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Negotiating Culture and Agency: Toraja Students' Engagement with AI in English Language Learning

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ABSTRACT

The increasing use of artificial intelligence (AI) in English language learning has generated growing interest in its pedagogical benefits and sociocultural implications. However, limited attention has been given to how students from local cultural communities interpret and negotiate AI use within their cultural contexts. This study explores how Toraja students engage with AI in English language learning and how such engagement relates to cultural identity and student agency. A qualitative case study design was employed involving nine Toraja undergraduate students with prior experience using AI tools in English learning. Data were collected over eight weeks through student assignment artifacts, semi-structured interviews, learning diaries, and focus group discussions. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns of practice, meaning-making, and cultural negotiation. The findings reveal four major themes. First, AI functioned as a learning partner that supported linguistic development, idea generation, writing organization, revision, and learner confidence. Second, students used AI as a source of global knowledge while recognizing its limited and often superficial representation of Toraja culture. Third, learners actively modified and enriched AI-generated content by adding local knowledge, correcting inaccuracies, and preserving cultural authenticity. Fourth, students expressed ambivalence toward AI, appreciating its efficiency while remaining concerned about dependency, cultural bias, and ethical use. The study shows that AI-mediated language learning is not culturally neutral but shaped by learners' identities, values, and local knowledge. It highlights the importance of integrating critical AI literacy and culturally responsive pedagogy in English language teaching.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of generative artificial intelligence (AI), such as ChatGPT, has transformed the global landscape of language learning. In higher education, AI has evolved from a mere technical aid to a cognitive partner that facilitates thought processes, language development, and text production

(Stockwell, 2024). This change positions AI as a significant component of contemporary learning ecosystems, wherein students engage with diverse digital resources to enhance their academic and linguistic skills (Lier, 2004).

The advantages of AI include better writing quality, faster revision processes, and support for self-regulated learning (Mekheimer, 2025; Jasim et al., 2024), have een extensively reported. However, discussions regarding its pedagogical and ethical implications remain open. Certain researchers argue that AI may promote creativity and offer immediate support (Lin & Chen, 2024; Oktafia et al., 2025; Wiyono et al., 2024). On the other side, others emphasize concerns regarding dependency, cultural representation bias, and the possible loss of authenticity in the learning process (Werdiningsih et al., 2024). This debate shows that understanding AI use is not limited to its technical performance. It also involves how users interpret meaning, identity, and values in their interactions with technology. However, existing studies have largely overlooked how these sociocultural dimensions are shaped within specific local contexts.

In Indonesia, research on AI in English learning is growing rapidly. However, the majority of studies concentrate on linguistic aspects, including grammar, vocabulary, and writing quality (e.g., Pryma et al., 2025; Dja'far & Hamidah, 2024). While these studies provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of AI, they pay limited attention to how learners engage with AI within their sociocultural environments. Research examining AI within socio-cultural contexts remains limited, particularly in regional cultural communities. The utilization of AI by Toraja students occurs within an integrated cultural identity, unique collective values, and epistemological perspectives that may diverge from the global viewpoints frequently replicated by AI models. This indicates the necessity for research that evaluates both the linguistic efficacy of AI and its operation within particular cultural contexts.

This limitation becomes more evident in culturally specific contexts such as Toraja. Toraja students engage with AI within a framework of strong cultural identity, collective values, and localized knowledge systems that may differ from the global perspectives embedded in AI models. Previous studies have shown that Toraja cultural values—such as *kapatonganan*, *kasiuluran*, *tengko situru'*, *kabassaran*, and *longko'/siri'*—play a significant role in shaping educational practices and reinforcing students' identities (Tandikombong et al., 2024). Additionally, learners often express cultural identity through references to local landscapes, cuisine, and Indigenous symbols in their English writing (Siumarlata & Arrang, 2023). However, these studies mainly focus on teacher-centered practices and do not explore students as active users of technology.

Despite these contributions, it seems that something is missing. Little is known about how students negotiate their cultural identities when interacting with AI technologies that operate on globally dominant data and perspectives. This gap is important because AI is not culturally neutral; it may shape, reinforce, or even marginalize local knowledge and identities. Therefore, it is necessary to examine how learners interpret and use AI within their own cultural frameworks. This study addresses this gap by focusing on Toraja students as both technology users and cultural actors, exploring how they engage with and make sense of AI in English language learning.

