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Implementation of AI in ELT classrooms: ChatGPT as a tool for learning English in the digital age

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the implementation of ChatGPT as an AI-based tool to support English language learning among university students in the digital age. Using a qualitative case study design, the research investigates how students integrate ChatGPT into their learning routines, its role in enhancing vocabulary acquisition, and its influence on learner motivation and engagement. Findings reveal that students perceive ChatGPT as a flexible, accessible, and non-judgmental learning companion that fosters autonomy and encourages active exploration of language since it is supported by a variety of language tasks such as writing, grammar correction, reading comprehension, and vocabulary building. Then, students also utilized the platform independently, treating it as a personal tutor that adapts to their individual learning goals and schedules, an approach that aligns with principles of self-directed learning and personalized education. Moreover, the tool's ability to provide immediate and contextualized feedback contributes to deeper vocabulary retention, while its interactive nature increases students' interest and confidence in using English. These insights highlight the potential of AI to complement traditional English Language Teaching (ELT) approaches by promoting personalized and learner-centered experiences.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology has changed almost all aspects of human life, including education. In this 21st century era, the integration of information and communication technology is inevitable in the teaching and learning process. One of the major breakthroughs that has caught the world's attention is the emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI), which is increasingly sophisticated and is starting to be integrated in various sectors, including education (Kristiawan 2024). In the context of English language teaching (ELT), technological advances demand changes in teaching approaches. Students' learning styles in the digital age have shifted: they tend to be more active in using digital devices, accessing information independently and seeking more interactive learning experiences. This poses a challenge for teachers to adapt teaching methods to remain relevant and engaging for the digital native generation.

Therefore, utilizing cutting-edge technology such as AI is a potential solution to support a more effective and enjoyable English learning process (Wang, Wang & Zou, 2024). AI offers various

advantages in education, such as the ability to customize learning materials to individual needs, provide instant feedback, and provide flexible access to learning. The application of AI in English learning can help students improve their language skills through more personalized and adaptive interactions. Some AI platforms already used in education include chatbots, virtual assistants, and learning recommendation systems (Syafruddin, Hidayati & Triastuti, 2025).

One example of an AI product that is currently popular is ChatGPT, a chatbot based on GPT (Generative Pre-trained Transformer) technology developed by OpenAI. ChatGPT has the ability to understand and produce natural language, so it can be used for various learning activities, such as conversation practice, correcting writing, and providing material explanations in English. ChatGPT is interactive, flexible and accessible anytime and anywhere, making it a potential learning tool in the modern ELT classroom (Zakiyah, 2024). However, while ChatGPT has been widely used informally by learners and educators around the world, there is still a lack of academic studies that examine the actual implementation of this technology in the context of the English language classroom, especially in Indonesia. Not many studies have specifically evaluated how ChatGPT can assist students in improving their English language skills, as well as what their perceptions and experiences are when using AI as part of the learning process (Susanto, 2024).

Therefore, this research aims to take a deeper look into the implementation of ChatGPT in English language learning in the digital era. This research will focus on How is ChatGPT implemented as a tool for learning English in the digital age for students, what are students' perceptions of using ChatGPT in improving their English vocabulary, how does ChatGPT influence students' engagement and motivation in learning English. The results of this research are expected to contribute to the development of more innovative and technology-based English teaching methods, as well as a reference for teachers, educational institutions, and technology developers in designing learning systems that are more responsive to students' needs in the digital era.

