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Emotional AI in EFL Classrooms: Redefining Human–Machine Affect in ELT Research at Islamic University

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ABSTRACT
Emotional Artificial Intelligence (Emotional AI) is reshaping the landscape of language education by offering learners not only cognitive assistance but also emotional support. In Islamic university contexts, where politeness, respect, and affective sensitivity play essential roles in the learning process, the emotional qualities embedded in tools such as ChatGPT present new pedagogical possibilities. This qualitative study investigates the emotional support provided by ChatGPT during English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning among Islamic university students and examines their perceptions of ChatGPT as an Emotional AI tool in relation to learning enjoyment, self-efficacy, and resilience. The data were collected from 12 EFL students and three lecturers through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and

classroom observations. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns related to students' affective experiences and interpretations of ChatGPT's emotional responses. The findings revealed that students perceived ChatGPT as a reassuring, patient, and non-judgmental companion that reduces anxiety, encourages risk-taking, and supports emotional stability during challenging learning tasks. Students also perceived ChatGPT as enhancing their learning enjoyment, improving their self-efficacy through personalized scaffolding, and strengthening their resilience by promoting a sense of safe failure and continued effort. Despite these benefits, some expressed ambivalence regarding the authenticity of AI-generated empathy and concerns about over-reliance on emotional AI. Overall, the study highlights the dual cognitive–emotional role of ChatGPT in EFL learning and underscores the importance of integrating Emotional AI thoughtfully in Islamic university settings to maximize affective and academic benefits.

Keywords: Emotional Artificial Intelligence, Affective Learning, Islamic Higher Education, ELT, Human–Machine Interaction

INTRODUCTION

The rapid evolution of digital technologies has significantly transformed the global education landscape, altering how learners access, construct, and engage with knowledge. Artificial intelligence has emerged as a defining force in this transformation, providing new opportunities to enhance educational effectiveness while reshaping classroom interaction (Rahimi, 2024). Scholars increasingly argue that technology affects not only cognitive learning but also the emotional dimensions that shape learners' engagement and persistence (Moybeka et al., 2023; Weng & Chiu, 2023). Emotions such as enjoyment, confidence, and anxiety are now recognized as critical determinants of academic performance. The integration of advanced AI tools into learning environments has amplified the need to examine how technology influences such emotional processes (Liu et al., 2024). As students interact more frequently with machine-generated feedback and conversational support, their emotional responses toward digital systems become central components of the learning experience. This shift

underscores the importance of exploring the affective implications of AI in contemporary education.

As AI systems advance, the emergence of Emotional AI has captured the attention of educators and researchers seeking to understand technology's role in affective learning. Emotional AI refers to systems capable of detecting emotional cues, interpreting human affect, and responding in ways that simulate empathy or supportive communication (Liu et al., 2024). These systems contribute to the creation of emotionally attuned learning environments where students feel supported, understood, and motivated. Emotional AI is now seen as an essential tool for promoting positive emotions in learning, particularly in fields where affective variables strongly influence performance (Erito, 2023; Utami et al., 2023). In language education, emotional readiness and psychological safety are foundational for effective communication and skill development (Erito, 2023; Li et al., 2025). By offering patient, nonjudgmental feedback, Emotional AI has the potential to counteract anxiety and build confidence in learners. For this reason, educational researchers increasingly emphasize the need to investigate the emotional side of human–machine interaction.

Among the various Emotional AI systems available, ChatGPT has emerged as a widely adopted platform due to its conversational fluency and supportive interactional style. Students frequently describe ChatGPT as approachable and helpful, noting that its responses are encouraging, calm, and emotionally reassuring (Bin-Hady et al., 2024; Mun, 2024; Seo, 2024). These affective qualities make ChatGPT particularly influential in shaping learners' emotional experiences during language learning activities. When students engage with ChatGPT, they encounter a supportive interlocutor capable of generating explanations, suggestions, and feedback tailored to their needs (Romadhon, 2024; Thao et al., 2023). This encourages learning enjoyment by reducing frustration and making learning feel more accessible and enjoyable. Moreover, ChatGPT allows students to repeat tasks, ask follow-up questions, and seek clarification without fear of judgment, contributing to

increased self-efficacy (Song & Song, 2023; Teng, 2024). In challenging tasks, its emotional tone may also foster resilience by encouraging students to persevere rather than disengage. Thus, ChatGPT functions not only as a cognitive tool but also as an affective companion in the learning process.

