

Navigating the "Dependency Trap": A Systematic Literature Review on Generative AI in EFL Learning and Its Contextual Barriers

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ABSTRACT

The rapid integration of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) is changing English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. Students often use GenAI as a backup resource or private tutor because of challenges such as large class sizes and delayed teacher feedback. However, this creates a major risk: the technology can easily shift from a helpful learning support into a tool that does the actual thinking and writing for the student. This systematic literature review synthesizes research from 2023 to 2026 to examine how classroom barriers and student habits combine to create a “dependency trap”. It is a self-reinforcing cycle where over-reliance on AI hinders independent language development. By following PRISMA guidelines, a systematic search was conducted across Scopus and Web of Science. The screening focused on peer-reviewed studies investigating the structural, cultural, and pedagogical challenges of using GenAI in global EFL contexts. The synthesis shows that a lack of clear university policies, unequal access to technology, and teacher stress all accelerate student dependency on AI. Students often trust fluent AI outputs blindly because the text sounds academic, even when they lack the skills to spot errors. This leads to two major risks: cognitive offloading, which creates fluency without comprehension, and a loss of unique student voice, where writing becomes repetitive and formulaic. The study concludes that simply allowing students to use AI without guidance is insufficient. Instead, educational institutions must establish clear usage policies and formal AI literacy training. This

will help students critically evaluate AI tools and protect their own learning autonomy.

Keywords: generative AI, EFL learning, contextual barriers, dependency trap, systematic literature review

INTRODUCTION

The rapid use and development of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) have transformed educational practices across disciplines, including English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL). Recent empirical studies have shown that GenAI tools such as ChatGPT, Gemini, and other large language model (LLM)-based applications are increasingly used to support language learning through automated feedback, writing assistance, conversational practice, machine translation, vocabulary development and personalized learning experiences (Dinh, 2025; Karu & Hoque, 2024; Lee et al., 2025; W. C. Wang & Zou, 2026). Within the context of EFL/ESL, GenAI has been positioned as a supplementary learning resource. They are capable of extending learning opportunities beyond classroom boundaries and reducing barriers associated with limited teacher availability and restricted exposure to English.

Empirical studies included in this review indicate that students perceive GenAI as accessible, efficient, and supportive for language development, particularly in writing and feedback-related tasks (Almusharraf et al., 2025; Nelson et al., 2025; Tekir, 2026). Several studies reported positive perceptions regarding increased confidence, reduced anxiety, improved engagement, and enhanced opportunities for autonomous learning (Cen & Shakibaei, 2026; Farangi & Nejadghanbar, 2026; Kurniati et al., 2025; Y. Shen & Guo, 2024). Teacher-focused studies similarly highlighted the potential of GenAI to support instructional preparation, assessment practices, and individualized feedback while also emphasizing concerns regarding implementation readiness and pedagogical adaptation (Al-Maawali, 2026; Arefian et al., 2026; Korucu-Kis & Bakla, 2026; Nazim & Alzubi, 2025).

Despite the opportunities, the rapid use and adoption of GenAI have generated growing concerns regarding learner autonomy, academic integrity, critical thinking, authorship, and excessive dependence on machine-generated output (Li & Ding, 2025; Nguyen et al., 2026; Y. N. Shen & Chen, 2025). Across the reviewed literature, concerns repeatedly emerged that learners may rely on GenAI not only as a learning aid but also as a substitute for cognitive effort and

language production (Albeihi & Rice, 2025; Ding & Song, 2026). In EFL/ESL environments, where linguistic and limitations, assessment pressure, and unequal access to instructional support are common, GenAI may become a compensatory mechanism rather than a scaffold for learning.

This review conceptualizes this phenomenon as the “dependency trap”. It is a self-reinforcing cycle in which contextual barriers encourage learners and teachers to rely increasingly on GenAI. Repeated reliance may gradually reduce independent language processing, learner agency, and critical engagement with language learning tasks. Studies included in this review reported concerns related to overreliance on AI-generated writing, reduced opportunities for productive struggle, weakened self-regulation, and uncertainty regarding authentic language development (Abduh et al., 2025; Albadarneh et al., 2024; Al-Kadi & Ali, 2024).

