

The AI Dilemma in EFL Classrooms at Higher Education

Mansyur Mansyur¹, Nur Ilmi Saskia Masmuda², Arrayana Nasra³

^{1,2,3} Universitas Negeri Makassar, Indonesia

Corresponding Author:

Mansyur Mansyur

mansyur.fbs@unm.ac.id

Abstract

Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) has rapidly reshaped English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning in higher education, creating a paradox in which task efficiency coexists with cognitive passivity. This issue is rarely examined among English Education students, who are simultaneously language learners and future language teachers. This study investigates how these students navigate the dilemma of using AI in language classrooms, mapping both the opportunities for task efficiency and the challenges of cognitive passivity. An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was applied at the English Education Department of Universitas Negeri Makassar. A Likert-scale questionnaire was distributed to 67 undergraduate students, followed by semi-structured interviews with 7 purposively selected students; quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and the interview transcripts using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that students overwhelmingly value AI as an efficient virtual assistant for finding vocabulary (97.1%), correcting grammar (95.6%), and saving time (91.1%). At the same time, a notable minority report cognitive risks such as overreliance, dependency for idea generation, and reduced confidence when working without AI. Crucially, most students are not passive: they apply self-regulated learning strategies, setting strict personal boundaries (85.1%), critically analysing why AI makes corrections (86.5%), and deliberately editing AI output to preserve their authentic human voice (86.6%). The study contributes empirical evidence on how future language educators balance automated assistance with independent critical thinking, and offers practical recommendations for cultivating self-regulated AI use in EFL settings.

Keywords: *artificial intelligence, EFL, cognitive passivity, self-regulated learning, academic integrity*

Introduction

Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) has brought big changes to higher education, especially in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. Today, using AI tools like ChatGPT or smart grammar checkers is a global trend that has deeply changed how students learn languages (Crompton et al., 2024). In the learning process, these AI tools work as digital scaffolding that helps students reduce their technical workload. For example, AI gives students great opportunities to quickly find the right vocabulary, build early essay drafts, and fix grammar mistakes instantly. Because AI handles these basic language rules, students can save a lot of time and energy, allowing them to focus more on developing their main ideas (Deep & Chen, 2025; Feng, 2024).

Many recent studies show that the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) brings significant positive impacts to English language learning. Several contemporary researchers agree that AI serves as an effective virtual assistant to increase learners' confidence and reduce foreign language anxiety (AlTwijri & Alghizzi, 2024; Wah, 2025). Furthermore, these generative tools have been proven to accelerate essay writing efficiency and make it

easier for students to understand difficult reading texts (Crompton et al., 2024; Daud et al., 2025; Deep & Chen, 2025). With the help of direct feedback from AI, students can improve their linguistic skills independently (Feng, 2024; Idham et al., 2024).

Despite these benefits, recent literature warns about serious threats regarding the use of this technology in academic environments. The uncontrolled use of AI can trigger cognitive passivity, hidden plagiarism, and a decline in students' academic integrity (Bouteraa et al., 2024; Cong-Lem et al., 2024; Williams, 2024). When students rely too heavily on machine instructions, they tend to experience lazy thinking and lose the ability to generate original ideas (Alm, 2024; Farrokhnia et al., 2023). This overreliance also erodes the authenticity of the human voice, making students' writing sound stiff and robotic (Chavez et al., 2024; Rudolph et al., 2024).

From the teachers' perspective, managing the use of AI in the classroom has become a major struggle (Chavez et al., 2024). Many language instructors complain that it is very difficult to control how much students use these tools outside the classroom. Teachers notice that some students go too far, relying completely on AI to do their assignments instead of making their own effort (Wardat & Akour, 2025). This uncontrolled habit makes it hard for educators to know if a student's work is truly original. As a result, teachers are deeply concerned about how to enforce academic rules and prevent students from taking unfair learning shortcuts (Cong-Lem et al., 2024).

Therefore, a major gap remains between these technological benefits and the real cognitive challenges. Most previous studies have only focused on the general sophistication of AI tools or their direct impact on final academic grades (Deep & Chen, 2025; Liang et al., 2021). Very few studies have empirically explored this paradox, where task efficiency happens at the same time as cognitive passivity. Furthermore, this issue is rarely studied from the unique perspective of English Education students. These students have a dual role: they are currently language learners, but they are also future language teachers. Understanding how they regulate their learning is crucial, yet this specific area is still widely ignored in current research (Chan & Hu, 2023).

