

# Consumers or Producers? The Feedback–Autonomy Paradox of AI Tools in Blended ESP Learning

Kawkab Al Balushi<sup>1,2\*</sup> and Mahizer Bin Hamzah<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Preparatory Studies Centre, University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Suhar, Oman,

<sup>2</sup>Department of Human Development, Sultan Idris Education University, Tanjung Malim, Malaysia

\* Corresponding Author Email: [Sohkawkab@utas.edu.om](mailto:Sohkawkab@utas.edu.om)

DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v15-i4/29189>

**Published Online:** 29 October 2026

## Abstract

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools now reach English for Specific Purposes (ESP) students through the smartphones they already carry, often before institutions have decided how these tools should be used. This qualitative case study examines how ESP students and teachers at a university in the Sultanate of Oman experienced AI-supported feedback in blended learning, and how the appeal of immediate feedback interacted with the need for learner autonomy. The data come from a wider doctoral study of mobile technology in ESP classes and comprise semi-structured interviews with ESP teachers, five focus groups with 30 second-year students from maritime, engineering and medical programmes, 81 open-ended questionnaire responses and three classroom observations. AI use was not a preset topic; it emerged from participants' own accounts of the applications they used. Students described ChatGPT and AI speaking applications as an always-available, non-judgmental tutor that gave immediate feedback and helped them rehearse speaking, writing and professional communication with more confidence. Teachers welcomed this but worried that students might become consumers rather than producers of language. We interpret these accounts as a feedback–autonomy paradox: the support that builds confidence can also crowd out independent effort, while autonomy without guidance leaves learners unsure of their progress. Teachers managed the paradox through dialogical use of AI, recorded practice followed by peer or teacher feedback, and professionally authentic tasks, while cost, limited training and the absence of shared guidance constrained equitable access. We argue that the feedback–autonomy balance should be treated as a design decision that changes over the course of a programme, and we outline implications for ESP teachers and institutions.

**Keywords:** Artificial Intelligence, Chatgpt, Feedback, Learner Autonomy, English For Specific Purposes, Blended Learning, Mobile Learning, Oman

## Introduction

When Omani universities moved from emergency online teaching to blended learning in 2021–2022, mobile phones were already the main device through which many students reached their courses. A 2021 survey at the International Maritime College Oman found that

94% of the students who responded used mobile devices for online learning, yet many also reported difficulty coping with online lectures and feeling unmotivated to attend sessions or take part in discussions (IMCO, 2021). When classes returned to campus, ESP teachers reported that learners were hesitant to participate and interact with their peers, and that communicating in English was a clear barrier, especially between teachers and students.

ESP courses teach English through the vocabulary, tasks and communication demands of the learner's field, and they depend on teachers assessing learners' needs and designing courses and materials accordingly (Chalikandy, 2013). In Oman this matters because many students who graduate from secondary school have been reported to lack the ability to use English efficiently across the social, personal, academic and work situations they will face (Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2011). For students preparing for careers in maritime operations, engineering or medicine, ESP is where that gap is meant to be closed.

Although Gulf nations are making significant investments in AI and educational technology, little is known about how these tools inspire and connect students studying English for work. Some colleges and universities in Oman have created their own blended learning policies, but the Ministry of Higher Education has not created a common or public policy. As a result, class-by-class decisions are made regarding when and how students may use AI on their phones.

Two well-documented benefits of mobile language learning sit uneasily together in this context. Immediate feedback is among the most valued affordances of mobile applications, and learner autonomy is widely presented as a central motivational benefit of mobile learning (Wang & Gunaban, 2023). Feedback that is always available may reduce the need to think independently, while autonomy without guidance can leave learners unsure whether they are progressing (Al Balushi & Hamzah, 2026). AI tools intensify this tension, because they offer conversational, individualised responses and can also produce finished work on the learner's behalf. Previous research has established each side of this tension separately. Mobile and automated feedback studies have shown that immediate, explanatory feedback supports engagement, persistence, and confidence. (Marwan et al., 2020; Al-darei & Elhag, 2022), and mobile learning studies indicate learner control over when and how to study supports autonomy (Lai et al., 2022). A number of recent studies have reported benefits for confidence and personalization as well as concerns about dependency and academic integrity (Muniandy & Selvanathan, 2025; Tai & Chen, 2024) alongside concerns about dependency and academic integrity (Edmett et al., 2024; Xiao et al., 2026). What remains unknown is how these two factors interact in classroom practice: whether the same AI-supported feedback that builds learners' confidence also weakens their independent effort, how students and teachers experience the two together, and what teachers actually do to manage the balance. Most existing studies measure feedback or autonomy as separate outcomes, rely on a single data source, or are conducted outside the Gulf, and few examine ESP learners in blended programmes, where students must produce discipline-specific language rather than general English.