In this digital age, students are increasingly exposed to various technological tools that support language learning. However, the traditional English Language Teaching (ELT) approach often fails to fully leverage these advancements. Many students find it difficult to stay engaged and motivated in conventional classroom settings, particularly when it comes to vocabulary acquisition and real-time language use. The emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI), particularly tools like ChatGPT, has created new opportunities for student-centered and interactive learning. Yet, the integration of AI in ELT classrooms remains limited due to lack of awareness, training, and empirical understanding of its pedagogical impact (Dwivedi et al., 2023). Therefore, it is crucial to explore how AI tools like ChatGPT can be effectively implemented to enhance English learning, especially in vocabulary development and student engagement. This study is limited to the use of ChatGPT as an AI-based tool in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, specifically focusing on vocabulary enhancement and student engagement. The research is conducted qualitatively and involves a limited number of high school students who have access to ChatGPT and utilize it in their language learning process. Other AI applications and broader ELT domains such as grammar, writing, and speaking, although related, are beyond the scope of this research. Additionally, the study is confined to a specific educational setting and may not be generalizable to all student populations.

Vocabulary is a foundational element in language acquisition. Without adequate vocabulary, learners cannot effectively understand or convey messages in the target language. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings, vocabulary learning becomes even more critical because learners often lack immersive exposure to authentic language environments. According to Nation (2020), vocabulary learning involves both receptive (listening and reading) and productive (speaking and writing) knowledge, which must be acquired through repeated exposure and meaningful practice.

In traditional classrooms, vocabulary teaching often relies on rote memorization, isolated word lists, and textbook-driven instruction, which can limit long-term retention. The shift toward communicative language teaching (CLT) has emphasized contextual vocabulary use, task-based learning, and student-centered approaches. However, the lack of sufficient practice and exposure outside the classroom remains a persistent challenge (Rahman et al., 2024). With the advent of digital tools and AI technologies, vocabulary learning can now occur in dynamic, interactive, and engaging ways.

ChatGPT offers learners immediate exposure to new vocabulary in context, allowing them to engage in real-time dialogue and learn word usage within meaningful communication. This approach aligns with the principles of incidental vocabulary learning, where words are acquired naturally through exposure to language use (Wang & Heffernan, 2023). Student interest is a pivotal factor in language learning success. When learners are motivated and engaged, they are more likely to participate actively, retain information, and persist in their studies. Dörnyei (2020) highlights that intrinsic motivation, curiosity, and personal relevance significantly influence language learning outcomes. In many EFL contexts, traditional teaching methods fail to spark sustained student interest due to passive learning models, lack of real-world application, and repetitive tasks.

The integration of digital tools such as ChatGPT introduces novelty and interactivity into the language learning process. ChatGPT engages learners through personalized conversations, enabling them to explore topics of their choice, receive immediate feedback, and control the pace of learning. According to Zhou and Yan (2022), students using AI-based chatbots showed higher levels of interest and engagement, often describing the interaction as enjoyable and stress-free compared to classroom discussions. By creating a low-anxiety environment, AI tools support affective learning conditions, which are essential for sustained interest. Furthermore, ChatGPT's human-like conversational style helps simulate authentic communication, a critical factor in maintaining learners' motivation (Susanti & Izzah, 2022).

Interactive media have transformed modern education by shifting the learning paradigm from teacher-centered to learner-centered environments. Unlike passive forms of learning, interactive media allow students to engage with content through manipulation, feedback, and exploration. Hwang et al. (2021) assert that interactive tools enhance student motivation, support various learning styles, and facilitate deeper learning. In the context of ELT, interactive media provide multimodal resources that support vocabulary acquisition, listening and reading comprehension, pronunciation, and writing skills. Tools such as videos, games, simulations, and conversational agents make learning more contextual and meaningful. With the rise of AI, interactive learning has expanded beyond pre-programmed content to adaptive systems that personalize instruction in real time. ChatGPT serves as a prime example of AI-enhanced interactive media. Unlike static applications, it responds dynamically to user input, allowing for unscripted, personalized interactions. This flexibility fosters learner autonomy and mirrors real-world communication, thus preparing students for practical language use.

