

Between Empowerment and Dependency: Learner Psychology and Autonomous Learning Among Second-Year English Majors in The Era of Generative Artificial Intelligence

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ABSTRACT: The proliferation of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools has fundamentally altered the landscape of English language learning, raising urgent questions about learner psychology, self-direction, and the nature of autonomous learning. This conceptual-integrative paper examines how generative AI reshapes the psychological dimensions of autonomous language learning among second-year university students majoring in English in the Vietnamese higher education context. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2020), Benson's (2011) framework of learner autonomy, and emerging empirical evidence from EFL settings, the paper identifies a central tension between two divergent learner trajectories: autonomy-enhancing engagement, in which AI functions as a reflective thinking partner and adaptive resource; and dependency-oriented reliance, in which the outsourcing of cognitive effort to AI systems progressively erodes metacognitive capacity, intrinsic motivation, and self-regulated learning. Four psychological mechanisms are examined in depth: the displacement of cognitive agency, the restructuring of motivational orientations, the paradox of AI-mediated confidence, and the erosion of metacognitive awareness. The paper concludes by proposing a pedagogical framework for autonomy-preserving AI integration and calls for a reorientation of language teacher education toward what is termed critical AI mentorship.

KEYWORDS: learner autonomy; generative AI; EFL learner psychology; self-determination theory; self-regulated learning; Vietnamese higher education

I. INTRODUCTION

The classroom in which today's second-year English major navigates their learning is, in many ways, unrecognisable from that of a decade ago. Generative AI tools — ChatGPT, Gemini, Copilot, and their successors — have inserted themselves into virtually every phase of the language learning process: reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, writing composition, grammar checking, translation, exam preparation, and even self-assessment. For students in Vietnamese private universities, where English is simultaneously a major subject, a professional credential, and an aspirational identity, the arrival of these tools carries both extraordinary promise and underacknowledged risk.

The promise is intuitive and widely documented. AI systems offer personalised, on-demand, infinitely patient interlocution. They can explain grammatical rules in a student's first language, generate model texts at any level of complexity, provide immediate feedback on written drafts, and simulate authentic communicative encounters. For learners who have historically depended on limited classroom contact time and overburdened teachers, these affordances are genuinely democratising (Hwang et al., 2023; Bender, 2024).

Yet the risk is less frequently foregrounded in the literature, and it is precisely this gap that motivates the present paper. The concern is not primarily about academic dishonesty — though that is real — but about something more foundational: the psychological conditions under which deep, autonomous, and durable language learning takes place. When a student asks ChatGPT to explain why a particular sentence is grammatically deviant, they may receive a technically accurate answer. But did the act of asking cultivate the metacognitive habit of noticing? Did it strengthen the student's internal monitoring capacity? Or did it simply resolve the discomfort of uncertainty, bypassing the productive struggle through which durable learning is forged?

These are questions of learner psychology, and they sit at the intersection of several bodies of scholarship that have not yet been systematically brought into dialogue: self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2020), the autonomy tradition in applied linguistics (Holec, 1981; Benson, 2011), and the emerging empirical literature on AI-assisted language learning (Chan & Hu, 2023; Nguyen & Doan, 2025). This paper undertakes that synthesis, with specific attention to second-year university students majoring in English — a population that occupies a psychologically and academically significant transitional position: no longer novices, not yet the self-directed professionals their curriculum imagines them to be.

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The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical foundations of learner autonomy and self-determination in language learning. Section 3 maps the current landscape of generative AI use among EFL university learners. Section 4 presents a psychological analysis of four mechanisms through which AI use shapes — and potentially undermines — autonomous learning. Section 5 proposes a framework for pedagogically responsible AI integration. Section 6 discusses implications and directions for future research.

II. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: AUTONOMY, SELF-DETERMINATION, AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

2.1 Learner Autonomy in Applied Linguistics

The concept of learner autonomy entered the applied linguistics lexicon through Holec's (1981) influential monograph, which defined it as the ability to take charge of one's own learning. Subsequent decades of scholarship have elaborated, contested, and contextualised this definition in productive ways. Benson (2011), whose framework remains perhaps the most cited in the field, defines autonomy as the capacity to take control of one's own learning — a capacity that operates across three interrelated dimensions: control over learning management (goal-setting, planning, monitoring), control over cognitive processing (deploying learning strategies, managing attention, regulating comprehension), and control over learning content (selecting what to learn, how to engage with materials, and how to evaluate outcomes).

