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The Malaysian English Language Teaching Association✉ David Tchaikovsky Boon Ern Teh
david.t.@ipgm.edu.my<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2743-033X>

A Systematic Literature Review of ChatGPT's Role in Promoting Learner Autonomy in English Language Learning

Claudia Racquel XervaserSchool of Educational Studies,
Universiti Sains Malaysia

Penang, Malaysia;

Institut Latihan Kementerian Kesihatan Malaysia Sultan Azlan Shah
Perak, Malaysia**David Tchaikovsky Boon Ern Teh**Institut Pendidikan Guru Kampus Bahasa Antarabangsa
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Traditional English language instruction has often prioritized teacher-led approaches, limiting learners' agency in directing their own progress. The emergence of AI tools such as ChatGPT offers new opportunities to foster learner autonomy through personalized, interactive, and self-paced learning experiences. However, challenges related to accuracy, ethical concerns, and potential learner overreliance raise important questions about its pedagogical integration. Existing research on this topic is fragmented, with limited focus on long-term outcomes and the role of educators in guiding AI use. This systematic literature review aims to examine the role of ChatGPT in promoting learner autonomy in English language learning and identify existing gaps emerging from the review. A systematic search was conducted using Google Scholar and Semantic Scholar, applying defined inclusion and exclusion criteria. After screening titles and abstracts, 13 articles were shortlisted. Following full-text analysis, all 13 studies are deemed to have met the eligibility criteria for inclusion. The findings are organized into two thematic areas: (1) the roles ChatGPT plays in supporting learner autonomy, such as enabling self-directed learning, offering immediate feedback, and personalizing interaction; and (2) the existing gaps in current literature that emerged from the review. While the reviewed studies indicate positive trends, including increased learner engagement and confidence, they also highlight concerns about AI limitations and the need for pedagogical oversight. The review concludes that ChatGPT has significant potential to enhance learner autonomy when integrated within intentional instructional frameworks. Its effectiveness depends on careful teacher mediation, robust empirical support, and ethical considerations to ensure that AI complements rather than replaces human instruction in fostering sustainable, self-regulated language learning.

KEYWORDS: English language learning, ChatGPT, learner autonomy, language education

INTRODUCTION

English language education has shifted from teacher-led models to learner-centered approaches that prioritize autonomy as a central pedagogical goal (Benson, 2013). Autonomy, defined as learners' ability to take responsibility for their learning, is increasingly viewed as essential for personalized and lifelong learning (Son et al., 2025), supported by self-regulated learning strategies such as goal setting and self-evaluation. In parallel, artificial intelligence (AI) has transformed language education by enabling personalized, adaptive, and scalable instruction (Roll & Wylie, 2016). Tools like Grammarly illustrate early AI applications for grammar correction (Fitria, 2021), while advances in Natural Language Processing (NLP) now support richer engagement and improved speaking proficiency (Woo & Choi, 2021).

ChatGPT, OpenAI's generative model, has gained attention for facilitating authentic dialogue, enhancing vocabulary and grammar learning, and increasing learner engagement and autonomy (Kohnke et al., 2023; Kostka & Toncelli, 2023). Learners report greater confidence and motivation due to its personalized feedback (Alzahrani, 2024; Ghimire et al., 2024), while teachers benefit from reduced workload and improved instructional differentiation (Farrokhnia et al., 2024).

Despite its potential, ChatGPT raises critical concerns. Its reliability is questioned due to tendencies to generate inaccurate or culturally insensitive outputs (Ray, 2023), while ethical risks include academic integrity violations, overreliance, and data privacy issues (Alzahrani, 2024; Halaweh, 2023). AI tools may also discourage critical thinking and creativity when used uncritically (Hieu & Thao, 2024; Hockly, 2023), and context-specific issues, such as data governance in Saudi Arabia, complicate adoption (Urman & Makhortykh, 2025). Scholars maintain that AI lacks human pedagogical sensitivity and emotional intelligence (Cope et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2021), warranting cautious integration into education.

While AI supports language proficiency gains, its impact on learner autonomy remains inconclusive. Although tools like ChatGPT offer flexible learning environments, uncritical use may lead to dependency and hinder deep engagement (Darvishi et al., 2024; Pham et al., 2024). For example, Vietnamese learners reported increased confidence with AI, yet struggled without it (Nguyen et al., 2024). Active engagement with ChatGPT correlates with better outcomes, whereas passive use does not (X. Wang et al., 2023). However, most studies focus on isolated skills, overlooking broader dimensions of autonomy (Alshammari, 2024), and persistent concerns around ethical use, cognitive offloading, and learner scaffolding remain. Given ChatGPT's widespread use and pedagogical relevance, a systematic review is needed to synthesize evidence on its impact in promoting learner autonomy in English language education and to identify its most frequently reported pedagogical functions.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Learner Autonomy

Learner autonomy, originally conceptualized by Holec (1981) as the capacity to take charge of one's learning. Rooted in socio-constructivist (Vygotsky, 1980), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), and motivational theories (Ryan & Deci, 2000), autonomy is understood both as a process and a learning outcome, closely tied to intrinsic motivation. Benson (2013) further highlights the situated, relational

nature of autonomy, noting its emergence from complex interactions among personal, institutional, and technological conditions, and arguing for its pedagogical cultivation rather than simple withdrawal of teacher control.

The theoretical underpinnings of learner autonomy resonate with the broader transition from teacher-centered to learner-centered pedagogies (Yildiz Durak, 2023). Within these settings, learner autonomy intersects with creativity, as digital tools support exploration, multimodal expression, and experimentation (Lan, 2018). However, despite its long-standing advocacy in educational discourse, autonomy remains unevenly implemented, especially in under-resourced contexts, which is why both Holec (1981) and Voller (2014) caution that autonomy must be scaffolded through structured support, not presumed, reinforcing the need for intentional instructional design.

