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AI Literacy as a Condition for Learner Autonomy in University EFL

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Abstract

Personalized language learning, instant feedback and independent language practice are new opportunities that generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) has brought to higher education. The introduction of AI tools is not always conducive to the autonomy of the learner and can paradoxically lead to greater reliance on AI assistance for students. This study investigates the context in which GenAI can facilitate the autonomy of the learners in academic contexts at the university level in the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) while avoiding risks of cognitive dependency, superficial learning, and academic integrity problems. This study, which uses a structured integrative literature review, draws on international and Azerbaijani literature, focused primarily on the last six years from 2020 to 2026, as well as key theories of learner autonomy. Four analysis points have been examined: teacher mediation, critical evaluation, teacher's feedback and AI literacy, and self-directed learning. The results indicate that GenAI can improve student's autonomy in setting learning goals, creating purposeful prompts, questioning the answers generated by GenAI, revising answers independently, and reflecting on the learning process. To this end, the study proposes a five-stage autonomy framework, called the AI-literate autonomy, which includes Goal, Prompt, Verify, Revise, and Reflect. Its practical implications are relevant to EFL teaching in universities, curriculum development, teachers' professional development, and the proper use of AI in the context of Azerbaijani higher education. The study suggests that AI literacy is an enabling condition that is vital to meaningful learner autonomy and not just a digital competence.

Keywords: *generative artificial intelligence; AI literacy; learner autonomy; EFL; higher education; academic integrity*

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1. Introduction

In higher education, Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) has transitioned from being an experimental technology to an everyday learning tool. Large language model interfaces can provide explanations, examples, dialogues, vocabulary practice, feedback, reformulations and simulated interaction within seconds in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts. Higher education and writing, however, have been highlighted in recent reviews as particularly important aspects of the domain and evidence of listening, reading, long-term developments, and durable learning is less. (Li et al., 2024; Lo et al., 2024; Tang & Zhang, 2026). The issue with education is not just if students can use GenAI, but what sort of learning agency does it create? The concept of learner autonomy is helpful to look at this problem. The classic view of autonomy relates to learners' ability to make decisions

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regarding their learning (Holec, 1981). Later studies highlight that autonomy is not about 'self' learning or the absence of teachers but a multifaceted competence related to the control of learning management, cognitive processes and the learning content in social and technological contexts (Benson, 2011). GenAI challenges this law. It's a tool that provides instant suggestions which can increase choice and access, but which can also move problem solving, evaluation and revision of language out of the learner's head and into the system. This tension seems particularly significant in the university EFL context. While additional practice, personalized support, feedback, and teacher assistance all have been supported by systematic reviews, there are concerns about issues with accuracy of output, privacy, academic dishonesty, overreliance, and weak evidence of long-term benefits of instruction (Li et al., 2024; Lo et al., 2024). According to Wang et al. (2026), in L2 writing, the latest synthesis reveals that the use of GenAI is focused on feedback, revision and polishing, and that GenAI can rearrange some of the tasks more quickly than assessment practices can adapt. Therefore, relying on AI support cannot be considered as independent learning. This question becomes locally relevant due to Azerbaijani scholarship. Mammadova (2025) also explores the role of AI in grammar and writing development, highlighting the importance of pedagogically controlled implementation, while Əşrəfova (2025) shows the potential of using chatbots for personalized learning and teacher support but points to accuracy, excessive dependence, ethics, and the teacher's readiness as key concerns. Mehdizade and Orujlu are among the factors that are listed as barriers to foreign-language skill development by Ismayilli et al. (2026), which include inadequate communicative practices and a lack of technology-supported learning environments. Orujlu (2026) also correlates the methodological competence and ability to utilize the teaching technologies of teachers with the quality of higher education in English. In the context of university English teaching, Nuri (2025) suggests that the approach should be student-centered and incorporate the use of technology, whereas Ismayilli (2024) emphasizes the importance of verbal communication and speech etiquette in language learning. These studies offer a perspective that responsible use of AI in Azerbaijan should not be merely measured by the adoption of the tools but by the enhancement it brings in terms of purposeful language use, reflection, and learner responsibility. The research gap to be solved in this study is thus conceptual and pedagogical. The current reviews map applications, benefits and risks; and research trends; and the AI-literacy frameworks outline AI competences for understanding, using, evaluating and ethically managing AI (Ma et al., 2024; Ng et al., 2021). In learner-autonomy research, on the other hand, it is determined who is supposed to take the decisions in learning. These are sometimes referred to individually. This article combines them to pose the following question: (RQ1) What are the most plausible autonomy-enhancing practices in university EFL supported by the use of GenAI? What makes scaffolding productive rather than dependency or offloading the cognition? (RQ2) (RQ3) What are the pedagogical principles that follow in the context of learning English as a foreign language at university level in Azerbaijan? The contribution is an autonomy framework, that considers critical evaluation and learner autonomy as a precondition of, instead of an add-on to, autonomy supported by AI.