This article takes that tension as its focus. It builds on an earlier article from the same doctoral study (Al Balushi & Hamzah, 2026), which reported five themes from teacher interviews and student focus groups at one maritime college. Despite the fact that the article identified AI-supported feedback as one motivational affordance and overreliance on AI as one challenge,

it did not examine how the two relate. As a result of the present article, this work is extended in three ways. As a first step, it expands the evidence base from one college and two data sources to three colleges (engineering, maritime, and medicine) and four data sources. The second thing it does is change the unit of analysis: it treats learners' motivation and teachers' concerns about dependency as two sides of the same relationship, and it shows that they both arise from similar AI features. Third, it shifts from describing the tension to describing how it is handled, recording the task-design and mediation techniques teachers employ to maintain student accountability for language creation. By demonstrating that feedback and autonomy transcend its personal, internal, and external categories rather than functioning as distinct influences, the essay conceptually expands Song's (2000) paradigm.

It addresses three research questions:

- RQ1. How do ESP students and teachers describe their use of AI tools in blended ESP learning?
- RQ2. What role does AI-supported feedback play in students' confidence and motivation?
- RQ3. What concerns about dependency and learner autonomy do participants raise, and how do teachers manage them?

This title is influenced by the idea indicated by one of the teachers who said that students should be "producers" rather than "consumers" on AI platforms. In the article, the researcher discusses how that concern arises from the same features students value most.

### **Literature and Conceptual Framework**

#### *Immediate feedback in mobile language learning*

One of the key motivational affordances of mobile applications is instantaneous automated feedback. According to (Marwan et al., 2020), students who got rapid feedback on practice activities shown higher levels of interest and persistence than those who received delayed feedback because the latter caused performance uncertainty and impeded error repair. Feedback quality is just as important as speed. Al-darei & Elhag (2022) discovered a wide range of sophistication in feedback kinds in an e-learning environment, with explanatory feedback which explains why an answer was incorrect proving to be more motivating than straightforward right/wrong signs. For ESP learners developing complex professional communication skills, instructor feedback on subtle aspects of professional language may still be necessary, because surface-level automated feedback may not be enough. Research on automated writing evaluation points the same way: such systems can approach the reliability of human raters on surface features such as grammar, spelling and punctuation, but struggle with the originality of ideas, rhetorical appropriateness and the effectiveness of arguments (Shermis & Burstein, 2013), and heavy reliance on them may narrow writing instruction to what algorithms can assess (Warschauer & Grimes, 2008).

#### **Autonomy and self-directed learning**

Self-Determination Theory proposes that intrinsic motivation thrives when three needs are met: relatedness, competence and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Mobile technologies can plausibly support all three, with competence supported through immediate feedback and scaffolded progression, and autonomy through learner control over when, where and how to study. Lai et al. (2022) found that Chinese university students valued mobile devices because they could pursue individual learning goals outside class. However, access to a device does

not by itself produce self-directed learning. Lai et al. (2022) found that learners sometimes lack the strategies and knowledge to use technology effectively, so teachers should support autonomous learning by providing guidance. There is therefore a link between feedback and autonomy as motivational tools, and literature already suggests that each is dependent on the other.

#### *AI in language learning: promise and concern*

According to recent studies (Muniandy & Selvanathan, 2025), artificial intelligence can help learners improve their confidence and speaking skills, and can also provide personalised learning (Tai & Chen, 2024), and research has examined how artificial intelligence affects students' motivation and anxiety while learning English (Syifauddin & Yuliansyah, 2023).). However, there are concerns about academic integrity and dependency Edmett et al. (2024); Xiao et al., 2026). Digital writing has been investigated in depth since Sutherland-Smith (2008) observed that plagiarism increases when online sources are readily accessible, and Newton (2016) points out that over-reliance on detection leads to adversarial assessment relationships rather than addressing the underlying issues of academic integrity. What is still thin is classroom-based evidence of how these benefits and concerns are experienced together by ESP students and teachers, particularly in the Gulf.