Empirical studies consistently report positive associations between autonomy and language learning outcomes, such as proficiency and engagement (Khaidir et al., 2020). Nevertheless, learners often grapple with limited strategic competence and persistent linguistic difficulties, which constrain their ability to act autonomously (K. Q. Tran, 2024; Tukan, 2024). Teacher-centered traditions and rigid institutional structures in many EFL settings further inhibit learner agency (Almusharraf, 2020; Çetin & Çakır, 2021), indicating that autonomy is highly contingent upon the cultural and systemic configurations of the classroom.

The proliferation of AI technologies, especially generative tools, introduces new possibilities for supporting learner autonomy by offering personalized feedback, adaptive scaffolding, and alternatives to direct teacher input (Godwin-Jones, 2019). ChatGPT, with its conversational interface and generative capacity, aligns with key principles of autonomous learning by enabling interaction, self-monitoring, and independent inquiry. Nonetheless, these affordances are not without risks: the potential for misinformation, over-reliance, and cognitive passivity demands critical scrutiny. The complexity of these dynamics highlights the need for robust empirical investigation into ChatGPT's pedagogical role, particularly in underdeveloped educational ecosystems.

Role of AI Tools in English Language Learning

The rise of NLP, particularly Transformer-based models (Ettinger, 2020; Vaswani et al., 2017), has accelerated the educational potential of AI. Pre-trained models like BERT and GPT expanded NLP capabilities (Dale, 2021; Radford et al., 2018), with GPT-3 demonstrating the ability to model nuanced language patterns and GPT-3.5 improving alignment with human responses through reinforced learning with human feedback (Abramski et al., 2023). As a GPT-3.5 application, ChatGPT has become increasingly embedded in educational contexts due to its capacity for open-ended, user-responsive dialogue (Kasneci et al., 2023).

The integration of AI into education reflects its growing ability to emulate human cognition through sophisticated algorithmic processing (Karsenti, 2019; Kaur & Gill, 2019). In language education, AI has enabled inclusive, multimodal, and personalized learning environments by blending text, audio, and visual elements (R. Wang, 2019). Initial AI tools, such as chatbots and conversational agents enhanced interactive learning by delivering immediate grammar and vocabulary feedback (Haristiani, 2019). These systems have since evolved into intelligent tutoring platforms powered by cognitive modelling and predictive analytics that provide real-time personalization (Maity & Deroy, 2024; Zhang et al., 2023), facilitating motivation, self-regulation, and autonomy (Mohebbi, 2025). Additionally, AI-driven assessment tools support targeted intervention and data-informed teaching by

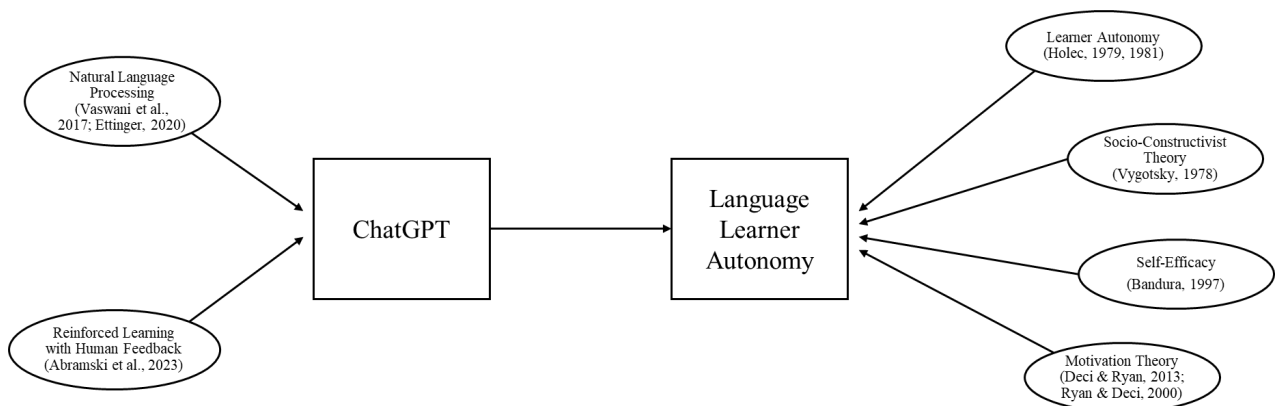
identifying learner-specific gaps (Son et al., 2025).

In the context of language learning, ChatGPT enables learners to engage in authentic practice and exploratory learning without the pressure of formal instruction. It promotes creative language use, conversational competence, and independent inquiry (Skeates, 2012), while also enhancing engagement through real-time feedback and formative self-assessment (Kohnke et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2024). Consequently, the teacher's role evolves into that of a facilitator, using ChatGPT to delegate repetitive tasks and foster inquiry-driven environments.

ChatGPT's adaptive responsiveness fosters curiosity-driven exploration, promoting learner confidence and self-initiated engagement, though its known limitations such as fabricated content, lack of transparency, and potential for plagiarism pose challenges to reliability and academic integrity (Solak, 2024). These shortcomings, however, create pedagogical openings for teaching evaluative and verification skills, aligning with the broader goal of developing autonomous and critically literate learners. Scholars warn that uncritical or excessive dependence on ChatGPT may erode deep engagement and intellectual autonomy (Adeshola & Adepoju, 2024; Montenegro-Rueda et al., 2023). Responsible integration therefore necessitates explicit pedagogical guidelines, ethical frameworks, and structured support. As ChatGPT becomes more pervasive in educational settings, systematic inquiry is urgently required to determine its impact on learner autonomy and to inform equitable and pedagogically sound implementation. Figure 1 depicts the conceptual framework of this review:

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of the Review



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The objective of this review is to systematically analyze the literature within the domain of English language learning to identify the most frequently cited role of ChatGPT in promoting learner autonomy, and to what extent does the existing literature report its impact on promoting language learner autonomy. This review examines the context of English language teaching and learning by addressing the following research questions:

Research Question 1:

What roles have ChatGPT played in promoting learner autonomy in the English language learning literature?

