



Learner Agency in AI-Mediated English Language Learning: A Multiple Case Study of EFL University Students

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Article Info	Abstract
Received: 2026-07-03 Revised: 2026-09-24 Accepted: 2026-09-28 Keywords: <i>Learner Agency;</i> <i>AI-Mediated English Learning;</i> <i>Thematic Analysis</i> DOI: 10.24256/ideas.v14i1.11625 Corresponding Author: Ishak Taulany ishak@iain-bone.ac.id Institute Agama Islam Negeri Bone	<i>Advancements in Artificial Intelligence have transformed how students learn English by providing rapid and accessible learning support. However, research on learner agency in AI-mediated English learning has largely focused on student perceptions, leaving a gap in understanding how learner agency manifests during actual interactions with AI. This study aims to explore how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students exercise learner agency within AI-mediated English learning. It employs a qualitative approach with a multiple-case study design, enabling the identification of both consistent patterns and variations across cases; each participant is treated as a distinct case representing unique experiences and patterns of learner agency, thereby fostering a deep understanding of agency across diverse contexts of AI usage among 15 undergraduate EFL students. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, AI interaction logs, and stimulated recall interviews, and subsequently analyzed using Thematic Analysis. The findings reveal that learner agency manifests through students' efforts to maintain control over the learning process, negotiate trust in AI through critical evaluation, and make strategic decisions during interactions with AI. These findings offer pedagogical implications for educators regarding the design of learning experiences that foster critical evaluation, decision-making, and responsible AI use. Conceptually, the study posits that learner agency in AI-mediated English learning is a dynamic and relational process shaped by the interplay between the student, the AI, and the learning context.</i>

1. Introduction

Artificial intelligence and other technical advances are driving transformational changes in language education systems in the classroom due to the impact of contemporary reality. The transition from teacher-centered instruction to today's learner-centered educational approaches has been fueled by technological advances over the past century (George et al.,

2025). The numerous intelligent systems applications of artificial intelligence- that are assisting in the transformation of the roles played by educators, students, and schools are responsible for this change in patterns (Viktorivna et al., 2022). This change puts students in a position where they are active agents in charge of organizing, directing, and assessing their own learning processes. Students are no longer seen as passive recipients of knowledge when learning English; Rather, they are seen as active creators of knowledge through interaction with a variety of learning materials and a dynamic learning environment. In the era of technology, education places a strong emphasis on access that allows individual to follow their passions and goals and offers a rich social learning environment so that individual can learn what they want and choose (Sudibjo et al., 2019). Therefore, students' capacity to make decisions, engage actively, and take full responsibility of their own learning process is just as important to the success of English language learning today as the quality of instruction.

The emergence of AI-mediated learning, which is learning that occurs through the mediation of AI in various learning activities. AI mediates students' interactions with the content, provides rapid feedback, suggests alternative solutions to difficulties, and even assists students in making decisions during the learning process. In language learning, this mediation, in the form of quick feedback, suggests a good attitude toward AI tools (Son et al., 2023). As a result, language learning nowadays is more than just completing academic language assignments; it also includes actively experimenting with AI for diverse multilingual learning activities (Liu & Zhao, 2026).

Although artificial intelligence offers various benefits in learning, its presence also raises fundamental questions regarding the student's role as a learner. The ease of obtaining answers through artificial intelligence can hinder students from thinking independently and developing metacognitive skills such as managing their thought processes, engaging in self-reflection, and critically evaluating information (Goyal, 2025). Consequently, the central issue in English language learning within this study is no longer merely whether AI is effective, but rather how students can maintain an active role when the learning process is mediated by AI.

In this context, the concept of learner agency becomes highly relevant. The foundation of the concept of learner agency is the ability to take responsibility, which is linked to reflective skills and the ability to evaluate one's own actions (Ільченко & Карпенко, 2024). Although many related concepts, such as learner autonomy and self-regulated learning, have been widely used to explain students' independence and evaluation of their learning, these concepts have not yet fully captured the dynamics of students' active roles in decision-making that occur when they interact with AI.

The concept of learner autonomy generally emphasizes a learner's ability to learn independently and take responsibility for their own learning, whereas self-regulated learning focuses more on students' initiative in planning, monitoring, and evaluating their learning goals. Even concepts such as AI literacy which is used to understand, critically evaluate, and use AI ethically and which is closely related to learner agency in AI-mediated learning, do not yet fully explain the dynamics of acceptance and rejection of feedback offered by AI. Therefore, in this context, the definition by Conrad, Olga, and Kizilcec (2026) of "student agency" as a student's ability to act intentionally and make choices aligned with their goals becomes a highly relevant perspective.