2. METHOD

This study applied a qualitative case study design to explore how EFL students implement ChatGPT in learning English in the digital age. Following Creswell and Poth (2021), qualitative research was chosen because it is especially suitable for investigating complex and dynamic social phenomena in their natural settings. This approach allowed the researchers to delve deeply into students' authentic experiences, behaviors, perceptions, and reflections regarding the use of ChatGPT not only in formal classroom contexts but also in informal, self-directed learning situations. The case study method was particularly appropriate because it enables comprehensive exploration of a bounded system in this case, a specific group of students engaging with ChatGPT over a defined period and context. By focusing on real-life applications and interactions, the study sought to generate rich, contextual insights rather than broad generalizations.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that those included could meaningfully inform the research questions. The sample consisted of students enrolled in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) program at a private school in East Java, Indonesia. Selection criteria required that participants had used ChatGPT regularly for at least one month prior to data collection, possessed basic digital literacy skills, and had consistent internet access to support independent interaction with the tool. Prior to participation, all students received a clear explanation of the research objectives and procedures, after which they provided written informed consent. Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout, with confidentiality and anonymity ensured during data handling and reporting.

The study was conducted during the participants' college years at Ahmad Dahlan University, encompassing both classroom-based learning sessions and self-directed activities outside the

classroom. This dual focus aimed to capture a more complete picture of ChatGPT's role in supporting vocabulary acquisition and language practice across different learning environments. To gather comprehensive data, the research employed multiple qualitative data collection techniques, which included semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis:

1. Semi-structured interviews served to elicit students' personal experiences, perceptions, motivations, and challenges in using ChatGPT. An interview guide containing open-ended questions provided structure while still allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on areas they found significant.
2. Observations targeted specific behaviors during classroom sessions and independent study periods, focusing on indicators such as engagement, frequency of ChatGPT use, and vocabulary-related activities. An observation checklist was used to record consistent data.
3. Document analysis involved reviewing students' chat histories and screenshots of their interactions with ChatGPT. This enabled the researchers to trace how vocabulary was encountered, processed, and applied in actual learning scenarios. A document protocol ensured that this process adhered to ethical standards regarding students' personal data.

The instruments used in this study were carefully designed to align with the research objectives and included: an interview guide (with prompts to explore depth), an observation checklist (capturing engagement, vocabulary use, and interaction styles), and a document analysis protocol (outlining systematic and ethical procedures for reviewing student-generated data).

For data analysis, the researchers applied Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase thematic analysis, which is well-suited for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data. The process began with familiarization through repeated reading of transcripts and documents to deeply understand the data. This was followed by generating initial codes to organize meaningful features, searching for broader themes by grouping related codes, reviewing themes against the data set for coherence, defining and naming themes to clarify their essence, and finally producing a detailed narrative report directly connected to the research questions. By combining a qualitative case study design, multiple data sources, and rigorous thematic analysis, this method aimed to provide an in-depth, nuanced understanding of how ChatGPT is practically implemented by EFL students, its impact on vocabulary learning, and its role in shaping learners' motivation and engagement.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section outlines the results of the research centered around three key research questions: (1) How is ChatGPT implemented as a tool for learning English in the digital age for students? (2) What are students' perceptions of using ChatGPT in improving their English vocabulary? (3) How does ChatGPT influence students' engagement and motivation in learning English? Utilizing thematic framework, the data is categorized with supporting quotations from participants and analyzed in conjunction with pertinent literature.

3.1. The Implementation of ChatGPT as a Flexible and Independent Learning Tool

The first theme identified relates to how students implement ChatGPT in their English learning routines. Participants described their use of ChatGPT as a practical and flexible tool, functioning as a personal tutor. It was particularly useful for activities such as writing practice, understanding reading texts, constructing dialogues, and even grammar correction. Students emphasized the accessibility and responsiveness of the tool, which allowed them to study independently without the constraints of time or instructor availability.