#### *Conceptual framework*

The study used Song's (2000) framework of motivational influences in web-based instruction, which distinguishes personal factors (such as learning style, media preference and prior technology experience), internal factors (learners' motivational processes, represented here by Keller's ARCS model of attention, relevance, confidence and satisfaction) and external factors (environmental influences such as learner support). The framework was used to organise the data collection instruments and the initial analysis. Two limitations of the framework shaped our reading. First, the pilot study showed that the boundaries between the three factors were more fluid than Song anticipated. Second, Song's model treats motivational components as separate influences, whereas our earlier analysis of the wider dataset suggested that some of them, notably confidence and sustained attention, can pull against each other. We therefore use Song's categories to locate what participants described, and we treat the feedback–autonomy relationship as one that runs across categories: feedback is an external support that shapes internal confidence, while autonomy is both a personal characteristic (learner agency) and a condition of internal motivation.

### **Methodology**

#### *Design*

The study is a qualitative case study using an interpretive methodology, which presupposes that environmental elements and personal experiences combine to produce motivation. The second-year ESP course at National University, a university in the Sultanate of Oman, is the subject of this case study. It is taught in a blended learning environment, with two contact hours on campus and two online via Microsoft Teams and Moodle. The first researcher is an English lecturer with ten years' experience at the university. This insider position gave access and contextual knowledge but also carried a risk of assumptions and of participants presenting their views favourably; a reflexive journal was kept to record assumptions and analytic choices.

*Participants and data sources*

The article draws on all four data sources of the wider doctoral study (Table 1). Teachers were recruited by an open email invitation to ESP teachers and selected for availability and disciplinary diversity across engineering, maritime and medicine. Student focus group participants were volunteers identified through 12 ESP teachers (54 volunteers), from whom 30 were selected for gender balance, availability, discipline diversity and language proficiency; students in focus groups came from classes other than those observed. The questionnaire was posted on Moodle by ESP teachers and remained open for two weeks; about 350 students had access to the link and 81 responded. Classroom observations used convenience sampling of teachers who agreed to be observed and who were known to use mobile applications, and each class was observed once for a full class period.

Table 1

*Data sources drawn on in this article*

| Data source              | Participants / units                                                                                                                                                | Programmes                                 | Use in this article                                                                |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Teacher interviews       | Eight ESP teachers (T1–T8)                                                                                                                                          | Engineering, maritime, medicine            | Views on AI tools, immediate feedback, dependency, task design, selection criteria |
| Student focus groups     | Five groups of six second-year students (30 students; FG1–FG5)                                                                                                      | Two maritime, two engineering, one medical | Students' accounts of AI tools, feedback, confidence and distraction               |
| Open-ended questionnaire | 81 responses (about 350 students had access) (Q1–Q81)                                                                                                               | Engineering, maritime, medicine            | Supporting illustration; institutional support, cost, training                     |
| Classroom observations   | Three ESP classes, one full period each: English for Maritime Studies (online, Teams), English for Marine Engineers, English for Process Engineering (face to face) | Maritime, marine and process engineering   | Context for how phones and search tools were used; no generative AI observed       |

*Instruments and the emergence of AI as a topic*

The teacher interview protocol asked about mobile applications and student interaction, effective features, motivation, examples of applications, criteria for selecting applications, challenges, and how effectiveness is judged. The focus group protocol contained nine questions on blended learning, apps used, engagement, interaction, collaboration, motivation and differences from traditional classes. The questionnaire asked open-ended questions organised by Song's three factors, together with background and reflection sections. None of these instruments asked about AI directly. AI tools entered the data because participants named them when asked which applications they used, what made them feel confident, or what helped them improve. This has an important consequence for interpretation: the data show what participants volunteered, not how common AI use is in the student population.

*Data collection procedures*

Each focus group had six participants and was audio-recorded on two mobile phones; recordings were transcribed with a transcription application. Teacher interviews were recorded and transcribed. Participants were told the purpose of the study, that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. Classroom observations were conducted before the interviews and focus groups to inform the instruments and are used here as contextual data on how phones were used in practice.

*Analysis*

The study analysed each data source thematically: familiarisation with the data, initial coding, searching for patterns across codes, reviewing themes and naming them, followed by comparison across sources to identify convergent and divergent patterns. Two validation steps were carried peer debriefing with two qualitative researchers and checking with five interview participants. For this article we carried out a focused analysis of the full dataset. All segments referring to AI tools, automated or immediate feedback, learner control or independence, dependency, and teacher management of these issues were extracted, compared across teachers, focus group students and questionnaire respondents, and interpreted through Song's framework. Because the questionnaire was answered in writing by respondents who could not be questioned further, and because we judged that some responses may have been generated with AI tools (see Limitations), claims in this article rest primarily on convergence between interview and focus group data, with questionnaire data used as supporting illustration.

*Ethics*

The study was approved by the university's research ethics committee (application submitted in January 2024) and by college-level permissions. Participants were assured of voluntary participation and confidentiality. To protect identities, teachers are coded T1–T8, focus group participants are identified by group (FG1–FG5), and questionnaire respondents by their response number (Q1–Q81). Quotations are verbatim, including non-standard usage.