In article Gupta et al. (2024), learner agency is rooted in an engagement that emphasizes an individual's capacity for self-regulation, the shaping of their own learning experiences, and the active construction of knowledge throughout the learning process. Learner agency is

reflected in behaviors where individuals take the initiative to assess learning needs, set learning goals, identify learning resources, select and implement appropriate learning strategies, and evaluate their learning outcomes (Deschênes, 2020). Based on this concept, learner agency relates not only to the freedom of choice but also reflects a student's ability to act reflectively amidst the various opportunities and challenges that arise within the learning environment. Consequently, in the AI era, learner agency becomes increasingly crucial, as students must possess not only the ability to use AI but also the capacity to actively evaluate, critique, and determine the extent to which AI should play a role in their learning process.

Current research on AI in English language education is dominated by studies focusing on students' perceptions of AI, the effectiveness of its use, and the challenges and risks it poses. Studies (Crompton et al., 2024; Kristiawan et al., 2024), have found that AI positively impacts student skills, including speaking, writing, reading, and self-regulation. However, Rukiati et al. (2023) conclude that while AI in ELT offers benefits, it also presents potential threats to the human role as an active agent capable of fostering positive learning outcomes.

Consequently, learner agency has emerged as a focus of research in the field of AI-mediated learning. Yet, previous studies tend to position AI as a factor that can both support and constrain learner agency. Pauzi et al. (2026) indicates that learner agency understood as an inherent quality exercised within decision-making spaces and experienced subjectively and relationally is shaped by AI systems that define the scope of such agency. While this perspective is significant, it does not fully explain how students actualize this agency through actions and decision-making during interactions with AI in the learning process. Furthermore, qualitative research on the concept of learner agency among EFL students in Indonesia remains limited.

Based on this phenomenon, this study aims to explore how learner agency is enacted by Indonesian university students learning English (EFL), serving as a lens to understand their active roles in AI-mediated English learning. The study is expected to provide deeper insight into how students make decisions, interpret the use of AI, and sustain their active engagement in the English learning process. The findings are anticipated not only to enrich the literature on learner agency within the context of AI-mediated learning but also to offer implications for the development of human-centered English language learning in the era of artificial intelligence.

The following questions are addressed in order to fulfill the study's objectives:

1. How do students experience learning agency in AI-mediated English language learning?
2. What factors enable or limit learner agency in AI-mediated English language learning?
3. How do students negotiate learning decisions in AI-mediated English language learning?

2. Method

This study employs a case study design and a qualitative methodology. It aims to provide an in-depth examination of how individuals make sense of a phenomenon, activity, or event (Merriam, 2010). A qualitative case study approach was selected to understand how students maintain an active role in AI-mediated learning processes.

The study participants consisted of fifteen English majors from two higher education institutions located in different regions. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) enrollment in an undergraduate English program; (2) experience using AI in English learning activities; (3) regular use of AI in English learning; and (4) willingness to participate in interviews, share AI interaction histories relevant to English learning, and engage in stimulated recall interviews. These criteria were established to ensure that each participant possessed relevant, information-rich experience regarding AI usage in English learning and the decision-making processes involved in AI interactions. The participants represented various academic year levels, as detailed in the following profiles.

Table 1. Participants Profile

Participants Code	Academic Year	AI Platform Used	Intended Use	Frequency of Use
P01	First Year	ChatGPT, Gemini AI, Google Translate	Explanatory Prompting, Assignment, and Translating	3-4 times/ week
P02	First Year	ChatGPT, Google Translate, Stimuler AI	Explanatory Prompting, Speaking Practice, Translating, and Assignment	2-3 times/ week
P03	First Year	Gemini AI, Grammarly, DeepL Translator	Assignment, Grammar Checker, and Translating	3-4 times/ week
P04	Second Year	Perplexity, Gemini AI, DeepL Translator	Assignment, Explanatory Prompting, and Translating	4-5 times/ week
P05	Second Year	Claude AI, Google Translator	Explatory Prompting, Writing, and Translating	2-3 times/ week
P06	Second Year	Gemini AI, DeepL Translator, Stimuler AI, Quillbot	Writing, Translating, Speaking Practice	3-4 times/ week
P07	Third Year	Gemini AI, Claude AI, Quillbot, Google Translator	Writing, Translating, and Explanatory Prompting	2-3 times/ week
P08	Third Year	ChatGPT, Gemini AI, Quillbot, Google Translate, DeepL Translator	Writing, Translating, and Explanatory Prompting	3-4 times/ week
P09	Third Year	Claude AI, Quillbot, DeepL Translator	Writing, Translating, and Explanatory Prompting	4-5 times/ week
P10	Fourth Year	Perplexity AI, Quillbot, DeepL Transtator	Writing, and Translating	Daily
P11	Fourth Year	Claude AI, Gemini AI, Quillbot, Google Translate, DeepL Translator, Consensus AI	Writing, Translating, and Explanatory Prompting	5-6 times/ week
P12	Fourth Year	Gemini AI, ChatGPT, Quillbot, DeepL translator	Writing, Translating	Daily

