Vietnamese EFL Lecturers' Perspectives on Leveraging AI Tools to Enhance Students' Autonomous Learning

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ABSTRACT

This study explores Vietnamese EFL lecturers' perceptions of AI tools' influence on students' autonomous learning. The research inquires into how AI can assist students in setting their learning goals, identifying the resources needed, choosing learning methods, tracking their progress, and evaluating their learning outcomes, based on interviews with 15 lecturers from the Language Institute at Van Lang University. Five main themes were identified through thematic analysis using NVivo software: AI in setting lesson objectives, access to learning resources, method selection, tracking learning progress, and evaluation. The results demonstrate that AI tools enhance autonomous learning, but their effectiveness depends on students' perceptions and the tools' features, suggesting that human guidance is still needed.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence (AI), English language learning, teacher perspectives, Autonomous Learning

Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as a major force of change in the design and delivery of English Language Teaching in recent years. In educational technology, AI offers adaptive, personalized solutions that support learners' self-directed learning. According to Holec (1981), autonomy is defined as the learner's ability to take charge of their own learning. This responsibility involves determining learning objectives, choosing appropriate methods and resources, managing learning activities, and evaluating learning outcomes. In such settings, AI tools, ranging from intelligent tutoring systems to language-specific platforms, are increasingly recognized for facilitating learner autonomy (Luckin et al., 2016; Zhang & Aslan, 2021). This research examines English lecturers' perspectives on the utility of fostering learner autonomy, especially in EFL contexts where autonomous learning is key to students' development.

AI tools have been recognized in English language teaching for fostering learner motivation, providing personalized learning paths, and improving academic outcomes. Such tools can provide learners with real-time feedback on grammar correction and support adaptive language use, thereby enhancing learner autonomy and increasing their interest. Studies reveal that AI-powered applications, gamified platforms, and intelligent tutoring systems can enhance

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language skills, including reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Tai et al., 2020; Holmes et al., 2019). In addition, research shows that AI tools can support interaction and learning by adapting to students' skill levels and learning styles (Luckin et al., 2016; Pane et al., 2017). Therefore, it is important to integrate AI tools carefully alongside traditional teaching methods to achieve a balanced approach and maintain strong language learning outcomes.

Although many studies have explored the application of artificial intelligence (AI) in education, much of this literature focuses on technological advancements or student engagement with comparatively little emphasis on pedagogical perspectives from educators (Zhang & Aslan, 2021; Luckin et al., 2016). Research discussing the application of AI in English language learning in Vietnam remains limited, particularly those focusing on teachers' perceptions. While recent studies, such as those by Thai (2023) and Xuyen (2023), offer insightful insights into student engagement with AI tools, empirical studies that have explicitly examined the role of AI in fostering learner autonomy from English language teachers' perspectives are still relatively underdeveloped.

This study investigates English lecturers' perceptions of the use of AI tools in promoting learner autonomy among EFL students. A total of 15 lecturers from the Language Institute at Van Lang University participated in this study. It critically examines how AI tools help students set learning goals, access appropriate resources, track their progress, and evaluate their learning outcomes. Drawing on educators' experiences and reflections, the study also highlights the potential benefits and challenges of integrating AI. Therefore, it recommends developing customized teacher training programs, ensuring digital resource access at all levels, and implementing long-term strategies grounded in these findings. Furthermore, this research indicates how AI can be effectively integrated into curriculum design to foster autonomous learning, with significant implications for policymakers, educators, and curriculum developers seeking to responsibly and effectively steer English language education in Vietnam through the use of AI. In conclusion, the study highlights future directions and encourages more student-directed AI-based learning environments in higher education.

Literature Review

Learner Autonomy in Language Education: Learner autonomy has recently become a core principle in contemporary language education, giving students the ability to be effectively involved in their learning process. The concept of learner autonomy was originally introduced by Holec (1981), who defined autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p. 3). This covers decisions on determining learning objectives, selecting content and progressions, adopting learning methods and techniques, monitoring the learning process, and evaluating outcomes. Over the last four decades, the concept has shifted from a peripheral educational topic into a central pedagogical aim. Benson (2011) indicated that independent learners show high levels of motivation, continued engagement, and are also more likely to develop long-term, self-directed learning behaviors. One of the main points in language learning, retention, and application is maintaining a consistent intake practice, combining exposure with self-assessment. Little (1991) also supports this by arguing that learners need to be active in all learning aspects in order to internalize and use a new language.

