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Exploring ESL Learners' Perceptions and Practices of Artificial Intelligence in the English Language Classroom

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Abstract
Artificial intelligence (AI) has reshaped English language learning by providing innovative opportunities for individualized, interactive, and self-directed learning. Even though AI is becoming more widely used in language learning, few qualitative studies have examined how ESL learners perceive and practice AI, especially in the setting of Pakistani higher education. The purpose of this study is to explore ESL learners' perceptions and practices of AI in the English language classroom, using a qualitative research methodology. In this context, 12 ESL students who had experience with AI-powered tools were selected using purposive sampling for semi-structured interviews. An expert-validated interview technique was used to gather data through semi-structured interviews, and the six-phase thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke was used for analysis. The results revealed that participants actively practiced AI technologies, such as ChatGPT, DeepSeek, Grammarly, and Duolingo, in their English language learning routines and had generally positive perceptions of AI. The practice of AI to enhance writing, reading, vocabulary, grammar, and general language ability was reported by the participants. The study also found that AI encouraged independent learning and aided in the growth of critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, and other crucial 21st-century abilities. On the other hand, ESL learners pointed out some challenges, such as over-reliance, fake information and internet issues. Overall, the results confirm the

Technology Acceptance Model by showing how learners' perceptions of AI's usefulness and ease of use affect its acceptance in English language learning.
Keywords: ESL learners, perceptions, practices, artificial intelligence, English language learning, technological acceptance model, usefulness, ease of use.

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1. Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) integration is quickly changing teaching and learning in education, especially in language classrooms. Artificial Intelligence (AI) solutions such as chatbots, intelligent tutoring systems, and voice recognition software provide individualized and engaging learning experiences for students studying English as a second language (ESL) (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). To meet the needs of each learner, these resources may help with vocabulary development, pronunciation practice, grammatical correction, and writing improvement (Zhang & Zou, 2021). Despite recent developments, understanding how ESL students view and interact with AI technology in the classroom is still lacking. The efficacy of integrating AI into language training can be strongly impacted by learners' attitudes and actions towards the technology (Marrone et al., 2024). While some students would see AI as a helpful addition to conventional education, others might worry about it being overused or not including a human connection (Xin et al., 2023a). For example, it has been demonstrated that using AI-driven conversational tools helps ESL students speak more fluently; learners report better pronunciation and greater confidence while speaking. Similarly, it has been shown that AI-powered writing aides such as ChatGPT help students improve their academic writing abilities by providing them with real-time feedback (Mohammed & Mudawy, 2025).

It is crucial to investigate how ESL students see and use AI, given its increasing use in language instruction. Knowing the experiences of students can

help developers and educators create AI-assisted learning environments that are more successful (Moulieswaran, 2023). Artificial Intelligence (AI) chatbots have been used successfully in education regularly, particularly in language teaching and learning. AI has several benefits for language learning, including enhanced efficiency, student engagement in the teaching-learning process, and information accessibility from any location or device (Mohammed & Mudawy, 2025). However, not much research has been done to critically analyze their efficacy and acceptability among Pakistani ESL learners. Learning outcomes can be improved, and better integration techniques can be guided by an understanding of learners' perceptions and practices. This study aims to examine the integration of AI in ESL education by examining the perceptions and practices of ESL learners towards AI tools and how they integrate these technologies into their language learning practices.

1.1 Research Gap

The majority of previous research has mostly used quantitative methods to look at students' attitudes, acceptability, or learning results, despite the fact that the incorporation of artificial intelligence (AI) into English language learning has drawn growing scholarly attention. As a result, little research has used qualitative inquiry to examine the perceptions and behaviors of ESL students, especially in higher education settings. Furthermore, there is a dearth of data from Pakistan that describes learners' real-world experiences, the AI tools they employ, and how these tools affect their English language learning. In order to close this gap, the current study uses a qualitative methodology to provide a thorough understanding of how ESL students see and use AI in English language classrooms. Another research gap is the absence of the Technological Acceptance Model. While the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in English language learning is getting increasing scholarly attention, much of the research that has been done so far has either

examined learners' practices or their views, with very few studies looking at both aspects at once.

1.2 Research Questions

1) What are ESL learners' perceptions of the effectiveness of Artificial Intelligence?
2) How do ESL learners practice Artificial Intelligence in English Language classrooms?

