reported	Self-Reported Frequency	Skills said to be most helped
P12	F	Start of university	Elsa Speak, ChatGPT, Grammarly, Duolingo, Google Translate	Quite often for speaking practice; lecturer materials and textbooks still dominate for tasks	Speaking, pronunciation

3.1. Patterns of AI tool use

Most of the participants didn't use just one tool. Nine out of the twelve participants mentioned using three or more different tools, and the tool they chose depended on the language skill they were working on, as shown in Table 2. Most participants used Grammarly to check their grammar, and fewer people mentioned using ChatGPT, Duolingo, Gemini, or QuillBot. Writing help was provided by Grammarly, QuillBot, or a chatbot, depending on what was needed for the task. For speaking and listening, participants used special apps like Duolingo, Elsa Speak, and Stimuler, along with ChatGPT's voice feature. When it came to reading, most of the support came from ChatGPT and Gemini, with five participants using each of these tools. The vocabulary was divided between Duolingo, which had six participants, and chatbots, which also had six. For translation, most participants used Google Translate, with seven participants, while ChatGPT was used by four and Gemini by two as other options. Three participants used few tools: P2 used ChatGPT for all seven skills, P3 used Gemini alone, and P7 used ChatGPT for everything plus Grammarly for grammar. Participants added their own opinions to each tool. Grammarly was praised for catching errors fast, but P9, P11, and P12 mentioned that some of its corrections didn't match their original meaning or style, were too much, or needed to be checked again.

Table 2. Tools reported for each language skill

Skill	Participants reporting a tool	Tools named (number of participants)
Speaking	12	Duolingo (4), ChatGPT (4), Elsa Speak (3), Gemini (1), Stimuler (1)
Listening	11	ChatGPT (5), Spotify AI (2), Elsa Speak (2), Duolingo (1), YouTube AI Summary (1), BBC AI (1)
Reading	10	ChatGPT (5), Gemini (5), Duolingo (1)
Writing	11	ChatGPT (4), Grammarly (4), Gemini (3), QuillBot (2)
Grammar	12	Grammarly (7), ChatGPT (4), Duolingo (2), Gemini (1), QuillBot (1)
Vocabulary	11	ChatGPT (6), Duolingo (6), Gemini (1)
Translation	11	Google Translate (7), ChatGPT (4), Gemini (2), DeepL (1)

Use is triggered by difficulty of the assignments given by the lecturer. Participants did not say that AI was used regularly for every task. Five of them (P2, P6, P7, P9, P11) mentioned they usually used it when they found a task or idea difficult to understand. The participants shared different ideas about how much they use AI. P4 thought about 70% of their work came from AI and 30% from manual sources. P1 said they split their work evenly between AI and other methods and usually asked friends who knew more before starting. P5 thought using AI was similar to using other methods. P8 used AI almost every day, depending on how hard the task was. P10 used AI often for tasks but not every single day. P12 mainly used AI for practicing speaking, but for her coursework, she still mostly depended on the materials from her lecturers and textbooks. Several people said that AI is built on top of knowledge they found somewhere else first. P2 mentioned that before using ChatGPT, they need to understand the basic information provided by their lecturer or teacher first. P3 established a clear way to divide tasks: *"The idea should come from us; we only use AI for suggestions as extra help."* P11 had some ideas for an essay but found it hard to write proper English sentences. They said, *"AI helped by providing different sentence options, which I then changed on my own."*

3.2. Perceived benefits and challenges

There were four main benefits that were always named by the participants which are speed and availability, explanation of difficult material, socially easier practice, and feedback on mistakes. The benefits always come alongside the challenges. The participants reported that they also found four

mains concerned which are the quality of AI output, cost and repetitive features, limits in speaking practice, and dependence.

The first benefit is speed, practicality and availability at any time. Eleven of the 12 participants gave speed, practicality or availability as a reason for using AI rather than other resources (P1–P11). P1 and P4 stressed that AI is accessible around the clock, and P5, P7, P8 and P11 stressed use at any time and place. Several linked this to limited time. P2 said, *“using AI is one of the right choices to save time in doing all the tasks”*. P3 valued that AI is responsive when a task is urgent, and P8 liked that AI can be asked repeatedly.