Autonomy is also aligned with related ideas such as learner agency, self-regulated learning, and metacognition, which are more widely accepted normative constructs in education. According to Zimmerman (2002) and reflected in Holec's (1981) conception of autonomy, the self-regulated learners are those who plan for, monitor, and evaluate their learning outcomes. Such

learners are more resilient and flexible in either technology-rich or blended learning environments, where the demand for self-regulation and learner agency becomes greater. Recent research has also explored how learner autonomy can be enriched through digital learning environments. As Azevedo et al. (2022) have noted, digital tools can enable learners to engage in self-directed learning and provide real-time progress tracking, access to a variety of resources, and differentiated feedback. Students in technology-mediated learning environments need to evaluate the quality of online materials, manage their own distractions, and set their own learning goals. Pham & Nguyen (2024) highlight that while digital tools, like ChatGPT, promise potential benefits to language acquisition, their integration into the teaching practice should be carefully designed in order to better promote learning autonomy.

In conclusion, learner autonomy is a key concern in modern foreign language education, focusing on independent learning and sustained motivation. According to Holec (1981), recent studies have further reinforced its relevance in diverse, digitalized, and multilingual contexts. Its effective promotion requires explicit pedagogical approaches and learners' readiness not only for digital competence but also for intercultural awareness.

Role of Technology and AI in Supporting Autonomy

Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) is an earlier framework of AI, so it is important to understand the conceptual foundations that it has built for understanding technology use in language learning. CALL *employs digital tools and resources to support language learning from multiple perspectives, providing interactive and personalized experiences that promote* learner autonomy. For instance, the use of computer-assisted games in grammar classes is one manifestation of CALL, which has been shown to greatly enhance student motivation and amplify the efficiency of their practice, thereby supporting more autonomous learning behaviors (Nguyen & Truong, 2025). *Since the inception of CALL, AI tools have revolutionized language education by enhancing personalized learning experiences through* sophisticated algorithms and real-time feedback.

Artificial intelligence (AI) is important for enhancing learning autonomy by providing learners with flexible learning opportunities through tools such as chatbots, automated essay grading systems, and Duolingo (Foroutan et al., 2013). Such tools promote self-regulation and autonomy in learning by providing learners with instant feedback that helps them to control their learning process.

In addition, AI improves learner engagement, a crucial element of autonomy encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects, by providing real-time feedback and adaptive learning that increases students' motivation and autonomy (Ma & Chen, 2024). AI also supports learner-centered education by enabling teachers to shift from passive content providers to facilitators who help students effectively use AI tools, treating AI as a support system rather than a replacement (Foroutan et al., 2013). In addition, AI helps overcome academic procrastination: students who use AI-powered applications exhibit greater engagement, better task and time management, and lower procrastination when completing tasks (Liu & Yee, 2022).

In conclusion, AI tools significantly enhance learner autonomy by improving engagement, reducing procrastination, and providing personalized learning experiences. However, successful integration of AI requires careful pedagogical planning and continuous educator support to maximize its impact on student learning (Ma & Chen, 2024).

English Lecturers' Perspectives on AI and Autonomy

English lecturers' perspectives on AI tools in language education also suggest how these tools can support learners and promote autonomy. AI-driven platforms, such as intelligent tutoring systems and language-learning apps, deliver tailored experiences that enable students to progress through content at their own pace. Such tools are an invaluable addition in supporting learner engagement as they provide adaptive learning paths based on each student's prior learning (Hazaymeh et al., 2024).

AI provides real-time feedback, which is particularly beneficial in language learning. Language students should also receive guidance on aspects such as pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary to facilitate their language learning. AI's interactive features, such as instant feedback and gamification, contribute to teachers' findings that students are more engaged and motivated (Zainuddin, 2024). Such automated responses increase the depth of students' engagement (Zainuddin, 2024) and support language learning by providing continuous and varied skill practice.

However, concerns regarding the excessive dependence on AI tools remain prevalent among educators. AI excels at performing specific tasks, but it does not have the ability to support collaborative learning, which is paramount to language learning. Educators emphasize that an excessive dependence on technology should be balanced with methods that incorporate group work and face-to-face collaboration (Xuyen, 2024). Thus, AI should be considered a supplement to the teacher-student exchange rather than a substitute that alters its core nature (Hazaymeh et al., 2024).