Research Question 2:

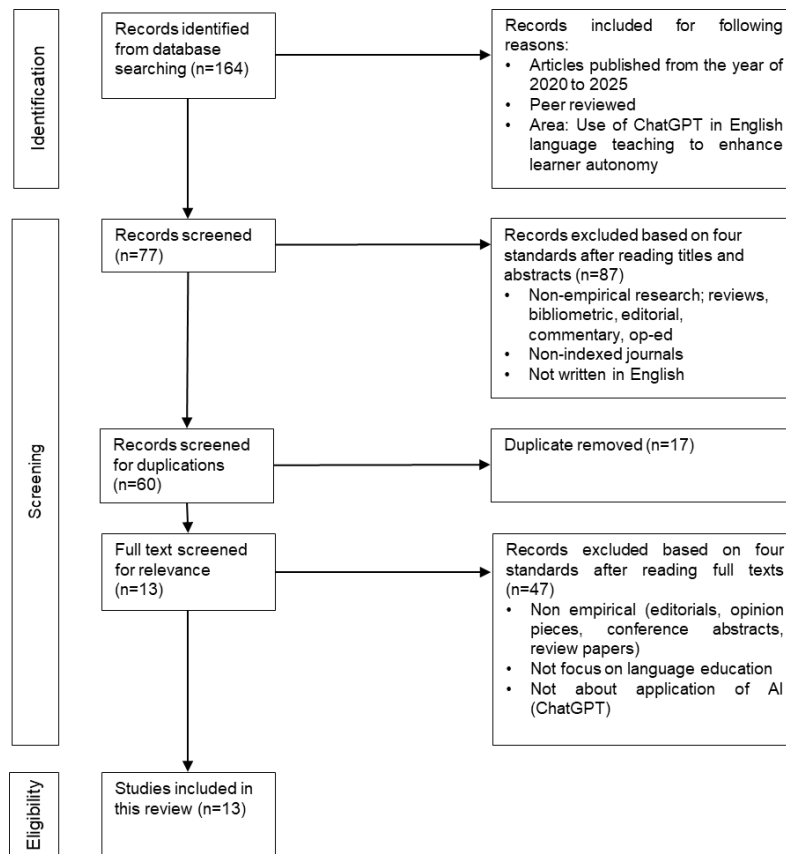
What are the notable gaps in existing literature regarding the role of ChatGPT's in promoting learner autonomy in English language learning contexts?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This review adhered to the PRISMA Statement (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) (Page et al., 2021), following a structured three-phase process: article selection, screening and inclusion based on predefined criteria, and subsequent data coding and analysis. Literature screening was primarily done using Zotero (Corporation for Digital Scholarship, 2024), after which Microsoft Excel (Microsoft Corporation, 2024) was used to document the metadata of the literature and determine inter-coder reliability. Figure 2 depicts the flowchart of article selection.

Figure 2
Flowchart of article selection



Article Identification

The database used to search for the articles was Google Scholar and Semantic Scholar, as these two databases represent the two largest open-source academic repositories. A systematic search strategy was formed, including key search terms and related text words. The following Boolean search string was used to initiate the article identification:

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"ChatGPT"  
AND ("English language teaching" OR ELT OR ESL OR EFL)  
AND ("learner autonomy" OR autonomy)  
NOT (review OR survey OR bibliometric OR editorial OR commentary OR opinion OR  
perspective)
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Further filters were added to the initial identification, where articles must be peer-reviewed and published between the year 2020 to 2025. The initial identification yielded 164 hits, after which the metadata for each hit was extracted and exported into *bibtex* format before importing into Zotero for further processing.

Article Screening and Inclusion

Via Zotero, the metadata for each entry was updated using the “*Verify and Clean DOIs*” function. This step enabled an automated metadata update for all entries – any references with no valid working DOIs were excluded from the analysis. Next is filtering non-empirical research, reviews, bibliometric studies, editorials, commentaries, and op-eds by examining their titles and abstracts. Articles published in non-indexed journals and those written in languages other than English were also excluded. A total of 87 entries were discarded. Further screening identified 17 duplicates, all of which were subsequently removed. Next, full texts were obtained and screened, during which non-empirical studies were once again excluded. Those that were not focused on English language education were removed alongside papers that do not centralise the use of ChatGPT. A total of 47 entries were filtered. The remaining 13 articles in full text fit the inclusive and exclusive criteria and were deemed suitable and appropriate for this review.

Coding and Analysis

For fidelity purposes, the first author coded the selected articles independently. In the first stage of the process, author, date, and country of origin study designs; sample and sample size; research design, data collection method, analysis technique, and findings were summarized using Microsoft Excel (Microsoft Corporation, 2024). The co-author then reviewed the coding cookbook by indicated agreement or disagreement with the coding conducted by the first author. An ICC3,1 point estimate of .87 was obtained using JASP Team (2025), indicating reasonable degree of coding agreement between authors.

RESULTS

The results of the review are presented in two themes to reflect role and impact of ChatGPT in promoting learners’ language learning autonomy.

Study Characteristics

The studies employed diverse research designs to examine ChatGPT’s role in learner autonomy across

various contexts. There was, however, a clear preference for interpretive and post-positivist paradigm in these studies – five studies each were categorized as mixed-method and qualitative studies. The remaining studies comprised of three quantitative studies, with one being a cross-sectional survey, the other two experimental, interventionist studies.

