

# AI Tools' Impact on ELT Learner Independence: Ethical Implications in Higher Education in Madhesh Province, Nepal

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## Abstract

*The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into education is revolutionizing traditional teaching and learning practices, offering transformative potential in enhancing learner engagement and performance. In the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), AI tools are increasingly adopted to personalize instruction, improve accessibility, and foster learner autonomy. However, their use also raises significant ethical concerns, particularly regarding originality, critical thinking, and academic integrity. This study aims to explore the multifaceted impact of AI tools on ELT learners in higher education across Madhesh Province, Nepal. It focuses on identifying both the educational benefits and the ethical challenges associated with AI use in ELT contexts. A quantitative research design was employed, involving thirty purposively selected ELT learners and twenty English language teachers from various districts of Madhesh Province. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and analyzed to assess perceptions and experiences related to AI integration in ELT. The findings reveal a dual*

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*impact: while AI tools support learner autonomy, facilitate personalized learning, and enhance accessibility, they also contribute to increased plagiarism, reduced critical thinking, and suppressed creativity. The study concludes that although AI holds considerable promise for ELT, its implementation must be carefully balanced with ethical considerations to support holistic learner development.*

**Keywords:** *AI Tools, ELT Learners, Ethical Implications, Higher Education, Madhesh Province.*

## Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI), needless to say, is rapidly evolving in the 21st century and there is no any other sector untouched by AI. Furthermore, AI has facilitated human activities and made the human tasks easy and accessible. Baker and Smith (2019, p. 10) offer a comprehensive definition of AI as computational system that exhibit cognitive functions, commonly associated with human intelligence, particularly focused on learning and solving complex problems. This clearly hints us that AI emphasizes on creating a kind of computational system that replicates human intelligence to accomplish various sorts of human tasks requiring cognitive abilities for the better performance. AI utilization has shifted a paradigm in language education from traditional, teacher-centered instruction to learner-centered approaches emphasizing autonomy and self-regulation. It has played a vital role in providing learning autonomy to the English Language Teaching (ELT) learners and teachers.

In the context of education, the rise of AI is significantly transforming teaching and learning practices. As AI technologies continue to evolve, educational processes are becoming both more sophisticated and increasingly challenging. The traditional teacher-student interaction is gradually shifting toward a digitally connected environment, mediated through virtual platforms and AI interfaces. With the integration of AI-powered tools, the conventional paper-based methods of instruction are being replaced by dynamic screen-based approaches, enabling distance education and facilitating personalized learning experiences. According to Luckin et al. (2016), AI has the potential to deliver adaptive learning systems that adjust content and learning speed to meet individual learners' needs, thus promoting student engagement, autonomy, and deeper understanding. Moreover, AI tools support real-time feedback, intelligent tutoring systems, and automated assessment, enhancing the efficiency and responsiveness of instructional design.

These technologies also allow educators to track students' progress more accurately and intervene when necessary, fostering a more inclusive learning environment. As noted by Dhawan and Batra (2020), AI is poised to influence a broad spectrum of human activities, including but not limited to education. The integration of natural language processing and machine learning further enhances communication between learners and digital platforms, making the learning experience more interactive. As educational institutions increasingly adopt AI-driven systems, there is a growing need to ensure ethical use, data privacy, and equitable access to such technologies.

With regard to adoption of AI tools in higher education of Nepal, particularly in Madhesh Province, educators and learners are capitalizing these tools on fostering teaching efficiency and learning outcomes. Moreover, AI tools in Madhesh are not only enabling the educators and learners to initiate new teaching and learning solutions but also creating opportunities for deeper learning. Furthermore, AI tools have played remarkable role to equip students and teachers with information and communication (ICT) skills and ultimately resulted quality education. Simultaneously, AI tools have emerged as innovative solutions, offering virtual tutoring, automated assignment systems, and AI driven language learning platforms for ELT learners. These tools have made possible to improve variety of learning resources, practice real-world language abilities in virtual settings. However, these days, the excessive dependency on AI tools in education has also been sparking various ethical issues, especially its serious impact on enhancing learner autonomy. Even though AI tools provide students and teachers greater independence and tailored learning opportunities, they also pose ethical concerns including plagiarism, decline in creativity, and weakening of creativity. Therefore, this research uses its lenses to explore the multifaceted impacts of AI tools on ELT learners in higher education within Madhesh Province, emphasizing both benefits and various ethical issues concerned. By employing a quantitative approach, the study seeks to provide information for educators, policymakers, curriculum designers, and higher education institutions in Nepal.