1.3. Research Objectives

- To know the perception of ESL learners of the effectiveness of Artificial Intelligence.
- To know the practice of ESL learners of Artificial Intelligence in the English Language Classroom.

2. Literature Review

Artificial intelligence (AI) in language learning has garnered a lot of interest, particularly about how it might enhance speaking abilities. Many studies investigating how AI technologies enhance an L2 speaker's speaking skills have examined the advantages and difficulties (Kovalenko & Baranivska, 2024). AI-driven instruction successfully fosters the development of L2 speaking abilities and self-regulation in language learners; AI technology can maximize language learning and teaching experiences while fostering learners' autonomy and metacognitive speaking strategies (Qiao & Zhao, 2023). The function of AI in developing English language learners' speaking ability has been the subject of several studies in recent years (Kang, 2022). AI has improved student learning by providing individualized and flexible learning opportunities. AI-driven platforms examined enormous amounts of data on student performance and preferences, found unique learning styles, and appropriately customized material (Daweli et al., 2024). Numerous studies on the effectiveness of AI in EFL education have been

carried out as a result of the rapid developments in using AI for EFL. These research conclusions suggested that AI may be a useful tool for improving language learning outcomes (Adiguzel et al., 2023). Artificial intelligence (AI), in particular, has revolutionized education by shifting the paradigm of learning from a traditional approach to one that is more interactive and adaptable (Hendriyani & Wulandari, 2025).

Additionally, even though AI allows for customization in English language instruction, there is a chance that the algorithms employed might exacerbate linguistic and cultural prejudices. Disparities in access to technology also contribute to difficulties integrating AI into English language instruction, exacerbating educational inequality (Crompton et al., 2024). To acquire a language, learners must repeat phrase patterns that illustrate word connections. One instance of AI being used to learn a language is when a student utilizes Siri, an Apple-developed iOS operating system, to have an English conversation. This is particularly pertinent to students studying English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) (Ali, 2020). Personalized learning experiences are replacing conventional learning models to modernize education. To improve the effectiveness of the teaching-learning process and represent a significant advancement over conventional e-learning programs, students can utilize technology to obtain educational information that is customized to their requirements and learning preferences (Alenezi, 2025). The goal of artificial intelligence (AI) is to give computers enough intelligence to perceive and respond similarly to humans. In contrast to machines, humans can learn from their experiences, which empowers them to make thoughtful decisions based on their unique situation. In contrast, a computer must adhere to human-created algorithms to do the necessary work. The goal of Artificial Intelligence is to reduce this gap between humans and computers by looking for novel ways to give computers

intelligence and make them behave like people. The phrase is frequently used about efforts that create systems that provide humans with unique intellectual capacities, such as the capacity for thought, meaning-finding, or experience-based learning (Khan et al., 2021).

Moreover, in recent years, we have seen a tremendous advancement in artificial intelligence, which is characterized by its capacity to mimic human intelligence and has an impact on several facets of society. AI is being researched more and more as a potential tool to enhance and support language instruction. Speaking, listening, reading, and writing are among the fundamental language skills that artificial intelligence may enhance. Artificial Intelligence (AI)-powered resources, including chatbots, virtual tutors, speech recognition, and language learning applications, contribute to the development of dynamic and captivating educational experiences. These developments, which include personalized learning materials, tailored examinations, and immediate feedback, have the potential to speed up language learning and enhance learners' communication abilities in the modern world (Wei, 2023). Artificial Intelligence (AI) have grown significantly in higher education across numerous tertiary institutions. AI has proven crucial to scholarly and administrative endeavors (Bibi, 2025). AI is an assessor and assistant for students learning English as a second language. AI uses neural computing devices, intelligent teaching methods, and autonomous evaluation tools to help students improve their language proficiency more quickly (Shah, 2025). China has set aside AI education demonstration areas to investigate the application of AI for subject learning. Since 2020, a few Chinese schools have used AI affordances through various AI tools to provide individualized instruction and real-time feedback for EFL speaking and listening. However, higher education has been the primary focus of research on AI's application in EFL (Xin et al., 2023). Recent Artificial Intelligence (AI) developments have made writing tools