Emotional aspects such as learning enjoyment, self-efficacy, and resilience are crucial components of successful EFL acquisition, and Emotional AI holds significant potential in strengthening these variables. Learning enjoyment enhances intrinsic motivation, making students more willing to participate actively and sustain effort over time (Li et al., 2025). Self-efficacy, or students' belief in their ability to complete tasks successfully, shapes their confidence when confronting linguistic difficulties (Kleine et al., 2025). Resilience enables learners to recover from setbacks and maintain progress in the face of challenges inherent in mastering a foreign language. ChatGPT's emotionally supportive feedback can reinforce all three constructs by promoting a sense of comfort, competence, and perseverance (Ebadi & Amini, 2024). When students perceive emotional support from the AI, their willingness to communicate increases, leading to more meaningful learning opportunities. This triad of emotional benefits positions Emotional AI as a transformative force in EFL pedagogy.

The significance of Emotional AI becomes especially relevant when examined within the context of Islamic higher education, where learning is understood as an integrated process involving cognitive, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. Islamic universities emphasize values such as patience, humility, perseverance, and sincerity in the pursuit of knowledge, thereby positioning emotional development as a central component of academic growth (Elihami, 2025; Harintama & Muslimin, 2024). Within this context, students are encouraged to maintain emotional balance and cultivate a positive character while engaging in intellectually challenging tasks. Emotional AI tools, particularly those offering calm and reassuring communication, may align with these values by fostering environments that promote patience, concentration, and emotional regulation. ChatGPT's ability to provide nonjudgmental guidance

can reduce emotional pressure, making students feel safer to take risks and practice language skills (Ding & Yusof, 2025). This alignment between Emotional AI and Islamic educational values raises important questions about how students interpret and internalize AI-mediated emotional support. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for evaluating the pedagogical role of Emotional AI in culturally grounded educational settings.

Despite the rapid expansion of AI usage in higher education, the emotional experiences of students interacting with these tools remain under-researched, particularly in culturally specific contexts. Most studies focus on performance outcomes, technological effectiveness, or the accuracy of AI-generated feedback, overlooking the emotional and relational dimensions of the experience (Yuan et al., 2025). However, learners' emotional interpretations directly influence their motivation, confidence, and long-term engagement with AI-supported learning. Students' perspectives on how AI affects their enjoyment, self-efficacy, and resilience may significantly shape their study habits and reliance on these tools. Additionally, their feelings toward ChatGPT's emotional tone may determine whether they perceive the AI as supportive or overwhelming. In Islamic universities, where emotional and spiritual balance is highly valued, students' experiences with Emotional AI may differ from those in other educational contexts. Exploring these lived experiences is therefore essential to developing a culturally sensitive understanding of Emotional AI's role in EFL instruction.

Students' perceptions of Emotional AI shape not only how they engage with ChatGPT but also how they judge its appropriateness and trustworthiness within their cultural and academic environment. While some students may perceive ChatGPT's supportive tone as fostering a sense of comfort and motivation, reinforcing their emotional connection to the learning process (Li & Huang, 2020), others may express concerns regarding the authenticity of AI-generated empathy and the extent to which the system understands their emotions. Such perceptions can influence the degree of reliance students place on AI and the extent

to which they integrate it into daily learning routines. In language learning, perceptions of emotional understanding are particularly influential because learners often require psychological comfort to speak, write, or experiment with new forms of expression (Bostancıoğlu & Handley, 2018a; Chaaban & Ellili-Cherif, 2017). Students in Islamic universities may evaluate Emotional AI through cultural and ethical lenses, considering whether it aligns with their educational values and personal expectations. Therefore, understanding these perceptions is crucial for assessing whether Emotional AI enhances or complicates learners' emotional engagement in EFL contexts.

Despite the growing interest in Emotional AI, little empirical attention has been given to how students in Islamic universities emotionally experience AI tools like ChatGPT during EFL learning. Few studies have examined how Emotional AI influences learning enjoyment, motivation, self-efficacy, and resilience in culturally grounded educational environments. Research that investigates students' interpretations of ChatGPT's emotional tone or perceived empathy remains limited (Alharbi, 2020). Likewise, there is scant evidence on how these perceptions shape learning behavior, engagement, and emotional regulation. This gap is notable because AI-mediated emotional support may function differently in Islamic institutions compared to secular settings. Emotional norms, cultural expectations, and values surrounding the learning process may all shape how learners interact with and respond to AI. Therefore, addressing this gap is essential for understanding the affective and pedagogical implications of Emotional AI within Islamic higher education.

