



Students' perspectives and experiences of using ChatGPT as a virtual mentor in self-directed English learning

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Abstract

This study investigated students' perspectives and experiences of using ChatGPT as a virtual mentor in self-directed English learning, addressing the limited focus on learners' lived experiences in AI-supported educational contexts. A qualitative case study design was employed to explore how students perceive and interact with ChatGPT in their independent learning processes. The participants were seven undergraduate students from an English Education Teaching program, selected through a screening questionnaire. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. The findings indicate that students experience ChatGPT as a flexible and accessible learning support tool that facilitates understanding of complex materials and enhances language skills, particularly in writing. It also serves as a source of immediate feedback, enabling learners to revise their work efficiently and independently. From an affective perspective, students report increased confidence, reduced anxiety, and greater motivation due to the non-judgmental nature of AI interaction. However, limitations such as lack of personalization, general feedback, and absence of progress tracking are also identified. Overall, ChatGPT is perceived as a complementary virtual mentor that supports, but does not replace, human instruction in self-directed learning.

Keywords: ChatGPT, self-directed learning, virtual mentor, students' perspectives, learning experiences

INTRODUCTION

The emergence and rapid evolution of artificial intelligence (AI) have brought substantial changes to global educational practices, particularly in shaping how learners engage with knowledge and experience the learning process. The integration of AI-based technologies in educational settings has enabled institutions to enhance instructional delivery, tailor learning experiences, and provide immediate feedback, while also raising concerns regarding ethics and academic integrity. Yusuf et al. (2024) point out that the increasing use of generative AI in higher education introduces significant challenges related to fairness and academic honesty. In

Indonesia, Syuhra et al. (2025) report that AI integration in English language learning has contributed to improved student performance, especially in productive skills, although learners' experiences still reflect concerns about ethical use and contextual relevance. In a similar vein, Ahimsa & Khawa (2025) argue that AI can facilitate autonomous learning through instant feedback and personalized assistance, yet students' experiences may also reveal a tendency toward dependency that potentially weakens critical thinking. These perspectives indicate that AI adoption is closely connected to how learners perceive, interpret, and experience its role in their learning activities.

In the Indonesian higher education context, the implementation of AI tools such as ChatGPT has increasingly influenced how students engage with English language learning and construct their learning experiences. Universities have begun incorporating such technologies in an effort to combine innovation with pedagogical responsibility (Syuhra et al., 2025). This situation reflects a broader interaction between global technological advancement and local educational realities, where students' experiences become central in understanding how AI supports independent learning (Ahimsa & Khawa, 2025). Research in Technology-Enhanced Language Learning (TELL) also demonstrates that digital tools influence not only instructional practices but also learners' experiences of interaction and engagement (Yusuf et al., 2024). Mushafiyyah et al. (2025) found that pre-service teachers experienced meaningful learning when applying TELL through the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework, as it facilitated cognitive, social, and teaching presence. Nevertheless, students also reported challenges such as limited digital competence and inadequate technological infrastructure, indicating that their experiences are shaped by both enabling and constraining.

Within this evolving educational landscape, ChatGPT has become one of the most influential AI tools affecting students' learning experiences. The integration of generative AI into academic contexts has transformed how learners seek information, receive feedback, and complete academic tasks. Morell-Mengual et al. (2025) report that a significant proportion of university students have adopted AI tools such as ChatGPT in their studies, indicating a shift toward AI-mediated learning experiences. However, students' perceptions of ChatGPT vary, with some viewing it as a helpful learning companion, while others express concerns about dependency, reliability, and reduced human interaction (Younas et al., 2025). In the context of English Language Teaching (ELT), these experiences are particularly important, as students simultaneously develop language skills and form perceptions of how AI contributes to their learning autonomy (Z. Li et al., 2024). These diverse perspectives highlight the importance of examining students' experiences more deeply.