Of the five mixed method studies, three were explanatory QUAN-QUAL studies (Beknazar & Lee, 2025; Q. Huang, 2025; Zakwani & Binu, 2025) with an added focus on ChatGPT-mediated self-directed learning, whereas Agustini (2023) employed an exploratory QUAL-QUAN design looking at how ChatGPT enhanced explicit learner autonomy. Equally important, Li et al. (2024) conducted a convergent mixed-method study looking into how ChatGPT facilitates self-directed learning in online language learning, which is increasingly becoming the staple in many educational contexts.

Of the five qualitative studies, two were exploratory in nature as they investigated how ChatGPT enhanced learner autonomy, metacognition and language competency in tertiary education (Du & Alm, 2024; Van Horn, 2024). In a separate study, Alm (2024) carried out a longitudinal case study, collecting semester-long reflective journals and digital portfolios to explore how learners formulate shared agency in their use of ChatGPT, which is very similar to what Alshammari (2024) had discovered through the use of focus group interviews looking at how learners utilized ChatGPT to enhance their experience with self-directed learning. Embracing what is likely the most critical stance amongst the studies discussed in this review, Na et al. (2025) utilized conversational analysis to explore language learner autonomy.

Contrastingly, there were only three quantitative studies that fit the search parameters. Tan et al. (2024) conducted a straightforward cross-sectional survey that looks at how learners' self-perceived independence is aided by their use of ChatGPT, suggesting a shift away from a reliance on teachers. Jaashan (2025) approached ChatGPT as an instructional learning tool that facilitated learners' acquisition of syntactical patterns in English, albeit in a classroom setting. Away from the classroom setting, Xu and Liu (2025) employed a true experimental design looking into how ChatGPT fared against specialist AI such as Duolingo, as perceived and experienced by learners in China.

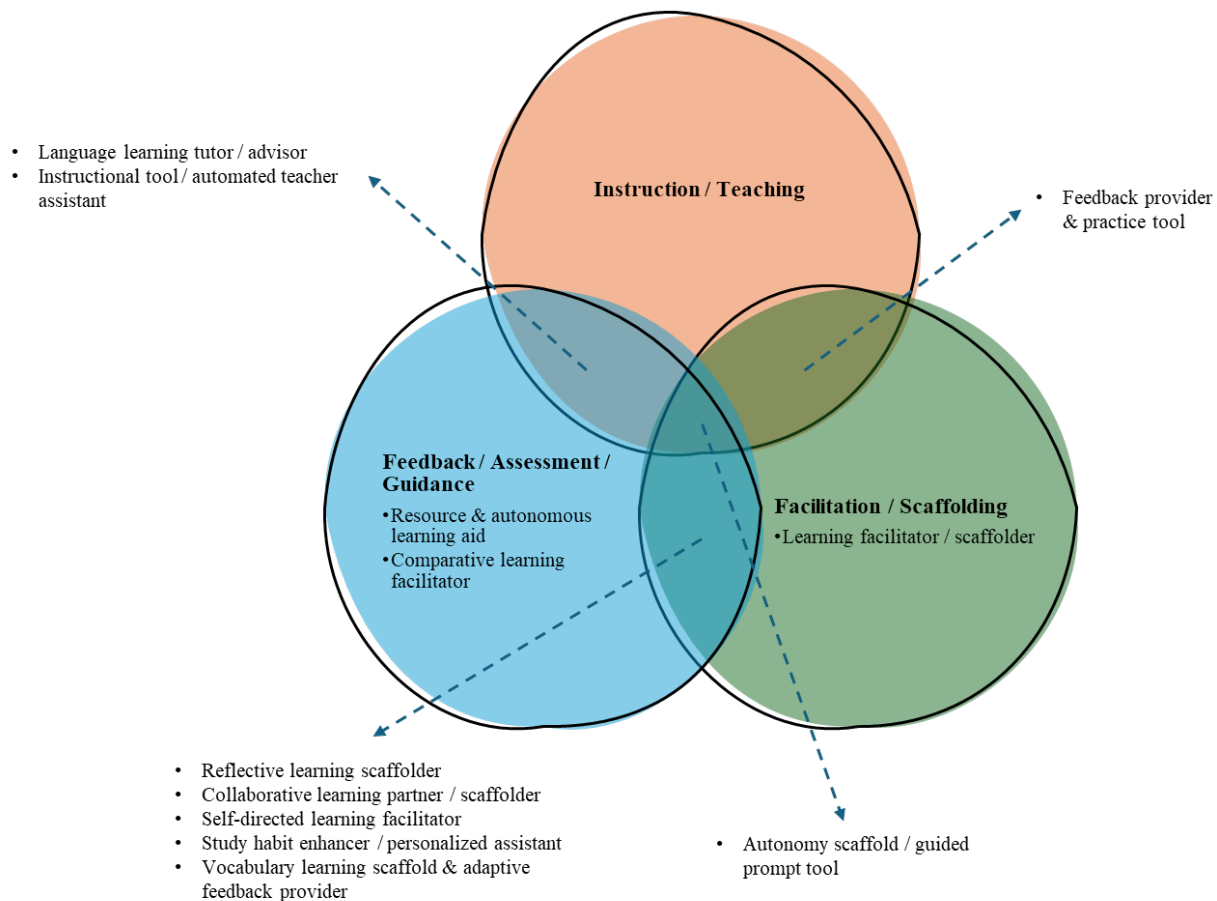
Collectively, these studies reveal varied methodological approaches, participant profiles, and instructional contexts. The multifaceted nature of ChatGPT's integration in various language learning contexts is apparent and clearly elucidated in these studies. However, given the proliferation of online / digital learning in post-pandemic contexts, studies that looked into how autonomous language learning may arise from the use of ChatGPT is surprisingly scarce. Appendix 1 illustrates a summary of literature reviewed in this article.

