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The Future is Connection:

Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society

EAL/D students' constructions of agency in AI technology-assisted learning environments: A case from the field of media and communication studies

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The use of generative AI (GenAI) technologies has become increasingly prevalent across Australian higher education. As these tools become an integral part of learning, they also raise concerns about over-reliance and learner agency (Resnick, 2024), authorship, ownership, and problematic forms of co-creation (Bozkurt, 2024). In Australia, 31% of the student population identify as having English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D) (Australian Government Department of Education, 2024). Apart from cultural and linguistic challenges, EAL/D students also need to adapt to new academic expectations and practices that account for the impacts of GenAI technologies (Kebble, 2023). Given the unique challenges facing EAL/D student cohorts with their diverse pre-existing technological backgrounds, a gap exists in understanding how EAL/D students perceive their own work and academic contributions in relation to their use of GenAI tools. This study explores EAL/D students' AI-assisted learning experiences and perspectives on agency through qualitative interviews conducted with 34 Master of Digital Communication students over 18 months. Findings suggest that EAL/D students are instinctively adjusting and adapting their learning practices as they engage with these technologies and making agentic decisions that support their learning. To maintain what they considered to be original and creative in their work, students developed several strategies to distinguish their own work from AI-generated output. We also found that as EAL/D students' engagement with AI increases, they develop critical self-scrutiny. They maintain agency and ownership over their assessed work by ensuring that their (human) creativity remains central throughout the learning process. While there are some commonalities, the students in our study took diverse paths, with some students developing more nuanced and balanced approaches to using AI than others. For these students, the shift enabled them to integrate GenAI strategically while maintaining their own voice and sense of agency.

Keywords: generative AI, English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D), ownership, agency, learning, experience

Introduction

Generative AI (GenAI) technologies are transforming the landscape of higher education in Australia and are increasingly visible in students' learning contexts. These technologies have brought benefits and challenges to learning and teaching environments. Researchers suggest that Large Language Model (LLM) chatbots offer benefits for student learning, such as explaining confusing ideas, polishing assignment drafts, and providing personalised learning opportunities (Chhina, Antony & Firmin, 2023). LLM chatbots can have a positive impact on student learning, including increasing students' cognitive performance and critical thinking skills, as well as improving digital literacy (Dimeli & Kostas, 2025). However, GenAI technologies also pose challenges to academic integrity, assessment design and learning environments more generally. One of the key concerns arising from the rapid growth of GenAI technologies is that over-reliance on these tools may reduce opportunities for students to engage deeply with the content and develop critical thinking skills (Wang et al, 2025). The prevalence of AI is blurring the boundary between learner autonomy and cognitive offloading. Recent critical observations in similar contexts (Hamamra et al., 2026) underscore that learner-centred research exploring how AI influences students' understanding of autonomy and integrity remains globally scarce.

In Australian higher education, over 30% of students come from English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D) backgrounds (Australian Government Department of Education, 2024). Universities often interpret the learning needs of these students through the lens of English-language development support and academic literacy training (Bedford et al., 2024). However, in terms of GenAI use, cultural factors have been found to influence students' perceptions of the benefits and associated concerns of these technologies for learning (Yusuf et al., 2024). Research found that international students are particularly subject to "self-policing" when using Gen AI tools in academic writing (Zheng,

2025). Conscious of their language competence, international students regard the "perfect English" generated by AI as inauthentic and exercise their agency by intentionally downgrading their vocabulary to "humanise" their work to appear authentic and take control of authorship (Zheng, 2025). EAL/D students continue to represent one of the most vulnerable cohorts affected by the rollout of GenAI technologies and tools.