Existing literature on GenAI in EFL/ESL education has explored students’ and teachers’ perceptions, ethical concerns, writing practices, motivational outcomes, teacher readiness, and classroom integration (Barrett & Pack, 2023; Cong-Lem, 2025; Neff et al., 2024). However, findings remain fragmented across educational levels, national contexts, language skills, and methodological approaches. While some studies emphasize the pedagogical benefits of GenAI, others highlight risks associated with dependency, superficial learning, academic dishonesty, and unequal institutional preparedness (Ansaree & Uddin, 2026; Li & Ding, 2025; Y. D. Wang & Fussell, 2026).

Therefore, a systematic synthesis is necessary to consolidate current evidence and identify how contextual barriers may contribute to dependency. By integrating findings across learner, teacher, institutional, and ethical dimensions, this review seeks to provide a clearer understanding of how the “dependency trap” emerges and what pedagogical responses may support responsible, autonomous, and critically informed GenAI integration in language education.

This review is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do students and teachers perceive the use of GenAI in EFL/ESL learning and teaching?
2. What benefits and risks of GenAI use are reported in empirical EFL/ESL studies published between 2023 and 2026?
3. What contextual barriers contribute to learners’ or teachers’ reliance on GenAI in EFL/ESL contexts?
4. How does the reviewed literature explain or imply the emergence of GenAI “dependency trap” in EFL/ESL learning?

METHOD

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) design guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) 2020 framework. The review focused on empirical research examining the use of generative artificial intelligence in EFL/ESL learning and teaching contexts. This systematic review delineates the exploratory research questions by articles selecting, identifying, and analysing present information (Colquhoun et al., 2014). The objective was not only to summarize perceptions of GenAI use but also to identify contextual barriers that may encourage repeated or excessive reliance on AI-supported learning practices.

a. Data Sources and Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted using two major academic databases: Scopus and Web of Science. These databases were selected because they provide broad coverage of peer-reviewed publications. The search was restricted to studies in English between 2023 and 2026, reflecting the period during GenAI became widely adopted and increasingly investigated in educational research. Search terms combined concepts related to generative AI and language education. Keywords included variations of:

1. "generative AI"
2. "ChatGPT"
3. "large language model"
4. "AI tools"
5. "EFL"
6. "ESL"
7. "English language learning"
8. "English language teaching"
9. "perception"
10. "attitude"
11. "experience"
12. "barrier"
13. "challenge"
14. "dependency"
15. "overreliance"
16. "autonomy"
17. "AI literacy"

b. Eligibility Criteria

During this process, the empirical research with a well-designed methodology was considered within the review by referring to the

claims of Firmstone (2019). Similarly, editorials and opinion pieces were excluded from this review because of lacking methodological rigor. The inclusion and exclusion criteria are listed in Table 1.

