Sada Al-Jamiah Journal for Humanities (مجلة صدى الجامعة للعلوم الإنسانية)
Volume 4 - Issue 1 - 2026 - Pages 525-539
Website: https://oujournals.ly/index.php/sajh/index

Exploring AI in English Language Learning: EFL Students' Perceptions and the Gap Between Reality and Expectations at the University of Benghazi

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استكشاف الذكاء الاصطناعي في تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية: تصورات طلاب الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية والفجوة بين الواقع والتوقعات في جامعة بنغازي

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Received: 20-01-2026; Accepted: 09-03-2026; Published: 23-03-2026

Abstract:
In today's digital age, the use of technology and artificial intelligence (AI) in English language learning has become inevitable. Recently, AI tools have rapidly grown and gained a lot of attention as effective solutions to the many challenges encountered in traditional language instruction. The main aim of this study is to investigate undergraduate EFL students' perceptions of artificial intelligence (AI) in English language learning at the Faculty of Languages, University of Benghazi. In addition, the current study aims to address the challenges and benefits students perceive with regard to the AI implementation in language learning, with a special focus on the gap between students' expectations and actual experiences. To collect data, a quantitative survey of 101 eighth-semester students across four departments was employed to measure expectations, experiences with AI tools, and perceptions of implementation during the academic year 2025/2026. Results show generally positive attitudes: students reported previous use and good experiences. However, students also reported challenges such as technical/infrastructural issues and insufficient institutional training/support. The present study concludes with recommendations to bridge the gap between expectation and reality.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence (AI), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Language Learning, Students' Perceptions, University of Benghazi.

الملخص:
في عصرنا الرقمي الحالي، أصبح استخدام التكنولوجيا والذكاء الاصطناعي في تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية أمرًا لا مفر منه. شهدت أدوات الذكاء الاصطناعي نموًا سريعًا مؤخرًا وحظيت باهتمام كبير بوصفها حلولًا فعّالة للعديد من التحديات التي تواجهها طرق التدريس التقليدية للغات. الهدف الرئيسي من هذه الدراسة هو استقصاء تصورات طلاب البكالوريوس في اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية تجاه الذكاء الاصطناعي في تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية بكلية اللغات بجامعة بنغازي. كما تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى تناول التحديات والفوائد التي يدركها الطلاب فيما يتعلق بتطبيق الذكاء الاصطناعي في تعلم اللغة، مع تركيز خاص على الفجوة بين توقعات الطلاب وتجاربهم الفعلية. لجمع البيانات، أُجري مسح كمي شمل 101 طالبًا في الفصل الثامن من أربعة أقسام خلال العام الأكاديمي 2026/2025 لقياس التوقعات والتجارب مع أدوات الذكاء الاصطناعي والتصورات حول تنفيذها. أظهرت النتائج مواقف إيجابية عمومًا؛ حيث أبلغ الطلاب عن استخدام سابق وتجارب جيدة. ومع ذلك، أشار الطلاب أيضًا إلى تحديات مثل المشكلات التقنية/البنية التحتية وعدم كفاية التدريب والدعم المؤسسي. تختتم الدراسة الحالية بتقديم توصيات لسد الفجوة بين التوقع والواقع.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الذكاء الاصطناعي (AI)، الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL)، تعلم اللغة، تصورات الطلاب، جامعة بنغازي.

1. Introduction

In the current era, the world is witnessing unprecedented dramatic developments in the field of technology. Perhaps the most important of these technological developments is artificial intelligence (AI) and its applications. The impact of AI on humans is obvious as it enters in almost every aspect of humans' lives. AI can solve complicated problems and do things that

humans cannot in just a few seconds. In fact, scientists believe that the control of AI over humans' lives is inevitable.

Accordingly, education in general, and language teaching in particular, is not immune to these developments. Education is changing dramatically as artificial intelligence (AI) technologies evolve at a rapid pace (Daweli and Mahyoub, 2024). Artificial intelligence has become an unavoidable reality in language teaching and learning. Teachers and students now use a wide range of AI applications. AI has emerged as a game changer in education, affecting teaching, learning, and administration worldwide (Jacques et al., 2024). Many second language researchers argue that any resistance to the use of artificial intelligence will fail miserably, and those who resist it will find themselves lagging behind in keeping pace with developments and new methods in education. While recognizing that technology has some disadvantages that one must be aware of, fear of artificial intelligence and its negative effects is no excuse for not using it to deliver information to students and make the learning process more enjoyable and effective. Conducted during the academic year 2025/2026, this study aims to explore English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' perceptions of AI-enhanced English language learning and to compare these perceptions with the actual realities of AI implementation in their learning environment.

2. Research Aims

The current study aims to investigate undergraduate EFL students' expectations, experiences, and perceptions of AI-enhanced English language learning at the University of Benghazi, and to identify gaps between their expectations and the practical realities of AI implementation.

3. Research Questions

1. What are students' expectations regarding the use of AI in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL)?
2. How do their experiences with AI tools compare to these expectations?
3. What are the challenges and benefits students perceive in AI-powered language learning?

4. Literature Review

This section reviews key definitions and perspectives on AI, drawing from contemporary scholarship in order to establish a conceptual framework for the study.