In recent educational contexts, students increasingly perceive ChatGPT not merely as a digital tool but as a virtual mentor that facilitates their independent learning. Through its interactive responses, learners engage with ChatGPT in ways that resemble mentoring interactions, especially when they seek explanations, clarification, and feedback. Ronanki et al. (2023) describe ChatGPT as an intelligent system capable of generating contextually appropriate responses that support learning processes. Similarly, Lin (2023) explains that students experience ChatGPT as a learning companion that assists them in setting goals and reflecting on their progress. Sain et al. (2024) further emphasize that its adaptive nature allows

learners to receive responsive and personalized feedback, enhancing their engagement in learning activities.

Students' experiences with ChatGPT also demonstrate its role in supporting various dimensions of learning. From a cognitive perspective, learners rely on ChatGPT to simplify complex ideas and organize their understanding. Gill et al. (2024) highlight that AI-based interaction fosters a sense of presence that encourages active engagement in learning. X. Lin (2023) reports that students experience increased autonomy when interacting with ChatGPT during their learning activities. Annamalai & Nasor (2025) further reveal that learners feel more motivated and self-directed when ChatGPT supports their learning needs.

Beyond cognitive support, learners also experience emotional and motivational benefits when using ChatGPT as a virtual mentor. The non-threatening nature of AI interaction allows students to explore ideas freely and ask questions without hesitation. Viorennita et al. (2023) note that students value ChatGPT's neutral and supportive communication style, which enhances their confidence. Huesca et al. (2024) argue that personalized feedback contributes to more meaningful learning engagement. Huang et al. (2025) further demonstrate that real-time interaction with chatbots can sustain learners' motivation and curiosity throughout the learning process. These findings suggest that students' experiences with ChatGPT encompass both cognitive and affective dimensions of learning support.

Self-directed learning (SDL) reflects how students experience autonomy in organizing and managing their own learning processes. It involves learners taking responsibility for identifying their learning needs, setting objectives, and evaluating their progress. Boles (2014) defines SDL as a learner-centered approach that encourages individuals to take control of their learning through reflection and self-awareness. Mentz et al. (2019) conceptualize SDL as a combination of autonomy, motivation, and metacognitive regulation that enables learners to independently manage their learning activities. Loyens et al. (2008) further explain that SDL shares characteristics with self-regulated learning, particularly in terms of active participation and control over learning processes.

In practice, students experience SDL as an ongoing and reflective process that requires continuous adjustment of learning strategies. Learners plan their activities, monitor their progress, and evaluate the effectiveness of their approaches. Olivier (2020) explains that SDL in contemporary education involves managing complex learning tasks across both traditional and digital environments. Li & Wu (2023) emphasize that learners must also develop digital literacy skills to critically evaluate information from online sources. Tonder et al. (2022) further highlight that reflective thinking plays a crucial role in helping learners refine their strategies and improve learning outcomes.

With the integration of AI technologies, students' experiences of SDL are increasingly shaped by their interaction with tools such as ChatGPT. Learners use AI as part of their independent learning process, but their experiences depend on how critically they engage with the technology. Olivier et al. (2022) argue that SDL in digital environments involves both independence and interaction with technological systems. Syarifudin et al. (2019) highlight that multimodal learning environments enhance learners' experiences by providing diverse resources. OECD (2023) further explains that AI supports learner autonomy by enabling flexible and personalized learning opportunities. These perspectives indicate that students'

experiences in SDL are influenced by both internal factors and their interaction with digital tools.

Students' experiences in AI-supported learning environments are shaped by their interaction with technology, their engagement in learning activities, and their emotional responses to digital tools. These experiences encompass cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions that influence how learners interpret and utilize AI in their studies. Amrang et al. (2025) explain that learning experiences are constructed through active engagement in instructional activities. Kesumaningsari et al. (2022) highlight that students' experiences are influenced by teaching methods as well as emotional factors such as motivation and anxiety. Cramarenco et al. (2023) further note that learners' perceptions of digital tools depend on usability and familiarity with technology.

