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LEARNER AGENCY AND MOTIVATION WHEN USING AI AS A LANGUAGE PARTNER OR TUTOR

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Annotation. This article examines how artificial intelligence, when used as a language partner or tutor, shapes learner agency and motivation in TESOL contexts. As AI systems become increasingly embedded in the linguistic landscape, they affect not only learners' performance but also their autonomy, emotional orientation, and willingness to engage with English. Drawing on existing research, theoretical discussions, and learner experience reports, this paper argues that AI can significantly enhance autonomy by providing flexible, immediate, and personalized support. At the same time, it can unintentionally weaken agency through overreliance and diminish intrinsic motivation when interactions lack authenticity. The article concludes by offering implications for TESOL educators on how to integrate AI responsibly to ensure that learners remain self-directed and meaningfully engaged.
Keywords: learner agency, motivation, artificial intelligence, TESOL, autonomy, AI tutors.

Introduction. The rapid integration of artificial intelligence into educational environments has introduced a new dynamic to language learning, one in which learners interact not only with teachers and peers but also with digital conversational partners capable of generating explanations, offering feedback, and simulating dialogue. AI systems such as ChatGPT, Duolingo Max, Grammarly, and various speech-recognition tools present themselves as endlessly patient interlocutors—entities that do not tire, do not judge, and respond at the speed of curiosity. As a result, learners turn to these tools not only for academic practice but for emotional reassurance, clarification of doubts, and personalized exploration outside the classroom. This shift has generated considerable enthusiasm, yet it has also raised concerns about how AI may alter psychological dimensions that are vital for successful second-language acquisition, particularly learner agency and motivation. Learner agency refers to the capacity to make intentional choices, assume responsibility for learning decisions, and engage actively with the learning process. Motivation encompasses the complex impulses—cognitive, emotional, and social—that sustain a learner's engagement and effort. Both constructs have deep roots in TESOL scholarship, and both have traditionally been influenced most strongly by the human relationships within the classroom: the teacher's guidance, peer support, and real communicative needs. With AI entering this ecosystem, the pedagogical landscape becomes more fluid. The learner is no longer dependent on traditional structures of time and authority, and this newfound independence invites both empowerment and vulnerability. The question is not simply whether AI assists learning, but how it reshapes the learner's relationship with autonomy, confidence, curiosity, and responsibility. This article therefore seeks to analyze the complex interplay between AI, agency, and motivation, offering a nuanced understanding suitable for contemporary TESOL discourse.

Methods. This study adopts a narrative review approach, synthesizing insights from research in applied linguistics, TESOL, and educational technology. Unlike systematic reviews that prioritize rigid methodological filtering, the narrative method allows for a broader and more flexible integration of findings, capturing emerging patterns that illuminate how learners experience AI-mediated language practice. The reviewed materials include peer-reviewed articles, empirical investigations, case studies of AI-assisted learning, and qualitative reports in

which learners describe their interactions with AI tools. These sources cover a range of technological contexts, from conversational chatbots to intelligent tutoring systems and automated writing evaluators.The analysis centered on conceptual categories linked to learner autonomy and motivation, particularly goal-setting behaviors, perceptions of control, emotional responses during interaction, and levels of cognitive engagement. Emphasis was placed on studies where learners discussed how AI affected their choices, confidence, and persistence. Through this thematic integration, the review identifies recurrent benefits, challenges, and tensions that arise when AI becomes a central participant in the learning process.

Results. The review revealed several consistent patterns regarding the ways AI influences learner agency. Many learners experienced a heightened sense of control over their learning process due to the flexible and immediate nature of AI support. The ability to request explanations in different styles, ask follow-up questions without fear, and adjust the complexity of tasks created an environment in which learners felt empowered to design their own pathways. This autonomy was especially evident among learners who used AI to explore topics beyond their coursework, such as preparing for job interviews, crafting real-world messages, or rehearsing conversations from daily life. In these instances, AI was perceived as a responsive companion that allowed learners to navigate their personal linguistic goals in ways traditional classroom structures did not always accommodate. Motivational effects were also prominent. Learners frequently reported that AI's non-judgmental and patient nature reduced affective barriers, particularly anxiety associated with speaking or making grammatical mistakes. This emotional safety encouraged experimentation and greater risk-taking, reinforcing the learner's willingness to engage. Moreover, the novelty and interactivity of AI-based practice stimulated curiosity. Learners enjoyed receiving immediate answers, creatively using prompts to explore new ideas, and engaging with feedback that adapted to their needs. Many expressed that AI made practice feel more accessible and less intimidating, contributing to sustained engagement over time.However, the findings also highlighted risks that complicate the picture. A notable concern was the emergence of overreliance, in which learners increasingly depended on AI to generate ideas, translate texts, or provide solutions before attempting to think independently. This pattern diminishes the cognitive struggle essential for language development and subtly shifts agency away from the learner. Some learners became passive consumers of AI-generated content, experiencing a reduced sense of ownership over their learning. Additionally, motivation sometimes declined when interactions with AI felt artificial or predictable. The lack of genuine human nuance—unexpected reactions, lived experience, emotional depth—occasionally led learners to perceive AI conversation as hollow, reducing the desire to engage meaningfully. Digital literacy also influenced learner outcomes: those with strong technological skills navigated AI confidently, while others struggled, limiting their autonomy despite the tool's potential.

Discussion. The findings suggest that AI has the capacity to enrich learner agency by offering personalized, flexible, and accessible support. When learners feel able to direct the content, pacing, and depth of interactions, they are more likely to experience a sense of competence and ownership. These qualities contribute positively to motivation, especially when combined with reduced anxiety and the emotional comfort AI often provides. In this sense, AI acts as a catalyst for autonomy, supporting learners in taking risks and exploring English more freely than they might in traditional classroom settings. Yet the results also emphasize the fragile balance between empowerment and dependency. Without careful guidance, learners may drift toward behaviors that undermine their autonomy, relying on AI as a shortcut rather than as a scaffold. When AI becomes a source of ready-made answers rather than a tool for structured inquiry, motivation can shift from intrinsic curiosity to superficial completion. This confirms that

educators remain essential intermediaries, responsible for designing tasks that ensure learners remain intellectually engaged, reflective, and critically aware of AI's limitations. Teachers can help learners use AI not as a crutch but as a partner—one that strengthens, rather than replaces, human interaction and communicative practice. If integrated thoughtfully, AI can support sustainable motivation, but only when paired with meaningful challenges, reflective tasks, and opportunities for authentic social communication.

Conclusion. Artificial intelligence is reshaping the psychological and pedagogical foundations of language learning in TESOL. Its ability to provide immediate, personalized, and emotionally safe interaction creates powerful conditions for enhancing learner agency and motivation. Learners often feel more confident, autonomous, and curious when practicing with AI. However, these benefits coexist with risks, including overreliance, diminished cognitive effort, and possible declines in motivation when interactions lack authenticity. The key challenge for TESOL educators is to integrate AI in a manner that strengthens genuine autonomy while preserving the depth, complexity, and human connection essential to language learning. When used responsibly, AI can support learners in developing not only linguistic competence but also the self-directed habits and resilient motivation crucial for long-term success.

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