AI tools certainly present great potential to promote autonomy in learners, but if they are to be integrated successfully, there must be a balance between AI support and human interaction. To conclude, the authentic integration of AI tools can indeed enhance learner autonomy through personalized learning and engagement, but it requires a fine balance. Ongoing teacher training, equitable access to technology, and careful consideration of pedagogical goals are necessary to ensure AI supports, rather than hinders, traditional educational methods (Xuyen, 2024).

Research Questions

While considerable research has been conducted on the integration of AI tools in education, a notable gap exists in understanding English lecturers' perspectives on leveraging AI to foster students' autonomous learning. Existing studies predominantly focus on the advantages of AI in personalizing learning and providing real-time feedback, yet they fail to adequately address the practical challenges educators face in incorporating these technologies into their teaching practices. Moreover, the role of lecturers in effectively balancing AI with traditional pedagogies to support learner autonomy remains underexplored. This study seeks to address the gap by interviewing lecturers at the Language Institute of Văn Lang University and thereby offers valuable insights into the potential and challenges of AI tools in enhancing autonomous learning in language education. This research, therefore, aims to address the following question:

In EFL lecturers' perception, how can AI influence autonomous learning for English language learners?

Methods

Pedagogical Setting & Participants

This research examined the perceptions of 15 English lecturers from the Language Institute at a private university in Vietnam. The research site was selected because it has a large number of English lecturers, has recently promoted AI integration in language teaching, and has granted ethical approval and data collection access.

A purposive sampling method was employed to recruit lecturers who had engaged with or experimented with AI tools (such as ChatGPT, QuillBot, Grammarly). Lecturers were excluded if they had no AI experience. This strategy ensured that respondents could provide detailed and relevant answers regarding the incorporation of AI into language teaching.

Participants were recruited through professional networks and university contacts. An email invitation was sent to 30 lecturers; 15 consented to participate, yielding a response rate of 50%.

Fifteen Vietnamese EFL lecturers participated. They had 3-15 years of teaching experience and taught General English (A1–B2), Academic English, and English for Specific Purposes. This diversity offered different perspectives on AI use in promoting learner autonomy. All participants were informed of their rights and assigned codes (P1–P15) to protect their identities. The study was conducted in accordance with institutional guidelines on anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary participation.

Table 1

AI Tool Usage by Participant Groups

Participant Group	Teaching Experience	AI Tools Used in Teaching
P2, P3, P4, P9	10+ years	E-learning, Grammarly, Kahoot, ChatGPT, Quizizz.
P5, P6, P7, P8, P10, P11, P14	5-10 years	E-learning, ChatGPT, Copilot, Online Dictionaries.
P12, P13, P15	≤5 years	E-learning, Google Translate, ChatGPT.

Design of the Study and Data Collection

A qualitative approach was used to investigate what teachers experience and how they interpret AI tools for students' autonomous learning. A qualitative research design was employed because it enables the generation of rich, nuanced, and contextually grounded insights into learners' engagement with AI technologies (Creswell & Poth, 2024). This methodological approach is particularly well suited to examining the complex, multilayered nature of students' experiences, allowing the researcher to uncover subtle attitudes, meanings, and behavioural patterns that quantitative approaches may overlook (Allan, 2020). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews (Kallio et al., 2016) following the principles of interviewing, with Microsoft Teams, from May to June 2024.

The interview questions were developed based on established frameworks of learner autonomy (Holec, 1981; Benson, 2011) and prior literature on AI in language learning. The participants were asked to discuss AI and the five different tasks they carry out: (i) the setting of the lesson

objectives, (ii) the exploration of learning resources, (iii) choices about learning approaches, (iv) status of progress at learning stages, and (v) results evaluation for students.

Fifteen EFL lecturers participated in this study from the Language Institute at a Vietnamese university. This number was deemed sufficient because data saturation occurred after the 13th interview, with no new information or themes emerging, and two additional interviews confirmed it. Each lasted about 20–25 minutes, adjusted according to their AI integration experience in teaching. Although relatively concise, this length was adequate for focused discussions because the participants were experienced lecturers familiar with AI integration, and follow-up prompts were provided to elicit deeper elaboration on certain points. The interviews were audio recorded with consent and then transcribed verbatim. Since all of these interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, translation procedures were followed to ensure linguistic accuracy and semantic equivalence. This enabled a methodologically well-structured yet flexible investigation of the nature of teacher engagement with AI in supporting learner autonomy.