Next, detailed explanation of difficult material. All 12 participants could recall a moment when AI made something difficult understandable. Grammar was the skill most often said to benefit (eight participants: P2, P3, P4, P5, P7, P8, P9, P11), followed by writing (five: P1, P4, P8, P9, P11), speaking (four: P1, P6, P10, P12), vocabulary (two: P7, P10) and reading (one: P6). What participants valued was explanation that adapted to their level. P2 said that other people’s short explanations did not work for him: *“I need ChatGPT to explain the grammar material in detail”*. P4 valued examples: *“AI can give around five different example sentences in one question until we really understand”*. P1 found academic journals hard to read as a beginner and was *“helped by AI, which can give explanations in language that is easy to understand”*. P10 used Gemini to explain unknown words in a reading text according to context, P7 could learn the meaning of slang and idioms straight away, and P12 could listen to pronunciation examples repeatedly until she became used to them.

Participants are also agreed that AI comes with socially easier practice. Four participants described AI as easier than dealing with people. P1 said that when she was embarrassed to ask about material she did not understand, *“we can ask AI for help, because it does not feel intimidating”*. P3, who described herself as an introvert who rarely interacts with other people, said she preferred to chat with AI. For speaking, P4 valued that ChatGPT can be talked to casually without fear of being judged, and P12 chose AI because *“I can practice on my own and do not feel embarrassed when I make mistakes”*.

Finally, feedback on mistakes and word choice. Six participants (P3, P4, P7, P8, P9, P11) described AI feedback as helping them see their errors or improve their wording. P8 said that *“AI does not only correct but also gives an explanation, so I understand it better”*. P4 used AI for academic essays because *“AI can give suggestions for more appropriate word choice”*, and P3 said Gemini helped raise the level of the vocabulary in her writing. P7 valued receiving feedback immediately, and P9 and P11 said that AI made them more aware of their own mistakes.

Despite its benefits, the use of AI also has some challenges. The major challenge is wrong, confusing or unnatural output, and the need to check it. All 12 participants had encountered wrong or confusing answers (P1 said “often”). Nine of the 11 participants who used translation tools (P4–P12) said the output was sometimes unnatural, too literal or out of context, and P7 said that translations *“need to be checked again after being translated because they often do not fit the context”*. P4 warned that, without care, *“the language style sounds far too AI-like”*. P1, P2 and P4 added that the quality of an answer depends on the quality of the prompt, and P4 closed her interview by saying that what matters most is *“our prompting skill and students’ critical attitude”*. P1 did not copy AI output directly, since *“it is also made by humans and sometimes makes errors”*. Seven fell back on a friend who understood better when doubt remained (P1, P2, P6, P7, P8, P11, P12), and five rephrased or re-asked the question (P2, P4, P5, P7, P8). Two participants relied more on how convincing the answer looked. P7 said *“if the answer is in line with what I asked and the language is natural and not contrived, then I can trust it”*, and P3 said *“when AI explains in detail with logical and clear points, I think it can be trusted”*. The two participants who explained how a specific wrong answer arose both linked it to hurrying. P2 said, *“because we are often in a hurry, the AI ended up giving a wrong answer”*. P3 recalled an assignment she remembered only at the deadline: she sent AI a photo of the questions and, in her words, *“I immediately copied it into my notebook, but after matching it against the questions again, some answers did not fit”*. She concluded that answers must be cross-checked before they are accepted.

Another challenge is cost and repetitive or restricted features. Five participants (P1, P5, P6, P7, P8) mentioned paid features, advertising or costly premium versions; P8 said of Elsa Speak that *“the price is quite expensive for premium”*. Five of the six Duolingo users (P5, P6, P10, P11, P12) found its vocabulary or exercises repetitive. Three participants (P6, P7, P8) also noted word or sentence limits in free versions of Google Translate and Grammarly.

The participants also notice that speaking and listening practice that cannot replace people. Seven participants (P1, P3, P4, P5, P9, P11, P12) pointed to limits in AI-based speaking or listening practice. Some found conversation limited in range: P1 said Duolingo’s conversations were not broad or varied enough, and P11 found its conversation limited. P4 found ChatGPT’s intonation stiff and its grammar correction in speech inconsistent. Others raised accent and articulation. P3 noted that speaking with Gemini requires *“clear articulation”*, P11 observed that *“the accents used are not very varied”*, and P5 noted that BBC AI mostly used British accents. Two participants contrasted AI with real interaction. P9 said that practicing conversation with ChatGPT Voice *“does not yet feel like speaking with a person directly”*, and P12 said Elsa Speak could not yet replace conversation with real people.