**Findings**

AI tools appeared in the accounts of teachers and students across the three colleges (Table 2). Five themes describe how they were used and valued, and where the tension between feedback and autonomy arose.

Table 2

*AI and automated feedback tools named by participants and how they were described*

| Tool                                                 | How participants described using it                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Source                 |
|------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|
| ChatGPT                                              | Speaking practice and pronunciation feedback; voice mode for fluency; feedback and tips on report writing; translation and explanation of technical terms; asking when a class question is very challenging; in-class role-play with peer feedback | T6; FG1; FG2; Q69; Q71 |
| ELSA Speak                                           | Speaking practice in professional contexts, including demo job interviews, with goal setting and progress tracking                                                                                                                                 | FG2; Q69               |
| TalkPal                                              | Practice in technical communication with immediate feedback and progress tracking                                                                                                                                                                  | Q71                    |
| Role-playing chatbot in a business English app       | Rehearsing a contract negotiation without fear of embarrassment                                                                                                                                                                                    | Q64                    |
| AI voice messenger                                   | Speaking practice with “somebody or something to talk English with”                                                                                                                                                                                | Q51                    |
| Grammarly, QuillBot                                  | Instant feedback on writing (ship reports and emails); language review                                                                                                                                                                             | FG4; T6; Q39           |
| DeepSeek, Copilot and other tools named by a teacher | Teacher’s own use for language review and writing (tool names as transcribed)                                                                                                                                                                      | T6; Q39                |
| Gamma                                                | Making presentations “more professional”                                                                                                                                                                                                           | FG1                    |

*“Somebody or something to talk English with”: AI as an always-available, non-judgmental practice partner*

The most frequent use of AI described by students was speaking practice. A student in FG1 said, “I like ChatGPT: I use it to practice speaking and writing,” and another explained, “For Speaking classes especially presentations or project discussions, I use ChatGPT to practice and get immediate feedback. This helps me identify pronunciation errors and improve my fluency” (FG1). For students in FG2, the appeal was partly emotional. One said, “I like ChatGPT because I feel that I have personal tutor who can guide me whenever I have any doubt or I need any extra support,” and another, “I like ChatGPT because it doesn’t judge me... I usually chat with ChatGPT using to practice speaking and it provide me with the feedback and suggestions on how to improve my spoken English.”

Questionnaire respondents described the same experience and tied it to a lack of interlocutors. One wrote: “nowadays we are using AI for everything and I am using the AI voice messenger to improve my speaking skills which was hard to develop it before, now I have somebody or something to talk English with them” (Q51). Another described a role-playing chatbot inside a business English app used to practise negotiating a contract, which “significantly improved my fluency and negotiation phrasing under pressure, without the fear

of embarrassing myself in front of a real person" (Q64). A teacher who taught English for engineers used ChatGPT's voice mode with his students: "Basically, I use it ChatGPT, the voice mode, and this helps the students to interact and to check their level of fluency" (T6).

Taken together, these accounts show AI functioning as a private, low-stakes rehearsal space. This matters in a setting where teachers reported that learners were hesitant to speak in class and where students may have few opportunities to speak English with others outside it. The accounts are also consistent with the wider finding of the doctoral study that shy students participated more when they could use their phones, for example through anonymous responses or shared documents.

#### *Immediate feedback as a motivational scaffold*

Students linked AI tools to feedback that was immediate, personalised and explanatory. In FG2, a student said her writing had "improved dramatically since I started asking ChatGPT to provide me with feedback," explaining that she "struggled to understand the structure of report writing and ChatGPT gave me tips on how to work on it and made it easier for me." In FG4, a student described using Grammarly on a phone while practising ship reports and emails: "I used Grammarly to get feedback instantly. It helped me to learn and practice writing as if I were on a ship as I saw my mistakes, learned appropriate expressions, and practiced writing like I would on a ship." Speaking applications added progress tracking. A student who practised demo job interviews with ELSA Speak wrote that she liked "the fact that I was able to set my goals and track my progress" (Q69), and another wrote that TalkPal "uses AI and provide immediate feedback and I could track my progress" (Q71).

The value of immediate feedback went beyond AI. Teacher recalls previously disengaged student who became animated in Kahoot game once he saw his name rising on the leaderboard. In FG4, teachers linked instant feedback with persistence and interest, while students associated confidence with using apps daily. One student said using her phone made her feel more confident, especially AI apps like ChatGPT. AI tools in the classroom reduced stress, according to a teacher: "Students are more confident." they don't feel stressed" (T6). According to Song, feedback serves as both an external support (the tool and the teacher's decision to use it) and an internal source of confidence and satisfaction. Also, they illustrate why feedback is treasured: it allows learners to see their mistakes and progress without needing a teacher..

