

15 - 17 May 2026

Rome , Italy

The Role of Ai in Developing Efl Learners' Autonomy: Opportunity or Obstacle?

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Abstract

The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in language education has redefined pedagogical practices, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. While AI-powered tools promise to enhance personalization, engagement, and learner-centered approaches, their impact on learners' autonomy remains a subject of debate. This study aims to explore the dual role of AI in fostering, or potentially hindering, the development of autonomy among Moroccan university EFL learners. Drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data, the study investigates how AI tools influence learners' decision-making, self-regulation, and motivation in language learning contexts. Combining quantitative data from questionnaires distributed to 200 EFL students with qualitative insights from interviews conducted with 10 professors, the research assesses how AI affects students' capacity for self-directed learning. The findings reveal prevalent use of AI-powered platforms such as ChatGPT, Google Translate, Grammarly, and Duolingo among EFL learners, primarily for language practice, grammar correction, vocabulary acquisition, translation tasks, and exam preparation. Both students and professors acknowledged that these tools can significantly enhance language learning autonomy by enabling personalized, flexible learning experiences and fostering increased responsibility and motivation. However, concerns were also raised about the potential downsides, particularly overreliance on AI, reduced engagement in critical thinking, and threats to academic integrity. While some professors observed improved student engagement and self-directed learning, others noted a decline in cognitive effort when learners relied too heavily on AI-generated content. Overall, AI emerged as a double-edged sword; it offers valuable support for autonomous learning, yet its unchecked use may hinder essential skill development. The study concludes that the thoughtful and guided integration of AI is crucial to ensure it strengthens rather than weakens EFL learner autonomy.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence; English; Language Education; Practices; Selfregulated-Regulated

Learning; Technological Tools.