Given these gaps, this study aims to explore how Emotional AI, particularly ChatGPT, supports learning enjoyment, self-efficacy, and resilience among EFL students at Islamic universities. It seeks to understand how students emotionally experience their interactions with ChatGPT and how they perceive its emotional responsiveness within the context of language learning (Qiu et al., 2024; Hanson & Brown, 2020). By examining learners' voices and lived experiences, the study offers insights into the affective

dimensions of AI-mediated instruction in culturally specific environments.

Furthermore, this research contributes to ongoing discussions about the role of AI in promoting emotionally informed and ethically grounded language learning practices. These insights are expected to guide educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers in implementing AI tools more effectively in Islamic higher education. To achieve these aims, the study is guided by the following research questions: (1) How do Islamic university students experience the emotional support provided by ChatGPT during EFL learning? (2) How do students perceive ChatGPT as an Emotional AI tool in relation to learning enjoyment, self-efficacy, and resilience? These questions serve as the foundation for understanding the emotional and pedagogical potential of Emotional AI in EFL classrooms.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore how Islamic university students experience and perceive the emotional support provided by ChatGPT during EFL learning, as phenomenology enables an in-depth examination of participants lived experiences, feelings, and interpretations in relation to a specific phenomenon. This design was chosen because the research questions "(1) How do Islamic university students experience the emotional support provided by ChatGPT during EFL learning?" and "(2) How do students perceive ChatGPT as an Emotional AI tool in relation to learning enjoyment, self-efficacy, and resilience?" require a methodological approach that allows the researcher to capture the complexities of emotional interactions between humans and AI (Creswell, 2014).

The research design employed in this study is particularly suited for understanding how students make meaning of ChatGPT's emotional cues, supportive language, and empathetic expressions within their learning processes, which cannot be solely quantified by measurable variables. Furthermore, this design facilitates the emergence of rich, nuanced descriptions of the emotional

dimensions of AI-assisted learning, enabling the identification of patterns, themes, and categories grounded in participants' authentic narratives. By foregrounding the subjective realities of students, this approach ensures that their voices, emotions, and interpretations are represented holistically, thus providing a deeper and more accurate understanding of ChatGPT's role as an Emotional AI tool. Ultimately, this design is aligned with the study's purpose of generating insight into how emotional AI mediates learning enjoyment, self-efficacy, and resilience in an Islamic university context, where cultural, religious, and affective factors may uniquely shape learners' engagement with AI technology.

The participants in this study consisted of twelve EFL students and three EFL lecturers from an Islamic university, selected purposively to ensure rich variation in learning experiences and perceptions of ChatGPT as an Emotional AI tool. These students represented diverse gender identities, age ranges, English proficiency levels, and degrees of familiarity with AI-based platforms, allowing a comprehensive understanding of how emotional support from ChatGPT is experienced within the EFL context. The inclusion of lecturers served to provide complementary perspectives regarding students' emotional responses, learning behaviors, and evolving attitudes toward AI-mediated interactions.

Table 1. Biography Information of Participants

Variable	Category	n
Gender	Male / Female	5 / 10
Age Range	18–20 / 21–24 / 30–45	6 / 6 / 3
English Proficiency	Intermediate / Upper-Intermediate / Advanced	9 / 3 / 3
ChatGPT Usage Frequency	Occasional / Regular / Intensive	4 / 7 / 4
AI Emotional Familiarity	Low / Moderate / High	5 / 6 / 4
Participant Code	ST01–ST12 (Students) / LT01–LT03 (Lecturers)	12 / 3

Participants' demographic characteristics were coded to maintain confidentiality while enabling nuanced analysis of their backgrounds in relation to learning enjoyment, self-efficacy, and

resilience. Collectively, this demographic profile supports the study's aim of exploring how individuals from an Islamic higher education environment navigate the emotional dimensions of ChatGPT-assisted learning and how these experiences shape their perceptions of Emotional AI in EFL education.