Data analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis, as advanced by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012), through a systematic process: familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, developing themes, reviewing the data, and finally giving them names and defining them. An inductive and deductive coding strategy was therefore employed to ensure that themes developed naturally, rather than an overemphasis on a deductive approach before data collection, thereby allowing the study to focus solely on the role of AI in students' autonomous learning.

NVivo software was used throughout the analysis to store transcripts, generate and manage codes, cluster subthemes, and visualize thematic relationships to ensure transparency and consistency in data handling. The analysis focused on how AI contributed to defining lesson goals, selecting available materials, analyzing approaches, checking progress, and appraising performance.

Based on the principles Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended, several strategies have been used to enhance trustworthiness: member checking (participants reviewed their transcripts and interpretations); peer debriefing with two qualitative researchers; and, finally, intercoder reliability checks were conducted on a portion of the data to confirm coding consistency. These, combined with maintaining an audit trail and full participant and context documentation, enhanced credibility, dependability, and confirmability, which Nowell et al. (2017) emphasize in their trustworthiness criteria. The research was conducted in accordance with particularly strict ethical guidelines.

Findings

This section presents a comprehensive analysis of the qualitative study's findings, covering each research goal and addressing each research objective with the information gathered from the interviews. The participants' responses and experiences are thoroughly analyzed in the following subsections.

AI in Setting Learning Objectives

The interviews with the 15 lecturers at the Language Institute of Van Lang University revealed varied perceptions regarding how AI helps students set their learning objectives. While lecturers

recognized that AI can help learners clarify expectations regarding learning tasks and structure short-term study periods, they also observed that its impact on more substantive aspects of autonomous learning remains relatively limited. Overall, they tended to position AI as a resource that can support task planning rather than guiding learners towards deeper, longer-term goals.

A large number of lecturers described AI as a helpful supplementary tool that enables students to better understand assignment expectations and generate initial ideas. One lecturer explained that

> *"The identification of learning objectives is often tied to students' use of AI tools, which helps them complete assignments efficiently"* (P1).

These observations indicate that AI might provide immediate procedural support, especially for learners who have difficulty structuring short-term academic tasks.

At the same time, lecturers expressed uncertainty about whether these forms of support can facilitate autonomy. Most participants indicated that while AI may support information organization for learners, the pedagogical complexity of helping students identify meaningful or developmentally informed objectives is beyond its capabilities. As one lecturer remarked,

> *"Setting goals should be done manually. AI cannot replace human effort in structuring knowledge effectively"* (P10).

The data revealed lecturers' concern that AI-generated suggestions may primarily help students complete assignments rather than foster their ability to set meaningful learning goals.

In addition, three more lecturers raised concerns about artificial intelligence, as it tends to prioritize short-term success over long-term educational planning. These concerns raised doubts about whether AI tools can truly support language development, with one excerpt noting,

> "*Students tend to focus more on short-term benefits rather than long-term planning when using AI tools*" (P8).

In summary, lecturers reported that AI enhanced learners' ability to manage immediate academic tasks; however, they also expressed caution about its impact on students' long-term autonomy, emphasizing that goal-setting still requires teacher guidance and pedagogical support.

AI in enhancing access to learning resources

Adaptation to Individual Needs

According to the participants, AI was widely regarded as a tool that enhances students' access to learning resources, particularly by responding to individual learning needs. A central theme, evident across 18 excerpts, highlighted AI's ability to customize and adapt learning materials to learners' varying proficiency levels. Lecturers perceived this personalization as facilitating a more effective and individualized learning experience. As one participant observed*, "AI can help adjust progress according to students' learning needs" (P2),* illustrating how AI-driven adaptation may strengthen learners' engagement with content suited to their current capabilities.

Lecturers further emphasized the convenience AI provides in helping students determine appropriate learning levels, a theme reflected in three excerpts. They explained that AI can assist learners who are uncertain about resource selection, enabling them to align materials more accurately with their skill sets. Complementing this perspective, five excerpts described AI's capacity to facilitate learners' adaptation to a broader spectrum of learning needs. One lecturer

captured this challenge by asking, *"When discussing CEFR skills, how do students determine their appropriate level?" (P6),* suggesting that AI may help illuminate such decisions that learners typically struggle to make independently.