One respondent explained:

> *"I personally use ChatGPT almost every day to practice writing and reading in English. Usually, I type in a topic, then I ask ChatGPT to explain it using intermediate vocabulary. Sometimes I also ask for sample texts or practice making conversations, then I ask for corrections."* (R1)

Another participant stated that they initially used ChatGPT for translation purposes but later discovered its potential for practicing English more broadly, especially in understanding technical terms and grammar structures:

> *"At first, I used ChatGPT to help translate lecture articles, but eventually I realized that it could also be used to practice English. I like to ask questions about technical terms in English or ask for explanations of difficult grammar."* (R2)

The third respondent highlighted the platform's utility in supporting academic tasks such as presentations and reading comprehension exercises:

> *"I usually use ChatGPT to help with English assignments or presentations. But I also like to ask for summaries of readings or reading exercises."* (R3)

These responses reveal that ChatGPT has been implemented by students as a versatile and self-directed learning assistant. It accommodates different learning goals, provides tailored feedback, and enables students to engage with language use in meaningful and autonomous ways. The flexibility offered by ChatGPT supports students in managing their own learning processes according to their personal schedules and needs, making it especially effective for those who seek learning opportunities outside the traditional classroom setting.

Furthermore, its instant responses and adaptability to various language tasks—ranging from grammar correction and vocabulary building to reading comprehension and academic writing—demonstrate its role as an empowering tool for independent English language learning. In essence, ChatGPT promotes learner autonomy, fosters individualized learning experiences, and supports the development of English skills in a dynamic and accessible digital environment.

3.2. Students' Perceptions on Vocabulary Development

The second emerging theme concerns the perceived contribution of ChatGPT to students' vocabulary enhancement. Participants consistently reported that the platform provided immediate, clear explanations of unfamiliar words, including synonyms, antonyms, and usage examples in various contexts. This immediate feedback and contextual application were seen as instrumental in helping students internalize new vocabulary.

One student elaborated:

> *"I think it's very effective. I can immediately see synonyms, antonyms, and how words are used in sentences. Sometimes I type in words I don't know, and ChatGPT explains them easily."* (R1)

Another noted the frequency of encountering new words while using ChatGPT:

> *"Honestly, I feel like my vocabulary has improved since using ChatGPT. I often come across new words that I never knew before. Sometimes ChatGPT also gives example sentences, so I understand how to use them."* (R2)

The third respondent focused on acquiring more formal or academic vocabulary:

> *"I feel like my vocabulary has improved because I now know words that are commonly used in business or academic contexts. Now I've also started making a vocabulary list from my conversations with ChatGPT."* (R3)

Overall, these findings highlight how ChatGPT promotes not only vocabulary acquisition but also learner autonomy, long-term retention, and confidence in using new words across various contexts. Students perceive ChatGPT as a dynamic and interactive tool that supports vocabulary development through immediate feedback, example sentences, and contextualized explanations. Its capacity to adjust responses based on students' input makes it especially effective in clarifying complex or unfamiliar terms. This tailored support helps bridge the gap between passive recognition and active usage of new vocabulary, particularly in both conversational and academic settings.

In addition, the repeated interaction with ChatGPT encourages exploratory learning behaviors. Students are motivated to investigate new words, ask follow-up questions, and even document useful vocabulary in personalized lists. This proactive habit indicates a deeper level of engagement, where vocabulary is not only learned but also integrated into the students' working language repertoire. Ultimately, ChatGPT functions as both a responsive language tool and a catalyst for meaningful vocabulary growth, enabling learners to build their language skills at their own pace and based on their specific interests and needs.

3.3. Students' Perceptions on Vocabulary Development

The third and final theme highlights how ChatGPT influences learners' motivation and engagement in studying English. Students expressed that the platform contributed positively to their confidence and willingness to practice language skills. Its non-judgmental feedback, immediate responses, and accessible nature fostered a sense of independence and enjoyment in learning.