In addition, students experience AI-supported learning as a flexible and adaptive process that enables them to access information and feedback more efficiently. Chan & Hu (2023) report that learners perceive generative AI as useful in providing instant explanations and alternative perspectives. Alam & Mohanty (2023) highlight that digital technologies enrich learning experiences by enabling interaction with diverse and multimodal resources. Rapanta et al. (2020) emphasize that meaningful learning experiences are influenced by structured interaction and effective feedback mechanisms.

However, students' experiences with AI are not always entirely positive, as they may encounter limitations related to accuracy, understanding, and dependency. Yan et al. (2023) highlight that AI systems may generate responses that lack accuracy or contextual relevance. Floridi & Chiriatti (2020) explain that AI operates based on statistical patterns rather than true comprehension. Viorennita et al. (2023) further caution that overreliance on AI may reduce learners' critical thinking and independent learning abilities.

Overall, students' experiences with ChatGPT in AI-supported learning environments are complex and multifaceted. Learners not only benefit from the support provided by AI but also actively interpret and evaluate its role in their learning processes. Roe & Perkins (2024) suggest that students experience AI as a reflective partner that encourages deeper thinking. Marquardson (2024) highlights that AI supports learners in planning and adjusting their learning strategies. H. Wang et al. (2024) further demonstrate that AI interaction enhances students' ability to regulate their learning processes. These findings reinforce that students' experiences are central to understanding the role of AI in supporting self-directed learning.

Despite the increasing use of ChatGPT in language education, research specifically examining students' experiences of using ChatGPT as a virtual mentor in self-directed English language learning is still limited. Existing studies tend to focus on performance outcomes and technical effectiveness rather than exploring how learners interpret and experience AI-assisted learning (Chiu, 2024). Furthermore, there is still insufficient understanding of how students navigate their interactions with ChatGPT within self-directed learning frameworks (Yusop, 2024). ELT students, who serve as both learners and future educators, represent a particularly important group, yet their perspectives are often underrepresented in current research (Giray et al., 2025). These gaps indicate the need for more in-depth exploration of students' lived experiences in AI-supported learning environments.

Previous studies suggest that students' experiences with ChatGPT and SDL can be understood from multiple dimensions. From a cognitive perspective, learners experience ChatGPT as a tool that helps organize and evaluate their learning (Z. Li et al., 2024). From a reflective standpoint, students perceive AI interaction as a form of guidance that supports independent learning (Castañeda et al., 2024). From a practical perspective, learners experience ChatGPT as assistance in managing complex academic tasks (He & Kang, 2025). In addition, students' experiences include affective aspects, such as increased confidence and motivation (Giray et al., 2025), as well as engagement shaped by their level of AI literacy (Lee et al., 2025). Du & Alm (2024) further demonstrate that students experience reduced anxiety and greater autonomy when using ChatGPT in language learning. These findings highlight the multidimensional nature of students' experiences in AI-supported learning.

However, important gaps remain regarding how students experience ChatGPT specifically as a virtual mentor. Existing research has not fully explored how learners interpret AI as a mentoring presence or how they negotiate their autonomy during interaction with such systems. Much of the literature emphasizes measurable outcomes rather than capturing the depth of students' lived experiences (Yusop, 2024). Annamalai & Nasor (2025) indicate that students experience both support and dependency when using ChatGPT, while Sevnarayan (2024) highlight concerns about reduced human mentorship. These issues underscore the importance of investigating students' perspectives in order to understand how they make sense of AI-supported learning.