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on AI in English Language Teaching. It happens by shifting the focus from technical effectiveness to sociocultural engagement. It highlights how global technologies are negotiated within local cultural contexts. It also demonstrates that AI use involves not only language development but also the construction and negotiation of cultural identity. The findings emphasize four key aspects: AI as a linguistic partner, AI as a site of cultural representation, the negotiation of local identity, and the ethical and emotional ambivalence in human–AI interaction.

This study seeks to address the primary question: "In what ways do Toraja students engage with and understand the role of AI in English learning?" This research is significant as it expands the discourse on AI in English Language Teaching from a technical perspective to encompass sociocultural understanding, identity, and cultural agency. This study enhances the literature on place-based learning by demonstrating the negotiation of global technologies within a local cultural context (Gruenewald, 2003).

2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative case study design. This design is suitable for in-depth exploration of context-specific phenomena, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly defined (Yin, 2018). It enables a nuanced understanding of how Toraja students engage with AI in English language learning within their sociocultural environment. Qualitative case studies are also appropriate for capturing the complexity of participants' lived experiences through multiple data sources (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018).

Nine students from Toraja participated in this study. They ranged in age from 19 to 23 years old and consisted of five female and four male students. All participants were undergraduate students enrolled in English-related courses. Their English proficiency levels ranged from intermediate to upper-intermediate, based on classroom performance and lecturer assessment. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, with the main criterion being prior experience using AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT) in English language learning. Rather than relying on sample size alone, this study adopts the concept of information power (Malterud et al., 2016), which suggests that the more relevant and rich the data, the fewer participants are required. Given the study's focused aim, specific sample, and depth of data collected from multiple sources, the number of participants was considered adequate to generate meaningful insights.

Data were collected over a period of eight weeks. This study employed four data sources to ensure triangulation: (1) student assignment artifacts, (2) semi-structured interviews, (3) learning diaries, and (4) focus group discussions (FGDs). A total of nine individual interviews were conducted, each lasting approximately 30–45 minutes. In addition, two FGDs were carried out, each involving 4–5 participants and lasting around 60 minutes. The interviews and FGDs were guided by open-ended questions designed to explore students' experiences, perceptions, and reflections on AI use. Examples of guiding questions included: (a) "How do you use AI tools in your English learning process?" (b) "How does AI influence the way you express your ideas or identity?" (c) "Do you think AI reflects your cultural background? Why or why not?" Learning diaries were collected weekly to capture students' ongoing reflections, while assignment artifacts provided evidence of AI-mediated language production. This multimodal approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of students' practices and interpretations (Bond et al., 2020).

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six phases proposed by Braun & Clarke 2006). The analysis was conducted manually to allow close engagement with the data. In addition, AI-assisted tools (ChatGPT) were used as a supplementary analytical aid to help organize initial codes, identify potential patterns, and facilitate data reduction. The use of AI was limited to supporting analytical efficiency, while the interpretive process remained fully grounded in the researcher's judgment and contextual understanding.

First, all interview transcripts, diaries, and artifacts were read repeatedly to achieve data familiarization. Second, initial codes were generated inductively based on meaningful units of data. For example, statements such as "AI helps me organize ideas faster" were coded as AI as cognitive support, while expressions like "AI doesn't reflect my culture" were coded as cultural misrepresentation. Third, codes were grouped into broader categories to identify potential themes. These categories were then reviewed and refined through iterative comparison across data sources. For instance, codes related to AI assistance, feedback, and idea generation were combined into the theme AI as a linguistic partner. Similarly, codes reflecting tension, doubt, or discomfort were developed into the theme ethical and emotional ambivalence.

To enhance trustworthiness, the researcher maintained a coding log and conducted a peer debriefing with a colleague familiar with qualitative research. This process helped ensure consistency and reduce subjective bias (Nowell et al., 2017).

Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the study. All participants provided informed consent prior to data collection and were informed about the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms

were used in place of participants' real names, and all identifiable information was removed from the data. The data were securely stored and accessed only by the researcher. This study was conducted following institutional ethical guidelines and received approval from the relevant academic authority at the researchers' institution.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Findings

The analysis of four data sources—interviews, task artifacts, learning diaries, and FGDs— revealed four primary themes that describe how Toraja students engage with and interpret the use of AI in English learning. The four themes include: (1) AI functioning as a learning partner for linguistic and cognitive reinforcement, (2) AI serving as a conduit for global knowledge and a reflection of Toraja representation, (3) the negotiation of local authenticity and cultural agency, and (4) ambivalence characterized by admiration, doubt, and ethical vigilance. This presentation outlines the findings for each theme derived from participant data.