To address this gap, the main objective of this study is to deeply investigate how English Education students navigate the dilemma of using artificial intelligence in language classrooms. Specifically, this research aims to map both the opportunities for task efficiency and the challenges of cognitive passivity experienced by these learners. To achieve this goal, the study applies a mixed-methods approach. It combines a quantitative survey to capture general usage trends with in-depth qualitative interviews to explore students' personal experiences. Through this combination of data, the research hopes to provide practical recommendations on how students can better manage their self-regulated learning when using AI tools.

Method

This study applied an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) to get a complete picture of the research problem. The research was conducted in the English Education Department at Universitas Negeri Makassar. The participants were undergraduate students who have a unique role as both language learners and future English teachers. For the data collection, the researcher first distributed a close-ended questionnaire using a Likert scale to 67 students to understand their general use of AI. After that, 7 students were carefully selected from the survey group to participate in semi-structured interviews. This second step aimed to deeply explore the reasons and personal experiences behind their survey answers.

For the data analysis, the quantitative data from the questionnaire was analyzed using simple descriptive statistics. The researcher calculated the percentages and

frequencies to see the general trends of AI opportunities and challenges. Meanwhile, the qualitative data from the interviews produced a 32-page transcript. This text data was analyzed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher read the transcripts carefully, coded the important information, and grouped the students' responses into several main themes. Finally, the quantitative numbers and the qualitative themes were combined to answer the research questions clearly and comprehensively.

Results and Discussion

This section explores how English Education students navigate the complex dilemma of using Artificial Intelligence in their academic routines. By combining quantitative survey results with in-depth qualitative interviews, the findings reveal a dynamic relationship between the students and AI. The discussion is divided into three main areas: the technological opportunities, the cognitive challenges, and the self-regulated learning strategies employed by the students.

Technological Opportunities and Task Efficiency

The data strongly indicates that students actively utilize AI as a highly efficient virtual assistant to manage their academic workload. Based on the survey, an overwhelming majority of the students agree that AI makes finding appropriate English vocabulary (97.1%) and fixing grammatical errors (95.6%) incredibly fast and easy. Furthermore, 91.1% of the respondents state that the use of AI significantly cuts down the time required to complete English assignments.

These quantitative numbers are deeply reflected in the students' daily learning behaviors. During the interviews, students expressed that AI provides a safe and judgment-free zone for them to explore ideas without the fear of making mistakes. As one student highlighted regarding the brainstorming process:

"Sometimes I can brainstorm with friends, but occasionally it feels awkward or I feel insecure about my questions. With AI, brainstorming is much freer. I can ask the most random things up to the serious ones without feeling limited." (Maulia, Interview Transcript)

Another student emphasized the constant availability of AI as a major advantage compared to traditional resources:

"AI is always there every time, twenty-four hours a day. If I ask a friend, it is not guaranteed that their answer is correct or complete. AI defines things clearly, completely, and in detail." (Nurmutya, Interview Transcript)

These findings support the claims made by previous researchers in the Introduction. The students' experiences perfectly align with Crompton et al. (2024) and Daud et al. (2025), who stated that generative tools accelerate writing efficiency and help students overcome language barriers. Furthermore, the students' preference for AI over traditional dictionaries proves Wah's (2025) theory that AI serves as a personalized virtual assistant that significantly boosts learners' confidence in completing technical tasks.

Cognitive Passivity and the Crisis of Confidence

Despite the celebrated benefits, the data also uncovers the latent risk of cognitive passivity in the EFL classroom. While most students do not openly identify as cognitively lazy—indeed, 44.8% explicitly disagree that they feel too lazy to construct English sentences themselves—a meaningful minority does fall into the trap of overreliance. Around 23.9% of the students admit feeling cognitively lazy and preferring to let AI construct English sentences for them, while a comparable share (roughly one-third) feel they are at risk of losing their ability to generate original ideas. In addition, responses to

working without AI are sharply divided: 34.3% of respondents express agreement that they lack the confidence to submit assignments without first running them through an AI checker, with an equal 34.3% remaining unsure and only 28.4% confidently rejecting this dependency. Taken together, these figures show that cognitive passivity is not the majority experience, but it is a real and concerning tendency for a substantial subgroup of learners.