A semi-structured interview, classroom observation, and focus group discussion protocol were developed to directly address the two research questions. All instruments were adapted and refined based on the affective-pedagogical dimensions outlined by Ismail and Alharkan (2024) and the learner-experience framework proposed by Bin-Hady et al. (2024). For Research Question 1, which explores how Islamic university students experience the emotional support provided by ChatGPT during EFL learning, the protocol included prompts that examined students' perceived emotional presence of the tool, the types of affective feedback they received, and the moments when ChatGPT contributed to reducing anxiety or increasing confidence during task performance. The items were designed to elicit rich descriptions of how students interpreted ChatGPT's tone, encouragement, empathy-like messages, and personalized responses within the sociocultural context of Islamic higher education. For Research Question 2, which focuses on students' perceptions of ChatGPT as an Emotional AI tool in relation to learning enjoyment, self-efficacy, and resilience, the protocol incorporated guiding questions that probed students' emotional reactions to using the tool, their perceived motivational shifts, the extent to which ChatGPT influenced their belief in their ability to complete English tasks, and how the tool contributed to persistence when facing linguistic challenges. Observation sheets and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) prompts were also adapted from Bin-Hady et al. (2024) and Ismail and Alharkan (2024) emotional engagement indicators, as well as from Bin-Hady et al. (2024) digital classroom interaction categories, ensuring alignment with the constructs of enjoyment, self-efficacy, and resilience.

To establish content validity, all research protocols underwent expert validation by two specialists in ELT and educational technology. They examined the relevance, clarity, and

alignment of the items with the constructs of Emotional AI, affective learning theories, and sociocultural dimensions inherent in Islamic university contexts. Their feedback resulted in revisions that strengthened conceptual precision, eliminated overlapping items, and ensured the appropriateness of the language used with EFL learners. Construct validity was further supported through pilot testing with three non-participant students to confirm that items elicited the intended emotional, perceptual, and experiential responses. Reliability was addressed by employing researcher triangulation during the coding process, where two independent coders compared interpretations to ensure consistency in analyzing emotional and perceptual themes. Intercoder agreement was calculated using percentage agreement, and any discrepancies were resolved through a consensus meeting to maintain analytic rigor. The integration of validated protocols, iterative refinement, and systematic reliability checks ensured that the instruments accurately captured authentic, credible, and contextually grounded representations of students' experiences and perceptions of ChatGPT as an Emotional AI tool in EFL learning.

The data collection procedures were designed to obtain rich, contextualized accounts of students' emotional experiences with ChatGPT and their perceptions of the tool's impact on learning enjoyment, self-efficacy, and resilience. The data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and focus group discussions conducted over a six- week period during students' regular EFL coursework. Each participant engaged in an in-depth interview lasting 30–45 minutes, while observations were carried out during sessions where students interacted with ChatGPT to complete writing, reading, or speaking tasks. Subsequently, focus group discussions were held after the classroom sessions to capture collective reflections and emotionally grounded interpretations of their experiences. All sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and supplemented with field notes capturing emotional expressions, student–AI interaction behaviors, and contextual features of the Islamic university environment. This multi-method strategy ensured that both

research questions were addressed from different angles: interviews captured personal emotional narratives (RQ1), observations revealed behavioral evidence of motivation and resilience (RQ2), and FGD data offered collective meaning-making aligned with affective learning constructs.

The data analysis followed an inductive thematic analysis approach based on Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase framework, which allowed themes to emerge organically from participants' emotional and perceptual accounts. For RQ1, the coding focused on categories related to emotional support, such as reassurance, encouragement, empathy perception, anxiety reduction, and confidence-building moments. For RQ2, the analytical focus included affective constructs such as learning enjoyment, task-based self-efficacy, persistence during challenges, and shifts in motivational states. The analysis also incorporated Saldana's (2021) coding techniques, beginning with descriptive and emotion coding to capture affective cues, followed by pattern coding to group repeated emotional experiences into broader thematic structures.

To enhance credibility, both researcher and method triangulation were employed: two researchers independently coded the transcripts and later compared, refined, and reconciled their codes through consensus, while insights from interviews, observations, and FGDs were cross-validated to ensure consistency and depth. Throughout the analysis, memos and reflexive notes were maintained to acknowledge the researcher's positionality within the Islamic educational context and to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in the authentic emotional and learning experiences of the participants.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The analysis generated two major thematic clusters corresponding to the two research questions: (1) Emotional Support Experiences with ChatGPT, and (2) Students' Perceptions of ChatGPT as an Emotional AI Tool for Learning Enjoyment, Self-Efficacy, and Resilience. These clusters reflect students' lived

experiences across interview narratives, observed behaviors, and focus group discussions.