2. Literature Review / Theoretical Framework

2.1. Learner autonomy as retained decision-making

Holec (1981) has given a basic account of autonomous learning that centers on objectives, content, methods, monitoring and evaluation. Benson (2011) builds on this tradition by demonstrating that autonomy is manifested in various forms of control and is influenced by learning environments and

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technologies. In the context of the present study, these viewpoints suggest a straightforward, but challenging, criterion: autonomy is only guaranteed when a technology enables the learner to make choices about the learning process that affect what he or she learns, and that are not just about performing the task more efficiently. This is important because GenAI can do what used to require learners' thinking to be revealed: brainstorming, choosing words, restructuring sentences, fixing grammar, creating examples, and editing drafts. If the operations are outsourced unexamined, the outcome might be better, but the learner's ability to pinpoint needs and/or justify decisions may not be. On the other hand, using AI-generated content as a starting point for the learner to question, compare, refine and articulate the information makes AI a facilitator of metacognition, not a replacement for it.

2.2. AI literacy as the missing competence layer

The second conceptual layer is that of AI literacy. Ng et al. (2021) present a synthesis of the concepts of AI literacy with regards to knowledge and understanding of AI, using AI, evaluating AI and ethical issues. Ma et al. (2024) define ChatGPT literacy as a set of six constructs – benefits, limitations, prompting, response evaluation, assessment with the help of AI, and ethics. Their cross-national analysis of language teachers shows that being proficient in "operational" use of a language is not sufficient for responsible integration; it also needs evaluation and knowledge of the outcomes of such integration. The unit of analysis becomes a combination of autonomy and AI literacy. The key question is not if a student starts using an AI tool on their own, but whether the student maintains epistemic and pedagogical control when using an AI tool. An apparently independent learner who takes all the corrections generated by the computer may be less independent than a learner who also consults a teacher, their peers, dictionaries, corpora and artificial intelligence and then makes and explains a final decision. AI literacy is then a facilitating factor for autonomous learning in AI-rich learning environments.

2.3. Evidence from AI-supported language learning

Synthesis of research always includes affordances and constraints. After examining the first year of research with ChatGPT for education, Li et al. (2024) identified roles in self-directed learning, content generation, and teacher workflows, as well as lacking evidence on the long-term impacts and poor quality feedback. Lo et al. (2024) found that there were 70 empirical studies on ESL/EFL that synthesized positive results in terms of opportunities for learning and personalized support, but also found that there was information that was erroneous, privacy concerns, and academic dishonesty. Their analysis also revealed a high focus on higher education and writing with other language skills relatively undertouched.

Overall, Tang and Zhang (2026) found that the effects of AI in language learning are positive, yet they emphasized that there remains an imbalance in terms of age groups, technologies, and pedagogical methods in the wider AI-in-language-learning literature. Previous systematic studies have also raised concerns about the limited support for theory and research design (Weng & Chiu, 2023). For L2 writing in particular, Wang et al. (2026) report that GenAI activities are focused on feedback, revision and polishing, and highlight the danger of constructive misalignment in the design of assessment when L2 learning tasks are not aligned with GenAI. This makes it hard to argue for technological optimism and for a one-size-fits-all answer. The stronger interpretation is conditional, that is, it requires the design of the task, learners' competencies, the mediation of the teacher, as well as assessment.

2.4. Azerbaijani and Nakhchivan scholarship

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Local research will serve as important contextual anchors. The study of AI and grammar/writing by Mammadova (2025) is relevant as it takes AI as a tool to help with language accuracy and the production of written texts, but not as an independent author of texts. Her verified affiliation at Nakhchivan State University and ORCID record helps to distinguish her from other researchers with the same name, and her paper on educational chatbots clearly considers the tradeoffs between personalized engagement and accuracy/overreliance, ethics, and teacher readiness. These worries are similar to those seen globally and provide further rationale to support an evaluative, human-supervised approach to use.