In response to the growing adoption of GenAI technologies, educators have increasingly emphasised the need to strengthen student agency to avoid over-reliance on AI-assisted learning (Xu et al., 2025). In this study, we adopt the typology proposed by Matusov et al. (2016), which has also been applied in subsequent research to explore student agency (Hussein et al., 2025; Vaara et al., 2026). In particular, Dai (forthcoming) introduces a theoretical framework on student agency and its implications for creativity and AI-assisted learning engagement. Under this typology, student agency is categorised into instrumental, effortful, dynamically emergent and authorial agency types (Dai, forthcoming). Students' instrumental agency is exemplified by a goal-oriented mindset that uses AI as a pragmatic tool to improve productivity in creative tasks. Research indicates that GenAI technologies have great potential to provide more personalised support for learners and, in turn, increase learners' instrumental agency (Roe and Perkins, 2024). Effortful agency is manifested in students' commitment to completing academic tasks, while AI serves as a cognitive offloading tool. However, the use of AI might disempower learners by limiting exploration in the learning process (Resnick, 2024). Dynamically emergent agency is seen in students' co-construction of creativity when working with AI tools. Finally, authorial agency regards creativity as an individual's original "voice", thus proclaiming authorship during the interplay with AI. Students' insights, deliberate control, and proactive leadership that emerge from ongoing reflection and self-scrutiny in human-AI interaction were identified as mini-c creativity, a crucial element contributing to agentic engagement with GenAI (Dai, forthcoming). Further empirical exploration is needed to understand how students' agentic engagement develops through their learning practices. Particularly, this gap is pronounced for EAL/D learners.

To address this gap, this study examines students in the field of communication and media studies, where the concept of authorship is central to their skill set. We aim to provide a case study examining how EAL/D students engage with these technologies and how students develop agentic engagement under these newly developed AI-supported learning conditions. Through the lens of Dai's agentic engagement, this research asks: *How do EAL/D students in Australian higher education negotiate their sense of agency in AI-supported learning environments?* For this study, student agency is defined as the ability of students to take ownership of their learning, make decisions about what and how they learn, and thereby influence their own learning goals.

Methodology

We used semi-structured interviews and follow-up interviews to explore how students negotiate their sense of agency while using GenAI tools in their assessments. Interviewees were recruited from cohorts of first- and second-year master's degree students at an Australian university's Postgraduate Digital Communication Program. This course was selected because over 80- 90% of students enrolled each semester are from EAL/D backgrounds. This course introduced the use of GenAI technology as part of the Australian Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency's (TEQSA) requirements for the university-wide course review since 2025.

Interviews and follow-up interviews were held either in person or on Zoom with audio recorded. Each session lasted up to 15-30 minutes. All recordings were transcribed, anonymised, and coded using NVivo 14 software. Reflective thematic content analysis by Braun and Clarke (2019) was applied in an inductive and iterative approach (Dey, 2003) to identify themes and patterns in the data. The findings reported in this article focus on how student exercise their agency through AI-assisted writing. This research was approved by the University's ethics committee as a Human Ethics Low Risk Application (Approval project ID 9473).

Findings

Two themes relating to student agency emerged from the student interviews. First, **reconstructing authenticity through human creativity**: this theme shows how students claim authorship by positioning GenAI as a supportive tool while retaining ownership of their creative ideas and distinctive voice. The second theme, adaptive engagement and agency, demonstrates how students engaged with AI in selective and strategic ways while safeguarding their original thinking.

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Theme 1: Reconstructing authenticity through human creativity

The data shows that EAL/D students actively reconstructed notions of authenticity of assessment ownership by positioning AI as a supportive tool and maintaining their ownership through instrumental agency, for example:

Original would be the first one, where I didn't use AI at all. I purely used my mother tongue to brainstorm myself, and then wrote a Chinese piece, and then I translated it. And the second one is…actually in daily life, I basically use both. I think both can count as my own original work, because letting AI give suggestions is like when we write and read a lot of other people's literature, and it's also through other people's articles that I get inspired. (Student 34)

Some students also develop strong authorial agency when comparing AI-generated outputs and their own expressive voice, for example:

I don't really use AI-directly-generated content. Actually, AI-generated content now is already more human-like than a few years ago, more stylistic, but I now feel that although it does have more style, those still aren't my words. Those are also expressions and habits that earlier self-media used. And I still think, "Hey, do I have my own language to express the same ideas?" (Student 9)