Research Question 1 - What roles have ChatGPT played in promoting learner autonomy in the English language learning literature?

Figure 3 depicts a visualization of said roles, of which consisted of three main domains, namely: (i) providing instruction and teaching, (ii) providing facilitation and scaffolding, (iii) providing feedback, assessment, and guidance.

Figure 3

What Roles do ChatGPT Play in Promoting Learner Autonomy in English Language Learning?



Generally, the systemic review suggests that ChatGPT has played multifaceted roles in promoting learner autonomy in English language learning. Its roles are far from linear; instead, these roles encompass overlapping functions and domains of use. This multilinearity also highlights the urgency to understand how it has decentralized the traditional classroom power dynamic, chiefly by shifting the authority of knowledge and feedback from the teacher to the learner's own digital workspace. Resultantly, this decentralization has enabled a more democratic and critical form of learning, especially where the "sage on the stage" model is replaced by student-driven inquiry enhanced and amplified by AI use.

For starters, Du and Alm (2024) and Jaashan (2025) reported uses of ChatGPT as a learning scaffold and real-time feedback provider. Such forms of automated feedback and scaffolding provide learners with a sense of security without fear of being ridiculed or reprimanded for poor language use. This may, in turn, encourage a more creative use of the target language not commonly seen in conventional classroom settings (Na et al., 2025). Likewise, ChatGPT operates and curates highly personalized conversational logs that are both contextual and iterative in nature, thereby presenting itself as a reliable personalized learning facilitator. Its capability to align individual knowledge levels, personal interests, user habits and specific learning goals allows learners to learn at their own pace, thus fostering greater ownership over the learning content and pace (Agustini, 2023; Z. Li et al., 2024).

Huang (2025) further observed that pedagogically guided use of ChatGPT can lead to improved task achievement in academic writing, but only if said use is pedagogically and ethically grounded.

Beyond the role of a mere facilitator, ChatGPT may exert a more direct influence on the learning process by embodying the role of a virtual tutor. Alshammari (2024) concluded that ChatGPT can act as a learning tutor tailored to deliver input regarding syntactical structure of the target language, a point which Jaashan (2025) reinforced in the discovery that learners who underwent ChatGPT-mediated grammar drills performed as well as those who learnt through traditional teacher-led approaches. Together, both studies suggest the possibility of learners achieving complete independence from the need for human tutor, as ChatGPT was found to be capable of effectively mitigating teacher dominance in the instructional process.

Contrastingly, other studies have shown that it is possible to position ChatGPT as an enabler of learner agency. Na et al. (2025) observed that participants, by being critical and selective of ChatGPT-generated feedback, were more likely to demonstrate meaningful target language development. Retaining autonomy to accept, reject, or maintaining indifference to any ChatGPT-generated feedback thus forms the bedrock for shared agency, a process which Alm (2024) likened to exploring or navigating the AI wilderness. This agency also meant that the learners' deployment of ChatGPT becomes deliberated and informed, taking into account the contextual and situational circumstances of its deployment (Z. Li et al., 2024).

It is also worth noting that maintaining and sustaining learner autonomy is not possible if learners merely engage with ChatGPT blindly or passively. Studies have yielded empirical evidence pointing that it is possible to foster metacognitive awareness through long-term engagement with ChatGPT during the learning process (Beknazar & Lee, 2025; Van Horn, 2024). Strategic use of ChatGPT, often characterized by effective prompt engineering, allows learners to optimize AI output and fosters self-regulated learning. However, Tan et al. (2024) cautioned that the benefits of developing metacognitive awareness via strategic use of ChatGPT is limited without specific pedagogical and ethical guidelines. Other key considerations flagged in the review are the need for learners to evaluate the accuracy and relevance of all ChatGPT-generated output, especially when most models available in the market remain highly susceptible to hallucinations, and the urgency to transition away from being passive consumers to active adapters of AI-generated content (Na et al., 2025).

In addition, ChatGPT's verbosity was identified as an added advantage for learners engaging in informal English language learning contexts. Participants reported enhanced engagement, personalization, and cognitive enrichment through the use of ChatGPT compared to those who did not (J. Xu & Liu, 2025). Similarly, Zakwani and Binu (2025) had demonstrated that ChatGPT-powered AI chatbots can positively impact self-regulated learning. Both studies arrived at a similar conclusion: participants were neither physically nor temporally constrained in their English learning. ChatGPT's verbosity not only mitigates reticence commonly associated with formal foreign or second language learning but also projects a sense of flexibility and convenience that conventional classroom-oriented modes of language teaching and learning cannot readily offer.