### **Objectives**

This study has been administered to achieve the following objectives:

- To investigate the impacts of AI tools on ELT learner independence,
- To elicit the information regarding the perceptions about benefits AI tools as well as ethical concerns,
- To suggest the pedagogical implications.

## **Review of Related Literature**

The various studies have clearly outlined that integration of AI tools into the educational landscape has resulted dramatic changes to ELT, especially at the higher education level. AI-driven tools are excessively being adopted by the educators, students, teachers and the professionals related to the field to assist individualized student learning. These tools, undoubtedly have enabled self-paced, tailored and most importantly have promoted learner autonomy. However, rapid use of AI-driven tools and over-reliance on such tools also showcases ethical concerns related to raising plagiarism, data privacy, diminishing critical thinking, and lack of originality. And such dehumanizing activities surely raise finger about responsible use of AI tools in ELT. This literature review section mainly explores existing studies that highlight both roles of AI tools in promoting learner autonomy and ethical dilemmas that arise, particularly in the context of Madhesh Province, Nepal.

### **Benefits of AI in ELT**

AI technologies are used rapidly in higher education and such technologies have enhanced teaching and learning experiences and promoted inclusivity. Karki and Khatri (2023) highlights how AI promotes deeper comprehension over rote memorization by enabling personalized learning by adjusting to each student's demands. By assimilating it with ELT learner independence, Dugosija (2024) states that platforms like Grammarly, Duolingo, and ChatGpt enables learners to learn their own pace by delivering personalized feedback and adaptive practice. At the same time, these applications support grammar correction, pronunciation evaluation, and vocabulary building which lessen ELT learners' reliance on their teachers.

In the same vein, Rukiati et al. (2023), as cited in Dugosija, 2024) argue that AI promotes self-directed English study by customizing tasks to each learner's unique necessities. These tools boost student engagement and confidence.

Monika et al. (2023) conducted a survey of PhD scholars and the result revealed that 72% of respondents experienced greater confidence in their academic writing due to AI support. The AI tools such as Grammarly and Quillbot played a remarkable role in enhancing language precision and organization, allowing students to write more independently and effectively. The research underscored the integration of AI tools within the academic research environment, facilitating paraphrasing, content creation, and grammar correction.

In a related perspective, Owan (2020) highlighted AI's pivotal role in customized education, observing that the AI tools like ChatGPT aid students in producing and enhancing academic materials. Automated grading and instant feedback enable learners to track their progress and revision, promoting self-regulation and goal-setting.

### **Ethical Implications of AI**

The rapid expansion of AI tools has heightened concerns about academic dishonesty. Tools like ChatGPT, facilitate the creation of essays, texts translations, and fabricated citations by students, complicating efforts to identify plagiarism (Karki & Khatri, 2023; Cotton et al. 2023). A study by Nietzel (2023) found that 43% of students used AI tools for coursework, prompting worries about the originality of their submissions and their responsibility for intellectual work. Karki and Khatri (2023) assert that AI generated content muddies the boundary between students and machine contributions, creating difficulties for institutions in preserving academic standards.

Regarding another ethical concern about data privacy and security, Xu and Yuan (2021) highlight that without strong data protection measures, sensitive information is vulnerable to misuse or leaks. For example, AI protecting tools for online examinations monitor students via webcams, raising issues of surveillance and consent.