Another important theme mentioned how AI can afford a more supportive learning environment. Four excerpts indicated that AI might reduce students' hesitation and enhance their participation in expressing their thoughts, particularly for shy or less confident students. In the words of one lecturer: "Students will not be afraid to engage with AI" (P9), suggesting that AI tools may help lower affective barriers and encourage inquiry-oriented learning behaviors.

However, despite such benefits, lecturers raised several concerns about the pedagogical and developmental implications of AI integration. Six excerpts highlighted the difficulties students face when attempting to modify AI-generated learning resources independently. Many lecturers questioned whether AI currently has the pedagogical sophistication to recognize and respond to students' complex, individualized learning needs. One participant reflected this skepticism, stating,

> "*AI is not yet smart enough to distinguish and meet learning demands accurately; only students can decide" (P9).*

Given these challenges, lecturers underscored the importance of instructional support, which was reflected in four excerpts. They argued that without appropriate guidance, students may struggle to use AI in ways that genuinely enhance their learning. One lecturer cautioned, *"If we do not guide students, their ability to interact effectively depends on them" (P8)*, emphasizing the risk that unstructured engagement with AI could result in superficial or inappropriate use of learning resources.

In short, lecturers viewed AI as a valuable tool that significantly enhances access to learning materials and fosters greater learner autonomy. However, they also noted that the extent of such autonomy relies on students' capacity to engage with AI in a goal-oriented and critical manner—an ability that, in their view, necessitates ongoing instructional support and the development of strong AI literacy to prevent overreliance and to promote meaningful, reflective learning.

AI's Role in Independent Learning Resource Access

Many lecturers emphasized that AI plays a meaningful role in enhancing students' ability to independently explore, evaluate, and use learning resources. A key subtheme, identified across nine excerpts, was the potential of AI to promote access to a wide range of educational materials and to support learners in synthesizing information independently. As one lecturer indicated,

> *"Having access to a variety of educational resources is important. AI supports students in connecting with comprehensive materials, like ChatGPT, which enhances their understanding"* (P2).

Another lecturer reflected similarly, *"This is an example of how AI refines the learning experience by providing students with relevant and suitable resources."* (P8). These views suggest that lecturers regarded AI as integral to promoting resource-rich environments that foster self-managed learning.

Another recurring subtheme concerned students' awareness and purposeful engagement with AI, discussed in five excerpts. Several lecturers emphasized that the educational value of AI is contingent upon how students integrate it into their learning practices. As one participant explained,

> *"If students do not use AI for learning purposes, its value diminishes. Students need to understand how AI tools can support their studies rather than just using them passively"* (P10).

This reflection illustrates the belief that effective use of AI in education requires not only technical proficiency but also intentional and reflective engagement. In this sense, lecturers associated autonomous learning with students' capacity to use AI critically and purposefully, transforming it from a passive aid into an active tool for self-directed learning.

Concurrently, lecturers articulated apprehensions regarding students' escalating dependence on AI tools. This issue appeared in 5 excerpts, reflecting apprehension that such reliance may impede learners' ability to think independently. As one lecturer explained,

> *"Students sometimes depend too much on AI to complete assignments. AI should be a tool for learning, not just for providing instant answers"* (P1).

These accounts highlight the risk that AI, if used uncritically, may foster dependence rather than autonomy.

Given these challenges, lecturers highlighted the importance of educational support—a view underscored in 4 excerpts. They observed that numerous students still need guidance to understand the ethical, intentional, and efficient use of AI tools.

> *"Teachers must guide students in using AI effectively. Without this, AI could become a tool for shortcuts rather than meaningful learning"* (P9).

Taken together, lecturers observed that AI enabled students to access and select learning resources independently. However, they also noted that effective use of these tools requires a certain level of comprehension and critical thinking, which, they said, can be supported through teacher guidance.

AI's role in enabling students to autonomously access learning resources

During the interviews, lecturers observed that AI is progressively influencing how students independently locate and utilize resources. The prevailing view- highlighted in 12 statements- was that AI-driven tools allow students to continue their development without needing teacher assistance. As one lecturer noted,

> *"When using AI, such as in the process of writing discussions, students can effectively solve problems. If used correctly, students can use AI to find information and support their assignments"* (P7).