I always ask AI, please revise my grammatical error only because I need my original idea, keep it original as it. I don't want AI (to take over), you know, so I ask it to revise to match my original idea of my sentences. (Student 10)

In many cases, students were aware of the rhetorical conventions of AI-generated content. Students made evaluative judgement and drew boundaries around which tasks they considered to be their creative contribution to projects and which tasks they were willing to outsource to GenAI tools, for example:

I think (AI doesn't work well on) creative story, I tried to ask them to generate a concept or creative idea, but I think they are providing more general ideas, not impactful. I think as marketing people, I have to own the idea. They can polish to make it more beauty, but at least I have to provide the first initial idea. (Student 6)

I always ask AI, please revise my grammatical error only because I need my original idea, keep it original as it. I don't want AI (to take over), you know, so I ask it to revise to match my original idea of my sentences. (Student 10)

Students also expressed concerns that using GenAI technologies too early might restrict their thinking before they had the opportunity to think independently. For students who develop critical self-scrutiny, there is a clear distinction between creative tasks and the tasks that could be outsourced to AI:

I don't trust AI. (Is it because you think the creativity by AI is not so good as human or is it because you are more excited about the creative tasks?) I think (it is for) both the reasons, and I prefer not to be boxed. If I ask it in advance, then my mind will be like, OK, so these are the ideas that I need to follow. But if I don't ask AI in advance, then maybe I will have more freedom in that way. (Student 27)

I will do my own research and the whole frame and all the general content. I would just use a little portion of AI to just polish because my language is not so authentic [Authentic here means native English]. (Student 7)

Theme 2: Agentic engagement with GenAI (repositing the role of AI)

Another key finding was that EAL/D students adopt a highly selective and strategic approach to using GenAI technologies. Specifically, students focussed on maintaining their own ideas while using AI to assist with grammar correction for example:

But when it comes to assignment, all the ideas, the original ideas come from myself. So, in this case, AI's role is just to assist me, to help me to improve my English skills (Student 13).

Students develop dynamically emergent agency with an active negotiation process when working with GenAI tools. Rather than passively accepting generated text, students would selectively accept, reject and rewrite AI-generated text outputs to ensure alignment with their intended meaning and personal expression, for example:

Sometimes I delete like complete paragraphs from the chat...because it doesn't make sense of what I'm looking to communicate. I'm just trying to sound more like me. I think that's my part. So, whenever I think that gives me like the way to say it, like to sound properly in a correct way. But then if it doesn't completely feel like what I want to do, I just introduce my own words. (Student 10)

Some students described strategic and reflective use of GenAI tools, and a focus on outcomes. The quotation below illustrates how some students position GenAI as a collaborative tool that supports idea organisation and refinement, while maintaining their own critical judgement and authorship:

For me it's about trying to achieve the best outcome possible regarding quality. It gives a sentiment of…I wouldn't say perfection but it is the best I can give with my own critical thinking and with AI corrections...in terms of the way its structure, it tried to help me organise the ideas but I will still have my own thinking of it, so I have like a bit of discussion with that like I think you should not change this. I want to keep it as my original version. (Student 2)

While some students value GenAI tool use for improving linguistic accuracy and confidence, others were concerned about losing their English capability or compromising their academic integrity. For example:

I just realised that English is not my first language, but if I don't get help from AI, I'm afraid that my English skill gonna still stuck. So, I just want to improve my English. So that's why I use AI. But still, I feel guilty for that because AI helped me revise my grammar…it [AI tools] could be really helpful when I summarise journal and something like that, and it helped me to improve my English skill actually. To be honest, I don't really immerse myself in AI unless I use it for positive improvement of myself. (Student 13)

Some students demonstrate flexible, adaptive ways of engaging with GenAI across languages. The quotation below shows how EAL/D students use their first language to make conscious decisions about writing when using AI for translation:

Sometimes if I, I don't really know how to put the instruction in English, I would just use in Chinese, and they will give me some answer, and then I will rewrite it based on my language level. (Student 1)

In these examples, we can identify students developing academic and linguistic competence, and we distinguish students' understandings about the authenticity of text (i.e., maintaining their voice and ownership) from authenticity of learning (i.e., developing their own academic skills).