Other local studies elucidate the pedagogical landscape within which AI will be deployed. In language learning, Ismayilli et al. (2026) point to communicative practice, authentic exposure, anxiety, methodological limitations, and a lack of technology-supported language learning environments as obstacles faced by foreign-language learners. Since the paper has been co-authored by Nigar Mehdizade and Afsana Orujlu, it also presents verified evidence for their scholarship related to the subject covered in the paper. Orujlu (2026) also believes that the ability to use new teaching technology should be part of the professional and methodological teacher training in higher education in Azerbaijan. A student-centered approach in university English teaching has been highlighted by Nuri (2025), and the integration of technology is also mentioned. Ismayilli (2024) has discussed how to integrate verbal communication and speech etiquette into the teaching of university English. These resources do not imply that GenAI is a promoter of autonomy, but rather that they represent areas of need that might be addressed through the implementation of well-thought-out pedagogical approaches centered on the use of genAI tools.

The synthesis is therefore two-fold: autonomy relates to the maintenance of learner autonomy and AI literacy to competent, critical and ethical engagement with AI. In the context of university autonomy in EFL, GenAI can be used to support the learner's control over their goals, evidence, linguistic choices, revision and evaluation, while protecting their autonomy regarding the use of AI.

3. Methodology

This study used a structured integrative literature review and conceptual synthesis. An integrative design was selected because the research question crosses empirical EFL studies, systematic reviews, learner-autonomy theory, AI-literacy frameworks, policy guidance, and Azerbaijani scholarship. No participants, surveys, experiments, or original quantitative data were created for this article.

The search was conducted and updated on 24 September 2026. Discovery combined publisher and journal platforms, DOI/Crossref-indexed records surfaced through scholarly web search, Google Scholar-discoverable records, ORCID records, ResearchGate records used only as discovery/identity corroboration, Nakhchivan State University staff pages, and official UNESCO materials. Core English search combinations included: (“generative AI” OR ChatGPT OR “artificial intelligence”) AND (EFL OR ESL OR “language learning” OR “language teaching”); (“AI literacy” OR “ChatGPT literacy”) AND “language education”; (“learner autonomy” OR “self-directed learning”) AND (AI OR ChatGPT); and (“second language writing” AND GenAI). For local scholarship, each of the six required names was searched in English and Azerbaijani transliteration variants together with “Nakhchivan State University,” ELT/language-learning terms, DOI, ORCID, and relevant journal titles.

Inclusion criteria were: (a) direct relevance to university EFL/ESL, AI literacy, learner autonomy, language-teaching methodology, or responsible educational AI; (b) peer-reviewed journal articles,

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scholarly books, conference research where directly relevant, or authoritative policy guidance; (c) normally 2020–2026 for AI topics, with older seminal autonomy sources retained; and (d) bibliographic details verifiable through a publisher, DOI record, institutional repository, ORCID/Crossref-linked record, or official organization. Sources were excluded when identity could not be disambiguated, bibliographic metadata conflicted materially without resolution, the item had no meaningful relationship to the research questions, or claims could not be traced to a stable scholarly source.

Screening was purposive rather than a claim of exhaustive systematic coverage. Search engines and federated scholarly discovery interfaces do not expose stable, reproducible total-hit counts across repeated queries; therefore, this article deliberately does not report a fabricated PRISMA record total. The final analytic corpus prioritized high-relevance reviews and frameworks plus verified local studies. Each retained source was coded for: pedagogical affordance; locus of learner decision-making; feedback/evaluation demands; risks of dependency or error; ethical/assessment implications; teacher role; and relevance to Azerbaijani higher education. Themes were compared across international and local literature and then mapped against the autonomy and AI-literacy constructs.

4. Results

4.1. GenAI expands opportunities, but opportunity is not autonomy

In the synthesis, opportunities for learning the language can be boosted in terms of both frequency and immediacy using GenAI. Students may ask for explanations at different levels, create other examples, practice dialogue, get draft feedback, make comparisons, and practice outside of class. These affordances match those outlined in local research (Ismayilli et al., 2026) and in international research that focused on personalized support and greater learning opportunities (Li et al., 2024; Lo et al., 2024).