4.1. Defining AI

Artificial intelligence is broadly understood as the ability of computer systems to perform tasks that traditionally require human intelligence, such as reasoning, problems-solving, provide advice, and language use. According to McCarthy et al. (2006), artificial intelligence (AI) is the ability of machines to use language, generate concepts and abstractions, solve problems that are typically solved by people, and enhance their own capabilities. Buabbas et al. (2023) point out that AI is essentially the process of endowing computers with human-like abilities like comprehension, reasoning, and problem-solving so they can mimic intelligence.

AI is commonly defined as a computer system that can carry out tasks that are typically associated with intelligent beings (European Commission Joint Research Centre, 2018).

4.2. The Role of AI in Education

The salient feature of modern education at all levels is the collaboration between humans (represented by the teacher) and machines (represented by artificial intelligence) to provide educational content that meets the level of students' ambitions in the twenty-first century. When utilized properly, AI has the ability to transform education into a more individualized and successful experience for all stakeholders (Daweli and Mahyoub, 2024). AI has changed higher education landscape dramatically as it has influenced all its components in a direct way. For

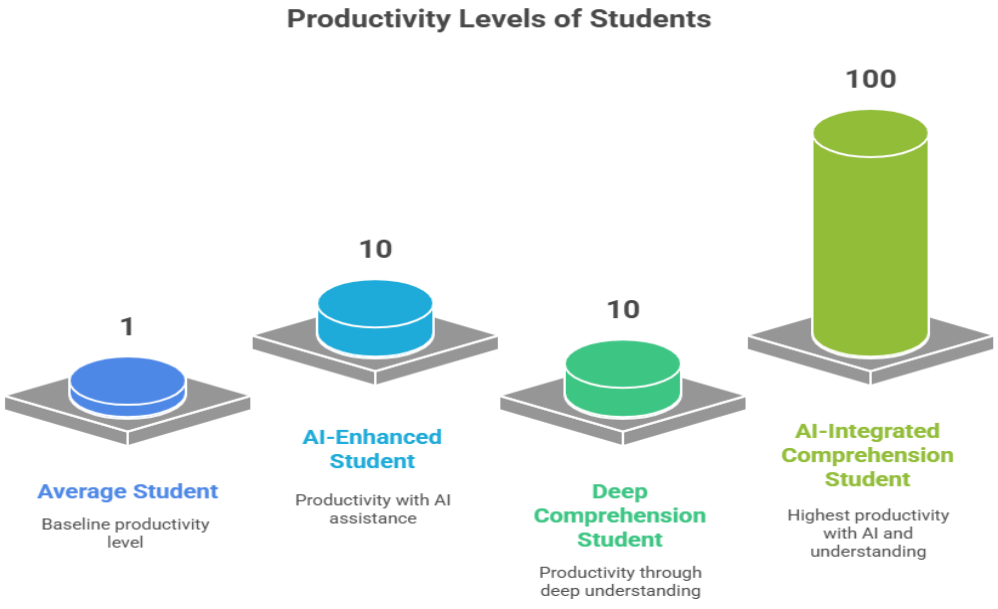
instance, AI has an endless use in research; AI enables researchers to easily evaluate huge data, revealing patterns and correlations and providing discoveries that might otherwise pass unnoticed (Jacques et al., 2024).

In addition to assisting in teaching and conducting scientific research, artificial intelligence has contributed to the field of educational administration. AI chatbots manage potential student inquiries, responding instantly and giving individualized help throughout the admissions process. They also provide students regular, even prescriptive, academic advice (Khan et al., 2024; Lucien & Park, 2024). Al tools can assist to identify and provide support to high-achieving students and those who struggle in their learning process. In this aspect, AI can help to analyze data and provide policy-making authority with insights in order to allocate resources more effectively.

On the other hand, artificial intelligence tools offer students countless forms of assistance which make the learning process more enjoyable and flexible. The use of AI in language instruction provides several advantages for students (Dilzhan, 2024). AL can increase opportunities for self-directed, experiential, and project-based learning for students (Shana'a & Ghaleon, 2023). Technology inspires students and offers tools for teaching and learning (Larsen- Freeman & Anderson, 2011). In this respect, Daweli & Mahyoub (2024, 162) argue that "AI has enhanced the learning process for students by offering personalized and adaptive educational experiences". Moreover, Kim et al. (2019) suggest that AI can enhance language input and provide language learners chances to develop their interpersonal skills in relation to learning English.

To illustrate the positive impact of artificial intelligence on student productivity, consider that an average student has a baseline productivity of ×1. A student who uses artificial intelligence achieves a productivity level of ×10, while another student with deep comprehension and effective information integration also reaches a comparable level of ×10. However, when combining artificial intelligence with profound understanding and adept linkage of information, a student's productivity can surge to ×100.