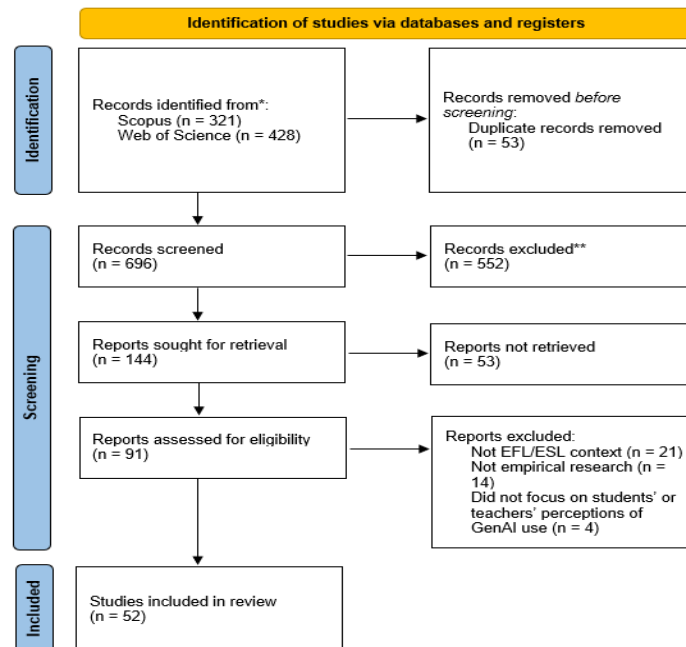
Table 1:
Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion	Exclusion
(a) Articles must be published	(a) Articles were composed in languages aside from English,
(b) Articles must be related to the application of "GenAI" or "Generative Artificial intelligence" or "AI technology" or "Large Language Model",	(b) Articles did not concentrate on the application of "AI" or "Artificial intelligence" or "AI technology" or "Intelligent support" or associated with "Effect" or "Effectiveness",
(c) Articles must be associated with "English Language Learning" or "English as a Second Language" or "English as a Foreign Language" or "ESL" or "EFL",	(c) Articles did not focus on English as EFL/ESL learning and focused on other foreign language learning,
(d) Articles must be in a peer-reviewed journal indexed in Scopus,	(d) Articles were written in peer-reviewed conference proceedings book reviews, editorial materials
(e) Articles must include empirical data, and	(e) Articles were not empirical research or those with little information about methodology, and
(f) Articles have to be published from January 2023 to May 2026.	(f) Articles were published before January 2023 and after May 2026.

c. Study Selection

The study selection process followed the PRISMA 2020 procedure. Records were identified from Scopus and Web of Science and exported for screening. Duplicate records were removed prior to title and abstract screening through Rayyan AI.

Figure 1:
PRISMA Flow Diagram



Eligible records proceeded to full-text assessment. Studies were excluded during eligibility assessment if they did not focus on EFL/ESL contexts, were not empirical, or did not investigate students' or teachers' perspectives regarding GenAI use. Following the screening and eligibility process, 52 empirical studies were included in the final synthesis.

d. Data extraction and Synthesis

Data extraction was conducted using a structured coding framework. Information extracted from each study included:

1. author(s)
2. publication year
3. country/context
4. participant characteristics
5. educational level
6. GenAI platform or tool
7. research design
8. language skill focus
9. reported benefits
10. reported risks
11. contextual barriers
12. implications for learner autonomy and dependency.

The included studies were synthesized thematically. First, studies were categorized according to their primary focus areas, including writing, feedback, motivation, teacher perception, ethics, reading, speaking, vocabulary learning, translation, and instructional material development. Second, similarities and differences in reported benefits and challenges were compared across contexts. Third, findings were interpreted through the conceptual lens of the dependency trap, emphasizing how contextual constraints including limited instructional support, assessment pressure, institutional readiness, and AI literacy may encourage reliance on GenAI and influence learner autonomy, critical thinking, and language development.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The synthesis of the included studies shows that GenAI integration in EFL/ESL learning and teaching is characterized by a central tension: GenAI is widely perceived as a useful scaffold for language development, but the same affordances that make it attractive also create conditions for overreliance.

a. GenAI as a scaffold for writing, feedback, and language production

The most dominant theme across reviewed studies is the use of GenAI as a scaffold for writing and language production. They reported that students used ChatGPT and similar tools to improve grammar, vocabulary, coherence, idea generation, and revision quality. For example, Aiman et al. (2025) found that ChatGPT-supported writing improved structural quality, logical flow, and linguistic sophistication. Tsai (2025) similarly reported improvements in business EFL writing, particularly in producing more professional and organized written output. Other studies on academic and EFL writing also showed that GenAI functioned as an editor, brainstorming partner, feedback provider, and revision assistant (Almusharraf et al., 2025; H. P. Hsu, 2025; Lee et al., 2025; Y. N. Shen & Chen, 2025; Tekir, 2026; W. C. Wang & Zou, 2026).