One student remarked:

> *"I became more enthusiastic about learning because I didn't feel alone. For example, if I was confused about grammar, I could just ask. And because the answers were immediate and clear, I became even more interested in continuing to learn."* (R1)

Another participant reflected on the tool's role in creating a more relaxed and self-paced learning environment:

> *"For someone like me who isn't in a language major, ChatGPT is like a personal tutor. I'm more motivated to learn because I know I can study anytime. Sometimes when I'm bored, I try chatting in full English with ChatGPT, which makes me more confident."* (R2)

Similarly, the third student observed a decrease in resistance toward learning tasks:

> *"In my opinion, ChatGPT makes me more interested in learning because the process is fast and practical. In the past, I was reluctant to open a dictionary or look up the meaning of a sentence, but now I can just ask."* (R3)

The findings reveal that ChatGPT plays a significant role in enhancing students' motivation and engagement in learning English. Participants consistently described how the platform encouraged them to practice more actively by offering immediate, judgment-free feedback. This responsiveness helped build their confidence and fostered a sense of independence, making English learning feel less intimidating and more enjoyable. For instance, one student mentioned that they felt less alone in their learning journey because they could easily ask questions and receive clear explanations. This instant support encouraged sustained interest and enthusiasm, especially when dealing with challenging topics such as grammar or vocabulary.

Moreover, ChatGPT's accessibility and on-demand nature allowed students to learn at their own pace and convenience, which contributed to a more relaxed and self-driven learning experience. One participant even likened ChatGPT to a personal tutor, highlighting how the ability to engage in full English conversations whenever they wanted helped boost their confidence and made learning more interactive. Another student pointed out how the tool made learning more practical and efficient, replacing the traditional effort of using a dictionary or searching online with a faster, more conversational approach. These insights indicate that ChatGPT not only supports cognitive development by improving language skills, but also significantly influences the emotional and motivational aspects of English language learning by reducing anxiety, increasing self-confidence, and sustaining learners' engagement in a low- pressure environment.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined the implementation of ChatGPT in English language learning among university students, focusing on three key aspects: its practical use, its impact on vocabulary development, and its role in fostering motivation and engagement. The findings reveal that ChatGPT is widely perceived as a flexible, accessible, and autonomous learning companion, supporting a variety of language tasks such as writing, grammar correction, reading comprehension, and vocabulary building. Students utilized the platform independently, treating it as a personal tutor that adapts to their individual learning goals and schedules—an approach that aligns with principles of self-directed learning and personalized education.

Furthermore, the study found that ChatGPT significantly contributes to vocabulary acquisition. Participants appreciated the platform's ability to offer immediate, contextualized explanations of new words, which not only improved their understanding but also encouraged them to engage more deeply with the learning material. This interactive process promoted better retention and fostered habits like vocabulary journaling, suggesting a shift from passive learning to active, exploratory engagement. Importantly, the emotional and motivational benefits of using ChatGPT were strongly

emphasized by participants. The platform's non- judgmental feedback, instant responsiveness, and availability fostered a sense of enjoyment, lowered anxiety, and increased learners' confidence in using English. These outcomes reflect the potential of AI to enhance both the cognitive and affective dimensions of language learning.

In conclusion, the integration of ChatGPT into English language learning presents promising opportunities for enhancing learner autonomy, vocabulary proficiency, and motivational engagement. While it may not fully replace traditional instruction—especially for speaking and listening skills—ChatGPT serves as a valuable supplement that can enrich students' learning experiences in the digital age. Future research is encouraged to explore more structured applications of AI in ELT classrooms, including its integration into formal curricula and its long-term effects on language proficiency development.

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Author contribution	:	Levina Galuh Y R initiated the idea, developed the research instruments, collected, analyzed data and wrote the initial draft. Khafidhoh analyzed the data, reviewed the initial draft and revised it.
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Ethics declaration	:	We acknowledge that this work has been written based on ethical research that conforms with the regulations of my university and that I have obtained the permission from the relevant institute when collecting data. We support GPELTL in maintaining high standards of personal conduct, practicing honesty in all our professional practices and endeavors.
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