It is also found that depending too much on AI tools can limit students' ability to think for themselves. Chatbots and grammar checkers quickly fix mistakes but often do not explain the reasons behind them, which can prevent students from learning deeply (Alghamdy, 2023; Iskender, 2023). A study by (Bin Mohamed, Hidayat, binti Suhaizi, bin Mahmud, & binti Baharuddin, 2022) showed that English language teachers worried that tools like ChatGPT could weaken students' research and problem-solving abilities. It shows in Madhesh's English classrooms, where memorization is common, relying on AI could make passive learning habits even worse.

Although research widely acknowledges the ability of AI tools to transform ELT, most studies mentioned above highlight advantages such as tailored learning, self-paced instruction, and enhanced student independence (Dugosija, 2024; Rukiati et al., 2023; Owan et al. 2023). However, some scholars have raised ethical concerns, including plagiarism, threats to data privacy and diminished original thought (Karki

& Khatri, 2023; Xu & Yuan, 2021; Cotton et al., 2024). Yet, there is a clear gap of research examining these issues within specific educational and cultural landscape, i.e. Madhesh Province of Nepal.

In Madhesh Province, education is often characterized by rote memorization and teacher-centered approaches. This context raises questions about whether AI integration might unintentionally perpetuate passive learning habits and hinder the autonomy it seeks to foster. Researchers like Mohamed (2022) and Iskender (2023) caution that AI tools like ChatGPT may reduce students' engagement in critical thinking and problem-solving skills already underdeveloped in regions like Madhesh. Moreover, the literature largely overlooks how ELT students and educators in Madhesh perceive and address these ethical challenges in their daily academic practices.

This study aims to bridge this gap by offering a focused, empirical analysis of how AI tools both enable and constrain student independence in Madhesh's higher educational settings. It contributes to the global discussion on AI in education by emphasizing ethical concerns and learner agency in a regionally distinct context that has received little attention in existing research.

## **Method**

This study employed a quantitative survey design mainly for investigating the impacts of AI tools on ELT learner independence especially in higher education of Madhesh Province, Nepal. A ten-item Likert-scale questionnaire was used to elicit the information regarding the perceptions about benefits of AI tools as well as ethical concerns.

The study focused on ELT learners and English language teachers from various higher educational institutions in Madhesh Province. Through purposive sampling, 30 ELT students and 20 English Language teachers were selected from districts including Sarlahi, Dhanusha, Parsa, Mahottari and Siraha. Participants were selected based on their experience with AI tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, QuillBot, and other similar platforms in academic contexts. The selected English teachers were engaged in tertiary-level English instruction, and the students were enrolled in bachelors and master's degree ELT programs. This deliberate selection ensured participants had substantial interaction with AI tools in their academic settings.

Primary data were gathered using a 10-item Likert-scale questionnaire administered separately to students and teachers. Each item was rated on a 5-point scale: Strongly Agree (5), Agree (4), Neutral (3), Disagree (2), and Strongly Disagree (1). The questionnaire aimed to assess perceptions regarding: The role of AI in fostering learner autonomy, pedagogical benefits, ethical concerns, including originality and critical thinking, and the necessity of regulating AI use in education. The given items were designed being solely based on literature section of the study and pilot-tested with 10 informants mainly for ensuring clarity and reliability.

The study firmly claims that it has followed ethical guidelines. The participants' identities were kept private with anonymous data adoption. Their individual or private information were not collected and the questionnaire was developed as per the relevancy of Madhesh's educational landscape, ignoring the sensitive issues.

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics to determine the percentage of distribution of responses across the Likert-scale categories (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree). Responses from the teachers and students were analysed separately to enable comparative insights. Manual coding was adopted to preserve contextual accuracy and ensure reliable interpretation.

## Result and Discussion

Responses made on AI impact on ELT learners' independence by 30 students and 20 teachers have been presented in tables and analysed below.