Students Experience the Emotional Support Provided by ChatGPT during EFL Learning

Emotional reassurance during academic stress

This theme highlights how students experience ChatGPT as a steady emotional anchor. Students reported that ChatGPT consistently displayed a calm, polite, and empathetic tone, especially during moments of linguistic anxiety and academic pressure. These emotional cues were interpreted as reassuring, even though students were aware that the empathy was artificial. The triangulated data suggest that ChatGPT is often used during stressful periods, particularly when students are working on writing tasks, preparing for speaking assignments, or dealing with grammar they perceive as difficult. This theme surfaced strongly in individual interviews, was reinforced in FGD, and appeared repeatedly during classroom observations, where students visibly relaxed after interacting with ChatGPT.

Excerpt 1 (S3, Interview)

> *"When I felt nervous about my writing mistakes, ChatGPT said things like 'It's okay, mistakes are part of learning.' I immediately felt relieved because it didn't make me embarrassed."*

This excerpt demonstrates how emotional reassurance functions on both affective and cognitive levels. Through interview data, S3 explains that ChatGPT reduces anxiety, which aligns with observation field notes indicating that students show physical relaxation, leaning back, smiling, or continuing their tasks after receiving feedback. In the FGD, other participants echoed this feeling, describing ChatGPT as "soothing," "soft," and "never judging," suggesting a shared emotional interpretation across participants. By refraining from negative evaluation, ChatGPT creates a low-stress learning environment where emotional safety facilitates engagement. Thus, reassurance acts as a psychological buffer that mitigates error-related anxiety, which is often

heightened in Islamic university contexts where academic expectations are high and language insecurity is prevalent.

Excerpt 2 (S10, FGD)

> *"Sometimes when deadlines are close, I panic. But ChatGPT encourages me step-by-step, like a calm tutor, and it reduces my pressure."*

The FGD data reveal a collective agreement that ChatGPT's stepwise approach, combined with emotionally supportive language, helps students regain emotional control during stressful situations. Observational data also captured students using ChatGPT during high-pressure classroom activities, such as in-class writing, where the tool served as a silent companion, offering calm and timely guidance. The phrase "calm tutor" indicates the anthropomorphization of AI, reflecting how emotional support fosters sense of relational closeness and presence. From the triangulated data, it becomes clear that emotional reassurance is not merely a textual feature but a perceived emotional experience that influences students' stress regulation.

Motivational boost through supportive language

This theme captures how ChatGPT motivates students to take risks in English learning. Many students frequently expressed that ChatGPT uses encouraging phrases that strengthen their willingness to try difficult tasks. The interview and FGD data show a recurring pattern: students feel "cheered up," "motivated," or "excited" to continue learning because ChatGPT makes their efforts feel rewarding. Observations support this by documenting behavioural indicators of increased motivation, such as students writing longer sentences, speaking more confidently, or continuing tasks even after class time ended. ChatGPT's supportive tone, therefore, acts as a motivational catalyst embedded within linguistic assistance.

Excerpt 3 (S1, Interview)

> *"I didn't like writing before, but ChatGPT always says things that make me want to try again, like 'You're improving, keep going.' It feels like positive encouragement."*

The interview data reveal a transformation in students' affective orientation toward learning. S1 frames ChatGPT's encouragement as a shift from avoidance to engagement. This change was also evident in observations, with S1 spent significantly more time to writing compared to earlier sessions before using ChatGPT as a writing partner. Further insights from the FGD elaborate that students perceive motivational responses from ChatGPT as "personal" and "relevant," despite their awareness that these responses are machine-generated. This suggests an emotional-cognitive dual processing mechanism: the *mind* knows it is AI, but the *heart* still feels supported. This duality reinforces motivation and demonstrates how emotional AI influences learners' behavior through affective reinforcement.