A similar subtheme, reported in 10 excerpts, indicated that AI played a key role in providing diverse materials, which could be customized to the learner and could foster further learning involvement. A lecturer added that

> *"With diverse AI tools available, they assist students in locating appropriate materials for personal use. When students access these tools, they feel more engaged in learning than just receiving information from lectures"* (P4).

Motivated or high-achieving students are also more likely to benefit from AI, as lecturers noted on several occasions, throughout 4 excerpts, saying that these students are better suited to apply such tools intentionally. As another participant said,

> *"AI learning resources mainly support students' progress. Autonomous learning tends to be higher among students who are already motivated to learn independently"* (P6).

Despite these advantages, five excerpts identified challenges and limitations, particularly a lack of AI literacy among some students. As one participant observed,

> *"Many students lack the ability to self-study, which prevents them from effectively using these resources"* (P5).

Overall, lecturers noted that AI significantly supports the development of learner autonomy, although its effectiveness varies depending on individual learners' capabilities and familiarity with AI tools.

AI in Method Selection

Lecturers' perspectives revealed that AI was increasingly important to students' selection of learning methods. The most dominant subtheme, evident in 22 excerpts, concerned the extensive use of AI instruments for pronunciation development: *"AI tools are useful for pronunciation practice, but premium features are often required for better accuracy"* (P3). Tools such as ELSA and Google Translate were often cited for their accessibility and effectiveness.

AI was also considered a strong facilitator of learning progress, as reflected in 8 excerpts on the acceleration in vocabulary and writing development. As one lecturer mentioned,

> *"These smart tools are highly convenient. They work faster than traditional methods and provide various ways to develop vocabulary and writing skills, helping students learn more effectively"* (P3).

Another emerging subtheme, with eight quotes, was AI's contribution to enhancing vocabulary and grammar. Another participant added that

> *"AI tools facilitate vocabulary and grammar development, making learning more efficient for students"* (P2).

Another subtheme concerned building confidence, especially for students who experience anxiety when speaking in person. This view was reflected in 7 excerpts, in which lecturers noted that AI can facilitate students' more active and comfortable participation. *"Many students are shy when it comes to face-to-face communication, but AI tools help them engage better in learning"* (P8), noted one of the lecturers.

A further subtheme, reported in 7 excerpts, concerned differences in AI use among learners. Lecturers observed that higher-level students use AI tools more strategically and extensively, as evidenced in one quote:

> "*Not all students make use of AI tools. More proficient learners tend to explore them more extensively*" (P6).

In addition, six excerpts highlighted the fact that AI could assist students in conducting research, especially on complex issues that they might find difficult to comprehend using traditional materials. As one lecturer put it,

> *"AI enables students to better research complex topics, especially when they have difficulty understanding information from other sources"* (P5).

To sum up, lecturers viewed AI as providing multiple avenues of methodological support across different language-learning areas. Simultaneously, they noted that its effectiveness varied according to learners' proficiency levels, their disposition to engage critically with AI applications, and the guidance provided by instructors in helping students integrate these applications into their learning practices.

AI in Tracking Learning Progress

Lecturers emphasized AI's increasing role in enabling students to track their learning progress. The most common subtheme, reflected in 17 excerpts, was the benefit of tracking features within e-learning platforms, which allow students to clearly evaluate their advancement. As one lecturer commented,

> "*E-learning platforms offer excellent tracking tools that allow students to keep up with their progress effectively*" (P1).

Another subtheme (appearing in 13 excerpts) highlighted AI's support in monitoring academic progress. Automated tools such as submission logs and progress dashboards were considered useful in enhancing the transparency of the process. One lecturer remarked,

> *"When using AI to submit assignments, it provides progress tracking, helping both teachers and students monitor learning"* (P10).

However, 12 excerpts emphasized that much of this depends on students' active use of the tools. Several lecturers noted that even advanced technologies are ineffective without active learner participation. As one participant explained,

> *"If students pay attention, they will know how much they have completed. Otherwise, even the best technology will not be effective"* (P3).

Collectively, lecturers observed that AI provided students with meaningful support in tracking their learning progress, but they also noted that its effectiveness varied depending on learners' awareness and motivation to engage with these functions.

AI in Evaluation

Feedback quality

The lecturers noted AI's important role in assessing learners, including automated feedback systems. A dominant topic, reproduced in nine excerpts, highlighted the broad use of the feedback functionality present in numerous educational AI tools. Such features were characterized as providing pragmatic, immediately applicable feedback mechanisms to facilitate learning. As one participant noted,

> *"These tools are designed with educational purposes in mind, often focusing on feedback features"* (P7).