None of these, however, ensures autonomy. Who does the regulatory work is the key factor. When the system chooses the goal, suggests the solution, verifies the solution and provides the final text, the learner may be the receiver of the completed cognitive activity. The same technology can facilitate autonomous regulation when the learner sets their learning target, limits the prompt, compares and contrasts the product with other evidence, edits the product and then reflects on what has changed.

4.2. Five conditions for autonomy-enhancing AI use

Five conditions reoccur throughout the conceptual synthesis. Firstly, it is important that the ownership of the goal is retained with the learner or is negotiated with the teacher. Secondly, the role of prompting is not to provide the answers, but to specify the task. Third, it must be contestable, strategies with which learners can monitor the linguistic correctness, factual correctness, register, source and appropriateness. Fourth, revision should offer learner choice, and if an AI-generated rewrite is taken as is it is a pedagogically different process than considering and justifying modifications to it. Fifth, reflection should make the learning process explicit, asking "what did the AI do, what did you reject, and what can you do without the AI the next time". An overlap between autonomy and AI literacy is operationalized in these conditions. They also provide an understanding of the reasons for the need for prompt skill. Suppose the learner is lacking in evaluation and reflection, a sophisticated prompt can still result in dependency. On the other hand, even a simple prompt can foster autonomy as it helps launch the process of comparing, checking, and learner writing revision.

Table 1. AI-literate autonomy framework for university EFL

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Stage	Learner responsibility	Appropriate AI role	Evidence of autonomy
1. Goal	Define the language problem or learning objective	Clarify options; suggest task variants	Learner can state why the task matters
2. Prompt	Specify level, purpose, constraints, and desired feedback	Respond within learner-defined constraints	Prompt reflects a learning intention, not simple outsourcing
3. Verify	Check accuracy, register, logic, and where relevant sources	Offer alternatives or explanations	Learner cross-checks and can identify uncertainty
4. Revise	Choose, reject, adapt, and rewrite	Provide feedback or comparison	Final text/performance contains justified learner decisions
5. Reflect	Evaluate what was learned and what remains difficult	Support self-questioning	Learner identifies transferable knowledge and a next step

4.3. Writing and feedback are high-value but high-risk domains

This is most clearly demonstrated in writing, where most of the current study of GenAI language learning is conducted (Lo et al., 2024). Mammadova (2025) places AI in grammar and writing support whereas systematic review (Wang et al., 2026) indicates that GenAI is particularly focused on providing feedback, revision, and polishing. It's these moments where students can learn from feedback, or give up the authorship of the text to automated rewriting. A task that has the goal of autonomy separates diagnosis from substitution. The student might self-edit a paragraph, get two suggestions from AI to work on, then compare the suggestions to a rubric or teacher feedback and then write the paragraph again on their own. If a short revision note is required, the student may be required to provide reasons for acceptance and/or rejection of suggestions. This design provides learners the opportunity to have their judgment evaluated and also helps to mitigate the temptation to mistake fluent output as evidence of learning.

4.4. Teacher mediation remains central

The synthesis doesn't lend itself to a teacher vs AI dichotomy. The same goes for the concept of AI literacy: it needs to be modeled, practiced and verified by norms. Ma et al. (2024) reveal that language-teacher ChatGPT literacy is composed of benefits, limitations, prompts, evaluation, assessment and ethics, and Orujlu (2026) identifies methodological and technological competence as a teacher development need in higher education in Azerbaijan. Teachers are thus still expected to plan activities in which the use of AI becomes evident, meaningful and in line with learning outcomes.

It is also important to note the limitation imposed by communication based teaching on substitution. The focus of Ismayilli (2024) is on verbal communication and etiquette in speaking, while in the analysis of Vandewalle's approach, Mammadova (2025) highlights communicative and culturally integrated language learning. Though the use of a simulated interaction and a rehearsal may be provided by AI, it is important that the negotiation of meaning, peer response, embodied communication, and culturally situated judgment not be replaced by private interaction with a chatbot.