Figure 1 Students' productivity levels



4.3 AI in Language Education

Contrary to what many believe, the use of AI and its application in education dates back to the beginning of this century (Jacques et al., 2024). The relationship between artificial intelligence and education began in the early days of the computer. Initiatives in the 1960s heralded the

beginnings of computer-based education (Moncaleano & Russell, 2018). Subsequently, Almehmadi (2023) notes that in recent years, the developments in AI have affected all facets of society and changed the educational landscape. Moreover, Isaee and Barjesteh (2026) argue that the incorporation of AI into education is considered an important development in technology-enhanced learning. In addition, AI is regarded by contemporary educational research as a strategic partner that radically changes the educational landscape (Elsaadi, 2026). AI plays an outstanding role in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT). In this respect, Liunokas (2025, 10) points out that "evidence suggests that ELT is the most common discipline for AI use in education". Moreover, Rivera Barreto (2018) points out that EFL has benefited greatly from technology. In addition, Isaee and Barjesteh (2026) argue that results from number of studies indicate that AI is now actively influencing language curriculum design and delivery rather than just supporting educational programs. Furthermore, according to Bakori and Ahmed (2025), AI can be very beneficial to enhance English language skills.

4.4 Related Studies and Research Gap

With the emergence of each new technology, especially in the field of education, it is important to understand students' and instructors' attitudes towards it. According to Elsaadi (2026), it is essential to comprehend how students view the use of artificial intelligence in the classroom since it is the primary factor that determines whether or not this technology is used successfully. In recent years, a number of studies have been conducted in various contexts to explore the students' and teachers' perceptions towards the uses of AI in language teaching and learning. For instance, from instructors' perspectives, studies show that attitudes toward educational technologies are typically positive. The findings also showed that instructors believed that AI can increase efficiency and accessibility and create chances for creative pedagogy (An et al., 2022; Kim, 2024; Slamet, 2024).

Isaee and Barjesteh (2026) conducted a study to investigate EFL Iranian teachers' and learners' perceptions of AI-supported pedagogical tools in English language teaching (ELT). The findings showed that both teachers and learners held generally positive attitudes toward AI in ELT. On the other hand, findings also revealed concerns about authenticity and integrity, as well as the need for institutional support and teacher training.

In other contexts, results from various studies as well as the existing literature that are concerned with integrating artificial intelligence (AI) into higher education show a general positive attitude toward the beneficial impact of AI tools. However, these studies also reveal significant challenges. These include data privacy, ethical guidelines, academic dishonesty, complete reliance on AI, and the need for careful planning and teacher training (Moncaleano and Russell, 2018; Dilzhan, 2024; Jacques et al., 2024).

In Libya, studies were conducted in different universities (Sirte University, Elmergib University, and Omar ALMukhtar University) to investigate instructors' and learners' perceptions of AI on English language teaching and learning. The findings indicated that most students and instructors perceive artificial intelligence (AI) tools positively; however, the results also demonstrated that ongoing assistance and thorough training are necessary to maximize the usage of AI tools and overcome related obstacles (Elsaadi, 2026; Almashrgy and Alburki, 2024; Ali and Bader, 2026).

Moreover, Hadaga and Elfalfal (2025) carried out a study that aimed to investigate Libyan EFL instructors' perceptions towards the integration of AI in language teaching at the University of Benghazi. The findings demonstrated that the vast majority of the participants held positive attitudes towards AI. Participants also highlighted the significant role that AI plays to help students to enhance their language skills.

Although these findings provide good signs for the application of AI in English language instruction in Libya, there is noticeable gap in the literature with regard to the undergraduates' perceptions of AI tools at the University of Benghazi. While different studies (Elsaadi, 2026;

Almashrgy and Alburki, 2024; Ali and Bader, 2026) were conducted in other universities in Libya, the present study concentrates on undergraduate students at the University of Benghazi. Therefore, the findings of this study will complete the picture with regard to students' perceptions of AI. In addition, unlike Hadaga and Elfalfal (2025), who focused on instructors' perceptions, the current study focuses on students' perceptions to better understand how they perceive AI in English language learning.

5. Methodology

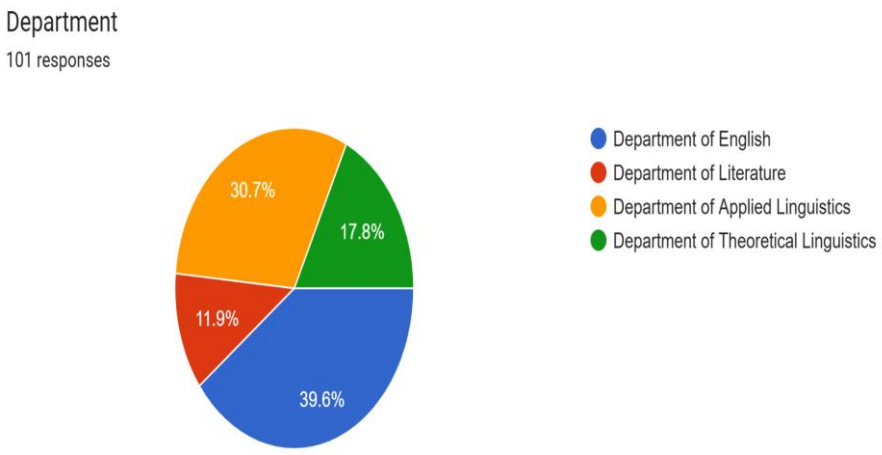
5.1 Research Design

The current study aims to investigate EFL undergraduate Libyan students' perceptions of AI implementation and experiences with AI tools with regard to English language learning. Accordingly, in order to gather as much numerical data as possible and to involve as many participants from different departments as possible, a quantitative approach was used, which enables the identification of trends, patterns, and generalizations. Groom and Littlemore (2012) explain that quantitative data often offer a comprehensive picture of general patterns and relations. According to Bao (2024), the quantitative method is a research paradigm that is based on the positivist assumption that reality might be objectively evaluated and comprehended.