The last challenge experienced by the participants is worry about dependence, and where to draw the line. Every participant said they had worried about relying too much on AI, though for different reasons. Some linked it to a limited knowledge base. P1, who had never taken an English course and learned only through the internet, said, *“I am very worried because of my limited knowledge of English”*, and P2 saw his reliance in grammar as a reason to study more. Others described a loss of effort or habit. P4 and P9 both described opening AI before trying a task themselves, which P4 called *“reflexively opening AI before trying to think for myself”*. P10 said, *“I am afraid of becoming lazy about looking for answers myself”*, and P11 said, *“I am afraid that if I use AI too often, I become less used to composing sentences myself”*. Two worried about transfer beyond AI. P6 feared that what she obtained from AI was something she could *“only apply at that moment, and not apply in the world of work”*, and P12 said, *“I am afraid my speaking is only good when I talk with AI”*. P7 and P8 pointed to habit: P7 was used to asking AI about everything, and P8 used it almost daily. P5 gave a different kind of reason, worrying that reliance on AI *“will damage the environment and can replace human work”*.

3.3. Influence on attitudes toward autonomous and technology-mediated learning

The first attitude toward autonomous and technology-mediated learning is confidence. No participant reported lower confidence. Five described themselves as more confident (P1, P3, P4, P7, P12; P4 said *“much more”*), five as slightly more confident (P2, P6, P9, P10, P11), and two as fairly confident (P5, P8). Participants gave concrete reasons. P1 could now pronounce words correctly that she previously could not. P3 said, *“this can make me confident to explain the material if my friend asks”*, after receiving detailed explanations of grammar. P4 felt more confident in presentations and essays because *“I have already had a chance to practice and the script has been checked beforehand”*. P12 said, *“I feel braver speaking English because I am already used to practicing”*. P9 and P11 felt more confident because they recognized their own mistakes better. P7 was more confident in understanding English but only moderately so in speaking.

Independence and reliance are the second attitudes toward autonomous and technology-mediated learning experienced by the participants. Views on autonomy did not form two clean groups. Seven participants leaned toward greater independence (P2, P4, P6, P9, P10, P11, P12), for example because AI let them study alone and at any time (P2, P9, P10, P11, P12). P10 said, *“I feel more independent because I can study at any time without always having to wait for friends”*. However, four of these seven also acknowledged some continuing reliance (P4, P6, P9, P11), and P12 added a limit of a different kind. P4 said, *“I tend to be more independent in finding out new things, but at the same time I depend on AI’s instant feedback”*, and P12 said, *“I feel more independent because I can practice at any time, but I still need practice with other people”*. Three participants (P1, P3, P7) felt independence and dependence in roughly equal measure; P1 said she felt *“50-50”*, since she could study at any time if she used AI wisely, but *“there is also dependence, or the desire to get things*

done instantly". Two participants leaned toward dependence. P5 said she felt "more dependent because I am already quite used to using AI", and P8 said, "*I feel more dependent on some skills such as writing*", while remaining fairly confident in other skills.

Finally, the last one is readiness to study without AI. All 12 said they could continue learning if AI were unavailable, naming books, dictionaries, videos, journals, courses, lecturers and friends as alternatives. Several pointed out that they had studied before AI was available: P2 said, "*people in the past could still learn English without AI too, so why couldn't I*", and P5 and P7 made similar points. Even so, four expected it to take longer (P1, P4, P8, P9), P3 allowed that she might find it difficult, and P6 expected the first period to be hard. The interviews did not ask whether worry about dependence had led participants to change how they use AI, and none volunteered a concrete change, although P2 said he should study more to reduce his reliance. The data therefore cannot show whether awareness of dependence led to behavioral change.

Table 3. Summary of thematic findings

Skill	Participants reporting a tool	Tools named (number of participants)
Skill-specific tool repertoires	Different tools for different skills; nine participants used three or more tools, two relied on one chatbot	P1, P4–P6, P8–P12 (multi-tool); P2, P3 (single chatbot)
AI used alongside human and print sources	AI consulted often but mostly when tasks or concepts were hard; friends, lecturers, dictionaries and textbooks remained in use	Most participants; see text
On-demand, detailed explanation	Fast, always-available, example-rich explanation, mainly for grammar and writing	All 12 described a moment of clarified understanding
Socially easier practice	AI felt less intimidating than asking or speaking to people	P1, P3, P4, P12
Accuracy and verification	Everyone had met wrong or confusing output; verification ranged from external cross-checking to judging internal coherence	All; coherence-based: P3, P7
Tool limitations	Paid features, repetitive content, unnatural translation, limited conversation and accents	Across participants (see text)
Shared boundary of acceptable use	Acceptable: aid, checking, practice. Excessive: copying without understanding, or replacing own effort or human interaction	All 12
Worry about dependence	Every participant had worried: loss of own effort, lack of basic knowledge, transfer beyond AI, habituation	All 12
Confidence	No participant reported a loss; gains ranged from slight to marked	All 12
Autonomy: independence-leaning	Feels more independent; most added a qualification (occasional reliance, or a continuing need to practice with people)	P2, P4, P6, P9, P10, P11, P12
Autonomy: balanced	Independence and dependence felt as roughly equal	P1, P3, P7
Autonomy: dependence-leaning	Feels more dependent through habit or on particular skills	P5, P8