#### *Autonomy in action: choosing, combining and directing tools*

There was no perception that AI use was passive among students. Many described themselves as selecting and combining tools for specific purposes. FG1 student who used ChatGPT for pronunciation feedback also used Gamma to make her presentation "more professional," demonstrating the strategic self-direction Song anticipates. Among the tools listed by a teacher are Copilot, DeepSearch, ChatGPT, QuillBot and Grammarly (T6), while a student suggests Grammarly, ChatGPT and DeepSeek together (Q39). Students also described using AI to support their own understanding. One wrote: "Sometimes, I find it easier to ask ChatGPT to translate for me and to explain anything challenging. I like ChatGPT because it is very fast and I can talk to it and get a response immediately" (Q71).

Teachers recognised autonomy as a benefit of mobile learning generally. One said that mobile use “empowers them to take charge of their own learning” (T7), and another noted that students who could review material at their own pace seemed to prepare more before class (T5). Another teacher suggested that students belong to “Generation Z and Generation AI,” using the tools they enjoy, and that using the same technology would help them enjoy class (T6). This digital identity is a personal factor that helps explain why students turned to AI on their own initiative.

*The other side: dependency, shortcuts and the risk of being consumers*

Teachers’ enthusiasm was consistently qualified. The strongest statement came from the teacher who most actively used AI in class: “I’m into AI, I’m into blended learning... but we have to be cautious about it because we cannot really say that it’s 100% positive.” He continued: “we need to make sure that our students are not consumers but producers and that are not addicted to these platforms, but they are interacting positively, engaging in a productive way. In order not to kill their creativity and their critical thinking” (T6). The concern was not about AI as such but about a pattern of use in which support replaces effort. Another teacher, in the earlier report from this study, identified “the fact that students tend to use ChatGPT to answer and complete their tasks” as a significant challenge (Al Balushi & Hamzah, 2026)

Several student accounts showed traces of the same pattern, but nothing alarming was found. One respondent wrote that when the teacher gives permission to search for information they find challenging, “I go immediately to ChatGPT because I know i will find all my answers there” (Q69). A teacher observed that when students finish a task quickly and wait for others, “they tend to use social media” (T8). The same device that supports independent practice also offers ready answers and competing attention. A student in FG2 put it directly: “sometimes, when I use my phone for looking up a word or working on a task, I end up visiting social media platforms. Therefore, I believe that I can’t entirely focus on any task when I am using my phone.”

This finding resembles the tension the wider study documented between engagement and distraction: focus depended more on the task than on the device. Students reported concentrating during interactive activities and losing focus during long reading. For AI, the parallel is that its value seemed to depend on whether the task required students to produce something, or only to receive something.

*Managing the balance: teacher mediation and task design*

Teachers did not treat the tension as a reason to avoid AI. Their responses were design decisions. First, they used AI dialogically. T6 described asking students to “make a conversation” with AI, see “what are the changes they have to do,” then “react and change whatever they have to change,” and connected this to motivation. He described the aim as a “dialogical approach and not monological approach where one is imposing his thought” (T6). Students confirmed teacher mediation: one wrote that “He taught us how to use artificial intelligence in the correct way” (Q41).

Second, teachers built tasks in which AI supported production rather than replaced it. In a CV-writing task, students wrote their own CVs and cover letters, and two class committees used

AI to shortlist applications and then interviewed their colleagues (T6). In a role-play, one team presented while a committee used ChatGPT to record what colleagues said and give “immediate feedback” (T6). These tasks required students to produce spoken and written language and to evaluate others, with AI in a supporting role.

Third, teachers combined automated feedback with human feedback. One teacher described asking shy students to record videos or voice messages so that “they get feedback from each other or get feedback from ask me for feedback” (T2). Another used Google Docs so that group members could see each other’s writing while it was being produced, which helped shy students who “don’t want to speak, but they can write” (T8). A student noted that teachers’ presentation recordings on Teams allowed them to “learn from our mistakes” (Q69). Fourth, teachers structured when phones could be used. In one observed class, students were asked to look up difficult words and to search for answers to reading questions on their phones, in groups of four with one word each, while the teacher circulated and encouraged them to speak English rather than Arabic. The observation notes record no use of generative AI in the three lessons, but they show the same logic: the phone provided just-in-time support, and the task and the teacher kept responsibility for language production with the students.