5.2 Participants

The participants in this study were 101 undergraduate students (21 males, 80 females) who enrolled in the 8th semester at the Faculty of Languages, University of Benghazi, during the academic year 2025/2026. In order to have an accurate overall picture about the topic under investigation, the participants were randomly chosen from various departments (Dept. of Applied Linguistics 30.7%; Dept. of Theoretical Linguistics 17.8%; Dept. of Literature 11.9%; Dept. of English 39.6%). The study's participants were between the ages of 20 and 22. Their native language is Arabic, and they are all EFL Libyan students. As a result, the participants met the study's objectives and could generate data for analysis.

Figure 2 Distribution of students by department



5.3 Data Collection Tool

Daniel et al. (2025:59) define survey as "instruments for collecting quantitative data to measure social, behavioural and educational phenomena". Accordingly, students were asked to complete an online survey with Likert-scale questions in order to collect empirical data on their perceptions and experiences about the topic under investigation. The survey is divided into four sections as follows: the first section investigates expectations of AI in EFL (questions 1 – 4).

The second section (questions 5 – 7) deals with experiences with AI tools. In addition, the third section (questions 8 – 10) explores perceptions of AI implementation. Finally, the fourth section (questions 11 & 12) examines overall impact and future engagement.

5.4 Data Analysis

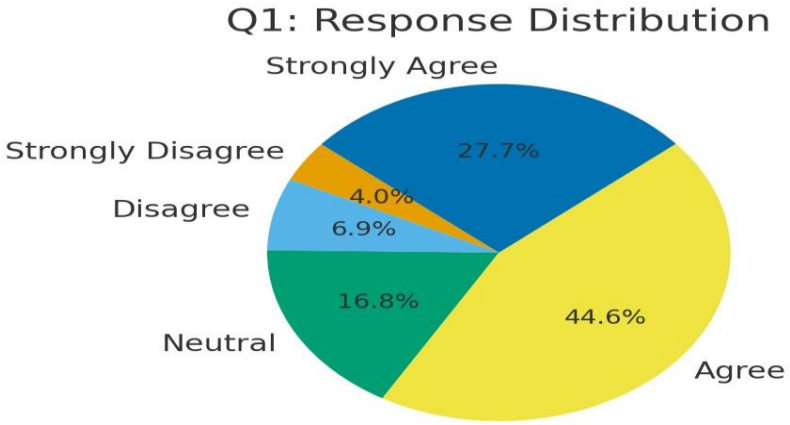
Depending on the nature of the data, various tools and techniques are available to analyze data. One of the well-known tools to analyze quantitative data is a means of statistical procedures. In fact, it can be argued that analyzing data using statistics usually makes the research more manageable and more efficient. In addition, statistics provides the researcher with useful information that might be used in making decisions and generalizations based on results. Subsequently, descriptive statistical analysis was applied to summarize participants' responses.

6. Results

Question 1: I believe that AI tools can provide personalized learning experiences that enhance my English language skills.

A significant majority (72.3%) of participants either agreed (44.6%) or strongly agreed (27.7%) that AI tools can provide personalized learning experiences.

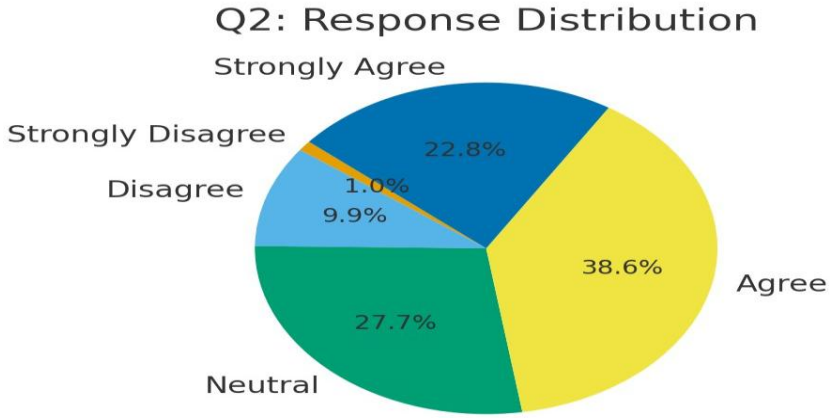
Figure 3 Participants' responses to the first survey item



Question 2: I expect that AI technologies will help increase my motivation to learn English.

Here, 61.4% of participants agreed (38.6%) or strongly agreed (22.8%) that AI technologies would help increase their motivation.