Participants Code	Academic Year	AI Platform Used	Intended Use	Frequency of Use
P13	Fourth Year	ChatGPT, Consensus AI, Google Translate, Grammarly	Writing, and Translating	Daily
P14	Fourth Year	ChatGPT, Gemini AI, Quillbot, Google Translate	Writing, and Translating	4-5 times/ week
P15	Fourth Year	Copilot, Gemini AI, Quillbot, DeepL Translator	Writing, and Translating	5-6 times/ week

The participants included three first-year students, two second-year students, four third-year students, and six fourth-semester students. All participants stated that they used AI for at least one to two hours daily.

Semi-structured interviews were used to interview each participant. The online, semi-structured interviews lasted between forty-five to an hour. As a stimulus for the interviews, the researcher also gathered data through AI interaction logs, in which participants were asked to submit a history of their interactions with the AI (via screenshots or shared links) that reflected their English language learning activities. In order to delve deeper into the characteristics of learner agency that surfaced during interactions with AI, the researchers conducted stimulated recall interviews based on the conversation history data.

The following procedures were used in data analysis using Braun & Clarke's (2006) theme analysis framework: (1) Familiarizing yourself with your data: This process entails reading and rereading the raw data (such as interview transcripts or interview notes) to identify any emerging ideas and trends; (2) Generating initial codes: This stage entails assigning codes to the data and categorizing pertinent information beneath each code; (3) Searching for themes: After the material has been coded, the codes are organized into major topics; (4) Reviewing themes: At this point, the researcher goes over the data to check that each piece of information classified into a topic is correct.

This stage permits themes to be merged, separated, or eliminated; (5) Defining and naming themes: The researcher summarizes each theme and explains how it connects to the study issue; (6). Product the report: The researcher delivers the findings in a clear narrative. The findings include in-depth descriptions of the themes, supporting data quotes, and analytical remarks (Ahmed et al., 2025; Braun & Clarke, 2006). These six stages were used as the data analysis framework for this study.

The entire coding process was conducted by the principal researcher, utilizing a reflexive journal to maintain data consistency and quality. The integrity of the coding process was upheld through the researcher's reflective engagement iteratively reading, reviewing, comparing, and refining codes and themes. The reflexive journal served to document assumptions, analytical considerations, code modifications, category mergers, and the rationale behind the principal researcher's decisions during theme development. Additionally, the journal helped the researcher recognize potential influences of personal perspectives on data interpretation and provided a record of the analysis process's evolution.

Data adequacy was deemed achieved once the data from all fifteen participants had been analyzed. Following the analysis of all interview results, the majority of the data yielded codes similar to those previously identified, with virtually no new codes emerging that were

substantially relevant to the research questions. Consequently, the data were considered sufficient, as the analysis revealed recurring core patterns and provided enough information to explain the participants' experiences regarding learner agency. Data obtained from subsequent participant interviews primarily reinforced, clarified, or offered variations on existing patterns rather than generating new codes or themes.

4. Result

This investigation revealed four interconnected elements that explain how students of English as a foreign language exercise learner agency in AI-mediated learning. The concepts presented here illustrate the dynamic process by which learner agency is exercised, negotiated, and restrained when dealing with AI. There are four themes:

Preserving Authority Over the Learning Process

Students strive to maintain control over their learning process despite using AI as a learning aid. They view AI as a tool for particular parts of the learning process rather than as a substitute for the thinking process.

Most students stated that they still independently determine learning topics, draft initial assignments, and develop ideas based on their existing understanding. AI is often used to correct grammar, structure sentences more formally, provide an outline that students then expand upon.

One student stated:

"The idea came from me while the AI only helped correct my grammar."

Another student also stated:

"AI only helps me create the outline, while the content is still developed independently."

This statement is supported by interaction logs with AI, which show that students explicitly limited the AI's role during the learning process. In some conversation logs, students instructed the AI to only correct linguistic aspects without changing the content or main ideas they had developed. In other conversation logs, students simply asked the AI to develop an outline or discussion framework before developing each point using valid information from scientific articles and other academic sources. This interaction pattern suggests that the AI was more often positioned as a technical support tool than as a primary idea generator.

Students explained that they deliberately limited the AI's role to ensure their own thinking processes remained independent.

One student explained:

"I shared my role with the AI so that I could continue to think without relying solely on the AI."