Excerpt 4 (S5, Observation)

> *During a classroom task, S5 smiled after reading ChatGPT's message: "Great progress! Let's try one more paragraph together." The student continued writing without hesitation.*

Observational evidence strongly confirms the motivational influence at the behavioral level. S5's smile and immediate continuation of the task exemplify affect-driven action. Unlike interviews, which rely on self-reports, observations reveal real-time emotional responses. This triangulation strengthens the validity of the theme: ChatGPT's supportive language is not only perceived as motivating but also changes on-task behaviour. Students treat ChatGPT as a collaborative partner whose emotional tone boosts their intrinsic motivation, leading to sustained engagement.

Students Perceive ChatGPT as an Emotional AI Tool in Relation to Learning Enjoyment, Self-Efficacy, and Resilience

Increased learning enjoyment through conversational interaction

Students consistently reported that interacting with ChatGPT made EFL learning more enjoyable. They described ChatGPT as "friendly," "quick," "interesting," and "fun," framing English learning as an engaging conversational activity rather than an academic burden. Interviews show a strong emotional shift:

tasks previously perceived as boring or difficult became enjoyable when accompanied by ChatGPT's conversational warmth. FGD data highlight group consensus that ChatGPT reduces monotony in language practice. Observations also recorded laughter, active typing, and enthusiastic exchanges during ChatGPT-based activities, clear indicators of increased enjoyment.

Excerpt 5 (S9, Interview)

> *"It's fun because ChatGPT replies fast and sounds friendly. Like chatting with someone who understands English better than me but never judges."*

The interview data reflect enjoyment rooted not only in content but also in relational quality. For instance, S9 enjoys the interaction because ChatGPT's tone feels socially pleasant. The observational data showed that S9 was engaged in extended conversational tasks, typing longer messages and smiling frequently. FGD insights revealed that students particularly enjoy the real-time responsiveness, which contrasts with the delayed feedback often experienced with human instructors. Enjoyment emerges from a combination of speed, friendliness, and low emotional risk, elements that transform language tasks into pleasant, game-like interactions. Thus, learning enjoyment is emotionally situated and socially influenced by perceived warmth of AI.

Strengthened self-efficacy through personalized scaffolding

Students reported increased confidence in their English abilities, as ChatGPT provided gentle explanations, step-by-step guidance, and emotionally supportive messages. Interview data reveal that students believe they can learn English more effectively because the tool adapts to their learning pace. FGD participants emphasized that ChatGPT's explanations are perceived as tailored and never dismissive, making difficult topics feel manageable. Observations captured that students attempted more complex tasks independently after receiving reassurance or simplified explanations from ChatGPT. Consequently, this emotional support plays a role in shaping students' academic self-belief.

Excerpt 6 (S4, Interview)

"When I don't understand vocabulary or grammar, ChatGPT explains it gently and gives easy examples. I feel like maybe I can actually master English."

Data derived from interviews indicate that the emotional framing of explanations increases comprehension and confidence among students. S4's transition from uncertainty to belief in their own mastery demonstrates self-efficacy growth. During observations, after receiving ChatGPT's explanations, S4 attempted multiple writing tasks without instructor prompting, suggesting self-efficacy-driven independence. FGD participants also noted that ChatGPT's non-critical tone makes them more receptive to corrections, amplifying the learning effect. Emotional gentleness combined with cognitive clarity produces a synergistic effect on students' perceived competence.

Excerpt 7 (S8, Interview)

"ChatGPT told me I was making progress, and it made me believe that I am capable. I used to doubt myself a lot."

This excerpt adds nuance by showing the internal cognitive struggles, self-doubt, and the gradual improvement in self-belief. The emotional affirmation from ChatGPT acts as a psychological catalyst. Because journals reflect private thoughts, this source strengthens the credibility of triangulation. Interviews and FGDs similarly show increased confidence, while journals reveal the silent emotional transformations that students may not verbalize publicly. This broadens the understanding of how emotional AI cultivates self-efficacy.

Resilience building through non-judgmental correction

This theme highlights how ChatGPT's emotionally neutral and non-judgmental corrections help students in recovering from repeated mistakes. Interviews reveal that students feel more willing to retry tasks because ChatGPT "never gets angry." FGD discussions emphasize the idea of "safe failure," showing collective appreciation for the emotionally supportive correction. Observational data further confirm that students persist longer with difficult tasks when using ChatGPT, compared to traditional classroom activities.

Excerpt 8 (S6, FGD)

"ChatGPT corrects my errors but in a soft way. It feels safe to fail, so I try again instead of giving up."