In response to these considerations, this study concentrates on students' perspectives and experiences in using ChatGPT as a virtual mentor within self-directed English learning. ChatGPT is understood as an interactive system that provides guidance, feedback, and adaptive support, while self-directed learning refers to learners' ability to independently regulate their learning processes. Within this framework, the experiences of ELT students are central, as they reveal how AI-mediated interaction influences learner autonomy and engagement in authentic learning contexts. Accordingly, this study aims to explore how ELT students perceive and experience the use of ChatGPT as a virtual mentor, with particular emphasis on their interactions and reflections during the learning process. Therefore, the study is guided by a single research question: how do ELT students perceive and experience the use of ChatGPT as a virtual mentor in self-directed English learning.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study applied a qualitative research approach with a case study orientation to investigate students' perspectives and experiences in using ChatGPT as a virtual mentor in self-directed English learning. A qualitative design was selected because it enables the exploration of participants' lived experiences, interpretations, and meaning-making processes within authentic educational settings. Lim (2025) explains that qualitative inquiry focuses on understanding human behavior in context through interaction and interpretation. Similarly, Leavy (2023) emphasizes that qualitative research prioritizes participants' subjective experiences and reflections rather than numerical representation. Matta (2022) further notes that knowledge in qualitative studies is socially constructed and shaped by context, making this approach appropriate for examining how students interact with AI in real learning environments.

The study adopted a case study design to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon within its real-life setting. This design allows for in-depth exploration of how students engage with ChatGPT and how they perceive its role in supporting their learning processes. Mirhosseini (2020) states that case studies are particularly effective in language education research for capturing authentic learning experiences. Shrestha & Bhattarai (2022) argue that case studies facilitate a detailed examination of individual experiences while maintaining contextual richness. Miller et al. (2023) further highlight that this approach connects theoretical understanding with practical educational realities.

The participants in this study were undergraduate students in their eighth semester from the English Education Teaching Department at a university in West Java. They were selected based on their prior experience using ChatGPT as part of their self-directed English learning. In qualitative research, participant selection emphasizes the depth and relevance of information rather than the size of the sample. Guetterman (2015) highlights that qualitative studies prioritize information-rich participants who can provide meaningful insights. Yin (2018) also explains that selecting participants closely related to the phenomenon under investigation enhances the depth of analysis. Marshall & Rossman (2016) further emphasize that purposive sampling ensures that participants are chosen based on their relevance to the research objectives.

To identify suitable participants, a close-ended questionnaire was distributed to 52 students as a screening instrument. This step was intended to select individuals who demonstrated active engagement and substantial experience in using ChatGPT. Creswell & Poth (2018) state that screening procedures are useful in identifying participants who meet the criteria for qualitative inquiry.

Based on the screening results, seven participants were selected for in-depth interviews. These participants met specific criteria, including active use of ChatGPT, consistent engagement in independent learning, and strong academic performance. Their selection ensured that the data collected would reflect meaningful and well-informed experiences. Etikan et al. (2016) explain that purposive sampling allows researchers to select participants with characteristics relevant to the study. Adeoye (2023) highlights that careful participant selection contributes to research validity. Oranga & Matere (2023) further emphasize that appropriate participant selection enhances the authenticity of qualitative findings.

Data were collected using two primary methods: a close-ended questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire was used as a preliminary screening instrument to identify participants with relevant experience in using ChatGPT. Cohen et al. (2018) explain that questionnaires allow researchers to gather structured data efficiently. Creswell & Creswell (2018) note that questionnaires can be used to identify patterns before conducting in-depth qualitative investigation. Dörnyei & Taguchi (2010) further emphasize that structured questionnaires are effective in capturing learners' behavioral tendencies.

The questionnaire consisted of eighteen Likert-scale items aimed at measuring students' understanding, experiences, and frequency of using ChatGPT as a virtual mentor in self-directed learning. Each item was rated on a five-point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The collected responses were quantified and converted into a standardized scoring system to classify students' levels of engagement. The results of the questionnaire

functioned as a screening mechanism to identify participants with high and very high engagement levels. Out of 52 respondents, seven students met the required criteria and were selected for the interview stage. The selection process considered questionnaire scores, engagement categories, experience with ChatGPT, and academic performance in the AI for ELT course. This approach ensured that the selected participants were capable of providing detailed and meaningful insights.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted as the main data collection technique to explore students' perspectives and experiences in depth. This method provides flexibility while maintaining a consistent structure across participants. Brinkmann (2022) highlights that interviews enable researchers to access participants' lived experiences through interactive dialogue. Leavy (2023) explains that interviews are essential for understanding participants' interpretations and reflections. Kallio et al. (2016) further state that semi-structured interviews allow researchers to explore emerging themes while maintaining focus on the research objectives.