Figure 4 Participants' responses to the second survey item



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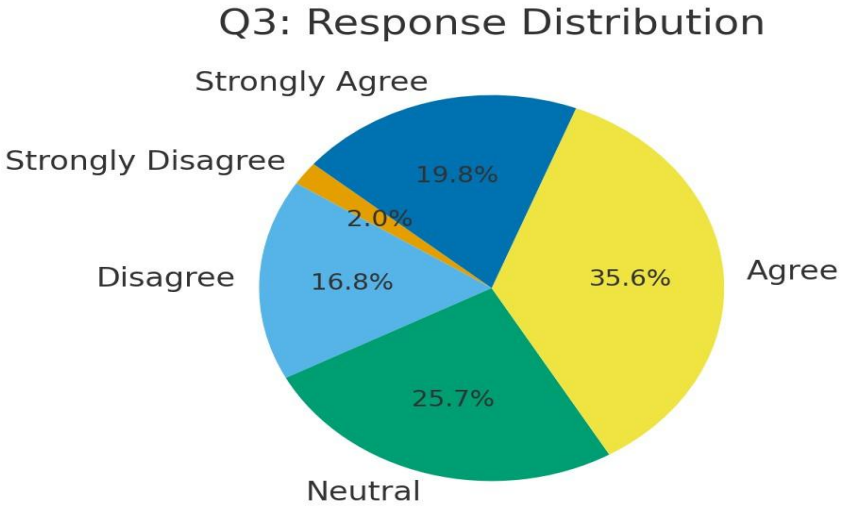
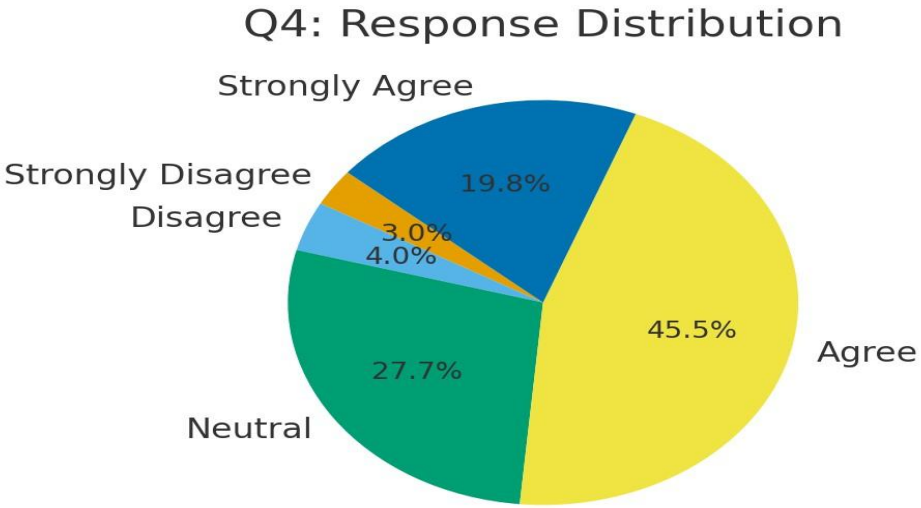
Question 3: I think AI can improve my speaking and listening skills more effectively than traditional methods.
A total of 55.4% of respondents agreed (35.6%) or strongly agreed (19.8%) that AI can improve their speaking and listening skills more effectively than traditional methods.

Figure 5 Participants' responses to the third survey item



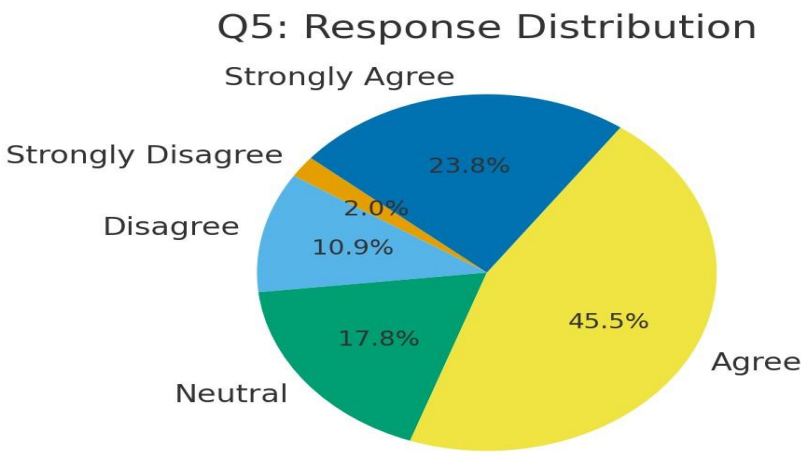
Question 4: I anticipate that AI tools will give me immediate feedback on my language use, which will help my learning.
The majority (65.3%) of students agreed (45.5%) or strongly agreed (19.8%) that AI tools would provide immediate feedback on language use.