**Table 1**

*ELT Students' Responses (N=30)*

S.N.	Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.	AI helps learner autonomy	33%	50%	10%	3%	4%
2.	I rely on AI tools	57%	30%	7%	3%	3%
3.	Feedback from AI improves writing	43%	40%	10%	3%	4%
4.	AI reduces critical thinking	30%	33%	17%	13%	7%

S.N.	Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5.	I understand grammar better via AI	27%	47%	13%	10%	3%
6.	Confidence improved via AI	30%	50%	13%	3%	4%
7.	AI overuse reduces creativity	30%	40%	17%	7%	6%
8.	Concern about plagiarism	37%	43%	10%	7%	3%
9.	AI support personalized learning	40%	43%	10%	4%	3%
10.	AI should be regulated	40%	37%	10%	3%	3%

*Source: Field Survey, 2025.*

The integration of AI tools in ELT settings has significantly impacted learner autonomy, perceptions of learning efficacy, and ethical concerns in the higher education context of Madhesh Province. The ten statements from the Likert scale students' responses reveal both positive and cautious attitudes among respondents toward AI-enabled language learning.

A substantial 83% (33% strongly agree, 50% agree) of participants believe that AI enhances learner autonomy. This indicates that students in Madhesh Province perceive AI as a catalyst for self-regulated learning, giving them the flexibility to practice, revise, and learn at their own pace without constant teacher dependency.

With 57% strongly agreeing and 30% agreeing, students overwhelmingly rely on AI tools. This shows high digital acceptance, suggesting that AI tools like Grammarly, ChatGPT, and translation apps have become embedded in ELT practices and learner routines.

The 43% of respondents strongly agree and 40% agree that AI feedback enhances their writing. This highlights AI's practical role in offering immediate corrections and structural suggestions, which is especially beneficial in rural and semi-urban institutions where teacher availability may be limited.

While 30% strongly agree and 33% agree that AI might reduce critical thinking, this suggests a cautionary awareness. Students seem to acknowledge that



over-dependence on AI may discourage original thought and problem-solving, raising concerns over cognitive development and the depth of learning.

Nearly three-quarters of the respondents (27% strongly agree, 47% agree) report enhanced grammatical understanding through AI. This implies AI is not just a crutch but also an educational resource that facilitates comprehension of linguistic structures in English.

A notable 30% strongly agree and 50% agree that AI boosts their confidence. This indicates that technology supports learners by reducing anxiety and offering a judgment-free space to learn and make mistakes, fostering a growth mindset.

This concern reflects a nuanced understanding—30% strongly agree, 40% agree—that AI might hinder original language use if excessively relied upon. The result underlines a tension between technological support and the erosion of creative output in writing and speaking tasks.

High concern over plagiarism (37% strongly agree, 43% agree) reveals an ethical consciousness among learners. The easy access to AI-generated content raises worries about academic integrity and originality in assignments and assessments.

With 40% strongly agreeing and 43% agreeing, this finding affirms that AI tools cater to individual learning styles and paces. This is particularly vital in a diverse educational region like Madhesh, where student backgrounds and proficiencies vary widely.

The desire for regulation—expressed by 40% strongly agreeing and 37% agreeing—points to an understanding of the dual nature of AI. Students recognize the need for ethical guidelines and institutional policies to prevent misuse while still leveraging its benefits.

The analysis of the Likert scale responses reflects a complex but largely optimistic engagement with AI tools in ELT across higher education institutions in Madhesh Province. Learners appreciate the autonomy, improved grammar and writing support, and personalized learning AI offers. However, they remain critically aware of potential downsides—plagiarism, reduced creativity, and compromised critical thinking—indicating a mature digital literacy and the need for balanced pedagogical policies. This evidence-based snapshot supports the call for structured AI integration with ethical considerations in educational policy reforms across the region.