The questionnaire data were analyzed as a screening tool using Likert-scale scoring to determine participants' engagement levels. Validity testing was conducted using the Pearson Product Moment correlation through IBM SPSS Statistics version 26, where all items were considered valid as the *r*-values exceeded the critical value. Reliability testing was performed using Cronbach's Alpha, and the results showed that all variables had coefficients above 0.60, indicating good internal consistency. Therefore, the questionnaire was valid and reliable for selecting participants.

The interview data were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) as proposed by Braun & Clarke (2021) to explore patterns related to students' perspectives and experiences. This approach was selected because it allows for a systematic yet flexible interpretation of qualitative data, enabling the researcher to construct meaningful themes based on participants' responses. Braun & Clarke (2021) emphasize that thematic analysis is particularly effective in identifying patterns of meaning across qualitative datasets while maintaining sensitivity to context. In this study, the analysis focused on capturing how students interpret and experience the use of ChatGPT as a virtual mentor in their self-directed learning.

The analysis followed six recursive phases, including data familiarization, generating initial codes, constructing themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. These stages were conducted iteratively rather than linearly, allowing continuous refinement of codes and themes throughout the process. Braun & Clarke (2021) highlight that reflexive thematic analysis involves an active role of the researcher in interpreting data, where themes are not simply discovered but developed through engagement with the dataset. This approach enabled the researcher to generate themes that meaningfully represent students' experiences and perspectives while ensuring analytical depth and coherence.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Time and context of use

The results indicate that students predominantly utilize ChatGPT outside formal classroom settings as part of their independent learning activities. Its use is typically triggered when students encounter difficulties in understanding instructional content or completing academic

tasks. This pattern suggests that ChatGPT is positioned as a supplementary learning aid rather than a central instructional tool. Additionally, students intentionally avoid using ChatGPT during classroom sessions in order to maintain concentration on the lecturer's explanations. This is illustrated in the following excerpts:

"I use ChatGPT outside of class to better understand the material by asking for simpler explanations." (P1 & P7)

"I use it only when I don't understand the material, usually as a last resort."
(P2 & P4)

These findings demonstrate that the use of ChatGPT is adaptive and dependent on situational learning needs. Students tend to treat ChatGPT as an on-demand resource that can be accessed when necessary, rather than as a continuously used tool. This behavior reflects the principles of self-directed learning, where learners independently regulate their use of learning resources. It also reinforces the notion that ChatGPT serves as a complement to, rather than a replacement for, formal instruction.

Understanding of course material

The findings further reveal that ChatGPT contributes to students' comprehension of complex learning materials. Students frequently rely on the tool to obtain simplified explanations, contextual examples, or analogies that facilitate understanding. This suggests that ChatGPT functions as a cognitive support system that helps students grasp initial concepts before engaging in deeper learning processes. This is reflected in participants' responses:

"I asked for an explanation in simpler language." (P1)

"If there's material that's hard to understand, I usually ask for it to be explained using real-life examples." (P3 & P5)

These findings indicate that ChatGPT plays a role in reducing cognitive barriers by transforming complex information into more accessible forms. Nevertheless, students do not depend solely on ChatGPT, as they continue to seek clarification from lecturers and other learning resources. This highlights that ChatGPT acts as a complementary tool that supports preliminary understanding rather than replacing traditional sources of knowledge.