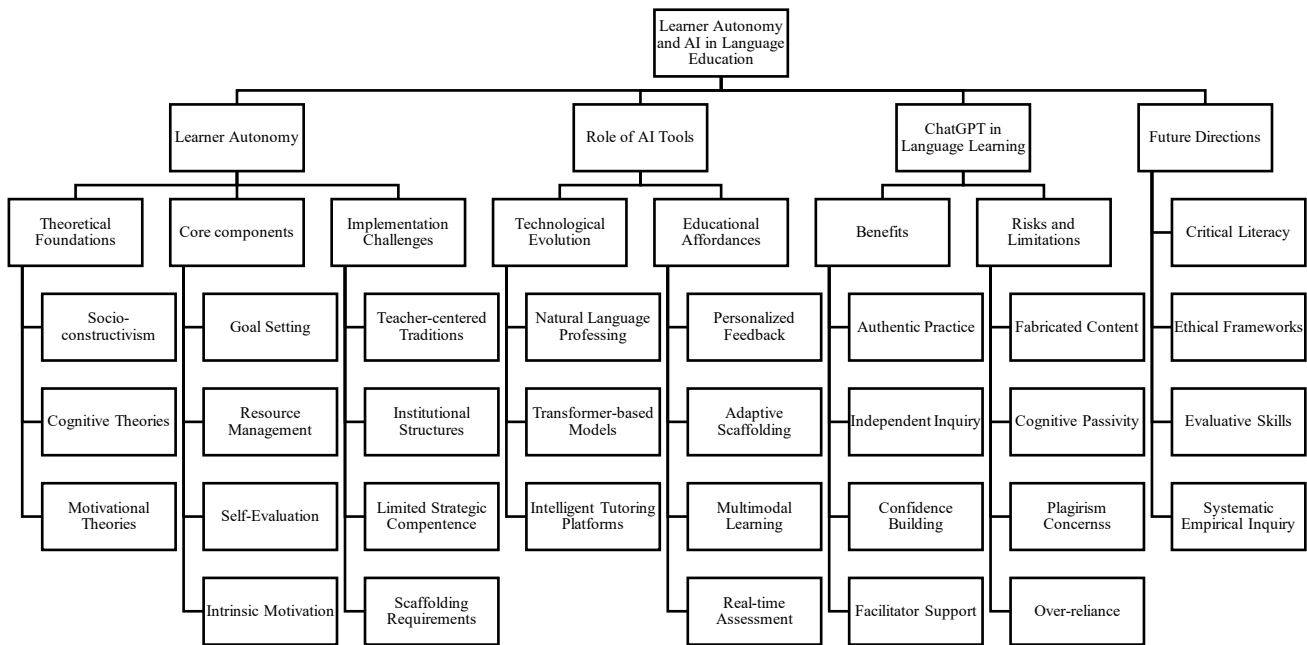
In brief, a consistent finding across the literature is how ChatGPT is positively perceived as a facilitator, instructor, feedback provider etc. that enriches the learners' language learning experience by enhancing learner autonomy. Its key affordances are aligned with the psychological needs for autonomy as outlined in Self-Determination Theory (Du & Alm, 2024; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Learners,

with the help of ChatGPT, develop greater agency and ownership over their learning process (Z. Li et al., 2024; Zakwani & Binu, 2025), though said development must be pedagogically and ethically guided. Finally, it is also important to note that multiple studies in the review have continued to emphasised the irreplaceable role of human educators in demonstrating empathy, providing nuanced feedback, and fostering a communal sense of belonging (Du & Alm, 2024; T. P. Tan et al., 2024).

Research Question 2 - What are the notable gaps in existing literature regarding the role of ChatGPT in promoting learner autonomy in English language learning contexts?

This review highlighted several notable gaps which warrant further extrapolation and elaboration. The coding exercise had yielded the following framework, as illustrated in Figure 4.

Figure 3
Emergent Research Gaps



The findings of these studies represent an empirical gap. Despite the positive effects reported of the use of ChatGPT on enhanced learner autonomy and proficiency (Jaashan, 2025; J. Xu & Liu, 2025), Tan et al. (2024) cautiously noted that the impact of ChatGPT use on learner autonomy was marginal. This finding was admittedly mediated by various contextual factors that said cross-sectional study was ill-equipped to address. For this reason, more comparative studies, like that by Xu and Liu (2025), are needed to understand the relative efficacy of ChatGPT against other AI tools in the market. Research looking into how ChatGPT can work in tandem with other digital tools or pedagogical approaches can further address this gap.

Another gap is the methodological gap. The body of literature reviewed in this study is characterized by a strong emphasis on exploratory and perceptual data, as evident from the study characteristics presented earlier. Despite this methodological gap, this preference remains invaluable in understanding the initial adoption of and attitude towards ChatGPT (Alm, 2024; Du & Alm, 2024), studies that

measure sustained impact on English language proficiency and autonomous learning behaviors are scarce. Moreover, these studies largely employed relatively small sample sizes that are context-specific and nuance, thereby limiting generalizability. Evidently, only a handful of studies incorporated robust analysis of learning outcomes (Jaashan, 2025; J. Xu & Liu, 2025), whereas Tan et al. (2024) provided a cross-sectional but nonetheless vital snapshot of the participants' habitual use of ChatGPT as a learning assistant. Therefore, there is a need for longitudinal and (quasi-)experimental studies that enables the tracking and mapping of how learner autonomy may develop over time with integrated use of ChatGPT.

The findings reported in this review also highlighted a lack of feasible pedagogical framework produced. Although a number of exploratory studies present in this review provided practical recommendations on pedagogical integration of ChatGPT (Du & Alm, 2024; Zakwani & Binu, 2025), none had proposed any comprehensive and feasible instructional or pedagogical framework to that effect. Doing so would enable an empirical testing and development of robust AI-enhanced instructional designs specific to language learning and teaching (Beknazar & Lee, 2025), in addition maximizing language learner autonomy whilst mitigating the risk of developing overreliance on ChatGPT, as Tan et al. (2024) so fervently warned.

Somewhat surprisingly, another gap that went under the radar is the absence of studies that looked into teacher perspective and training to use ChatGPT in their pedagogical practices. Also a majority of the students have positioned teachers as direct beneficiaries of their findings (Agustini, 2023; Beknazar & Lee, 2025; Du & Alm, 2024), none of them centralized teachers and their positionality in any of the studies. This observation is also accentuated by the findings by Huang (2025), who went as far as suggesting that ChatGPT may present itself as a viable substitute for teachers in circumstances where teachers become unavailable.