3.1.1 Theme 1: AI as a Learning Partner for Linguistic & Cognitive Empowerment

Table 1. The Summary of Theme 1, Code, and Subtheme

Theme	Sub-Theme	Initial Codes + Data Sources
1. AI as a Learning Partner for Linguistic & Cognitive Empowerment	AI as a provider of structure & ideas	"*AI helps brainstorming*" (W1); "*AI gives writing structure*" (A3); "*easier to find ideas*" (LD2); "*AI organizes the flow of writing"* (A6); "*AI helps with outlining*" (W4); "*AI assists with word choice*" (A8)
	AI as a nonjudgmental language tutor	"*Not afraid of making mistakes with AI*" (W2); "*AI helps with grammar*" (A4); "*AI improves my complex sentences*" (LD5); "*AI is a safe practice space*" (W6); "*learning new vocabulary*" (LD7)
	AI strengthening self-regulation	"*AI speeds up revision*" (A1); "*learning independently with AI*" (W3); "*double-checking before submitting*" (LD6); "*managing time better*" (W8); "*AI helps me reflect on the material"* (LD9)
	Efficiency & confidence	"*more confident after checking with AI*" (W7); "*saves time*" (LD4); "*writing looks neater*" (A2); "*AI boosts my confidence in English*" (FGD)

Students engaged with AI as both a linguistic and cognitive partner in their English learning process. Rather than merely using AI for surface-level correction, they relied on it to generate ideas, organize writing structure, and support revision. AI also functioned as a nonjudgmental learning space, allowing students to practice English without fear of making mistakes. As one participant noted, AI "helps find ideas and organize the flow of writing" (A6), while another described it as "a study friend who is always ready to help" (W2).

Beyond these functional benefits, this finding suggests a shift in how students conceptualize learning support. AI is not only perceived as a tool but as a form of cognitive scaffolding that enhances self-regulated learning. Students demonstrated increased autonomy by using AI to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own work. The nonjudgmental nature of AI also appears to reduce language anxiety, which is often a barrier in second language acquisition. This indicates that AI contributes not only to linguistic development but also to affective dimensions of learning, particularly confidence and motivation.

3.1.2 Theme 2. AI as a Window to Global Knowledge & a Mirror of Toraja Representation

Table 2. The Summary of Theme 2, Code, and Subtheme

Theme	Sub-Theme	Initial Codes + Data Sources
2. AI as a Window to	AI as a source of global discourse	"*AI opens new perspectives*" (W5); "*seeing international standards*" (LD1); "*broader access to information*" (A9)

Global Knowledge & a Mirror of Toraja Representation	AI's representation of Toraja globally	"*AI describes Toraja in a touristic way*" (W2); "*explanations are too general*" (A4); "*AI only displays tongkonan & rambu solo'*" (FGD); *"lack of deeper cultural values"* (LD3)
	AI as a trigger for cultural reflection	"*I become aware of how outsiders see Toraja*" (W7); *"learning to explain my own culture"* (LD8); *"AI makes me correct cultural information"* (A7)
	Medium for comparing local–global knowledge	*"comparing AI with my own experiences" (*W1); *"adding local details"* (A6); *"correcting inaccurate parts*" (LD2)

Students used AI to access broader global knowledge while simultaneously reflecting on how their local culture is represented. AI-enabled exposure to international perspectives and standards. On the other hand, students also recognized that its representation of Toraja culture was often generalized or superficial. For example, participants noted that AI tends to focus on well-known cultural symbols while overlooking deeper values.

This dual role positions AI as both a source of knowledge and a site of critical reflection. Rather than passively accepting AI-generated information, students actively compared it with their own lived experiences. This suggests that learners are not merely consumers of global knowledge but evaluators who negotiate between global narratives and local realities. The findings highlight an emerging critical awareness, where students begin to question the cultural limitations embedded in AI systems.