Figure 6 Participants' responses to the fourth survey item



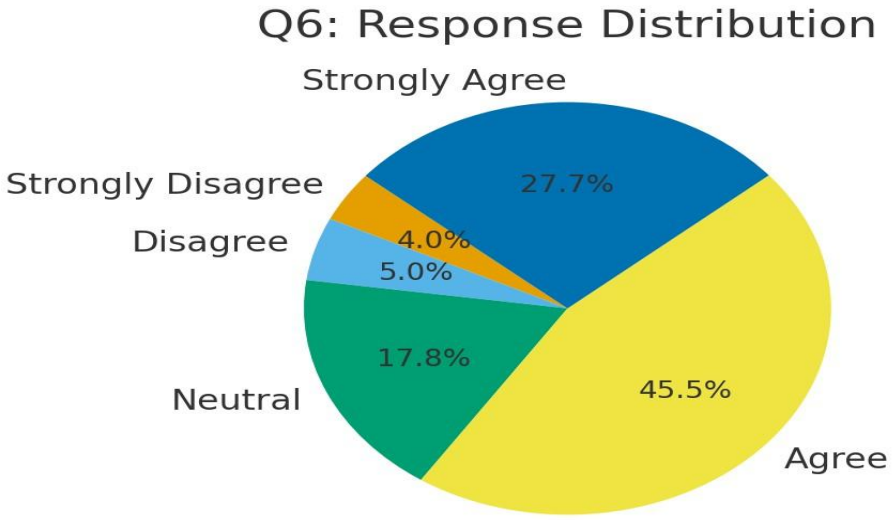
Question 5: I have used AI tools (e.g., language learning apps, chatbots) in my English language learning.
While 69.3% of participants agreed (45.5%) or strongly agreed (23.8%) that they have used AI tools, a notable minority (12.9%) disagreed.

Figure 7 Participants' responses to the fifth survey item



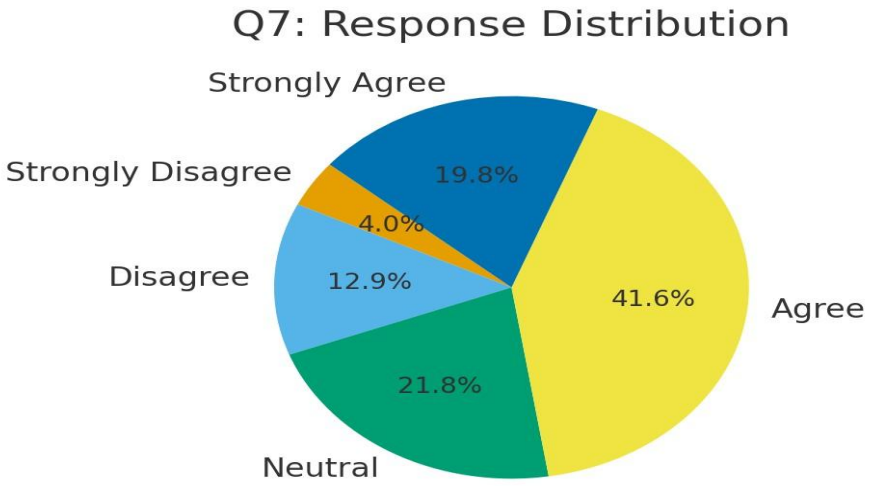
Question 6: My experience with AI tools in learning English has been positive.
A strong majority (73.2%) reported a positive experience with AI tools, with 45.5% agreeing and 27.7% strongly agreeing.

Figure 8 Participants' responses to the sixth survey item



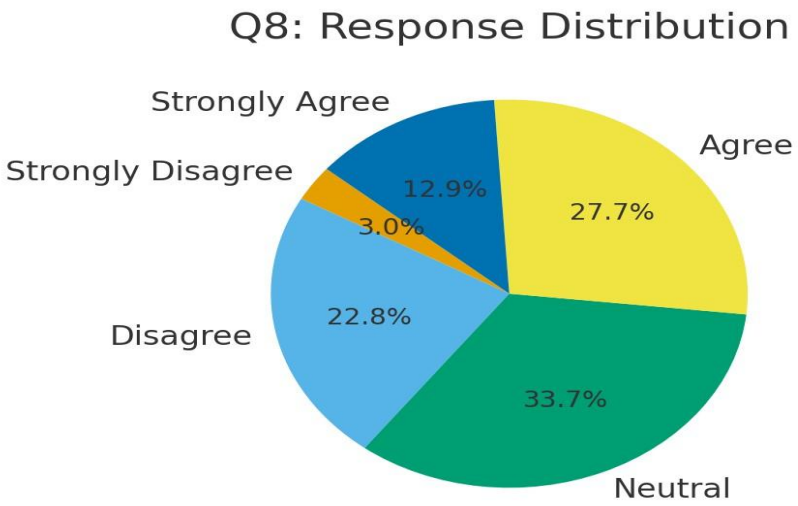
Question 7: I feel that AI tools have helped me improve my English language skills.
Approximately 61.4% of students agreed (41.6%) or strongly agreed (19.8%) that AI has helped improve their English skills.