and services easily available, fundamentally changing the authorship and editing process. These advancements are significantly impacting education in general as well as language learning and instruction, as this column will discuss. Created for essay evaluation, automatic writing evaluation tools have advanced beyond simple grammar and spelling checks to provide comprehensive assistance in identifying writing issues and highlighting areas that need improvement. Synchronous corrective feedback has lately been included in word processors or available as stand-alone applications. The application of ChatGPT to leverage formative input may theoretically be categorized into two hypotheses. In the first, feedback is viewed as a dialogic process. Feedback that incorporates interaction helps students clarify their expectations, get the information and direction they need, and advance their learning. ChatGPT promotes communication by answering user questions on a range of writing-related topics. It acts as a tool for on-demand help and provides recommendations when requested. It also acknowledges errors and fixes them, which gives the conversation purpose (Mahapatra, 2024). In conventional college-level writing courses for English as a foreign language (EFL), instructors use one-size-fits-all teaching and learning tactics when instructing students in essay writing, requiring them to use the same writing techniques they were taught in high school. However, as students in the digital age are accustomed to using new technologies in their everyday lives, such conventional EFL writing teaching methods in higher education are inappropriate for them. Therefore, to enhance teaching and learning outcomes, EFL teachers include innovative technology-based techniques in their lessons. Grammarly is an AI-based automated writing feedback tool that has become popular in language classrooms as one of the innovative teaching strategies for EFL essay writing (Tsung et al. 2023).

3. Research Methodology

In order to explore how ESL students perceive and use artificial intelligence in their English language learning, this study used a qualitative research approach. 12 ESL students who had previously utilized AI technologies for English language learning were employed using a purposive sampling strategy. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data, and the interview technique was created based on the goals of the study and the literature. To guarantee its clarity, applicability, and content validity, the interview process was validated by experts. With the participants' permission, all interviews were audio-recorded and verbatim transcribed. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis was used to examine the data.

3.1. Participants

12 ESL students who had previously used artificial intelligence (AI) technologies for English language learning participated in this qualitative study. To choose participants who might offer rich and pertinent information in line with the study's goals, a purposive sampling strategy was used. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather information in order to fully comprehend how participants viewed and used AI in English language classrooms.

3.2. Instrument

The main tool for gathering data was a semi-structured interview approach. The research objectives and a review of pertinent literature served as the foundation for the development of the interview procedure, which included both questions created especially for this study and those that were modified from earlier research. Subject matter experts examined the interview process to verify content validity and make sure the interview questions were relevant, pertinent, and clear. It was made up of open-ended questions intended to explore how ESL students perceive and use artificial intelligence in their English language learning.

3.3. Data Analysis (Braun and Clarke's Six-phase Thematic Analysis)

The six-phase thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to examine the qualitative data. Getting acquainted with the data, creating preliminary codes, looking for themes, evaluating themes, defining and labelling themes, and creating the final report were all part of the study. This methodical approach made it easier to spot and analyze recurrent themes and trends pertaining to how ESL students see and use artificial intelligence in their English language learning.

4. Findings

The semi-structured interviews' thematic analysis revealed a number of common points pertaining to how ESL students see and use artificial intelligence (AI) in their English language learning. The results show that most participants had favorable opinions of AI and thought it was a useful additional resource for improving their English language proficiency. After Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis, the researcher identified six themes discussed here:

4.1. Positive Perceptions of ESL Learners of AI

Participants had favorable opinions about AI and said it was a useful, approachable, and easy-to-use learning tool. They valued its capacity to facilitate individual learning, constant availability, and immediate feedback. Here, P indicates person.

"ChatGPT is useful in language learning. It is also easy to use." (P2)

Another ESL learner has also supported the view of P2, as

"Yes, it is very useful. It helps me in all four skills." (P3)

In addition to participant 3, another ESL learner expressed that,

"Mostly I use AI tools for my grammar correction, pronunciation and speaking skills because these AI tools are very helpful."(P6)

The results show that ESL students have favourable opinions about artificial intelligence and see it as a useful tool for learning English. Participants valued its accessibility, use, quick response, and capacity to facilitate self-directed learning. All things considered, AI was seen as a useful extra tool that improved students' self-assurance and involvement in the English language classroom.

4.2. ESL Learners' Practices of AI

The second theme looks at how ESL students use artificial intelligence (AI) to learn English. The results show that in order to improve a variety of language abilities, participants actively included AI into their regular learning activities. They reported utilising AI tools for speaking practice, writing, grammatical correction, vocabulary growth, reading comprehension, translation, and test preparation. The most popular AI tools are ChatGPT, Grammarly, Duolingo, and DeepSeek because of their accessibility, usability, and quick feedback.