What is crucial in Benson's (2011) formulation, and what distinguishes it from reductive interpretations of autonomy as mere independence or self-study, is its emphasis on capacity. Autonomy is not a fixed trait that some learners possess and others do not; it is a developmental achievement, cultivated through experience, reflection, and the progressive internalisation of self-regulatory strategies. This developmentalist understanding has important implications for how we conceptualise the role of AI: if autonomy is a capacity built through practice, then tools that systematically substitute for that practice may, over time, inhibit its development.

2.2 Self-Determination Theory and Language Learning Motivation

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000, 2020), provides a complementary psychological lens for understanding why learners engage with learning tasks in qualitatively different ways. SDT proposes that human beings have three basic psychological needs whose satisfaction is essential for sustained, intrinsically motivated engagement: autonomy (the experience of volition and self-endorsement in one's actions), competence (the experience of effectiveness and mastery), and relatedness (the experience of meaningful connection with others).

Within language learning, SDT has proven a generative framework. Learners who perceive their learning as self-determined — who study because they find it inherently meaningful, curious, or important — exhibit greater persistence, deeper processing, higher achievement, and stronger wellbeing compared to learners whose engagement is primarily controlled by external pressures such as grades, institutional requirements, or fear of disapproval (Alamer et al., 2025; Du & Alm, 2024). Controlled motivation is not without effect; it can drive short-term compliance. But it rarely produces the kind of durable, transferable competence that language education at the tertiary level aims for.

The relevance of SDT to the AI question is direct and urgent. If AI tools are experienced as sources of external answers rather than as scaffolds for autonomous inquiry, they risk shifting learners' motivational orientation from autonomous to controlled — or, in the most concerning cases, from controlled motivation to amotivation, the complete absence of self-determined engagement. Conversely, and this is the key qualification, if AI tools are deployed in ways that strengthen perceived competence and support volitional engagement, they can be powerful allies in the cultivation of autonomous motivation (Annamalai et al., 2025; Wang & Reynolds, 2024).

2.3 Self-Regulated Learning and Metacognition

A third theoretical strand relevant to this analysis is self-regulated learning (SRL), particularly Zimmerman's (2002) cyclical model, in which learning is organised across three recursive phases: forethought (goal-setting, strategic planning, self-efficacy appraisal), performance (self-monitoring, self-instruction, attention management), and self-reflection (self-evaluation, causal attribution, self-satisfaction or dissatisfaction). Critically, each phase requires learners to exercise metacognitive judgment — to think about their own thinking, to monitor the gap between current and desired performance, and to adjust their strategies accordingly.

Generative AI, as Combrinck and Loubser (2025) note, can function in a dual capacity within SRL: as a facilitator of learning — supporting goal-setting, providing formative feedback, modelling expert performance — or as a mechanism for offloading cognitive responsibility, in which students bypass the demanding metacognitive work of the forethought and self-reflection phases by outsourcing them to AI systems. Understanding which of these dynamics predominates — and under what conditions — is the central empirical and pedagogical challenge of the present moment.

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III. GENERATIVE AI USE AMONG EFL UNIVERSITY LEARNERS: THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE

The empirical literature on generative AI use among EFL university students has expanded rapidly since 2023, and several consistent patterns have emerged that are directly relevant to the autonomy question.

First, adoption rates are high and accelerating. Chan and Hu (2023) surveyed students across multiple university contexts and found that the majority had already integrated AI tools into their academic routines, with writing tasks representing the most common use case. This pattern is particularly pronounced in EFL contexts, where the gap between a student's competence in their first language and their target language creates fertile conditions for AI-mediated shortcutting.

Second, learner experiences are heterogeneous. Studies consistently report a bifurcation in how students use AI that maps imperfectly onto demographic variables and more closely onto what might be termed learner orientation. Some students use AI strategically and reflectively — posing questions, interrogating AI-generated responses critically, using AI feedback as a starting point for further inquiry. Others use AI as a completion engine, submitting AI-generated text with minimal engagement or treating AI explanations as terminal rather than generative (Nhan et al., 2025; Wang, 2024).