Discussion

In this study, we investigated how EAL/D students construct and understand their agency in AI technology-assisted learning contexts. Alongside some commonly agreed-upon extrinsic factors associated with using GenAI to save time on assessment writing or to look good in English grammar checking, which were noted by the majority of interviewees, EAL/D students in this study described a number of intrinsic motivations associated with learning. In particular, they emphasised the importance of reflecting their own authenticity, particularly in maintaining originality in the first draft. Students interviewed in this study also made a conscious effort to balance the perceived benefits of using GenAI tools against concerns about their ability to maintain personal authorship, ownership of the direction of their assessment outputs, and academic integrity standards as they understood them. Some students deliberately selected tasks they deemed acceptable practices to facilitate their work, such as generating ideas, checking grammar, or improving clarity of expression.

They also highlighted the central role of human creativity in their early drafting processes. Applying Dai's (forthcoming, para 36) concept of student–AI co-construction of "mini-c creativity" in AI-assisted learning environments, we observed some EAL/D students organically developed their own agentic practices when engaging with GenAI technologies. We observed that students proactively controlled their learning through using AI tools to generate (in Dai's words) "personally meaningful insights" (p.16). EAL/D students reported that they would continue to use GenAI tools but were also using sophisticated prompts to prevent their original ideas from being lost. Students intuitively positioned the tools as pragmatic language support while maintaining their own contributions and authentic voices, rather than viewing AI output as a replacement for their work.

To conclude, this study shows that the current concept of authenticity in assessment production from the perspective of EAL/D students was grounded both in academic integrity concerns (i.e., adherence to the university rules) and the extent to which the technologies gave students control over their assessment outputs (i.e., ownership over their own voice, ideas and creative decisions). While educators might be concerned about students' over-reliance on GenAI technologies and the loss of authorship control (Uanachain & Aouad, 2025), our findings suggest that many EAL/D students are actively negotiating their use of these technologies and working to preserve their ownership and agency during assessment writing. The question of whether this redefined understanding of authorship in the current academic landscape is a normative one is not our research focus. However, our findings provide insights into EAL/D students' learning experiences that are useful for educators to be aware of, given these students' diverse learning needs and trajectories of engagement, and how they are adapting to and developing with GenAI technologies. This research reemphasises the importance of voice and authenticity from students' perspective, which requires further research.

As academic policies evolve around GenAI use, and with academic publishing operations moving towards tiered frameworks (Raitskaya & Tikhonova, 2025) university and classroom policies might better mirror the boundaries that students are already drawing for themselves around acceptable uses that preserve students' understanding of their learning and agency (e.g., brainstorming, grammar checking and academic clarity feedback), uses that require disclosure (e.g., structural writing feedback or paraphrasing help), and prohibited uses (e.g., generating substantive content or arguments). EAL/D students have indicated that they face pressures around English language writing that monolingual English as first language students do not. Therefore, it is important for university policies to avoid inadvertently penalising EAL/D students for seeking language support that other students may not need. Given that students have indicated that they intrinsically value a human-first drafting stage, policies might require or encourage students to document this drafting stage (e.g., through submitting an initial outline or submitted draft with a timestamp before any AI-assisted revision) to ensure that this human-first drafting is supported rather than inadvertently discouraged by assessment design that requires the submission of a perfect final assessment. Students are already developing relatively sophisticated prompts to preserve their ideas and negotiate their personal authorship through these prompts, and so assessments might include a short reflective statement on their AI use (what tool was used, for what purpose and how students engaged with the output) to make this existing self-regulation visible to instructors and better support academic integrity processes rather than assuming misconduct.

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