The explanation demonstrates that the students' decision to limit AI assistance was not accidental, but rather a conscious decision to maintain authority over the learning process.

Furthermore, several students stated that they would rewrite the results provided by the AI using their own style to ensure that the final results still reflected their own thinking skills. Students emphasized that AI was used solely as a technical aid, while the process of thinking, analysis, and idea development remained independent.

Although students generally view AI as a tool to support learning rather than a substitute for active engagement in the learning process, the level of control or sense of ownership they exercise over that process varies. Some students rely more heavily on AI to complete specific tasks.

One student remarked:

"Sometimes, when working on a difficult assignment under tight time constraints, I tend to follow AI's suggestions without asking follow-up questions."

This variation indicates that the ways in which students maintain control over their learning processes are not uniform; there are differences in the extent to which they actively manage AI's role in their learning.

Overall, student experiences demonstrate that maintaining learner agency means retaining control over learning-related decisions. Even when AI is utilized as a source of assistance, students generally position themselves as the primary decision-makers regarding how AI-generated information is integrated into their learning activities.

Negotiating Trust Through Critical Evaluation

Students' trust in AI doesn't emerge automatically. However, before using the information provided by AI, they first conduct various forms of evaluation to ensure its reliability.

Students explained that they would check the AI's answers using scientific articles, books, and other academic sources. Some students also compared answers generated by two or more different platforms before deciding to use the information provided.

One student stated:

"I check manually, such as searching for concrete information on Google Scholar or other sources."

Another student also stated:

"And also, I sometimes use two different AI platforms and compare the answers they provide."

In several conversational accounts, students were seen asking follow-up questions to request more detailed explanations or other answers before deciding which information to use. This interaction pattern indicates that students do not view AI as a definitive source of information, but rather as one that still needs to be verified.

Students also explained their continued follow-up questions: they recognize that AI can produce inaccurate or hallucinatory information. Therefore, they feel the need to verify the information before accepting it.

One student explained:

"Sometimes the outlines provided by AI don't connect, so I keep re-entering the prompt or looking up journal articles to confirm."

Asking follow-up questions or checking the accuracy of valid sources is not simply a habit of using AI, but a conscious strategy students employ to build confidence in the information they use.

Students also explained that they do not immediately trust AI because they are aware of the possibility of providing inaccurate or hallucinatory information. Therefore, an evaluation process is a step they always take before accepting or rejecting information provided by AI.

Most students do not automatically regard AI-generated information as reliable. However, there are distinct differences in how critically students evaluate AI responses. Some students tend to accept AI responses if the answers seem plausible and align with their own knowledge. Records of student interactions reveal a lack of follow-up questions or attempts to verify the sources of information requested from the AI.

One student stated:

"Sometimes I simply accept the AI's answer right away when I feel it is accurate and consistent with my own understanding."

These differences demonstrate that trust in AI is not binary simply a matter of presence or absence; rather, students determine their own level of trust in AI based on their perception of the feedback provided. This variation indicates that learner agency is reflected in the differing levels of critical engagement during interactions with AI.

Overall, student experiences show that learner agency is also manifested through the critical evaluation of information provided by AI. By questioning, scrutinizing, and assessing AI responses, students determine the extent to which they trust and rely on AI in their learning process.

Strategic Decision-Making in AI-Mediated Learning

The use of AI is always accompanied by various conscious decisions made by students throughout the learning process. Interviews show that students continuously engage in decision-making, from determining when to use AI, selecting the platform to use, composing commands, evaluating AI responses, and deciding whether to use, modify, or reject those responses.

One student stated:

"I will accept the AI's suggestions if they align with my understanding."

Another student also stated:

"When the AI provides an answer that doesn't align with my understanding, I will continue to provide guidance to the AI until it produces the feedback I expect."

Conversation histories with the AI show that students not only provide a single prompt, but also repeatedly revise questions, clarify instructions, and request that the AI produce answers in different formats until they achieve a result, they deem appropriate. These interaction patterns demonstrate that students actively control the direction of the conversation with the AI through a series of decisions that continually evolve throughout the learning process.

Students' reasons for changing prompts or deciding to accept or reject AI responses largely indicate that the changes have not yet met their expectations.

One student explained:

"Even after I gave the prompt several times, the AI's response was far from what I expected, so I decided to search manually."

The decision of whether or not to use AI-generated answers is consistently based on their alignment with students' learning objectives. Some students also explained that if AI answers fell short of their expectations, they would rephrase their questions, refine their prompts (instructions), consult other sources, or compare results across various AI platforms until they found the most suitable answer. These varying student responses demonstrate that strategic decision-making hinges on how students perceive the utility or limitations of AI-generated feedback. Some students adapted their learning needs to the AI, while others extended their learning processes beyond the use of the tool itself.