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5. Discussion and Recommendations

The main conclusion is to consider GenAI as a conditionally scaffolded autonomy technology rather than an autonomy-producing technology. This is an interpretation that makes sense out of apparently conflicting stories in the book. Warnings of inaccuracy, academic dishonesty, privacy, and overreliance are acceptable with reviews that identify personalization and opportunities for more learning as the same affordance can have different pedagogical (learning) outcomes depending on task architecture and learner literacy (Li et al., 2024; Lo et al., 2024).

The proposed framework also helps to refine the connection between AI literacy and learner independence. The understanding, use, evaluation, ethics, prompting and assessment are highlighted by Ng et al. (2021) and Ma et al. (2024). A question that is added to the one above, according to Autonomy theory, is who decides the consequential decisions? The collective structure in turn makes evaluation and learner authorship structure requirements. It is not enough for students to be aware that AI can be incorrect; they need to routinely engage in activities that involve verification that impact the final product.

Then there are four practical changes that university EFL teachers should consider. So, for university EFL teachers, there are four practical changes to consider. First, create the AI-allowed task as tasks in processes containing evidence: initial attempt, prompt, selected output, revision and reflection. Second, have AI provide limited feedback before it will provide polished language. Third, cite course reading, dictionaries, corpora or credible sources for factual or academic claims, where appropriate, using triangulation. Fourth, keep regular (short) in-class writing, speaking or comprehension tasks (no AI), for both students and teachers to observe independent ability.

AI literacy should be integrated into the language curriculum instead of being a standalone digital-skills lecture for curriculum design. With lower levels of proficiency, teaching might include asking for understandable explanations and identifying mistakes and similarities or differences between simple options. At higher levels, students are able to assess register, argumentation, source quality, bias, rhetorical choices and conventions of the discipline. This development aligns with the local focus on the integration of technology in an educationally appropriate way (Nuri, 2025), with an increasing focus on the development of authentic communicative practice (Ismayilli et al., 2026).

Transparency on categories of authorized use are better than a vague prohibition for assessment and academic integrity. Tasks may include restrictions or permissions for using AI for feedback, brainstorming or a wider use, with disclosures. For cases where AI is allowed, the assessment should focus on the level of verification and revision, and not just surface fluency, as well as on the quality of explanation. UNESCO's 'human-centred' guidance also advocates for safeguarding human agency, privacy, inclusion and meaningful educational use (Miao & Holmes, 2023).

For teacher development in Azerbaijan, not only should the workshop be about tools being demonstrated, but it should also be about using them. Teachers must be given opportunities to practice creating prompts that maintain productive struggles, identify "hallucinated" or inappropriate language, develop AI-aware rubrics, talk about privacy and authorship, and provide options for students who have differing access. This is directly related to Orujlu's (2026) problems of methodological and technological competence and also to the problems of preparedness and ethical use highlighted by Əşrəfova (2025).

The study has some restrictions. It is not a traditional database-only systematic review but an integrative review that is structured. Therefore this does not purport to include all publications from

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2020-2026. The results of the model may become outdated quickly, as models rapidly change. A few local publications are recent and should be considered as scholarship that is contextual as opposed to as a mature cumulative evidence base. Last but not least, the proposed framework is conceptual and needs to be tested empirically on Azerbaijan university EFL learners with the transparent indicators of language performance, AI literacy and learner regulation.

6. Conclusion

GenAI redefines the definition of independent language learning, enabling learners to get explanations, feedback, examples, and polished text without the need to be taught by a teacher. But it is not the same to be independent of access as it is to be independent of autonomy. As discussed in the literature here, GenAI is more educationally defensible if it enables more practice and maintains the learner's accountability for goals, verification, revision, and evaluation. The article thus suggests an AI-literate autonomy cycle, which involves setting goals, prompting, verification, revision, and reflection. This novelty is the intersection of competence and language, namely in the language of AI literacy, and the tradition of decision-making, namely in the tradition of learner autonomy, and how the combination of these two is used in higher education in the field of EFL and higher education in Azerbaijan. The message for pedagogy is pragmatic: make it possible for the learner to be discerning about AI use. The next step in research would be to determine if such designs would lead to lasting improvements in independent language skills, or just improvements in the language skills associated with AI-assisted products.

Declarations

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Data Availability: All sources analysed in this review are publicly available and listed in the references.

Author Contributions: The author is solely responsible for the conceptualization, literature review, analysis, and writing of this article.

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