A further dominant subtheme, evident across the 6 excerpts, concerned AI's capacity to generate detailed analyses for specific assessment contexts, such as IELTS test preparation. Lecturers observed that learners can achieve accuracy rates and receive diagnostic feedback on specific areas for improvement. For example, one of the contributors stated,

> *"For example, in IELTS training, when students submit their responses, AI systems analyze them and provide feedback on accuracy and pronunciation percentages"* (P3).

Although these benefits were acknowledged, so , too, were the consistent, inherent weaknesses identified by educators in AI-generated feedback. This was the most common subtheme, with 13 excerpts. Participants were worried about AI giving generic feedback instead of in-depth, personalized guidance. As one lecturer explained,

> *"Most AI tools provide very general feedback rather than detailed, customized suggestions that help students make real improvements"* (P2).

Such limitations reinforced the lecturers' perception that teacher-mediated assessment is indispensable—especially when feedback has to be tailored to the individual students' needs, proficiency levels, and learning environments.

Overall, lecturers noted that AI added value to assessment practices by offering more readily available and immediate feedback. However, they also observed that its limitations in depth of analysis and in the personalization of feedback indicated that it should be used alongside, rather than as a substitute for, traditional teacher-based feedback.

AI in Self-Assessment

The analysis of the interview data suggested that lecturers perceived AI as playing a significant role in influencing the way students review and monitor their learning performance. The most common positive perception of learners - cited in 13 excerpts - was that AI tools enable learners to perform basic self-assessment and monitor their learning progress. As one of the lecturers observed, *"AI helps students self-assess and improve their learning process"* (P7).

A common concern, mentioned in 8 excerpts, was the limited capability of many AI systems. While AI can indicate correctness or completion, lecturers pointed out that it rarely offers meaningful pedagogical feedback. One participant commented that *"I do not think these tools provide sufficiently detailed feedback to students"* (P4), highlighting the superficiality of feedback produced by generic applications.

Moreover, 5 excerpts indicated that AI facilitates only surface-based assessment and is not a useful tool to determine the quality of students' conceptual comprehension and practical skills. *"AI allows students to know what they have completed but does not assess the quality of their understanding or practical skills"* (P4), a lecturer commented.

In summary, while AI-based tools enhanced learners' potential to monitor their progress and engage in self-assessment, lecturers noted that their pedagogical value was limited by tool design, student engagement, and the limited depth of feedback. As a result, they suggested that AI should be used as supplementary support rather than as the primary method of assessing students.

Discussion

This research investigated English lecturers' views on the impact of AI on learners' autonomy in the context of a Vietnamese university. Based on Holec's (1981) foundational theory of autonomy as "the learner's ability to take control of their own learning", the research examined whether AI enables or disables those core elements of an autonomous learning model: setting lesson objectives, learning resource access, method selection, tracking learning progress, and evaluation. The findings provide a complex picture: AI supports some procedural aspects of learning but falls short of encouraging the critical and reflective thinking required to maintain autonomy.

Lecturers in interviews acknowledged that AI increases students' access to learning materials and enables them to work at their own pace. These perspectives align with Benson's broad conception of autonomy (2011). The present study regards learners' freedom to select materials and regulate their learning environment as a manifestation of learner agency, albeit one of many possible dimensions. Some of these applications (vocabulary development, grammar correction, and pronunciation practice) were considered especially effective in enabling students to make their own learning decisions without needing to depend on teachers. Such instruments appear to enhance what Little (1991) describes as autonomy's emphasis on

independent action, that is, taking initiative in managing tasks and making choices during the learning process.

However, lecturers also remarked that AI falls short of fostering the reflective and metacognitive components of autonomy. AI can assist students in completing their assignments or proposals, but lacks pedagogical intentionality. This insight highlights a core theoretical contribution of the study: AI enables procedural autonomy but limits reflective autonomy. Consistent with autonomy theory, lecturers maintained that meaningful goal-setting requires learners to make sense of their learning needs, anticipate potential difficulties, and relate tasks to long-term development, capacities that remain beyond AI's current capabilities**.** This substantiates the claims made by Little (1991) and Zimmerman (2002) that autonomy is a process grounded in guided reflection, self-awareness, and strategic action.