"Sir, in the future, I want to be a communication specialist. So mostly I use AI tools for speaking skills."(P8)

Most of the ESL learners preferred to use AI for writing, reading and grammar correction. In this context, another ESL learner believed that,

"So in my opinion, AI is useful because it's improving reading and speaking. So, in my opinion, AI is improving when you do focus on it properly."(P10)

Similarly, one of the participants also pointed out that,

"In my point of view, practicing AI is very useful for English learning because it helps me and helps all students as well as to learn and focus on their communication, and boosts our confidence"(P11)

4.3. AI vs. Traditional Method

The third theme examines how ESL students perceive artificial intelligence (AI) in contrast to more conventional approaches of learning English. The results show that participants thought both strategies were worthwhile, but they also mentioned

a number of benefits of AI, such as immediate feedback, ongoing availability, individualized guidance, and increased flexibility in learning. Participants also recognized the value of conventional classroom instruction for teacher leadership, engagement, and tailored feedback. In this perspective, one of the ESL teachers expressed his view,

"I was initially really opposed to AI and preferred the traditional approach since we didn't want to rely on it before it became such a significant part of our lives. But now that I do prefer it, it's the assistant."(P4)

Another participant narrated that,

"Previously, teachers used to teach us in conventional methods, like the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) and other conventional methods as well. Now, we do learn English from AI tools like ChatGPT and DeepSeek." (P2)

A similar perception was narrated by another ESL learner as,

"The new English learners like us do prefer learning through AI rather than a traditional approach."(P5)

In summary, the results show that ESL students generally thought AI was a more adaptable, accessible, and effective learning tool than conventional approaches for a variety of language-learning activities. Participants appreciated AI's ongoing availability, personalized help, and quick feedback. But they also stressed that teachers and traditional classroom training are still essential for offering direction, engagement, and constructive criticism. AI was therefore seen as a supplementary instrument rather than a substitute for conventional instruction.

4.4. Perceived Ease of Use and Comfort with AI

The fourth finding investigates the perceived comfort and ease of use of artificial intelligence (AI) in English language learning among ESL students. The results show that most participants thought AI products were straightforward to use, easy to understand, and easy to navigate. They valued the AI tools' easy-to-use

interfaces, quick replies, and constant availability, which allowed them to finish language-learning assignments quickly and confidently. These encounters helped students feel more at ease and inclined to use AI in their English language studies. In this context, the interviewee shared his perceptions as,

"Indeed. We mostly receive assignments that are so large that we are not sure of where to start. I always go to ChatGPT first because it puts me at ease."(P4)

Another participant narrated that,

"I believe AI is really helpful and easy to comprehend and get expert in these four skills."(P6)

Additionally, P5 has shared his views in detail as,

"I think using AI technologies for writing and reading is really simple. Additionally, it has created a conversational tool that allows you to converse with AI much like you would with a person. It gives you feedback, corrects you, and imparts fresh information about reading, writing, and conversing. Yes, that is really beneficial."(P5)

The results show that ESL students thought AI technologies were easy to use and felt comfortable using them in their English language studies. Participants valued the AI tools' easy-to-use interfaces, quick feedback, and ongoing accessibility, which boosted their confidence and promoted frequent use. These results imply that AI's perceived comfort and simplicity of use contribute to its acceptability and incorporation into English language instruction.

4.5. AI's Role in Developing 21st- Century Skills

The results show that ESL students' development of 21st-century abilities is significantly influenced by artificial intelligence (AI). In addition to improving their English language abilities, participants claimed that AI tools promoted critical thinking, creativity, communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and independent learning. Learners were able to develop the skills necessary for

academic and professional success in the digital age by regularly interacting with AI-powered tools that allowed them to analyze data, come up with ideas, get quick feedback, and engage in self-directed learning.

One participant stated,

"Sir, as far as my personal experience, AI provides modern skills as well. We can improve our 21st-century skills through AI tools."(P8)

According to another participant,

"Thus, these AI apps taught me a lot about 21st-century skills. I'm now learning English and 4Cs using ChatGPT, Gemini, DeepSeek, Grammarly, and other AI technologies to improve my writing. These applications, which I now use on my phone, have improved my ability to study English."(P9)

One ESL learner further explained,

"AI can therefore greatly assist you in every field, both inside and outside of the classroom. Therefore, if you do not use AI in the twenty-first century, you are nothing." (P12)

Overall, the results show that AI tools do encourage autonomous learning, creativity, communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving among ESL learners. AI helps them build important 21st-century abilities. Most of the ESL learners believed that AI tools do improve their 21st-century 4Cs.