3.1.3 Theme 3: Negotiating Local Authenticity & Students' Cultural Agency

Table 3. The Summary of Theme 3, Code, and Subtheme

Theme	Sub-Theme	Initial Codes + Data Sources
3. Negotiating Local Authenticity & Students' Cultural Agency	Students as cultural correctors of AI	*"correcting AI's cultural explanations*" (W3); *"AI needs adjustment for Toraja context*" (A5); *"rejecting incorrect information"* (FGD)
	Adding local context for accuracy	*"adding customary details"* (LD6); *"including local terms"* (A3); *"explaining the meaning of rituals"* (W8)
	Cultural–AI collaboration	*"combining AI ideas with personal experience"* (A7); *"AI as a partner for writing about Toraja"* (W4); "*AI helps explain culture to outsiders*" (FGD)
	Awareness of cultural values & responsibility	*"must protect our own culture"* (LD9); *"afraid of explaining rituals incorrectly"* (W6); *"proud to introduce Toraja"* (A1)

The findings show that students actively negotiated cultural authenticity when interacting with AI. They did not simply adopt AI-generated content but modified, corrected, and enriched it with local knowledge. In some cases, students explicitly rejected inaccurate representations and added culturally specific details to ensure accuracy.

This behavior reflects students' roles as cultural agents rather than passive users of technology. Their actions demonstrate a sense of responsibility in preserving and accurately representing their cultural identity. The interaction with AI becomes a space for cultural negotiation, where global technological outputs are reinterpreted through local epistemologies. This suggests that AI use can reinforce, rather than diminish, cultural awareness when learners engage critically with its outputs.

3.1.4 Theme 4: Ambivalence: Admiration, Doubts, and Ethical Literacy

Table 4. The Summary of Theme 4, Code, and Subtheme

Theme	Sub-Theme	Initial Codes + Data Sources
4. Ambivalence: Admiration, Doubts, and Ethical Literacy	Admiration for AI's intelligence	"*AI is very smart*" (W2); *"fast & neat results"* (A3); *"more effective than ordinary browsing"* (LD4)
	Concerns about dependency	*"afraid of becoming too dependent"* (W7); *"worried I won't improve"* (LD1); *"must still use my own abilities"* (FGD)
	Caution toward cultural bias	"*AI doesn't understand Toraja context"* (A9); *"explaining rituals incorrectly*" (W3); "*AI feels too Western*" (FGD)

Ethical reflection in using AI	*"must verify first"* (LD5); "*AI is only a tool"* (W1); *"don't copy-paste"* (A2); *"must use responsibly*" (FGD)
Mixed emotions	*"admiring but also afraid"* (W9); *"AI makes me happy but unsure"* (LD7); *"uncertain whether it's fully allowed"* (FGD)

Students expressed ambivalent attitudes toward AI, characterized by both admiration and concern. On one hand, they appreciated its efficiency, accuracy, and ability to support learning. On the other hand, they voiced concerns about overdependence, potential loss of critical thinking, and cultural bias. One participant described feeling "amazed but also afraid" of relying too much on AI (W9).

This ambivalence reflects a developing form of ethical and critical digital literacy. Students are not only aware of AI's benefits but also its limitations and risks. Their cautious approach—such as verifying information and avoiding direct copying—indicates an emerging ethical stance toward AI use. This suggests that interaction with AI does not lead to blind dependence but can foster reflective and responsible learning practices.

3.2 Discussion

The findings of this study answer key research questions about how Toraja students practice and interpret the use of AI in English language learning. In general, the results show that students not only use AI as a technical tool, but also as a learning partner who interacts with their cultural identity and personal experiences. The following discussion links those findings to previous literature and explains the contribution of this study in a broader context.

3.2.1 Theme 1: AI as a Learning Partner for Linguistic & Cognitive Empowerment

The role of AI as a linguistic and cognitive partner highlights a shift in how learning support is conceptualized. Previous studies have framed AI as a form of cognitive and linguistic scaffolding (Bhatti, 2025; Pangestu & Suwartono, 2024), particularly in supporting writing development and language accuracy. Similarly, research has shown that AI can enhance self-regulated learning, especially in academic contexts that require independent writing (Abdallah, 2024; Vieriu, 2025).

This study extends these perspectives by demonstrating that AI also plays a significant role in the affective dimension of learning. Consistent with Aly et al. (2025), the perception of AI as a nonjudgmental environment reduces language anxiety. However, in the Toraja context, this affective support appears to be more pronounced, as students navigate both linguistic challenges and social expectations. AI thus functions as a form of affective-cognitive scaffolding, where emotional safety becomes integral to learning effectiveness. In other words, AI functions as an alternate learning environment that is customizable and devoid of social evaluation.

3.2.2 Theme 2: AI as a Window to Global Knowledge & a Mirror of Toraja Representation

Students are able to use artificial intelligence as a worldwide source of knowledge, but they are also aware of the limitations of AI when it comes to representing Toraja culture. Previous studies have demonstrated that artificial intelligence models frequently repeat dominant global knowledge and are not always accurate in the local context (Bender & Mcmillan-major, 2021; Peterson, 2025). According to the findings of this study, which are consistent with previous research, artificial intelligence has a tendency to provide a description of Toraja that is more touristic and shallow. For instance, it frequently emphasizes *tongkonan* and *rambu solo'*.