Another concern raised by lecturers is students' overreliance on AI. Those with limited digital literacy were frequently observed relying on AI for quick answers rather than critically engaging with assignments. These findings suggest that passive use of AI does not enhance autonomy. The results add to previous research cautioning that access to digital tools does not necessarily lead to more autonomous practices; rather, autonomy is mediated by learners' motivation and abilities to critically evaluate information.

One more notable finding is the disparity in the effectiveness of AI across different language skills. Tools that supported grammar and pronunciation were seen as very useful, but AI-generated feedback on writing and speaking tasks was often described as superficial, generic, and insufficiently sensitive to context. This limited accuracy in feedback may hinder the growth of metacognitive and self-evaluative capabilities which are fundamental for autonomous learning. While AI responses can be immediately generated, lecturers stressed that rich, personalized feedback, which is necessary for deeper learning, is still reliant on teacher guidance.

Lecturers also agreed that learners could use the AI tool's tracking features to keep track of their progress. Such processes are similar to Zimmerman's (2002) self-regulation model in which performance monitoring is considered fundamental to strategy adjustment and motivation maintenance. However, lecturers commented that learning analytics do not automatically create autonomous learners, as students need to understand how to interpret and respond to performance data. Without teacher guidance, monitoring tools may too easily become one more surface-level metric rather than a basis for reflective learning decisions.

Therefore, the findings point to a recurring idea: AI may facilitate autonomy only for learners who are willing to engage with it critically and intentionally. More proficient students were perceived as benefiting the most from AI, using it strategically to complement classroom instruction. However, less capable or less regulated learners were also more likely to misuse AI or rely on it. This differentiation highlights a key pedagogical consideration: Learner autonomy may be effectively supported by AI with adequate teacher guidance.

Taken together, these findings suggest several implications for pedagogy and institutional policies. First, AI should be used not as a substitute for human teaching but as a supplementary tool that fosters autonomous learning with the proper guidance. It is also essential for teachers to help learners make sense of AI-generated feedback, set meaningful learning goals, and develop reflective habits for sustained autonomy. Second, the incorporation of AI literacy into language curricula is necessary for the 21st century. Students must learn not only how to use AI tools but also how to question, evaluate, and apply AI outputs ethically and strategically. Such skills are foundational for preventing overreliance and sustaining autonomy. Third,

institutions and developers should work together to ensure that AI platforms are pedagogically oriented. Feedback tools must go beyond surface-level corrections and mechanical suggestions to support learning in ways that are more consistent with the reflective nature of autonomous learning.

To sum up, the present research provides evidence supporting the situated yet significant role of AI in promoting learner autonomy. AI is effective at providing access to resources, providing immediate feedback, and tracking learners' progress. However, it has a limited impact on the more profound cognitive and reflective aspects of autonomous learning, which are crucial to language acquisition. These findings emphasize that teacher involvement, dialogic support, and explicit instruction in AI literacy are critical for transforming AI from a superficial substitute for pedagogical engagement to a powerful impetus for autonomous learning.

Conclusion

This study explores ESL lecturers' views on the role of AI in fostering students' autonomous learning. Drawing on Holec's (1981) framework, autonomy was analyzed along five dimensions: goal setting, access to resources, method selection, progress tracking, and evaluation. Thematic analysis of interviews with 15 lecturers at Van Lang University revealed that AI tools have significant potential to support learner autonomy, particularly by improving access to personalized content, enabling independent study, and providing immediate feedback. However, AI also has a limited impact on reflective and metacognitive processes, which are considered to shape sustained autonomous learning. These findings suggest a significant implication: AI's educational value relies not only on technological capabilities but also on learners' motivation and teacher guidance.

In practice, language curricula in institutions should integrate a level of AI literacy to help students evaluate AI outputs critically, avoid overreliance on them, and apply them strategically. Teachers need to assist learners in making sense of feedback, identifying useful objectives, and participating in reflective practices. Developers should work with teachers to design AI systems that provide pedagogically grounded feedback.

This study is limited by its reliance on lecturer interviews and by its single-institution setting. Future research should incorporate students' perspectives, classroom observations, and longitudinal studies to examine the impact of AI on autonomy over time and across instructional contexts. Further inquiry should focus on designing and evaluating practical strategies that combine AI use with explicit teacher guidance. As AI technologies continue to evolve, ongoing research is necessary to ensure that technological innovation enhances, rather than replaces, fundamental pedagogical processes.

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Biodata

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