Third, and most pertinent to the autonomy question, the relationship between AI use and learner autonomy is neither straightforwardly positive nor negative — it is mediated. Nguyen and Doan (2025), in a quasi-experimental study comparing ChatGPT-facilitated and teacher-led learning groups, found that the ChatGPT group achieved significantly greater gains in learner autonomy and self-efficacy. However, qualitative data revealed that this autonomy gain was contingent on specific conditions: students who made autonomy gains were those who used AI to negotiate and co-construct understanding rather than to receive answers. Students who used AI primarily as an answer generator showed no significant autonomy gains.

Similarly, studies examining the relationship between ChatGPT use and academic wellbeing suggest a dose-dependent and orientation-dependent relationship. Moderate, strategic use is associated with reduced anxiety and enhanced confidence; excessive or avoidance-oriented use is associated with what Zhang et al. (2024) describe as diminished feelings of personal achievement and increasing dependence. These findings are consistent with SDT's prediction that external attribution of academic success — crediting AI rather than oneself — undermines the need satisfaction that sustains intrinsic motivation.

In the Vietnamese higher education context specifically, where educational culture has historically emphasised teacher authority, correct answers, and examination performance, the psychological dynamics of AI use carry additional complexity. Second-year English majors in Vietnamese private universities are, in many cases, undergoing their first sustained encounter with the expectation of academic autonomy — of forming and defending their own interpretations, managing their own learning trajectories, and developing a professional identity as future users and practitioners of English. The arrival of AI tools in this transitional moment is not neutral; it intersects with already fraught developmental negotiations around identity, competence, and self-direction.

IV. FOUR PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISMS: HOW AI SHAPES AUTONOMOUS LEARNING

4.1 The Displacement of Cognitive Agency

The most direct mechanism through which AI use can undermine autonomous learning is what this paper terms the displacement of cognitive agency — the substitution of AI-generated cognitive products for the student's own cognitive effort. This is not identical to cheating, though it can shade into it. A student who asks ChatGPT to explain a complex grammatical construction they have encountered is not cheating; they are seeking an explanation. But if that student receives the explanation, registers it as understood, and moves on without attempting to apply, test, or re-explain the concept in their own words, the cognitive work that would have consolidated the learning has been bypassed.

Cognitive load theory (Sweller, 1988) and the cognitive miser hypothesis (Szmyd & Mitera, 2024) together suggest that human beings have a systematic tendency to minimise cognitive investment when efficient alternatives are available. When AI tools offer immediate, fluent, authoritative-sounding responses, they create precisely the conditions under which cognitive minimisation is most likely to occur. Frontiers in Psychology research (2025) has demonstrated that this transition from tool-use to cognitive inertia is particularly evident at the metacognitive level, where AI reliance weakens learners' capacities for autonomous planning, monitoring, and self-evaluation — precisely the capacities that Benson (2011) identifies as constitutive of learner autonomy.

For second-year English majors, whose academic programme typically requires significant independent engagement with complex texts, writing tasks, and linguistic analysis, the risk of cognitive displacement is acute. The productive difficulty of working through an unfamiliar grammatical pattern, drafting and revising an analytical paragraph, or reconstructing the argument of a scholarly article — these are not merely vehicles for content learning; they are the primary sites at which autonomous learning capacity is built. When AI removes or shortcircuits these difficulties, it may remove the learning itself.

4.2 The Restructuring of Motivational Orientations

A second mechanism concerns the restructuring of learners' motivational orientations. SDT distinguishes between intrinsic motivation (engaging in an activity for its inherent interest and satisfaction), identified regulation (engaging because the activity is personally valued, even if not immediately enjoyable), introjected regulation (engaging to avoid shame or gain approval), and

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external regulation (engaging solely for external rewards or to avoid punishment). These forms of motivation exist on a continuum of self-determination, with intrinsic motivation and identified regulation associated with the most positive learning outcomes.

AI tools interact with this continuum in complex ways. On the one hand, AI can support intrinsic motivation by reducing anxiety, expanding the range of topics learners can explore, and providing the kind of responsive, non-judgmental interlocution that some learners find enabling (Hong & Guo, 2025). Students who experience AI as a thinking partner — one who meets them at their current level and scaffolds their reaching beyond it — report increased curiosity, engagement, and willingness to take intellectual risks.