Figure 9 Participants' responses to the seventh survey item



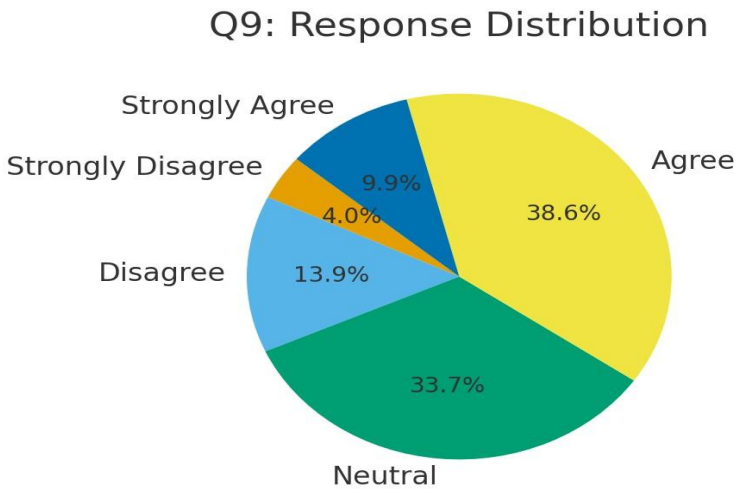
Question 8: I believe that the technical difficulties of using AI tools are a significant barrier to their effectiveness in language learning.
A total of 40.6% of participants either agreed (27.7%) or strongly agreed (12.9%) that technical difficulties are a significant barrier to AI effectiveness.

Figure 10 Participants' responses to the eighth survey item



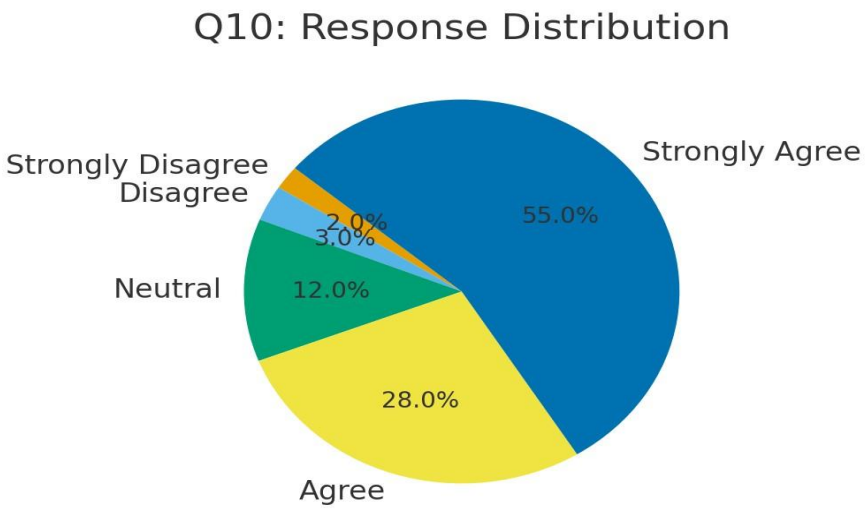
Question 9: I feel that there is adequate support and training available for using AI tools in my English learning.
Here, only 48.5% of students agreed (38.6%) or strongly agreed (9.9%) that there is adequate support for using AI tools.

Figure 11 Participants' responses to the ninth survey item



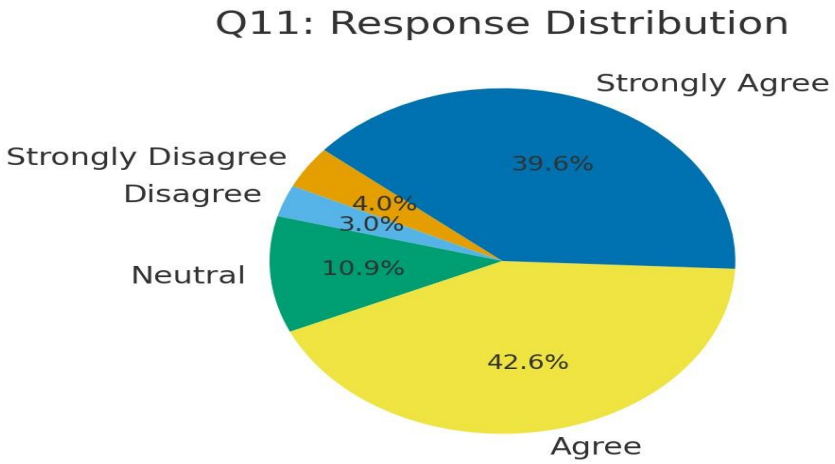
Question 10: I think that AI tools are compatible with my learning style.
A significant majority (82.2%) agreed (28%) or strongly agreed (54%) that AI tools are compatible with their learning style.

Figure 12 Participants' responses to the tenth survey item



Question 11: Overall, I believe that AI will play a crucial role in the future of English language learning.
A total of 82.2% of students agreed (42.6%) or strongly agreed (39.6%) that AI will play a crucial role in future English language learning.