One teacher also reported judging the effect of AI through pre-tests and post-tests, saying that students who used ChatGPT performed better than those who did not and showed gains in critical thinking and soft skills (T6). This is a teacher’s own report of his own study and was not independently examined here; we cite it as an indication of how teachers seek evidence, not as evidence of learning gains.

#### *Conditions for access: cost, training and guidance*

Access to AI feedback was uneven. Students noted that colleges provided platforms, Wi-Fi and some free software, but several identified gaps in training and subscriptions. One wrote that teachers “always inform us about new apps to use especially the ones with artificial intelligence... because these apps provide quick feedback. However, some of these app are expensive and students cannot always afford to subscribe” (Q69). Another said the college does not “provide training on using mobile devices for learning or subscriptions to educational apps” (Q58), and another that “more training and updated apps are missing” (Q56). Lack of guidance also affected how teachers’ use of technology was received: a student wrote that practices were less effective “when they just post materials without guidance, making it hard to stay engaged or know what to focus on” (Q24). Teachers’ selection criteria reflected the equity issue. One said that “the first thing is the Cost” (T8), and another tried to find free apps “that can be used by all learners” (T5).

Table 3

*How the feedback–autonomy paradox appeared in the data*

| Area of use         | What feedback offered                                                                                   | What was at stake for autonomy                                                          | How participants managed it                                                                                             |
|---------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Speaking practice   | Immediate, non-judgmental feedback on pronunciation and fluency; private rehearsal (FG1, FG2, Q51, Q64) | Practice can be self-directed, with goals set and progress tracked (Q69, Q71)           | Dialogical use of AI (T6); recording then peer or teacher feedback (T2)                                                 |
| Writing             | Tips on structure; instant corrections (FG2, FG4)                                                       | Risk that students “use ChatGPT to answer and complete their tasks” (earlier article)   | Tasks that require students to write and revise; shared documents that make writing visible (T8)                        |
| Finding information | “I go immediately to ChatGPT because I know I will find all my answers there” (Q69)                     | Answers arrive without effort; early finishers turn to AI or social media (T8)          | Teacher permission and structure; phones used for lookup within group tasks with English-only expectation (observation) |
| Access and guidance | Quick feedback from AI apps (Q69)                                                                       | Paid apps and limited training leave some students without support (Q56, Q58, Q68, Q69) | Free tools preferred (T5, T8); teachers teaching how to use AI (Q41); calls for licences and training                   |

## Discussion

### *A two-sided paradox*

A two-sided interpretation of the feedback-autonomy contradiction is supported by the findings. On the one hand, students reported confidence boosts and enjoyed tools that allowed them to practice quietly and receive fast feedback. On the other hand, both teachers and students realised that continuous assistance could impair self-reliance, focus, and originality. The conflict also runs the other way: too much autonomy without supervision can make students unsure of their development, which is why structure and supervision are also important in addition to the ability to experiment with tools. The paradox is therefore not a problem to be solved by choosing feedback or autonomy, but a relationship to be managed by teachers over time.

### *Relation to previous research*

The findings confirm reports that AI tools can build learners’ confidence and speaking practice (Muniandy & Selvanathan, 2025) and support personalisation (Tai & Chen., 2024), and they confirm the concerns about dependency raised in recent work (Edmett et al. , 2024; Xiao et al., 2026). The contribution here is to show both in the same classrooms and often in the same participants. The findings also fit the argument that feedback quality matters (Burston, 2015). Students’ descriptions of ChatGPT as giving “tips” and “suggestions on how to improve” suggest explanatory rather than right/wrong feedback, which may explain its appeal, but the study did not assess the accuracy or adequacy of the feedback. For ESP, where professional discourse conventions matter, the research on automated evaluation (Shermis & Burstein, 2013; Warschauer & Grimes, 2008) suggests a continuing role for teacher feedback on higher-

order features, and teachers' practice of pairing AI with peer and teacher feedback is consistent with that.

Through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), AI-supported feedback appears to serve competence, and learner choice of tools and pace serves autonomy. What the classroom data add is that these two needs can be met by the same tool while being in tension with one another. The evidence that students benefit from guidance (Viberg & Grönlund, 2013) is echoed in students' complaints about materials posted without guidance and in their appreciation of teachers who taught them how to use AI properly.

#### *Extending Song's framework*

The findings recommend three adjustments to Song's framework. First, support that simultaneously undermines another motivational resource sustained effort and independent attention can create confidence, which is regarded inside ARCS as a positive internal factor; the elements interact rather than just add up. Second, it is best to consider learner agency in selecting and combining tools as a personal aspect that interacts with prior technology experience and learning style. Third, the teacher is both an external factor (recommending tools, teaching how to use them) and a designer of internal motivational conditions (setting tasks that require students to produce language). The paradox is managed at the point where these roles meet.