3.4. Discussion

The results of this research, combined, imply that AI is placed at the functionally central and psychologically uncomfortable location in the English learning habits of participants at Politeknik Negeri Sriwijaya. Instead of becoming a single undifferentiated resource, AI became embedded as a workflow of skill-specific uses whereby various tools were utilized to different functions, a trend that fairly resembles how previous CALL technologies have been progressively specialized to specific language subskills as the profession expanded (Beatty, 2010; Chapelle and Jamieson, 2008), and they are consistent with technology acceptance accounts in which perceived usefulness drives adoption (Davis, 1989). The comments also point to facilitating conditions (Venkatesh et al., 2003): paid features, advertising and costly premium versions were mentioned by five participants and shaped which tools they used and how far. Convenience, accessibility and immediate feedback, which an earlier study of Indonesian university students identified as the most popular features of AI (Muslimin, 2024), were also the reasons these students gave for choosing it. A notable local finding is the weight students placed on AI for grammar explanation. This agrees with reports that AI tools are perceived as effective for grammar and vocabulary in vocational settings (Rokhayani, 2025) and

with the review finding that personalized feedback is the most frequently reported benefit of AI in language learning (Ma'ruf and Tanjung, 2025).

The pattern of use also qualifies a simple shortcut narrative. Participants described turning to AI when stuck and anchoring it in what lecturers, friends and dictionaries had already provided. P2 wanted the lecturer's basics first, P3 wanted the concept to come from herself, and P11 had ideas before asking for sentence options. This resembles the multi-stage use of ChatGPT reported for EFL writers, who draw on it for ideas, drafting and revision rather than as a single-step product (Su et al., 2023; Xiao and Zhi, 2023). It should be read with caution, because the evidence here is what participants said they do, not what they were observed doing, and some also described opening AI before trying a task themselves (P4, P9).

The accounts of speaking practice are consistent with the argument that AI conversation partners reduce the fear of negative evaluation central to foreign language anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986) and with studies of chatbot-supported speaking practice (Bashori et al., 2020; Du and Daniel, 2024; Fryer et al., 2019; Han, 2020; Huang et al., 2022; Kim and Su, 2024). P4 and P12 explicitly valued practicing without being judged or embarrassed. Two further points add nuance. First, the social ease reported by P1 and P3 extended beyond speaking to asking questions and interacting with people in general, which raises the question of whether AI lowers a barrier or lets learners avoid human interaction. P12 recognized this tension herself, calling it excessive to avoid speaking with other people because AI feels too comfortable, and both P9 and P12 said that speaking with AI is not yet like speaking with people. This fits the finding that AI-mediated practice has not always proved better than peer interaction for reducing anxiety (Ballıdağ and Aydın, 2025). Second, comments on articulation and the limited range of accents (P3, P11) echo concerns about how well voice-based tools handle diverse L2 speech (Moussalli and Cardoso, 2020).

Every participant had met incorrect or confusing output, which fits accuracy and reliability being among the most frequently reported limitations in the review by Ma'ruf and Tanjung (2025). The interviews add detail about what students do in response. Most used outside references such as dictionaries, lecturer materials and friends, while two judged answers by how logical or natural they sounded, and the two participants who explained how a wrong answer arose both linked it to hurrying (P2, P3). The interviews are therefore consistent with an explanation based on time pressure and verification habits, although the data cannot test it. A practical consequence is that verification and prompting skills, which P4 emphasised, can be taught.

The shared view of acceptable use is the clearest convergence in the data. Participants separated using AI to understand, correct and practise from copying output without understanding, much as electrical engineering students at the same institution separated brainstorming and language refinement from unreviewed copy-pasting (Al Ghani et al., 2026). This suggests that a similar informal norm may circulate across departments at the institution, although both studies capture stated views rather than behaviour. The interviews contained nothing on disclosing AI use to lecturers, and no participant raised data privacy, which the review evidence identifies as a major concern (Ma'ruf and Tanjung, 2025). These absences may reflect what students consider salient, or simply topics the interview did not probe.