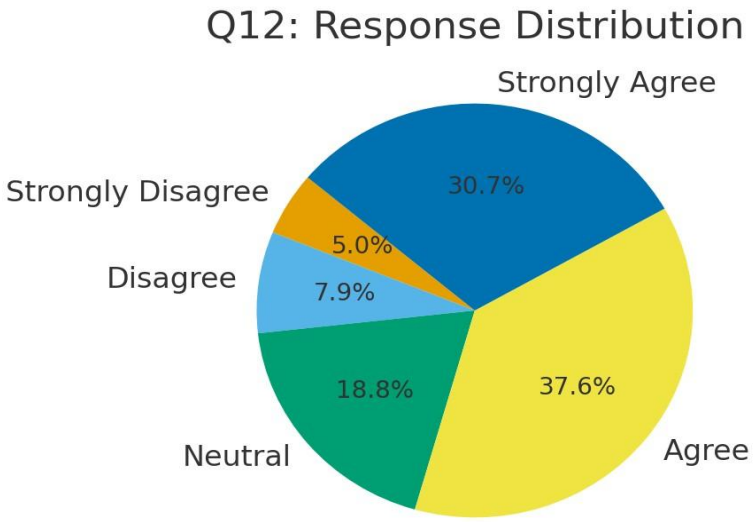
Figure 13 Participants' responses to the eleventh survey item



Question 12: I would be interested in participating in workshops focused on the use of AI tools for language learning.

Interest in participating in workshops focused on AI tools was expressed by 68.3% of respondents, with 37.6% agreeing and 30.7% strongly agreeing.

Figure 14 Participants' responses to the twelfth survey item



7. Discussion

Liunokas (2025) points out that it is crucial to fully understand how students perceive AI in English language instruction since these perspectives provide important information about the efficacy, acceptability, and future of technology based language learning classes. This section looks at the survey results based on three main questions of the current study: (1) students' expectations for AI in EFL instruction, (2) how their experiences compare to those expectations, and (3) the benefits and challenges they perceive.

In response to the first question, the results consistently indicated optimistic expectations regarding AI's educational role. Students see AI more than just a technological tool; they anticipate significant educational benefit from AI that meets their individual learning

preferences. This finding aligns with previous studies (e.g., Daweli and Mahyoub, 2024; Kim et al., 2019; Elsaadi, 2026; Almashrgy and Alburki, 2024; Ali and Bader, 2026; Maulida & Prasetyarini, 2024) which suggest that students view AI as a motivational tool and hold strong beliefs in its potential to enhance individual learning. The findings of the current study also reaffirm what the existing literature previously confirmed regarding students' perceptions that AI offers more effective learning methods.

The second question of this study aimed to explore students' experiences and compare them to their expectations. Generally, the findings revealed that students' experiences were positive and broadly consistent with the expectations; however, findings also revealed some gaps (partial rather than full fulfillment of those expectations). In other words, the relationship is one of partial convergence: expectations are high; experiences are positive but tempered by practical constraints (infrastructural, support, and tool-quality limitations). This finding is compatible with existing literature (e.g., Elsaadi, 2026; Maulida & Prasetyarini, 2024; Bakori and Ahmed , 2025) that suggests a gap in training and support that could hinder the effective use of AI in language.

In light of the third question, findings showed strong agreement among students that AI fits their learning styles and improves motivation. In addition, findings highlighted personalization as a primary perceived benefit by students. On the other hand, technical/infrastructural barriers were the most challenges reported by students. This likely includes unstable connectivity, device limitations, and imperfect speech-recognition or real-time-processing capabilities (e.g., problems that particularly affect speaking/listening features). This finding is consistent with previous studies that were conducted in various Libyan universities (e.g., Hadaga and Elfalfal, 2025; Elsaadi, 2026; Almashrgy and Alburki, 2024; Ali and Bader, 2026) which emphasize the need for better infrastructure and training programs to overcome these issues.

8. Limitations and Future Research

Like all research, this study has certain limitations, related to methodology, context, timeframe, and participant characteristics. The findings should therefore be interpreted with caution. Specifically, the study relied on quantitative methods using self-report survey data and descriptive analyses, which might restrict the generalizability of the conclusions. In this regard, future research could employ mixed methods or utilize alternative approaches to capture richer and more diverse forms of data, thereby providing deeper insight into the phenomenon under investigation.

Moreover, this study was conducted on a sample of only one university (University of Benghazi), which may not reflect the full picture in the rest of the Libyan universities and may affect the accuracy of the generalization. In this aspect, future research may involve samples from a variety of universities to overcome this issue and present a more precise picture about the implementation of AI tools in the Libyan universities. Furthermore, this study focused only on students' expectations and experiences and neglected those of the instructors. Subsequently, future research may compare students' expectations and experiences with those of the instructors.

9. Conclusion

The study aimed to investigate students' expectations and experiences regarding the use of AI in English as a foreign language (EFL) instruction. In addition, this study was an attempt to explore the challenges and benefits students perceive in AI-powered language learning. Moreover, this study shed some light on the students' beliefs and perceptions that shape their attitudes towards the integration of AI in language learning. Findings revealed strong evidence that the students at the University of Benghazi hold positive expectations for AI in EFL, especially with regard to personalization, compatibility with their learning styles, motivation, and the future role of AI in language learning. Moreover, students' experiences were broadly

positive and often consistent with these expectations; however, notable technical barriers and limited support reduce the consistency and depth of realized benefits.

10. Recommendations

In order to bridge the gap between reality and expectations, which will enhance the pedagogical application of AI in EFL education, some important issues need to be addressed. First of all, based on the findings, institutional investment in infrastructure is crucial to provide universities with adequate digital systems and reliable internet access and technical teams to support students and instructors. Secondly, this study recommends continuous training programs and intensive workshops for both students and instructors to enhance their awareness of the various implementations of AI in language instruction.

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