While the literature had considerable coverage on autonomous use of ChatGPT amongst learners, critical digital literacy remains conspicuously absent. Various studies have, to a certain extent, highlighted how critical evaluation of AI output is key to learner autonomy development (Q. Huang, 2025; Na et al., 2025; T. P. Tan et al., 2024; Van Horn, 2024), but they fall short of extrapolating how critical digital literacies (Bacalja et al., 2021; Harrison, 2025; Knobel & Lankshear, 2006) may mediate or moderate critical and ethical use of ChatGPT, and how in turn affects language learner autonomy.

Finally, there is also a need for greater exploration into the socio-affective dimensions of AI-mediated language learning, and how these dimensions directly or indirectly influence language learner autonomy. While autonomy is largely investigated as an intrapersonal phenomenon, current literature has yet to see how notions like collaborative learning, communities of inquiry / practice and socio-cultural learning are connected to language learner autonomy through the use of ChatGPT. For instance, the treatment of an AI tool as a "person" remains highly controversial and is subject to fierce debate (see Novelli, 2023; Schwitzgebel, 2023), but this had not prevented efforts to position AI as *More Knowledgeable Others* (MKO) (Creely & Carabott, 2025; Katsenou et al., 2025; M. Tran et al., 2025). How future studies position ChatGPT, whether from a utilitarian or an anthropomorphizing perspective, may prove to be groundbreaking in English language teaching and learning.

DISCUSSION

The systematic literature review had demonstrated the multifaceted roles that ChatGPT have played in enhancing English language learner autonomy in the language classrooms today. Expanding said understanding is a general outline of the various gaps that continue to persist in the field, some of which seemingly more urgent than others (i.e., lack of feasible pedagogical framework, greater focus on critical digital literacy and socio-affective dimensions). This section shall situate the use of AI in enhancing learner autonomy beyond that merely of the English language by extending the findings into three main points:

Firstly, a dominant sentiment emerging in the review is the capacity for ChatGPT to be a transformative learning mediator that is capable of fostering learner autonomy and self-regulated learning. AI tools like chatbots and intelligent tutoring systems, have been framed as agents or dialogic partners that are able to personalize and provide on-demand support (Abdelhalim & Almaneea, 2025; Gómez & Rodríguez, 2025). By reducing reliance on the human teacher, AI use has democratized learning primarily through positioning the learning process as something personal, intimate, and immediate. Additionally, AI tools have demonstrated the capacity to provide adaptive learning pathways, and a relatively “safe” space for practice, hence potentially enhancing motivation, self-efficacy, and ownership of the learning experience (Asiri & Shukri, 2020; Ullah et al., 2025; Wei, 2023). Parallel studies have also observed how the use of AI tools like ChatGPT was reported to have increased learner confidence, engagement, and facilitated development of metacognitive abilities, which are key to theoretical proponents of learner autonomy and self-determination theories (Darvishi et al., 2024; Huynh, 2024; C. Xu, 2024).

In reducing having learners reduced their reliance on the human teacher, AI use has induced a paradigm shift in the educator's role in the education system, particularly that in language learning. The initial fear that AI will render teachers obsolete is now largely assuaged (Alshammari, 2024; Katsenou et al., 2025), but the overwhelmingly consensus of the day is the argument for teachers to expand beyond being the primary and sole source of information and knowledge. Said expansion of roles include being facilitators, mentors, and designers of AI-enhanced learning ecologies (Cope et al., 2021; Creely & Carabott, 2025; Kohnke et al., 2023). Perhaps more importantly and critically, the teacher's role is to gatekeep and regulate their learners' use of AI via structured guidance and pedagogical scaffolding (Jeon & Lee, 2023; Lee et al., 2024). For instance, the triological learning framework that unifies the role of the teacher, learner, and AI as a learning artefact may prove useful (Katsenou et al., 2025; S. C. Tan et al., 2014).

However, Li and Wilson (2025) warned that balancing human and AI interaction in a pedagogical setting is a key challenge. AI use, regardless of its potency in enhancing learner autonomy, are not without risk. Overreliance on AI can result in a form of “permanent” scaffolding which undermines critical thinking, deep learning, and active cognitive processing (Babayev, 2025; Chen, 2025; Zhai et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2023). Adding to this risk is the susceptibility of AI hallucinating due to poor prompting and poorly defined parameters (Abramski et al., 2023; Hieu & Thao, 2024; Urman & Makhortykh, 2025). These lead to a worrying lack of critical judgement on AI-induced learning, which may in turn encourage blind adoption or worse, plagiarism of AI-generated content (Barrot, 2023; Jarrah et al., 2023; Tilfarlioglu & Ciftci, 2011). Therefore, it is pivotal that efforts advocating for integrated pedagogical guidance maximizing the benefits of AI tools, ChatGPT included, sustains in all levels of learning (J. Huang & Mizumoto, 2024; Yusop, 2024).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this systematic review demonstrated, at the very least, that the impact and perception of AI tools are not uniform. Factors such as the learner's language proficiency, educational level, cultural context, and the specific design of the AI interaction (e.g., gamified elements, guidance mechanisms) significantly influence outcomes (Othman et al., 2025; Qu & Wu, 2024; Vo & Nguyen, 2024). This goes to highlight the importance of extending studies of the use of AI tools in enhancing language learning autonomy in diverse contexts, further underscoring the point that effective integration must be context-sensitive (Alshammari, 2024; Beknazar & Lee, 2025; Pham et al., 2024).

From a pedagogical perspective, AI tools have become so pivotal and central at all levels of education. What comes after successful introduction, acceptance, adoption, and adaptation is ethical and responsible use of AI. This stance is clearly enunciated in the discussions concerning the use of AI to democratize language learning via cultivating learner autonomy and self-regulated learning. UNESCO (2022) outlined a series of recommendations on the ethics of AI use in recognition of this need, which further inspired classroom specific frameworks and guidelines (Chan, 2023; Chatzichristofis et al., 2025; Ofosu-Asare, 2025). These developments also meant that AI use needs to be better integrated with existing curricula, something that scholars have only begun to attempt recently (see Jomaa, 2025), although this endeavor will take more time and research to take shape.