Skill Development

The results show that the use of ChatGPT contributes to the improvement of students' English language skills, particularly in writing. Students commonly utilize ChatGPT to draft, revise, and refine their written outputs. In addition, the tool assists in improving grammatical accuracy and sentence structure. Some participants also reported improvements in reading comprehension and speaking skills, although these were less prominent. This is reflected in the following statements:

"My writing has improved because I get corrections and explanations from ChatGPT." (P1 & P7)

"I use ChatGPT to practice speaking and prepare for presentations." (P3 & P6)

These findings suggest that ChatGPT supports skill development by providing immediate feedback and opportunities for practice. Its role extends to both productive and receptive language skills, although the extent of improvement varies among learners. This variation

indicates that the effectiveness of ChatGPT is influenced by how actively students engage with the tool and integrate it into their learning process.

Feedback and Correction

Another significant finding is that ChatGPT offers instant and easily accessible feedback, enabling students to identify and correct errors efficiently. This immediacy is perceived as a major advantage, as it allows students to revise their work promptly and enhance their understanding of mistakes. Moreover, the feedback is often accompanied by explanations, which contributes to deeper learning. This is reflected in participants' statements:

"ChatGPT helps me understand my mistakes because it explains the corrections." (P1)

"Sometimes the feedback is too general, so I need to ask again to understand better." (P2 & P6)

These findings indicate that ChatGPT promotes an interactive and reflective learning process. However, the feedback provided is not always consistent in quality, as some responses lack specificity and clarity. Consequently, students are required to engage actively by asking follow-up questions or verifying the information. This suggests that while ChatGPT is effective as a feedback provider, its optimal use depends on learners' active participation.

ChatGPT's Role as a Mentor

Students' perceptions of ChatGPT as a mentor vary considerably. Some participants view it as a flexible learning companion, while others do not consider it a genuine mentor due to its limited ability to provide personalized and continuous guidance. In general, ChatGPT is perceived as a reactive system that responds to user input rather than proactively guiding the learning process. This is reflected in the following statements:

"ChatGPT can be a personal mentor because it helps me understand the material anytime." (P1)

"It's more like a support tool, not a real mentor who guides you continuously." (P5 & P6)

These findings suggest that ChatGPT is generally regarded as a supplementary mentor rather than a primary one. Its advantages lie in its accessibility and responsiveness, while its limitations are associated with the lack of personalization and sustained guidance. Therefore, ChatGPT is more appropriately positioned as a flexible learning assistant rather than a substitute for human educators.

Confidence and Motivation

The findings also highlight the influence of ChatGPT on students' confidence and motivation in learning English. Many participants reported increased confidence due to the opportunity to practice without fear of judgment. This creates a supportive learning environment that encourages experimentation and active engagement. However, not all students experienced the same level of confidence, as some still require validation from lecturers. This is reflected in participants' statements:

"I feel more confident because I can practice without being afraid of making mistakes." (P1)

"Sometimes I still doubt whether the answer is correct, so I need validation."
(P2 & P5)

These findings indicate that ChatGPT has diverse effects on students' affective dimensions. While it can enhance confidence and motivation by providing a non-threatening learning environment, its impact varies depending on students' level of trust and reliance on the tool. This suggests that affective outcomes are shaped not only by the technology itself but also by individual learner characteristics.

Limitations in Using ChatGPT

Despite its advantages, students also identified several limitations in using ChatGPT. These include a lack of personalization, overly generalized responses, and insufficient contextual understanding. As a result, students often need to reformulate their queries or consult additional resources to obtain more accurate information. This is reflected in participants' statements:

"Sometimes the answers are too general and don't match what I actually need." (P2 & P4)

"ChatGPT doesn't really understand my learning progress, so I have to explain everything again." (P3 & P6)

These findings suggest that ChatGPT is not yet fully capable of addressing individualized learning needs. Its responses often lack depth and contextual adaptation, which limits its effectiveness in complex learning situations. Therefore, students continue to rely on other resources and human guidance to complement its use. This reinforces the view that ChatGPT should be utilized as a supportive tool rather than a primary source of learning.