Learner agency is clearly evident in the strategic decisions students make regarding when and how they utilize AI. Actions such as modifying, verifying, or rejecting AI-generated responses indicate that students actively shape the role of AI to suit their specific learning needs.

Contextual Factors Shaping Learner Agency

Students' ability to maintain learner agency is influenced by various conditions they face during the learning process. Most participants revealed that when faced with multiple assignments with close deadlines, they tended to use AI answers directly without conducting their usual validation process. This situation made them feel they missed the opportunity to conduct a more in-depth evaluation of the AI's answers.

One student stated:

"There was an assignment from the lecturer with a very tight deadline, so I was forced to use the AI's answers 100%."

In addition to time pressure, students also revealed that the quality of the AI platform also impacted their learning style. Several participants stated that free versions of AI often produced inaccurate, repetitive, or inappropriate answers to the questions posed, leading them to resort to manual search.

One student stated:

"Some of the AI I use is free, so sometimes the results don't match what I asked for and stray from the discussion."

The limitations of free AI services prompted students to manually verify information by seeking alternative sources. This, in turn, fostered learner agency, as students responded by taking control of their information-seeking processes. These findings indicate that students' ability to maintain agency over the learning process is not static but varies depending on conditions, task characteristics, and the quality of the AI employed.

Learner agency does not manifest uniformly across all students; rather, it is shaped by the interplay between individual characteristics, AI-related conditions, learning tasks, and the academic context. These factors can either enable students to make independent learning decisions or, conversely, constrain their ability to exercise learner agency.

A comprehensive analysis of these cases reveals four forms of learner agency, although this is not experienced uniformly by all students. While control over the learning process and strategic decision-making is evident in most students, critical evaluation and responses to the contextual factors shaping learner agency vary in both intensity and form. Some students demonstrate agency by verifying, modifying, or rejecting AI responses, whereas others tend to rely more heavily on AI without conducting in-depth evaluations. Similarly, contextual factors such as perceptions of AI limitations, task demands, and students' prior knowledge elicit diverse responses. These variations indicate that learner agency manifests unevenly and does not constitute a uniform set of practices among students.