On the other hand, AI can facilitate a shift toward externally regulated motivation in more insidious ways. When students use AI primarily to satisfy external requirements — to produce an essay that meets a word count, to generate a correct answer for submission — the locus of regulation shifts away from the student's own values and interests toward the demands of the assessment system. This shift is particularly consequential in the long term: students who learn to use AI to satisfy external requirements develop habits of engagement that are contingent on external scaffolding, which may leave them less equipped for the autonomous professional practice that their English major is designed to prepare them for.

4.3 The Paradox of AI-Mediated Confidence

A third mechanism, and perhaps the most psychologically subtle, is what this paper terms the paradox of AI-mediated confidence. Self-efficacy — the belief in one's capacity to accomplish specific tasks — is a crucial predictor of autonomous engagement in language learning (Bandura, 1997; Shi & Zhang, 2025). Students with high self-efficacy set more challenging goals, persist longer in the face of difficulty, and attribute setbacks to remediable factors rather than fixed incapacity. The development of genuine self-efficacy depends on what Bandura (1997) calls mastery experiences: the direct experience of successfully accomplishing challenging tasks through one's own effort.

AI tools can generate a simulacrum of confidence that bypasses mastery experience. A student who produces a polished written argument with AI assistance may feel, in the moment, a genuine sense of accomplishment. But if that sense of accomplishment is not accompanied by the metacognitive awareness that the AI did the heavy lifting, it does not contribute to the stable self-efficacy that comes from genuine mastery. Indeed, it may produce what Duong et al. (2025) describe as a fragile confidence — one that is dependent on continued AI access and that collapses when the student is required to perform independently.

This paradox has particular salience in the context of high-stakes assessment. Students who have developed AI-mediated confidence may be genuinely surprised and distressed when examination performance does not match their sense of their own competence. This mismatch can, in turn, generate the kind of attributional confusion — am I actually capable, or was I just good at using AI? — that is corrosive to both self-efficacy and autonomous motivation.

4.4 The Erosion of Metacognitive Awareness

The fourth mechanism concerns metacognition — the awareness and regulation of one's own cognitive processes that is foundational to autonomous learning. Metacognition encompasses monitoring comprehension, identifying gaps in understanding, evaluating the quality of one's own output, selecting appropriate strategies, and adjusting those strategies in response to feedback. It is, in essence, the internal counterpart to the external scaffolding that teachers provide.

AI tools can undermine metacognitive development through what might be called metacognitive outsourcing: the transfer of monitoring and evaluation functions from the learner to the AI system. When a student relies on AI grammar checkers to identify errors rather than developing their own error-monitoring capacity, or when they use AI to evaluate the quality of their writing rather than developing their own critical reading capacity, they are not merely using a tool — they are deferring the development of a cognitive capability.

The longitudinal consequences of metacognitive outsourcing are not yet fully documented, but the theoretical prediction from both SRL research and cognitive load theory is concerning: learners who consistently externalise monitoring and evaluation functions develop weaker internal metacognitive capacities, which makes them more dependent on external scaffolding, which in turn limits their capacity for the self-directed learning that professional competence in English will require (Babayev, 2025; Combrinck & Loubser, 2025).

V. TOWARD A FRAMEWORK FOR AUTONOMY-PRESERVING AI INTEGRATION

The analysis in Section 4 does not imply that generative AI should be excluded from English language education. Such a prescription would be neither realistic nor desirable. What it does imply is that the pedagogical conditions under which AI is deployed matter enormously — and that those conditions need to be designed with explicit attention to the psychological mechanisms described above.

This section proposes a four-principle framework for autonomy-preserving AI integration in the English major curriculum, addressed primarily to course designers and language educators.

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5.1 Principle One: Preserving Productive Struggle

Pedagogical design should deliberately preserve what the learning sciences call desirable difficulties (Bjork & Bjork, 2011) — challenges that are effortful to navigate but that produce durable learning precisely because of that effort. This does not mean withholding AI access, but it does mean designing tasks in which AI cannot substitute for the core cognitive work. Tasks that require learners to apply, generate, critique, and reflect — rather than merely retrieve — are more resistant to AI displacement. For example, a task that asks students to evaluate an AI-generated paragraph against their own criteria, identify its weaknesses, and revise it with explanation requires the kind of critical engagement that strengthens autonomous capacity.