The findings of this study indicate that students predominantly use ChatGPT as a supplementary tool in their self-directed learning process rather than as a primary source of instruction. This reflects a significant level of learner autonomy, where students actively regulate their learning strategies and selectively integrate technological tools based on their needs. The fact that students tend to use ChatGPT outside the classroom, particularly when they encounter difficulties, suggests that they are engaging in reflective and independent learning practices. This behavior aligns with the growing trend of integrating artificial intelligence into education as a supportive mechanism rather than a replacement for traditional instruction. These findings align with research by Montenegro-Rueda et al. (2023), which highlight that ChatGPT enhances accessibility and flexibility in learning, allowing students to control the pace and depth of their learning experience. They are also consistent with research by Rahman & Watanobe (2023), which emphasize that AI tools like ChatGPT facilitate personalized learning by adapting to students' individual needs and enabling self-paced study. In addition, the findings correspond with research by Pradana et al. (2023), which position ChatGPT as a complementary educational tool that supports independent learning rather than replacing teachers. These findings reinforce the argument that ChatGPT contributes to the development of self-directed learning skills while maintaining the essential role of instructors in guiding the overall learning process.

In addition to supporting learner autonomy, the findings also reveal that ChatGPT plays a crucial role in enhancing students' understanding of complex English material. Students frequently use ChatGPT to simplify explanations, request paraphrased content, and obtain examples or analogies that make abstract concepts more concrete. This indicates that ChatGPT functions as a cognitive support tool that facilitates comprehension through scaffolding. The ability of ChatGPT to transform complex academic language into simpler forms is particularly beneficial for students who struggle with understanding instructional materials. This finding aligns with research by Albadarin et al. (2024), who state that ChatGPT can improve students' understanding by providing explanations that are tailored to their level of comprehension. They are also consistent with research by Rahman & Watanobe (2023), which show that AI-based tools enable learners to explore complex topics interactively, which enhances conceptual understanding. In addition, the findings correspond with research by Lubis et al. (2024), which highlight that AI tools can provide immediate clarification and personalized responses, which are essential for improving comprehension in language learning contexts. However, despite these benefits, the findings also show that students do not rely solely on ChatGPT. Instead, they use it as an initial step in understanding before consulting lecturers or other academic resources. This suggests that ChatGPT primarily supports surface-level comprehension, while deeper understanding still requires multiple sources and critical engagement.

Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that ChatGPT has a significant impact on students' language skill development, particularly in writing. Students frequently use ChatGPT to check grammar, revise sentences, and receive feedback on their writing. The immediacy of this feedback allows students to identify and correct errors quickly, which contributes to continuous improvement. This iterative process of writing, receiving feedback, and revising aligns with effective language learning practices, as it encourages active engagement and reflection. These findings align with research by Hosseini et al. (2023), which indicate that ChatGPT supports writing development by providing instant feedback and assisting with text generation, which helps learners improve their language skills. They also correspond with research by Rahman & Watanobe (2023), which highlight the role of continuous interaction in refining writing skills. Additionally, the findings are consistent with research by Pradana et al. (2023), which emphasize the usefulness of ChatGPT in grammar correction, idea generation, and text organization. These findings indicate that ChatGPT plays a crucial role in developing writing skills, especially in contexts where students require immediate and accessible feedback. However, the effectiveness of this tool depends on the extent to which students actively engage with the feedback and use it to improve their understanding.

Despite its advantages, the findings also reveal several limitations in the use of ChatGPT, particularly in terms of the quality of feedback provided. Students often perceive the feedback as too general, lacking depth and specificity, which requires them to ask follow-up questions to obtain more detailed explanations. This limitation reflects a broader challenge associated with AI-based learning tools, where responses are generated based on patterns rather than a deep understanding of individual learning contexts. These findings align with research by Montenegro-Rueda et al. (2023), which highlight that ChatGPT may lack depth and accuracy in certain contexts despite its accessibility. They are also consistent with research by Albadarin et al. (2024), which emphasize that AI-generated responses may not fully align with students'

specific needs, particularly in complex academic tasks. Furthermore, the findings correspond with research by Gill et al. (2024), which indicate that generative AI systems may produce superficial or even inaccurate responses, which can affect their reliability in educational contexts. These findings suggest that while ChatGPT is a valuable tool, it requires users to adopt a critical approach, verifying information and combining it with other reliable sources.