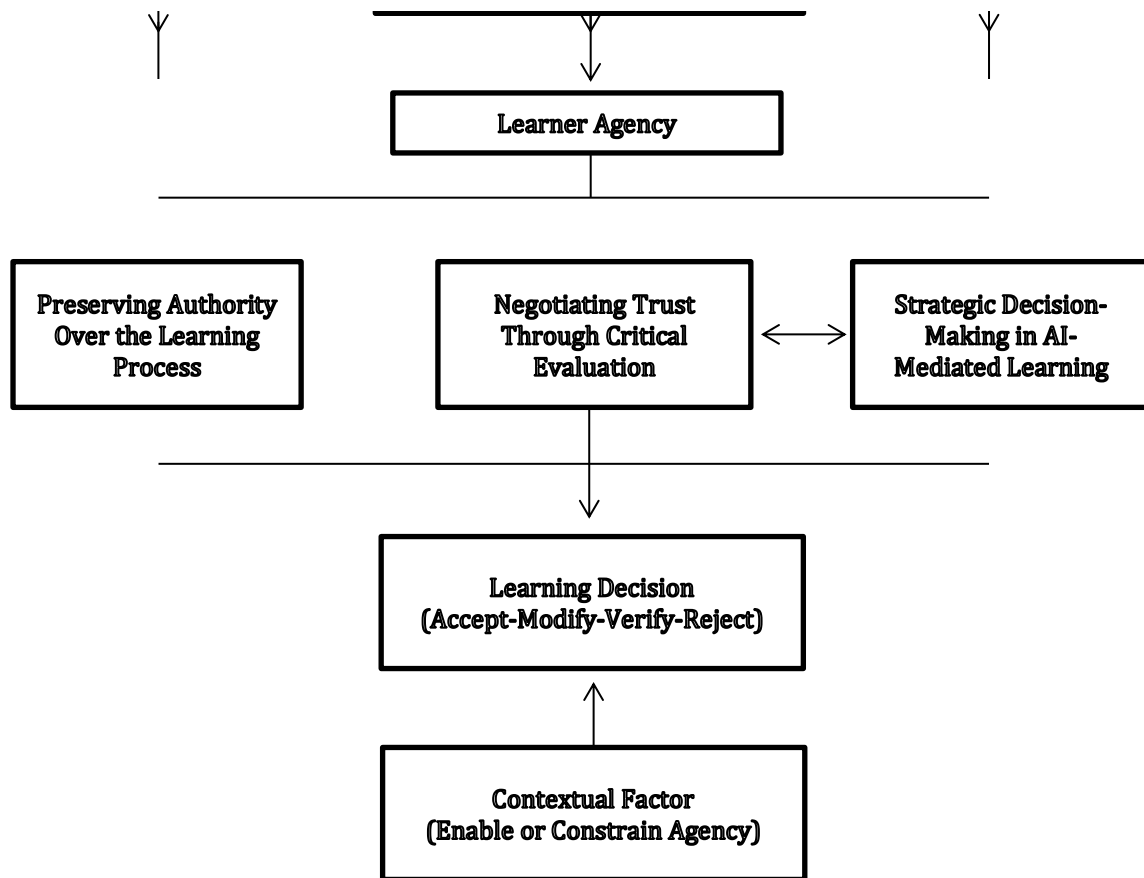
Table 2. Theme Summary

Theme	Core Finding	Representative Quote	Supporting Evidence From AI interaction Logs
Preserving Authority Over the Learning Process	Students retain control over the learning process.	"I balance my role with AI so that I keep thinking for myself rather than relying solely on it."	The student limits the use of AI assistance to requesting an outline of the discussion, without making any follow-up requests.
Negotiating Trust Through Critical Evaluation	Students critically assess and evaluate AI feedback before accepting it.	"Sometimes the outlines provided by AI don't connect, so I keep re-entering the prompt or looking up journal articles to confirm."	The student critically evaluates the AI's response, submits further prompts including a request for official information sources and then manually verifies the information from those sources in relation to the AI's response.
Strategic Decision-Making in AI-Mediated Learning	Students strategically determine how and when to use AI.	"When AI provides an answer that doesn't align with my understanding, I continue to guide it until it produces the output I expect."	The student submits a new prompt after finding the initial feedback provided by the AI inadequate.
Contextual Factors Shaping Learner Agency	The level of student agency varies depending on the learner, the AI, the type of task, and contextual conditions.	"For assignments with very tight deadlines set by the lecturer, I have been forced to use AI-generated answers entirely."	The student does not submit follow-up prompts and does not conduct an in-depth evaluation of the feedback provided by the AI.

Overall, these four themes suggest that learner agency in AI-mediated English learning is realized through students' sustained engagement in the learning process. A sense of ownership serves as a foundation for students to remain in charge of their own learning, while critical evaluation allows them to assess the reliability of the information generated by the AI. Strategic decision-making translates these evaluative processes into tangible actions, such as accepting, modifying, verifying, or rejecting AI-generated responses.

However, this form of agency is affected by contextual conditions and thus varies between-students. Thus, learner agency is understood not as a fixed individual trait, but rather as a dynamic process that is context-dependent and materialized through interactions as well as students' learning decisions involving AI. The following is a conceptual overview regarding the relationships between those four identified themes:

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Theme



4. Discussion

The research results indicate that learner agency is not manifested through rejection of AI, but through students' ability to maintain authority over their learning process. Students utilize AI as a supporting tool to improve technical aspects such as grammar, sentence structure, and writing outlines, while their thinking processes, idea development, and decision-making remain independent. Thus, learner agency in the context of AI-mediated learning is not reflected in how often they use AI, but rather in how they limit the role of AI so that it does not take over their thinking processes.

These findings suggest that learner agency is manifested through students' ability to maintain intellectual authority over the learning process, even though some learning activities are conducted with AI. This is in line with Code (2025) understanding of agency as an individual's ability to organize, direct, and control their educational experience. Learner agency in Hooshyar et al. (2023) also refers to the ability to act and cause change during the learning process.

The effect of AI on student agency is not inherent to the technology itself but depends on how AI is positioned within the learning process (Sylvia et al., 2026). The findings of McGivney (2025) also suggest that higher student agency is associated with more elaborative and clarifying conversations. When the AI system provides authoritative instructions, students demonstrate higher agency in response. Learner agency is no longer a fixed individual characteristic, but is constructed through ongoing interactions between learners and AI. Thus, students actively set boundaries to ensure that AI does not replace their role as learners but instead serves as a learning resource that remains under their control.

Maintaining a sense of ownership over the learning process aligns with the concept of learner autonomy, particularly regarding the emphasis on the learner's full responsibility and control over all learning decisions (Némethova, 2020). However, these findings extend that perspective by demonstrating that ownership in learning encompasses not only independent study but also the negotiation of decision-making authority between the learner and the AI. Students do not merely learn independently; they actively determine when AI is needed, how AI responses are utilized, and whether AI-generated information will be integrated into their learning.