The qualitative interviews provide a deeper understanding of why this happens. The temptation to bypass critical thinking usually occurs when students are overwhelmed by external pressures, such as tight deadlines or academic fatigue. One student honestly admitted to crossing the line into academic dishonesty under such circumstances:

"When I have activities outside of college and the deadline is approaching, I tend to just ask AI to do my assignment completely using my own prompt." (Warda, Interview Transcript)

This overreliance creates a psychological barrier. When asked how they would feel if forced to write an essay completely manually without AI, students expressed panic and worry, primarily due to their perceived lack of fundamental language skills.

"I would definitely panic at first. My knowledge of grammar is still lacking, and the vocabulary I know is very limited. I can think of simple ideas, but pouring them into English sentences is hard." (Andi Kamsina, Interview Transcript)

These confessions strongly confirm the warnings presented by Farrokhnia et al. (2023) and Alm (2024), who argued that excessive reliance on machine instructions triggers lazy thinking and erodes students' ability to produce original thoughts. The findings also validate the concerns of language teachers (Cong-Lem et al., 2024), showing that uncontrolled AI usage can threaten academic integrity and create a crisis of self-confidence among a portion of language learners, even when most students still report some resistance to fully surrendering their thinking to the machine.

Self-Regulated Learning and Maintaining the Human Voice

However, the most crucial finding of this study is that students are not entirely passive victims of technology. To navigate the AI dilemma, they actively employ Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) strategies. The survey shows exceptionally high self-awareness: 85.1% of students set strict personal boundaries for AI use, and 86.5% do not blindly copy answers, but rather analyze *why* AI makes certain grammatical corrections. The interview data reveals how students practically apply these boundaries. Before consulting AI, many students ensure they have a basic understanding of the material to prevent the machine from taking over their learning process.

"I will definitely study first. The main point is to learn about the assignment first... So, if I use AI later, I can validate its answers much faster. We cannot just feed a raw prompt to AI without knowing the context." (Alifah, Interview Transcript)

Furthermore, 86.6% of the surveyed students consciously strive to maintain their personal writing style. To combat the issue of stiff and robotic AI language (as criticized by Chavez et al., 2024), students purposefully edit the machine's output. They replace complex academic terms with simpler synonyms and remove specific punctuation marks that are characteristic of AI generation.

"I usually paraphrase it. I also avoid using the em dash (—) now. I prefer using multiple commas rather than em dashes because it makes the text look less like an AI product and more natural." (Maulia, Interview Transcript)

These self-regulation tactics fill the gap in the current literature mentioned in the Introduction. While previous studies (Al-Smadi et al., 2025; Deep & Chen, 2025) primarily focused on AI's general impact, this study provides empirical evidence on *how* English

Education students balance automated assistance with independent thinking. By utilizing iterative prompting and strict personal boundaries, these future educators prove that they can harness the efficiency of AI while actively protecting their cognitive development and authentic human voice.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study highlights the clear dilemma faced by English Education students when integrating Artificial Intelligence into their learning routines. On one hand, AI offers substantial technological opportunities by serving as an efficient virtual assistant that boosts task efficiency, simplifies grammar checking, and accelerates brainstorming. On the other hand, it poses serious cognitive challenges for a subset of learners, such as triggering cognitive passivity, inducing dependency, and lowering students' confidence when forced to work independently. However, this research shows that students actively combat this dilemma by implementing strong self-regulated learning strategies, setting strict personal boundaries, and carefully paraphrasing AI outputs to preserve their authentic human voice. This study moves scientific knowledge forward by providing empirical evidence on how language learners practically balance automated assistance with independent critical thinking.

This study is not without limitations. It was conducted in a single department at one university with a relatively small survey sample (67 respondents) and seven interviewees, so the findings should be generalised with caution. Future research is recommended to involve larger and more diverse samples across institutions, to incorporate teachers' perspectives directly, and to employ longitudinal designs that track how students' self-regulated learning strategies and dependency on AI evolve over time.

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