**Table 2***Teachers' Responses (N=20)*

S.N.	Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.	AI helps learner autonomy	30%	40%	20%	10%	0%
2.	I rely on AI tools	40%	30%	20%	10%	0%
3.	Feedback from AI improves writing	30%	50%	10%	10%	0%
4.	AI reduces critical thinking	40%	30%	10%	10%	10%
5.	I understand grammar better via AI	20%	40%	30%	10%	0%
6.	Confidence improved via AI	20%	50%	20%	10%	0%
7.	AI overuse reduces creativity	40%	40%	10%	10%	0%
8.	Concern about plagiarism	50%	30%	10%	10%	0%
9.	AI support personalized learning	30%	50%	10%	10%	0%
10.	AI should be regulated	60%	30%	10%	10%	0%

*Source: Field Survey, 2025.*

The ten statements from the Likert scale teachers' responses reveal both positive and cautious attitudes among respondents toward AI-enabled language teaching learning.

A total of 70% of teachers (30% strongly agree, 40% agree) believe AI fosters learner autonomy. This suggests a strong consensus that AI tools promote self-directed learning. Only 10% disagreed, and none strongly disagreed, implying broad recognition of AI's potential in enabling students to take charge of their own English language learning process.

Among the respondents, 70% (40% strongly agree, 30% agree) of teachers acknowledged personal reliance on AI tools, which illustrates that AI is not just a learner support tool but also integral to educators' workflows. This reliance may influence how they guide students to use such tools, possibly normalizing their adoption in ELT practices.

A dominant 80% (30% strongly agree, 50% agree) believe that AI-generated feedback enhances writing skills. This suggests trust in AI tools like Grammarly or ChatGPT in offering real-time, personalized suggestions, especially in grammar, coherence, and structure—areas traditionally handled through peer or teacher feedback.

Here, 70% of respondents (40% strongly agree, 30% agree) expressed concern that AI might dampen critical thinking, revealing a significant ethical implication. While AI helps with tasks, teachers worry it may do so at the cost of learners' analytical or reflective abilities—important pillars of higher education.

The 60% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that AI tools helped them understand grammar better, showing that these tools serve dual purposes: aiding both teaching and learning. However, 30% remained neutral, hinting at possible gaps in AI's explanatory clarity or user training in this regard.

A majority (70%) agreed that AI tools help boost learner confidence, likely due to immediate assistance and error correction, which can reduce anxiety, especially in second-language contexts. This confidence, however, may be superficial if not grounded in deep learning.

An equal 80% (40% strongly agree, 40% agree) warned that overreliance on AI may stifle creativity, emphasizing a core ethical concern. While AI can enhance productivity, its template responses may limit students' original thought or expression in writing and speaking tasks.

The 80% of teachers reported concern over plagiarism, a critical ethical issue tied to AI use. As students may submit AI-generated content as their own, this raises questions of academic honesty and institutional policy. This also reflects broader global debates about authorship and AI-assisted work.

Another 80% (30% strongly agree, 50% agree) agreed that AI enables personalized learning experiences. Adaptive technologies can tailor content to individual needs, pacing, and levels—especially beneficial in diverse classrooms like those in Madhesh Province.

A significant 90% (60% strongly agree, 30% agree) believe regulation is essential. This aligns with the ethical theme of the study, highlighting the need for guidelines on AI use to prevent misuse, ensure fairness, and maintain academic standards in higher education institutions.

The data reveals a nuanced perspective from educators in Madhesh Province. On one hand, they largely recognize the positive potential of AI in promoting learner autonomy, personalized learning, confidence, and writing skills. On the other hand, there are clear ethical concerns regarding diminished critical thinking, reduced creativity, and increased plagiarism.

The overwhelming agreement on the need for regulation (90%) suggests that while AI tools are welcome in ELT classrooms, their integration must be guided by clear policies, ethical awareness, and ongoing teacher training. If appropriately managed, AI could significantly empower ELT learners in the region, but without ethical safeguards, it could undermine core academic values and learning outcomes.

## **Discussion**

The above data gathered from ELT teachers and students in higher education institutions across Madhesh Province provide comprehensive insights into the AI tool usage. Both groups (i.e. teachers and students) acknowledged the rising prominence of AI in academic institutions, expressing blended views regarding their advantages and ethical implications.