The students' decision to critically evaluate AI output relates to the metacognitive dimension specifically, the aspects of monitoring and controlling cognitive processes (Stanton et al., 2021). These findings indicate that students monitor the quality and reliability of information before using it, implying that the process also involves a dimension of agency. Students do not simply monitor whether their learning is proceeding as intended; they use the results of that evaluation to make critical decisions regarding whether to accept, modify, verify, or reject AI-generated information. Thus, metacognition helps explain the monitoring process, while learner agency encompasses the decision-making actions taken following that monitoring.

Learner agency is manifested through a series of ongoing decisions made by students. Students not only decide when to use AI but also which AI platform to use, develop and revise prompts, evaluate AI information, and decide whether to accept, modify, or reject it. Thus, the interaction between students and AI is not a straightforward, linear process, but rather an iterative negotiation process. Each piece of information provided by AI serves as the basis for students' subsequent decisions. In this context, AI acts as a learning partner, providing various possible actions, while the final decision remains with the student.

These findings support the agency allocation framework, which states that learner agency is exercised and manifested in various decisions learners can make during the learning process (Conrad et al., 2026). This aligns with the definition of agency in Holmes, Keep, and Wieman (2020) as someone who makes decisions to achieve a goal. However, these findings demonstrate that these decisions are not solely related to the use of AI but also include the process of building trust in AI through critical evaluation, maintaining ownership of the learning process, and adapting AI use to the academic demands faced.

The strategic decision-making identified in this study also intersects with the concept of self-regulated learning, particularly regarding aspects of monitoring, planning and strategy selection, and evaluation (Mara & Morar, 2026). However, the study's findings indicate that learner agency encompasses a broader relational dimension. While self-regulated learning explains how learners manage their own cognition, motivation, and behavior, learner agency helps explain how students exercise decision-making authority in environments where some learning resources and decisions are mediated by AI. Thus, students' decisions to modify, verify, or reject AI-generated responses not only reflect self-regulatory strategies but also constitute actions through which students negotiate their stance toward AI.

Another concept closely related to the study's findings is self-directed learning, wherein students take the initiative and assume independent responsibility for seeking out learning resources (Loeng, 2020). The initiative to look for resources beyond those already provided also reflects the concept of learner agency. However, learner agency encompasses more than just independent initiative. When faced with inadequate AI responses, some students reacted by modifying prompts, verifying information, or seeking more accurate data. These actions demonstrate how learners actively respond to the various opportunities and limitations within their learning environment, signaling the emergence of learner agency.

Learner agency is also influenced by various contextual factors that not only limit but also strengthen student agency. These factors include academic pressure, time constraints, AI quality, and students' ability to evaluate the information provided by AI.

The same factors do not always produce the same form of agency. Limited AI quality does not always reduce student agency; some students are encouraged to search for scientific articles, compare several AI platforms, and verify the information they obtain. In these situations, AI limitations serve as triggers for the development of learner agency through critical evaluation activities and the search for alternative learning resources. Conversely, academic pressures such as short deadlines and high assignment loads limit student agency. In these situations, students reported more often accepting AI answers without conducting in-depth evaluation due to limited time for the verification process.

This finding aligns with Xing et al. (2026) which states that learner agency is conceptualized as a situational and motivational state, rather than a stable personal trait. The findings of McGivney (2025) also state that learner agency is multidimensional, with student agency dependent on the type of interaction students have with learning media. AI can expand agency when it supports planning, reflection, and revision, but it can also limit agency when it replaces assessment, encouraging uncritical dependence or a reduced role for the author (Sylvia et al., 2026). Thus, these findings reinforce the view that learner agency is contextual and dynamic. Agency is not understood as a fixed characteristic possessed by students but changes according to the conditions they face.

Learner agency, as a situational and relational phenomenon, aligns with a sociocultural perspective that views it not as an isolated, innate cognitive trait, but as something relationally formed through interactions between the learner and their environment (Castro & Pineda-Báez, 2023). Students' capacity to exercise agency is shaped by their interactions with AI, task demands, prior knowledge, and the conditions under which AI is used. This indicates that agency emerges from the relationship between the learner and the various resources, constraints, and opportunities available in their environment.

Various studies have explored conceptual frameworks regarding learner agency, particularly concerning the distribution of decision-making authority. The findings of this study align with that emphasis on decision-making but add an empirical dimension by demonstrating how agency can be observed through concrete learning actions. Students exercise agency by accepting, modifying, verifying, rejecting, or seeking alternatives to AI-generated responses. Thus, rather than merely conceptualizing agency based on who holds decision-making authority, this research highlights how that authority is enacted through the decisions students make while interacting with AI.

While agency in learning is associated with active decision-making, these findings also raise the possibility that the intensive decision-making involved in AI-mediated learning can create additional cognitive demands. When students must constantly evaluate, verify, compare, and decide which information to use, the learning process becomes highly demanding. Excessive decision-making has the potential to lead to cognitive overload, particularly if learners lack adequate knowledge of the subject matter.