4.6. Challenges and Limitations Of AI

The outcomes of this study explained that, despite AI's educational advantages, ESL students face a number of obstacles and constraints. Concerns about the dependability of AI-generated material, an over-reliance on AI, sporadic errors, and the need to validate AI-generated data were raised by participants. These results suggest that rather than taking the role of instructors or self-directed learning, AI should be utilized as an additional learning aid.

This was further validated by one of the respondents,

"No, I don't fully trust AI-generated feedback because I believe it isn't genuine enough to be accepted and because there are other apps or things where we can ask for suggestions or clarification on something I'm not sure about. I won't thus depend only on AI."(P1)

Another participant further explained as follows:

"I can state that on a few occasions, I asked ChatGPT a question and revealed that the answer I got was incorrect. Additionally, I thought it gave me the incorrect citation. Thus, it was difficult to trust AI-generated feedback. I was concerned about it." (P3)

One ESL further perceived that,

"Since AI might lead us to false information regarding learning and the English language, I believe authenticity is crucial in this situation. Furthermore, I believe that genuineness is crucial in this situation. Since they are always favorable and ChatGPT is unaware that it might provide us with bad comments, I don't trust them with the input."

In conclusion, participants acknowledged both the advantages of AI in education and its drawbacks. The results indicate that in order to fully reap the benefits of AI, students must validate material produced by AI and maintain a balanced approach that integrates AI-assisted learning with instructor direction and individual study.

5. Discussion

According to the current study, ESL students had positive perceptions of AI and considered it a practical and approachable tool for learning English. This result is also in line with research by (Lee et al. (2024), Kohnke (2024), and Kaharuddin et al. (2024), who found that university students perceived AI technologies as useful for enhancing English language acquisition, especially writing and grammar. The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), which suggests that people are more likely

to embrace a technology when they believe it to be useful and easy to use, and these ideas are supported by (Marikyan et al. 2023; Su & Li 2021).

To enhance their writing, reading, vocabulary, grammar, and speaking abilities, participants actively utilized ChatGPT, DeepSeek, Grammarly, and Duolingo. This result is consistent with those of Faizhal et al. (2025) and Moradi et al. (2022), who discovered that learners frequently incorporated AI technologies into their language learning activities to promote autonomous learning and language growth. Positive views of technology's utility promote its actual use, according to TAM. The association between perceived utility and technological adoption is seen in the participants' regular usage of AI technologies. According to the participants, AI improved communication, critical thinking, creativity, and independent learning. Concerns about over-reliance, errors produced by AI, and the necessity of verifying AI-generated data were stated by participants.

6. Conclusion

This study used a qualitative methodology to explore how ESL students perceived and used artificial intelligence (AI) in their English language learning. The results showed that participants actively incorporated AI-powered applications, such ChatGPT, DeepSeek, Grammarly, and Duolingo into their language learning routines and had generally good opinions of AI. Participants saw AI as a useful supplemental learning tool that improved language abilities, encouraged self-directed learning, and aided in the development of critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, and other crucial 21st-century competencies. The results, however, also brought attention to issues with the precision, dependability, and possible over-reliance on information produced by AI, highlighting the necessity for students to utilize AI critically and ethically. Overall, by offering comprehensive qualitative insights into the experiences of ESL students in the

Pakistani context, this study adds to the expanding corpus of research on AI in English language instruction.

Implications of the Study

By offering qualitative insights into ESL learners' beliefs and practices of AI in the Pakistani setting, this study adds to the existing body of literature. The results show how AI may improve language learning, independent learning, and 21st-century abilities, which has significant implications for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers. They also stress the importance of encouraging AI literacy, evaluating information created by AI critically, and integrating AI ethically into English language instruction.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be taken into consideration when interpreting the study's results. The results are context-specific and cannot be applied to larger groups because the study used a qualitative research approach and a purposive sample of ESL students. Furthermore, the study did not assess the efficacy of AI in enhancing language competency or include teachers' viewpoints; instead, it concentrated solely on learners' views and practices of certain AI tools. Additionally, this study only focused on a limited number of AI tools, i.e., ChatGPT, DeepSeek, Grammarly, and Duolingo. Other AI applications can be added in future studies.

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