#### *The ESP context*

ESP shaped how the paradox appeared. The AI uses that participants valued most were tied to professional communication: negotiating a contract, rehearsing job interviews, writing ship reports and emails, and simulating selection committees. This is consistent with our wider finding that professional relevance is a distinct source of motivation for ESP learners. It also helps explain why AI felt most useful when it stood in for interlocutors that students lacked, such as a practice partner for technical English, and it may be why teachers were most comfortable with AI when it fed into a professional task that students still had to perform themselves.

### **Implications**

#### *For ESP teachers*

- Plan the feedback–autonomy balance over time. Early in a course or when introducing a new skill, provide substantial support (AI feedback, teacher guidance, peer collaboration), and plan gradual reduction of that scaffolding as students gain competence.
- Use AI dialogically. Ask students to converse with an AI tool, decide what to change, and revise, rather than accept a single response.
- Pair automated feedback with human feedback. Recorded speaking followed by peer or teacher comments, and shared documents that make writing visible, keep the teacher and classmates in the loop.
- Design tasks in which AI supports production rather than replaces it, such as role-plays, CV and interview simulations, and reports that students write and then refine.
- Set clear rules about when phones and AI tools may be used, including on tasks where students finish early or where answers could simply be retrieved.
- Prefer free tools where possible, so that feedback is not available only to students who can pay.

*For institutions and policy makers*

- Negotiate institutional licences for the applications used across ESP programmes and provide equitable access for students who cannot afford subscriptions.
- Shift teacher development from “how to use apps” towards pedagogical design, giving teachers time to experiment with matching tools to purposes and to share practice in communities of practice.
- Provide clear, shared guidance on the use of AI in ESP classes. In the absence of national or institutional policy, teachers currently set the boundaries alone.

**Limitations and Future Research**

There are a few limitations to be aware of. Since AI was not included in the interview, focus group, or questionnaire protocols, the data only reflects participants volunteered to share and cannot reveal the extent of AI use. The questionnaire's shortcomings included the possibility that some students thought the questions were too lengthy, that some students provided very brief or repetitive replies, and that the first researcher concluded that some of the responses might have been produced by artificial intelligence. Because of this, the questionnaire is employed as evidence rather than as the foundation for assertions. Two of the five focus groups provided brief responses and were less responsive. The three classroom observations were one-time visits, did not document the usage of generative AI, and were unable to demonstrate how practices evolve over time. The initial researcher's role as a lecturer at the university, which has its own infrastructure and resources, may have affected the opinions of students and colleagues. The one instructor report of pre- and post-test increases was not independently evaluated, and the study did not measure learning outcomes or examine the accuracy of AI feedback.

Future studies could track students over the course of several semesters to observe how the ratio of autonomy to feedback changes as they grow more proficient. They should also investigate what ratio is necessary for students to become more self-sufficient. Studies on how this impacts the paradox, whether AI-enabled personalisation strengthens or weakens the professional and domain-specific motivations that currently drive ESP learners, and how ESP instruction should change as AI simplifies some professional communication tasks and may make deep disciplinary understanding more important are all necessary as AI tutors become more skilled.

**Conclusion**

ESP students in this study valued AI tools for the same reasons their teachers worried about them. Immediate, non-judgmental, personalised feedback gave students a place to rehearse professional English and helped them feel more confident, yet the same availability could turn students into consumers of answers rather than producers of language. We have described this as a feedback–autonomy paradox and shown that teachers respond to it through task design, dialogic use of AI, combined human and automated feedback, and clear expectations, while cost, training and policy gaps shape who benefits. Our central argument is that the feedback–autonomy balance is best treated as a pedagogical design decision that should change over a programme, with substantial support at first and deliberate withdrawal of scaffolding as learners become able to produce, judge and revise language for themselves.

## Declarations

*Funding:* No funding was allocated for this study.

*Ethics:* See Section 3.6.

*Relationship to earlier work:* This article draws on the same doctoral study as Al Balushi and Hamzah (2026). That article reported five themes from teacher interviews and student focus groups at one maritime college. The present article addresses a different question, uses data from three colleges and four data sources, and focuses on AI-supported feedback and learner autonomy.