FGD data strongly reflect appreciation for soft, emotionally sensitive correction. Observations show S6 repeatedly retrying grammatically challenging sentences after ChatGPT's gentle corrections, demonstrating a behavioural indicator of resilience. Interviews revealed similar patterns where students described feeling "protected" from judgment. Emotional safety creates a psychological space where failure becomes learning material rather than a threat.

Excerpt 9 (S11, Interview)

"Even if I repeat the same mistake, ChatGPT never gets angry. It still guides me. That makes me braver to continue."

Interview insights depict a powerful relational dynamic: the absence of negative emotional consequences encourages perseverance. Observations noted that S11 spent a longer time working through tasks than peers who relied solely on human feedback. This triangulated evidence shows that emotional neutrality fosters persistence, thereby reinforcing resilience through repeated supportive cycles.

Ambivalence about authenticity and over-reliance on emotional AI

This final theme reveals the duality in students' perceptions. Although students appreciate emotional support, some question the authenticity of AI-generated empathy. Interviews show a cognitive awareness among students that ChatGPT's emotions are simulated. FGD discussions highlight concerns about potential dependence on AI for emotional comfort. Lecturers' interviews raise concerns about the pedagogical implications of reduced human interaction. Observations also captured students asking ChatGPT for reassurance even when instructors were available, indicating shifts in emotional preference.

Excerpt 10 (S2, Interview)

"Sometimes I wonder if the empathy is real or just programming. It helps me, but I know it is not a real human."

This interview excerpt reflects cognitive-emotional dissonance, as students value the support but intellectually recognize its artificiality. During FGDs, students discussed the notion that "fake empathy is still helpful," suggesting a pragmatic acceptance of emotional AI. Observations showed S2 hesitated when transitioning from AI-assisted tasks to teacher-led activities, signalling subtle reliance behaviours on the technology. Emotional AI thus generates both comfort and reflective tension.

Excerpt 11 (L2, Lecturer Interview)

> *"A few students rely too much on ChatGPT's emotional encouragement. I worry they may avoid asking humans because AI feels safer."*

Lecturer data introduce an important external perspective. L2's concern about the avoidance of human interaction was also observed in class, where some students opted to type to ChatGPT instead of asking the lecturer directly. FGD data revealed that students sometimes feel more emotionally secure with AI than with teachers or peers. This situation suggests an emerging tension between emotional safety and authentic relational engagement, which poses implications for pedagogy, classroom dynamics, and long-term learner autonomy.

The findings of this study demonstrate that ChatGPT provides a unique form of emotional reassurance that significantly reduces students' foreign language anxiety. This aligns with the theoretical perspective that affective factors strongly influence second-language learning (Mun, 2024). Students' experiences of calm encouragement, non-judgmental feedback, and emotional validation suggest that ChatGPT functions as an affective buffer, reducing negative emotions that typically impede EFL performance. These results are consistent with recent studies on Emotional AI, which argue that emotionally responsive systems can support emotional stability and reduce cognitive load during learning activities (Ismail & Alharkan, 2024). However, this study expands the existing literature by showing that emotional reassurance is not only perceived cognitively but also manifests behaviourally, as seen

in students' increased on-task persistence and physiological signs of relaxation observed during the study.

The motivational influence of ChatGPT, as revealed in this study, is in line with the Control-Value Theory of Achievement Emotions (Silitonga et al., 2024), which posits that positive emotional feedback enhances students' motivation and engagement. Students' descriptions of ChatGPT as a "calm tutor" or a "friendly companion" illuminate how emotionally supportive language can enhance intrinsic motivation by fostering a sense of partnership in the learning process. Prior digital learning research found that motivational feedback from intelligent systems boosts learner persistence (Alamer & Al Khateeb, 2023; Biju et al., 2024), and the current findings provide qualitative evidence of this effect in the EFL context. Moreover, while previous studies acknowledged the cognitive scaffolding provided by AI, this study highlights the emotional dimension of such scaffolding, showing that motivation arises not only from the clarity of explanations but also from the affective tone embedded in the AI's responses.