5.2 Principle Two: Cultivating Metacognitive Visibility

Educators should make metacognitive processes visible and valued within the curriculum. This includes teaching students explicitly about the role of productive difficulty, self-monitoring, and error analysis in language acquisition — equipping them with the conceptual vocabulary to understand why bypassing struggle may feel efficient but is not always educationally sound. Reflective writing tasks, learning journals, and structured self-assessment protocols can all serve this purpose, creating spaces in which students are asked to account for their own learning processes rather than merely their outputs.

5.3 Principle Three: Developing Critical AI Literacy

Students need to develop what this paper terms critical AI literacy — the capacity to engage with AI tools analytically rather than receptively. This includes understanding that AI-generated text can be fluent but factually incorrect or logically weak; that AI feedback is probabilistic rather than authoritative; that the quality of AI output is heavily dependent on the quality of the prompts that generate it; and that using AI to complete a task and using AI to understand a task are fundamentally different activities with fundamentally different consequences for learning. Embedding AI literacy explicitly within the English major curriculum — not as a standalone digital skills module but as an integrated dimension of language learning pedagogy — is essential.

5.4 Principle Four: Reorienting Assessment

Perhaps the most structural intervention available to educators is the reorientation of assessment practices. If assessment tasks can be fully completed by AI with minimal student engagement, they are likely measuring output rather than learning. Assessment that is process-oriented — that values drafts, reflective commentary, oral discussion, and revision history alongside final products — is more resistant to AI substitution and more aligned with the goal of developing autonomous learners. This reorientation need not mean abandoning product-based assessment entirely, but it does require a more deliberate interrogation of what each assessment task is actually designed to develop and measure.

VI. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The analysis presented in this paper suggests that the relationship between generative AI and learner autonomy in the EFL university context is neither straightforwardly positive nor straightforwardly negative. It is conditioned, paradoxical, and profoundly dependent on the psychological orientations that learners bring to their AI encounters and the pedagogical frameworks within which those encounters are situated.

For second-year English majors in Vietnamese private universities, the stakes of this conditionality are high. This population is navigating a critical developmental transition — from dependent, instruction-following learners to autonomous, self-directed practitioners of English. The tools and habits they develop in this period are likely to shape their professional identities and capabilities for years beyond graduation. If the predominant pattern of AI use in this period is dependency-oriented — if students learn that the appropriate response to linguistic difficulty is to ask the machine — the consequences for long-term professional competence may be significant and difficult to reverse.

For teacher educators and curriculum designers, the implications are equally significant. The pedagogical frameworks that have dominated EFL instruction in Vietnam — transmission-oriented, examination-focused, teacher-centred — are poorly equipped to cultivate the critical AI literacy and metacognitive sophistication that autonomous AI-era learners require. A reorientation is needed, and it requires investment not only in curriculum redesign but in teacher professional development. Teachers cannot cultivate critical AI mentorship if they themselves have not developed the reflective AI literacy to model it.

For researchers, this paper identifies several empirical priorities. Longitudinal studies tracking the relationship between patterns of AI use and the development of autonomous learning capacity in Vietnamese EFL contexts are urgently needed. The mediating role of task design, teacher guidance, and learner orientation in shaping AI-autonomy dynamics requires more granular investigation. And the psychological construct of AI-mediated confidence, introduced in Section 4.3, warrants specific operationalisation and empirical examination.

VII. CONCLUSION

Generative AI is not going away. It will continue to expand its presence in the academic lives of second-year English majors and of every other population of language learners. The question that educators, researchers, and policy-makers face is not whether to engage with AI but how — and with what understanding of the psychological stakes involved.

This paper has argued that those stakes are most usefully understood through the lens of learner autonomy and self-determination: the capacity to take meaningful control of one's own learning, to engage with it from a position of genuine volition, and to develop the metacognitive sophistication to monitor, evaluate, and regulate one's own development. These capacities are not guaranteed by AI access, nor are they inevitably undermined by it. They are cultivated — or not — in the space between the tool and the learner, a space that pedagogy, curriculum design, and teacher professional development can actively shape.

The challenge for Vietnamese higher education, and for the language education community more broadly, is to occupy that space with intention: to design learning environments in which AI serves as a scaffold for autonomous development rather than a substitute for it, and in which students are equipped not merely to use AI effectively, but to understand what they are doing when they do so, and what they are choosing when they choose not to.

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