Students often perceived GenAI as helpful in writing because it allowed them to focus on content while receiving assistance with language form and organization (Almusharraf et al., 2025; Kurniati et al., 2025; L. Z. Wang et al., 2025). In this sense, GenAI can operate as a low-pressure writing assistant that extends feedback opportunities beyond the classroom. However, the writing-focused studies also provide some of the clearest evidence for the potential emergence of a dependency trap. Aiman et al. (2025) reported that excessive

reliance on ChatGPT could reduce creativity, originality, and personal voice. Tekir (2026) found that frequent GenAI use could result in more fluent texts but weaker authorial control and reduced originality. Shen and Chen (2025) further showed that learners' ability to use AI critically differed according to proficiency and academic level. Its value depends on whether students use it as a scaffold for reflection, revision, and decision-making or as a substitute for independent writing effort.

b. Immediate feedback, personalization, and emotional support

A second major finding concerns the perceived value of GenAI for immediate feedback and personalized learning. Students valued GenAI because it provided rapid and individualized responses that were often unavailable in traditional classroom settings. This was especially visible in studies focusing on vocabulary, grammar, reading, translation, and feedback. Abdelhalim and Alsehibany (2025) found that ChatGPT supported vocabulary learning and retention by increasing engagement and confidence. Ali et al. (2025) reported grammar and vocabulary improvement. Dinh et al. (2025) and Nguyen (2026) also reported that students perceived GenAI as useful for improving translation speed, translation accuracy, and learning motivation.

Personalization emerged as a particularly important benefit. Several studies showed that learners appreciated being able to control the pace, level, and type of support they received from GenAI tools (Aldamen et al., 2025; Alzubi et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2025; L. Z. Wang et al., 2025). This flexibility is highly relevant in EFL/ESL contexts, where learners may have limited opportunities for individualized teacher feedback or authentic English interaction. The affective dimension of GenAI use was also significant. Several studies reported that GenAI reduced anxiety, increased confidence, and provided psychological comfort for learners who felt insecure about their English proficiency. Kurniati et al. (2025), for instance, highlighted the role of "synthetic empathy" in supporting students' academic writing experiences. Wang and Fussell (2026) found that ESL students used GenAI to manage feelings of linguistic deficiency and cultural uncertainty, while Derakhshan (2025) reported that GenAI-mediated instruction improved emotional engagement and gave learners a stronger sense of ownership over learning.

These findings are important because they show that dependency may not only be cognitive or academic, but also affective. Students may rely on GenAI not simply because it produces better grammar or faster answers, but because it provides reassurance,

reduces embarrassment, and helps them cope with linguistic insecurity. This emotional support can be pedagogically valuable, but it may also create a cycle in which students turn to GenAI whenever they experience uncertainty, rather than developing tolerance for productive struggle in language learning.

c. Teacher perceptions: efficiency, professional support, and role anxiety

Teacher-focused studies show that teachers generally recognized the pedagogical usefulness of GenAI but remained cautious about its implications for professional identity, assessment, and learner development. Abdelhalim et al. (2025) found that EFL instructors perceived ChatGPT and other LLMs as useful for creating tailored materials and reducing administrative burden. Ansaree and Uddin (2026) similarly reported that instructors used AI tools for rapid material preparation and personalized learning pathways. Arefian et al. (2026) found that ChatGPT served as a virtual mentor for teachers by supporting lesson planning and grammar or vocabulary instruction. At the same time, teacher-focused studies repeatedly reported anxiety, uncertainty, and perceived threats to professional identity. Farangi and Nejadghanbar (2026) found that teachers experienced both confidence and concern, especially regarding job security, institutional support, and technological infrastructure. Shen and Guo (2024) similarly found that teachers experienced excitement and enjoyment alongside anxiety and stress caused by misleading AI responses and inadequate resources.