Another important aspect of this study is the exploration of ChatGPT's role as a "virtual mentor." The findings indicate that students have mixed perceptions regarding this role. While some students consider ChatGPT a helpful and flexible learning partner, most do not view it as a full mentor due to its lack of personalization and inability to track learning progress over time. This highlights a fundamental limitation of AI in education, as effective mentorship requires not only knowledge delivery but also emotional support, guidance, and adaptability to individual learners. These findings align with research by Montenegro-Rueda et al. (2023), which position ChatGPT as a learning assistant rather than a comprehensive mentoring system. They are also consistent with research by Lubis et al. (2024), which emphasize that AI tools should be viewed as supportive technologies rather than replacements for human teachers. In addition, the findings correspond with research by Gill et al. (2024), which highlight that AI lacks the human understanding and emotional intelligence required for effective mentorship. Therefore, ChatGPT is more appropriately positioned as a supplementary mentor that provides assistance but does not replace the role of educators.

Finally, the findings show that ChatGPT has a notable impact on students' confidence and motivation in learning English. The ability to interact with ChatGPT without fear of judgment creates a safe and supportive learning environment, which encourages students to practice more actively. This is particularly important in language learning, where anxiety and fear of making mistakes can hinder participation. These findings align with research by Hosseini et al. (2023), who found that ChatGPT enhances user engagement by providing an interactive and non-threatening learning environment. They are also consistent with research by Rahman & Watanobe (2023), which highlight that AI tools can increase motivation by allowing students to learn at their own pace and receive immediate feedback. However, the findings also correspond with research by Pradana et al. (2023), which note that concerns about the accuracy and reliability of AI-generated responses may reduce students' trust and confidence in using the tool. This dual effect suggests that while ChatGPT has the potential to enhance motivation and confidence, its effectiveness depends on students' trust in the system and their ability to critically evaluate the information provided.

These findings can be further understood through the following theoretical perspective. The findings above indicate that students perceive ChatGPT not only as a tool but also as a supportive learning partner in their self-directed learning process. When students use ChatGPT not only as a tool but also as a supportive learning partner in their self-directed learning process. When students use ChatGPT to understand materials, improve skills, and receive feedback, they are actively engaging in self-monitoring and reflection, which are core components of SDL. Therefore, the positive experiences reported by students in this study suggest that ChatGPT contributes to facilitating autonomous learning, as long as learners remain actively involved in interpreting and using the information provided.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that students' experiences with ChatGPT as a virtual mentor in self-directed English learning involve cognitive, emotional, and practical aspects. Students generally perceive ChatGPT as an accessible and flexible learning aid that helps them comprehend difficult materials, improve their language abilities, and obtain instant responses to their questions. The use of ChatGPT also appears to strengthen learners' confidence and motivation because it allows them to practice English in a low-pressure environment without fear of negative judgment. However, participants do not regard ChatGPT as a replacement for human mentors, since they acknowledge that AI tools still lack the ability to provide individualized support, deep contextual understanding, and consistent supervision of students' learning development.

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be taken into consideration. The study only involved a limited number of participants from one educational institution, which may restrict the broader applicability of the results. In addition, the research primarily explored students' perceptions and experiences rather than examining long-term learning achievement or comparing multiple instructional contexts. Nevertheless, the study offers meaningful implications for English language education by demonstrating the potential of ChatGPT as a supplementary resource for promoting autonomous learning. Features such as rapid feedback, easy access to information, and opportunities for self-practice may support students in learning more independently and effectively. Even so, the successful integration of AI technologies still requires learners' critical awareness and the active guidance of educators to maintain a balanced and purposeful learning process. Therefore, future research is encouraged to involve participants from more diverse settings, apply longitudinal research methods, and further investigate how AI tools like ChatGPT can be integrated with pedagogical approaches to encourage sustainable and personalized learning experiences.

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