Previous research has reported a tendency toward over-reliance on AI, where students depend heavily on AI-generated answers without critical evaluation; this can undermine learning outcomes and lead to errors in task performance (Pitts et al., 2025). In contrast, the findings of this study reveal instances where students question, modify, verify, or reject AI responses. However, the variation observed in these cases suggests that reliance and agency should not be viewed as mutually exclusive. One can rely on AI for assistance while still exercising agency regarding how that assistance is evaluated and integrated into the learning process.

Based on the overall findings of this study, it is proposed that learner agency in AI-mediated learning is a dynamic process manifested through three main mechanisms: maintaining authority over the learning process, negotiating trust through critical evaluation, and making strategic decisions. These three mechanisms do not occur in isolation but are influenced by various contextual factors that can strengthen or limit learner agency. Thus, this study broadens the understanding of learner agency as a phenomenon that is not only determined by individual characteristics but also shaped through ongoing interactions between students, AI, and the learning context.

The findings of this study are expected to empower English teachers pedagogically, enabling them to design learning activities that maintain student control over AI-integrated processes and position AI as a learning resource where students retain responsibility for retaining information, making learning-related decisions, and reflecting on their AI usage. Consequently, the findings highlight the importance of developing students' AI literacy; this should not be limited to prompt-engineering skills but must also encompass competencies in evaluation and decision-making. Students require opportunities to assess the linguistic accuracy of AI-generated output, determine when content verification is necessary, and decide when to accept, modify, or reject AI assistance. Integrating AI into English language

instruction should not aim merely to increase student access to the technology, but rather to foster a learning environment where students engage with AI critically and responsibly.

Thus, instead of focusing solely on the final product, teachers can assess various facets of the learning process, including the evaluation of AI responses, the reasoning behind decisions, verification efforts, and reflections on the role AI plays in their learning. Exercises involving verification and reflection on AI integration are expected to help ensure that AI usage supports active student participation rather than supplanting their role.

5. Conclusion

This study aims to explore how undergraduate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students use learner agency in Artificial Intelligence (AI)-mediated English learning, identify factors that shape learner agency, and explain how students negotiate learning decisions when interacting with AI. Based on analysis using Thematic Analysis, this study identified four main themes: maintaining control over the learning process; negotiating trust in AI through critical evaluation; strategic decision-making in AI-mediated learning; and contextual factors that shape learner agency.

The research findings indicate that learner agency in AI-mediated English learning is not determined by the intensity of AI use, but by students' ability to maintain control over the learning process. Students actively set boundaries on the AI's role, evaluate the credibility of AI-generated information, and make various strategic decisions when interacting with AI in accordance with their learning goals. Furthermore, this study also shows that learner agency is dynamic and influenced by various contextual factors. These factors can either strengthen learner agency such as when AI limitations encourage students to seek out other learning resources and engage in critical evaluation or limit learner agency such as when time pressures and academic workloads cause students to rely more heavily on AI-generated answers without undergoing a thorough evaluation process.

Overall, this study confirms that learner agency in AI-mediated English learning is not a characteristic that students possess or lack, but rather a capacity that is continuously negotiated through interactions with AI and shaped by the learning context. Therefore, developing learner agency in the AI era should be understood as a pedagogical process that positions students as the primary decision-makers in their learning, while AI serves as a learning resource that supports rather than replaces students' thinking processes.

However, this study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study involved only 15 students; therefore, the findings are not intended to be generalized to the entire EFL student population. Second, based on the interviews and AI Interaction Logs, most participants' use of AI focused on completing tasks related to writing skills, such as composing essays, papers, research proposals, and other written academic assignments. Meanwhile, the use of AI in other English language skills, such as listening, speaking, and reading, is still relatively limited. Therefore, the findings of this study are more representative of the dynamics of learner agency in the context of using AI to support academic writing activities rather than English language skills as a whole.

Given these limitations, future research is recommended to involve a more diverse group of participants with varying academic characteristics to provide a more comprehensive picture of learner agency in AI-mediated English learning. Future research should also explore the use of AI in other English language skills, such as listening, speaking, reading, as well as vocabulary and pronunciation learning, to provide a more complete understanding of how

learner agency manifests in various English language learning contexts.

Practically, the results of this study suggest that educators need not only encourage the use of AI in English learning but also design learning activities that develop students' abilities to critically evaluate information, make independent learning decisions, and maintain control over the learning process when using AI. Thus, AI can be utilized as a learning partner that supports the development of learner autonomy, rather than as a substitute for students' role in the learning process.

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