The responses on dependence and autonomy are mixed rather than polarized. Earlier work on Indonesian vocational learners describes both a sense of independence and a fear of over-reliance (Yuniarti and Pebriani, 2026), and the quantitative survey at the same institution reported positive effects on learner autonomy (Wijaya et al., 2026). The present data show how these can coexist within individuals. Every participant voiced worry about dependence, no one reported lower confidence, and most of those who felt more independent added a qualification. The concerns align with warnings that heavy reliance on AI dialogue systems and cognitive offloading may erode independent reasoning and engagement (Darvishi et al., 2024; Zhai et al., 2024) and with reports of reduced motivation to study independently among electronics engineering students at the same institution (Daradespa et al., 2026). P10's fear of becoming lazy and P11's fear of losing practice in composing sentences are cases in point. Students who lean toward dependence, such as P5 and P8,

may benefit from structured unassisted tasks. Students who gain confidence mainly through AI practice, such as P12, need opportunities to practice with people. Furthermore, this study adds a qualitative layer to the survey evidence at Politeknik Negeri Sriwijaya (Wei, 2023; Wijaya et al., 2026). Students in this sample did not treat AI as a single technology with one effect. They selected tools by skill, used them mostly when stuck, set their own limits, and held confidence and worry together.

4. Conclusion

Regarding use patterns, the participants showed a pattern of preliminary-use, selective tools depending on the skills, assignment-based frequency change and selective disclosure to lecturers. The main benefits were fast, detailed explanation available at any time, practice that felt less socially threatening, and feedback on mistakes and word choice. The main concerns were inaccurate or unnatural output, limited, paid or repetitive tool features, and dependence. All participants had met incorrect output, nine said they checked it against outside sources, and all 12 gave answers converging on the same boundary between using AI to learn and using it to avoid learning. Views on autonomy ranged from independence-leaning (seven) through balanced (three) to dependence-leaning (two), and most independence-leaning students qualified their view, by acknowledging some reliance or a continuing need to practice with people.

Theoretically, the paper broadens the coverage of technology acceptance and CALL models because it proves that the interaction between AI and learner autonomy in a vocational EFL is not a unitary attitude, but a dichotomous tendency with the participation of personal disposition and reduces past research that viewed attitudes towards autonomy as a homogeneous group of students (Yuniarti & Pebriani, 2026; Rokhayani, 2025). In practice, the findings suggest that the English Department lecturers can play the role of sustaining more consistent reflective AI use by making distinctions between guidance in relation to these various attitude profiles, that is, to provide structured opportunities to those who already use the unaided skills checks, and provide selective low-stakes unaided-skill checks to those who are ambivalent, rather than by using consistent policy statements or generic overreliance warnings that may prove to be ineffective in its own right in changing already-established behavior.

The limitations of this study are the small, carefully selected sample of 12 students of one department and semester group that cannot possibly determine whether the patterns of attitudes identified are permanent constitutions or momentary stages in the development of the student-AI relationship during the time of study. A longitudinal study of whether individual students switch between these profiles between semesters, or a comparative study of whether similar pattern of bifurcation, and similar gap between awareness and behavior is present in other departments and vocational institutions beyond Politeknik Negeri Sriwijaya could be applied in the future.

The findings suggest that AI is already being used by these students in their English learning, so its role is more clearly defined than simply being ignored. Participants used different tools depending on the skill they were working on, mainly turned to AI when they found a task or idea hard to understand, and still asked lecturers, friends, dictionaries, and textbooks for help. So, course design can see AI as just one of many tools or resources available. Lecturers can demonstrate which tools are best for different tasks, like using grammar checkers to fix mistakes, voice tools to practice speaking and pronunciation, and chatbots to explain concepts. They should also be honest about the tools' limitations, such as awkward or too direct translations, repetitive exercises, and special features that some students can't afford.

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- Author contribution** : First author initiated the research ideas, constructed the instruments, collected the data, drafted the manuscript, and reviewed the data analysis. Second author revised the research ideas and literature review, conducted the data analysis, and reviewed and edited the final draft. Third author contributed to the literature review and validated the instruments. Fourth author assisted with data collection and transcription. Fifth author organized the data and contributed to the interpretation of the findings. Sixth author provided administrative support and reviewed the final draft.
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