That issue, however, is expanded upon by the study, which demonstrates that college students are not only aware of these prejudices but actively use them as a source of reflection material in order to gain an understanding of how their culture is represented on a worldwide scale. Due to the fact that it demonstrates that interaction with AI can stimulate cultural awareness, this is a significant contribution in the context of AI-mediated language learning. This is an issue that has not previously been extensively covered in AI studies for English Language Teaching (ELT).

While this study confirms those limitations, it further shows that students actively engage with these constraints. Rather than passively accepting AI-generated content, they critically evaluate and compare it with their own cultural knowledge. This suggests that AI-mediated learning can foster critical cultural awareness. In the Toraja context, this awareness becomes particularly significant, as students recognize discrepancies between global narratives and lived cultural realities. Thus, AI functions not only as a knowledge provider but also as a catalyst for reflexive cultural understanding.

3.2.3 Theme 3: Negotiating Local Authenticity & Students' Cultural Agency

The negotiation of cultural authenticity illustrates that students function as active cultural agents in their interaction with AI. This finding aligns with place-based learning theory, which emphasizes the importance of local identity and experience in shaping learning processes (Gruenewald, 2003). It is also consistent with previous research in the Toraja context, which highlights the role of local culture as a meaningful resource in English language learning (Siumarlata & Arrang, 2023).

However, this study extends these perspectives by showing how such cultural engagement occurs within AI-mediated environments. Students do not simply incorporate AI into their learning; they actively reshape AI outputs to align with local epistemologies. This reflects a form of digital cultural agency, where learners negotiate between global technological knowledge and local cultural values. In this sense, AI does not replace local knowledge but becomes a space where cultural authenticity is actively constructed and maintained.

3.2.4 Theme 4: Ambivalence: Admiration, Doubts, and Ethical Literacy

The ambivalence expressed by students reflects a nuanced understanding of AI use that goes beyond simple acceptance or rejection. Previous studies have identified ethical concerns related to dependency, bias, and academic integrity in AI use (Eaton, 2025; Yan et al., 2025). Similarly, the importance of digital literacy and information verification has been emphasized in studies on technology-mediated learning (Bond et al., 2020).

This study supports these findings but also reveals a culturally specific dimension of ethical awareness. In the Toraja context, students' concerns are not limited to academic performance but extend to the accurate representation of cultural knowledge. Their cautious approach to AI use reflects a form of culturally embedded ethical awareness, where ethical considerations are shaped by both digital literacy and cultural responsibility. This highlights the importance of understanding AI ethics not only as a technical issue but also as a culturally situated practice.

3.3 Implications of the Research

A number of significant implications can be drawn from the findings of this study. At this point, the interactions that students have with artificial intelligence are not just cognitive-linguistic, but also cultural. This is a process that has not been well investigated in the literature on AI technology for language learning. Second, the research highlights the importance of a pedagogy that promotes critical cultural responsibility. This pedagogy should be one in which students are led to investigate, correct, and communicate their local opinions concerning the use of artificial intelligence.

Overall, this study demonstrates that the interaction between AI and language learners is not neutral but deeply shaped by cultural context. In the case of Toraja students, AI becomes a site where global knowledge, local identity, and ethical considerations intersect. This finding contributes to the broader discourse on AI in education. This shows that learners are not passive recipients of technology but active interpreters who negotiate meaning, identity, and values in their engagement with AI.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that AI functions not merely as a technological tool but as a sociocultural mediator in English language learning among Toraja students, supporting linguistic, cognitive, and

affective development while simultaneously shaping learners' cultural awareness and identity construction. The findings reveal that students actively engage with AI through processes of reflection, meaning negotiation, and critical evaluation of cultural representations, positioning themselves as cultural agents rather than passive recipients of AI-generated content. These results underscore the importance of integrating culturally responsive and critical AI literacy into English Language Teaching, enabling learners to use AI effectively while critically examining its cultural assumptions and limitations. Nevertheless, the study is limited by its small sample size, context-specific focus, and relatively short observation period. Future research should employ longitudinal and comparative approaches across diverse cultural settings to further examine the long-term influence of AI-mediated learning on language development, cultural identity, and learner agency.

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