## References

- Al Balushi, K., & Hamzah, M. B. (2026). The impact of mobile technology in blended learning on student interaction and motivation in ESP classes: A case study in Omani higher education. *Journal of Education and e-Learning Research*, 13(3), 57–65. <https://doi.org/10.20448/jeelr.v13i3.9151>
- Al-darei, I. S., & Elhag, A. (2022). The effect of feedback type in the e-learning environment on students' achievement and motivation. *Journal of Educational Technology and Online Learning*, 5(3), 694–705. <https://doi.org/10.31681/jetol.1111527>
- Al-Issa, A., & Al-Bulushi, A. (2011). English language teaching reform in Sultanate of Oman: The case of theory and practice disparity. *Educational Research for Policy and Practice*, 11(2), 141–176. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10671-011-9110-0>
- Burston, J. (2015). Twenty years of MALL project implementation: A meta-analysis of learning outcomes. *ReCALL*, 27(1), 4–20. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344014000159>
- Chalikandy, M. A. (2013). A comprehensive method for teaching English for specific purpose. *Arab World English Journal*, 4(4), 310–322.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The “what” and “why” of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11(4), 227–268. [https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PLI1104\\_01](https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PLI1104_01)
- Edmett, A., Ichaporia, N., Crompton, H., & Crichton, R. (2024). Artificial intelligence and English language teaching: Preparing for the future (2nd ed.). British Council. <https://doi.org/10.57884/78EA-3C69>
- International Maritime College Oman (IMCO). (2021). Online learning satisfaction survey. Unpublished report. Sohar, Oman: International Maritime College Oman.
- Keller, J. M. (1983). Motivational design of instruction. In C. M. Reigeluth (Ed.), *Instructional-design theories and models: An overview of their current status* (pp. 383–434). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates
- Lai, Y., Saab, N., & Admiraal, W. (2022). Learning strategies in self-directed language learning using mobile technology in higher education: A systematic scoping review. *Education and Information Technologies*, 27, 7749–7780. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-022-10945-5>
- Lai, Y., Saab, N., & Admiraal, W. (2022). University students' use of mobile technology in self-directed language learning: Using the integrative model of behavior prediction. *Computers & Education*, 179, Article 104413. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2021.104413>
- Marwan, S., Gao, G., Fisk, S., Price, T. W., & Barnes, T. (2020). Adaptive immediate feedback can improve novice programming engagement and intention to persist in computer science. In *Proceedings of the 2020 ACM Conference on International Computing*

- Education Research (pp. 194–203). Association for Computing Machinery.  
<https://doi.org/10.1145/3372782.3406264>
- Muniandy, J., & Selvanathan, M. (2025). ChatGPT, a partnering tool to improve ESL learners' speaking skills: Case study in a public university, Malaysia. *Teaching Public Administration*, 43(1), 4–20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01447394241230152>
- Newton, P. M. (2016). Academic integrity: A quantitative study of confidence and understanding in students at the start of their higher education. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 41(3), 482–497.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2015.1024199>
- Shermis, M. D., & Burstein, J. (Eds.). (2013). *Handbook of automated essay evaluation: Current applications and new directions*. Routledge.
- Song, S. H. (2000). Research issues of motivation in web-based instruction. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 1(3), 225–229. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QRDE-09-2000-0006>
- Sutherland-Smith, W. (2008). *Plagiarism, the Internet, and student learning: Improving academic integrity*. Routledge.
- Syifauddin, M., & Yuliansyah, A. R. (2023). The effect of using AI on students' motivation and anxiety in learning English. *Transformational Language Literature and Technology Overview in Learning (TRANSTOOL)*, 2(2), 9–15.  
<https://doi.org/10.55047/transtool.v2i2.1354>
- Tai, T.-Y., & Chen, H. H.-J. (2024). Improving elementary EFL speaking skills with generative AI chatbots: Exploring individual and paired interactions. *Computers & Education*, 220, Article 105112. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2024.105112>
- Viberg, O., & Grönlund, Å. (2013). Systematising the field of mobile assisted language learning. *International Journal of Mobile and Blended Learning*, 5(4), 72–90.  
<https://doi.org/10.4018/ijmbl.2013100105>
- Wang, X., & Gunaban, M. G. B. (2023). Effectiveness of mobile-assisted language learning in enhancing the English proficiency. *Journal of Contemporary Educational Research*, 7(11), 140–146. <https://doi.org/10.26689/jcer.v7i11.5588>
- Warschauer, M., & Grimes, D. (2008). Automated writing assessment in the classroom. *Pedagogies: An International Journal*, 3(1), 22–36.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15544800701771580>
- Xiao, F., Zhu, S., & Xin, W. (2026). Exploring the landscape of generative AI (ChatGPT)-powered writing instruction in English as a foreign language education: A scoping review. *ECNU Review of Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20965311241310881>