These findings show that the dependency trap can also affect teachers. Teachers may come to rely on GenAI for efficiency and productivity while simultaneously feeling professionally displaced or uncertain about their authority. This tension suggests that responsible GenAI integration requires more than student training. It also requires teacher professional development, institutional support, and clear pedagogical frameworks that help teachers use GenAI without weakening their agency.

d. Contextual barriers shaping GenAI reliance

The reviewed studies consistently show that GenAI use is shaped not only by individual attitudes but also by contextual barriers. These include unclear institutional policy, inadequate AI literacy, unequal access to technology, exam-oriented learning cultures, insufficient teacher training, and students' linguistic insecurity. One major barrier is the absence of clear institutional policy. Students and teachers frequently reported uncertainty about

what counted as acceptable or unacceptable GenAI use. Barrett and Pack (2023) found that many educators lacked institutional guidance or training on ChatGPT use. Similar concerns appeared in studies from Vietnam, Oman, Saudi Arabia, China, Iran, and Bangladesh, where unclear policies contributed to anxiety about academic integrity, assessment fairness, and responsible use (Al-Maawali, 2026; Ansaree & Uddin, 2026; A. X. Chen et al., 2025; Cong-Lem et al., 2024). Without institutional clarity, students may either avoid GenAI entirely, use it secretly, or rely on it without understanding ethical boundaries.

A second barrier is limited AI literacy and prompt literacy. Several studies reported that students and teachers lacked the skills needed to formulate effective prompts, evaluate AI-generated responses, identify hallucinations, and adapt output critically (Abduh et al., 2025; Alzubi et al., 2025; Y. Chen & Shim, 2026). This issue is especially significant in EFL/ESL contexts because lower language proficiency may make it more difficult for students to detect subtle grammatical errors, inappropriate tone, inaccurate content, or culturally unsuitable expressions. Shen and Chen (2025) showed that insufficient English proficiency may limit learners' ability to evaluate AI-generated academic writing, particularly among less advanced students.

A third contextual barrier is unequal access to technology and infrastructure. Studies identified high data costs, weak digital infrastructure, limited availability of paid AI tools, unstable internet access, and regional or national access restrictions as factors influencing GenAI use (Abduh et al., 2025; Ali et al., 2025; Ansaree & Uddin, 2026; Liu et al., 2025; Nazim & Alzubi, 2025). These findings indicate that GenAI integration may reproduce existing educational inequalities. Students and teachers with stable internet access, better devices, paid subscriptions, and higher digital confidence are more likely to benefit from GenAI than those in under-resourced contexts.

A fourth barrier is assessment pressure and exam-oriented learning. Cao and Abdullah (2025) found that students in an exam-focused context became highly engaged with AI but remained amotivated toward deeper learning. Yang and Lin (2025) similarly reported that students used GenAI for writing support but reverted to templates when preparing for exams. These findings suggest that when assessment systems prioritize final performance rather than learning processes, GenAI may become a shortcut for completing tasks instead of a scaffold for developing language competence.

e. Risks of overreliance, academic integrity, bias, and reduced learner agency

Although the reviewed studies reported many benefits, they also consistently identified risks related to overreliance, plagiarism, misinformation, algorithmic bias, reduced originality, and weakened critical thinking. Overreliance appeared in several forms: copying AI-generated responses, accepting feedback without evaluation, using GenAI to bypass language struggle, depending on AI templates, and relying on AI to reduce uncertainty or anxiety (Aiman et al., 2025; Almusharraf et al., 2025; Cao & Abdullah, 2025). Academic integrity concerns were especially prominent in teacher and writing-focused studies. Teachers worried that GenAI could enable plagiarism, misattribution of authorship, and submission of work that did not reflect students' actual language ability (Barrett & Pack, 2023; Belda-Medina & Kokosková, 2026; Neff et al., 2024). However, the reviewed studies also suggest that academic integrity should not be interpreted only as individual misconduct. It is closely connected to unclear policy, insufficient guidance, assessment design, and students' lack of confidence in their own linguistic resources.