While ChatGPT demonstrates substantial promise in fostering learner autonomy within English language education, its efficacy is admittedly contingent upon thoughtful pedagogical integration and sustained instructional mediation. The evidence reviewed highlights that autonomy is best cultivated when learners are supported in developing digital literacy, critical prompt formulation, and reflective engagement strategies. Future research must address current methodological limitations by employing rigorous, longitudinal, and contextually diverse designs, while also examining the ethical and cognitive dimensions of AI use. A critically informed and pedagogically grounded approach is imperative to ensure that ChatGPT functions not merely as a technological tool, but as a catalyst for meaningful, self-regulated language learning.

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Appendix 1

Summary of Literature Reviewed

Author(s)	Year	Title	Context	Methodology	Autonomy Focus	ChatGPT Role(s)	Notes / Details
Agustini, N. P.	2023	Examining the role of ChatGPT as a learning tool in promoting students' English language learning autonomy	Indonesia (<i>Kurikulum Merdeka</i>)	Exploratory mixed-methods (qual → survey + semi-structured interviews)	Explicit learner autonomy	Learning facilitator / scaffolder	Supports learners in regulating learning, setting objectives, making decisions; integrated into KMB program.
Alm, A.	2024	Exploring autonomy in the AI wilderness: Learner challenges and choices	German L2 learners	Qualitative case study (semester-long reflective journals, digital portfolios, interviews)	Autonomy & shared agency	Reflective learning scaffolder	Used to support learner journals, portfolios, and AI-mediated engagement; fosters autonomy & agency.
Alshammari, J.	2024	Revolutionizing EFL learning through ChatGPT: A qualitative study	Saudi Arabia (EFL)	Qualitative phenomenological (interviews, focus groups)	Self-directed learning	Language learning tutor / advisor	ChatGPT enhances reading, writing, grammar, and spelling; promotes self-directed learning and personalized support.
Beknazar, L.; Lee, Y.-J.	2025	ChatGPT as a vocabulary learning tool for EFL learners in Kazakhstan	Kazakhstan (EFL)	Explanatory mixed-methods (Quan → Paired t-test, Qual → surveys + interviews + logs)	Autonomy via strategy use	Vocabulary learning scaffold & adaptive feedback provider	Helps students with word meanings, translation, creative tasks; enables strategic autonomy and improvement in vocabulary.
Du, J.; Alm, A.	2024	The impact of ChatGPT on EAP students' language learning experience	New Zealand (EAP)	Qualitative exploratory (SDT framework; semi-structured interviews)	Autonomy & competence	Feedback provider & practice tool	Provides flexible, personalized feedback for EAP students; supports autonomy and competence.
Huang, Q.	2025	Investigating how learners utilize ChatGPT for autonomous learning	IELTS writing (university)	Explanatory mixed-methods (Quan → pre/post assessments, Qual → interviews)	Autonomous strategies	Autonomy scaffold / guided prompt tool	Encourages autonomous writing strategies in IELTS Academic Writing; provides structured guidance.
Jaashan, H. M. S.	2025	LLM-ChatGPT and learner autonomy: Teaching present simple tense as a model	EFL learners	Quasi-experimental between-subjects design (control vs experimental group)	Instructional autonomy	Instructional tool / automated teacher assistant	Used to teach present simple tense with drills and automated feedback; reduces teacher dominance.

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Li, Z.; Wang, C.; Bonk, C.	2024	Exploring the utility of ChatGPT for self-directed online language learning	USA (online learners)	Convergent mixed-methods (Quan → survey, Qual → 1-on-1 interviews)	Self-directed learning	Self-directed learning facilitator	Supports online language learners to structure study; personalized and flexible access to materials.
Na, I.; Duris, M.; Hegelheimer, V.	2025	ChatGPT in ESL Writing: L2 learners' practices and perspectives	US ESL writing	Qualitative interaction analysis (conversation logs, screen recordings, interviews)	Critical autonomy	Proofreader / feedback provider	Supports L2 writing revisions via feedback integration; helps learners critically evaluate output.
Tan, T. P.; Hanh, T. T. N.; Huong, G. N. H.	2024	Learner autonomy through the use of ChatGPT by third-year English students	Vietnam (EFL university)	Cross-sectional survey (quantitative)	Study habits & independence	Study habit enhancer / personalized assistant	Offers recommendations and feedback to support study habits and learning independence.
Van Horn, K.	2024	ChatGPT in English language learning: Exploring perceptions and promoting autonomy	Korean university EFL	Qualitative exploratory (pre-post surveys, interviews, observations)	Autonomy & metacognition	Collaborative learning partner / scaffolder	Promotes metacognition, collaborative activities, confidence-building; integrated into class observations and exercises.
Xu, J.; Liu, Q.	2025	Duolingo vs. ChatGPT in AI-integrated education	China (EFL)	True-experimental design (3 groups, MANOVA)	Autonomy, CT, motivation	Comparative learning facilitator	Used alongside Duolingo to provide AI-mediated exercises, feedback, and engagement; supports motivation & autonomy.
Zakwani, M. A.; Binu, P. M.	2025	Exploring student insights on ChatGPT as a resource for learning English and its influence on learner independence	EFL university	Explanatory mixed-methods (Quan → survey, Qual → semi-structured interviews)	Learner autonomy / SRL	Resource & autonomous learning aid	Tool for completing tasks, fostering self-regulated learning; flexible and convenient.