A substantial majority of students (80%) either strongly agreed or agreed that AI tools foster learner autonomy, indicating that these tools help students take greater control over their learning. Teachers echoed this sentiment, with 70 % recognizing AI's role in supporting student independence. These perspectives align with Dugosija (2024) and Rukiati et al. (2023), focus AI's ability to deliver personalized learning, provide prompt feedback, and self-paced study.

Regarding AI tool usage, 87% students reported relying heavily on platforms such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, and QuillBot for academic tasks. Similarly, 70% of teachers indicated they use AI tools to varying extents. This widespread adoption highlights AI's integration into the educational landscape of Madhesh Province. Notably, 83% of students and 80% of teachers agreed that AI generated feed improves writing skills, consistent with Monika et al. (2023), who observed enhanced confidence and precision in academic writing among AI users. However, alongside these benefits, significant concerns were raised. Both students and teachers agree that AI tools increase the risk of academic dishonesty. This aligns with Cotton et al. (2023) and Nietzel (2023), who note the difficulty of distinguishing between student-authored and AI-generated works due to tools that can create essays or paraphrase texts.

Positively, both groups appreciated AI's role in personalized learning, with 83 % of students and 80% teachers agreeing that AI supports tailored, flexible education. This is particularly valuable in resource-limited settings like Madhesh, where AI can enhance inclusivity and adaptability in learning environments.

A furthermore, a strong majority-77% of students and 90 % of teachers advocated for regulating AI use in education. This reflects widespread concern about the lack of ethical guidelines, training, and institutional policies, reinforcing Xu and Yuan's (2021) warnings about risks like data privacy breaches and academic surveillance in unregulated AI use.

In nutshell, the findings reveal a complex dynamic between AI's benefits and challenges in ELT. While AI tools significantly boost learner autonomy, writing proficiency, and personalized learning, they also raise serious ethical concerns, including plagiarism, weakened critical thinking, reduced originality, and ambiguity in authorship. These issues are particularly critical in Madhesh Province, where traditional teacher-centred teaching learnings intersect with emerging technologies.

## **Conclusion**

The present study examined the dual influence of AI tools on learner independence in ELT within higher education institutions in Madhesh Province, Nepal, focusing their potential to transform education as well as their ethical implications. Findings from ELT students and teachers reveal that AI tools, including ChatGPT, Grammarly and QuillBot, significantly promote learner autonomy, enhance academic writing, improve grammatical proficiency, and boost student confidence. The adoption of AI in educational contexts has also supported personalized learning experiences and enabled self-paced academic progress. However, the research also highlighted critical challenges. Both students and teachers expressed concerns that over-dependence on AI tools might undermine critical thinking, suppress creativity, and elevate the risk of plagiarism. Both technical and pedagogical challenges can be faced and there need strong measures to overcome these obstacles (Kovalenko & Baranivska, 2024). In Madhesh where passive learning practices are deeply rooted, the unguided applications of AI could reinforce superficial learning habits rather than encouraging in-depth understanding and independent inquiry.

Thus, while AI tools offer considerable benefits for ELT learners, their excessive and unregulated use may jeopardize core educational values such as

originality, intellectual engagement, and ethical integrity. These findings underscore the necessity of harmonizing technological advancement with ethical responsibility.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

The findings of this study reveal that while AI tools significantly enhance learner autonomy, their excessive usage may lead to unintended ethical issues. In the context of Madhesh Province, where teacher-centred instruction and rote learning practices prevail, the adoption of AI demands ethically sound approach. To ensure that AI promotes rather than obstructs independent learning, it is imperative to implement practical, pedagogically effective, and ethically guided strategies in ELT classrooms. Realizing the growing impacts of AI in education, it has been found to employ proactive measures that prepare students and teachers in Madhesh mainly for responsible use of AI. Next, integration of AI in the higher education institutions should not only focus on enhancing learning outcomes but also align with local values and community needs. In this context, various recommendations such as necessity of AI literacy programs for both teachers and students, encouraging student creativity, and ensuring ethical use of technology in classrooms can helps the institutions in fostering meaningful learning environment.

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