Bias and cultural limitations also emerged across the literature. Studies reported concerns about Western-centric cultural content, linguistic bias, algorithmic bias, hallucinations, and inaccurate or culturally inappropriate responses (Abduh et al., 2025; Al-Maawali, 2026; Alzubi et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2025). In EFL/ESL contexts, these risks are particularly serious because learners may not always have the linguistic or cultural knowledge needed to challenge AI-generated output. As a result, GenAI may reinforce dominant language norms and reduce attention to local identities, multilingual practices, and culturally situated expression. These risks show that GenAI can weaken learner agency when students treat generated output as authoritative. Learner agency is preserved only when students remain responsible for evaluating, revising, rejecting, or adapting AI suggestions. Therefore, the core issue is not whether students use GenAI, but whether they use it critically and transparently.

f. The dependency trap: from scaffold to substitute

Taken together, the findings suggest that the dependency trap emerges when GenAI shifts from being a scaffold for learning to becoming a substitute for learning. At the initial stage, learners use GenAI to reduce difficulty, receive feedback, and improve performance. When guided properly, this use can support autonomy, self-regulation, and confidence. However, when contextual barriers remain unresolved, GenAI can become a substitute for cognitive effort,

teacher interaction, peer collaboration, or independent language production.

The reviewed studies suggest that this shift is shaped by four interacting conditions. First, learners experience linguistic insecurity, limited confidence, delayed feedback, or academic pressure. Second, GenAI provides fast, fluent, and authoritative responses that offer immediate relief. Third, institutional contexts often lack clear policy, training, and assessment redesign. Fourth, repeated reliance reduces opportunities for productive struggle, critical evaluation, and independent language development. This cycle is visible in studies reporting copy-paste behavior, passive learning, reduced originality, hidden AI use, and uncertainty about whether AI-supported work reflects genuine learning (Cao & Abdullah, 2025; Li & Ding, 2025; Tekir, 2026; Y. C. Yang et al., 2025).

However, the findings do not support a simple rejection of GenAI. Many studies show that GenAI can promote autonomy when learners use it for feedback comparison, self-assessment, revision, strategic prompting, and reflective learning (Abdelhalim & Alsehibany, 2025; Y. Chen & Shim, 2026; L. W. Hsu, 2025; W. C. Wang & Zou, 2026). Thus, the dependency trap does not arise from GenAI use itself. It arises from uncritical, unsupported, and contextually pressured use. GenAI becomes problematic when it replaces learner decision-making rather than supporting it.

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review examined empirical studies on GenAI use in EFL/ESL learning and teaching published between 2023 and 2026. The findings show that GenAI offers clear benefits for writing, feedback, language development, and personalized learning while also raising concerns about overreliance, academic integrity, reduced originality, and unequal readiness across contexts. This review highlights the idea of the “dependency trap,” where GenAI shifts from supporting learning to replacing independent language practice and critical engagement. The findings suggest that this risk is shaped not only by the technology itself but also by contextual factors such as limited feedback, assessment pressure, unclear policies, unequal access, and insufficient AI literacy. Therefore, effective GenAI integration requires guidance and purposeful pedagogical use. This review has several limitations. It included only English-language studies indexed in Scopus and Web of Science between 2023 and 2026, which may have excluded relevant research from other sources and contexts. In addition, many included studies were perception-

based and conducted in specific settings, limiting conclusions about long-term learning outcomes.

The findings imply that teachers should use GenAI as a learning scaffold rather than a substitute for student effort, while students need support in developing AI literacy and critical evaluation skills. Institutions should establish clear policies and assessment practices for responsible AI use. Future research should examine the long-term effects of GenAI on learner autonomy, language development, and educational equity. Overall, GenAI has strong potential to support EFL/ESL education, but its benefits depend on balanced implementation that promotes autonomy rather than dependency.

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