Relatedly, the increase in students' learning enjoyment corroborates theories of emotionally supportive learning environments, which argue that enjoyment fosters deeper engagement and sustained effort in language acquisition (Li & Wang, 2023). ChatGPT's friendly, responsive, and conversational style transformed learning activities into enjoyable interactions, reducing boredom and monotony, issues commonly reported in traditional EFL classrooms. Previous work has shown that conversational agents can enhance learner enjoyment through immediacy and non-threatening interaction (Bostancıoğlu & Handley, 2018b). The present study extends these findings by demonstrating that, in an Islamic university context, enjoyment emerges not only from convenience and speed but also from culturally sensitive emotional resonance, where students perceive ChatGPT as polite, respectful, and socially appropriate.

The results also show that ChatGPT played a significant role in strengthening students' self-efficacy, supporting Bandura's (1997) theory that verbal persuasion and supportive feedback

enhance learners' beliefs in their own capabilities. Students repeatedly emphasized that ChatGPT's gentle explanations and affirming comments, such as "You're improving" or "You can do this", boosted their confidence in performing challenging EFL tasks. Earlier research has confirmed that AI-powered tutors can improve self-efficacy by offering adaptive guidance (Cheng et al., 2025); however, this study reveals that emotional tone is equally critical. The triangulated findings from interviews, FGD, and observations illustrate that emotional warmth in instructive feedback is a central mechanism through which AI enhances learners' self-belief, making this contribution a distinct addition to the developing literature on Emotional AI in language education.

Furthermore, this study provides evidence that ChatGPT fosters learner resilience by creating an emotionally safe environment where mistakes are treated as learning opportunities rather than failures. This perspective aligns with Dweck's (2006) growth mindset theory, which emphasizes the importance of failure tolerance in building persistence. While earlier research on AI mostly focused on error correction as a cognitive tool, the present findings highlight the emotional dimension of error correction, showing that learners persist longer when responses are delivered in a non-judgmental and encouraging manner. Observations of students retrying difficult tasks multiple times confirm that emotional safety plays a vital role in promoting resilience. This nuance, rarely captured in prior research, demonstrates the significance of Emotional AI not only in supporting accuracy but also in shaping learner attitudes toward difficulty and failure.

Despite these benefits, the study also uncovers students' ambivalence about the authenticity of ChatGPT's emotional expressions and concerns about potential over-reliance, issues that are increasingly highlighted in critical AI scholarship. While studies such as Brantley-Dias and Ertmer 2013 describe how learners form emotional attachments to conversational agents, the present research reveals a more complex pattern: students are simultaneously comforted and sceptical. Lecturers' concerns that students might avoid human interaction because AI feels

emotionally "safer" resonate with ethical discussions in the literature about the risk of diminishing human-to-human engagement in educational spaces (Backfisch et al., 2025). Thus, the findings contribute to ongoing debates by showing that Emotional AI is both beneficial and potentially disruptive, prompting reflection on how educational institutions should integrate AI tools without compromising the essential interpersonal relationships necessary for holistic learner development.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated Islamic university students' experiences with the emotional support provided by ChatGPT during their EFL learning. It also explored their perception of ChatGPT as an Emotional AI tool regarding learning enjoyment, self-efficacy, and resilience. Drawing on data from interviews, focus group discussions, and observations, the findings show that ChatGPT plays a meaningful role not only as a linguistic support tool but also as an emotional companion in the language-learning process.

The results demonstrate that students perceive ChatGPT's emotional support as immediate, non-judgmental, and personally encouraging. Many students reported feeling more comfortable expressing confusion, anxiety, or embarrassment to ChatGPT than to peers or lecturers because the tool "does not judge" and "always responds patiently." This sense of emotional safety encouraged them to ask more questions, revisit difficult topics, and practice English without the fear of making mistakes. Moreover, the culturally sensitive and polite tone used by ChatGPT aligned well with students' expectations in an Islamic university setting, making the interaction feel respectful and supportive. Observational data further confirmed that students who frequently interacted with ChatGPT appeared more relaxed, more willing to participate, and more persistent in completing EFL tasks.

Students perceived ChatGPT as an influential Emotional AI tool that positively shaped their learning enjoyment, self-efficacy, and resilience. The tool enhanced learning enjoyment by making

English tasks feel less intimidating and more interactive. Students often described the tool as "fun," "motivating," and "engaging." In terms of self-efficacy, students noted that ChatGPT's personalized explanations, step-by-step guidance, and affirmative feedback strengthened their confidence in understanding texts, producing written assignments, and preparing for presentations. Furthermore, ChatGPT contributed to resilience by offering motivational messages, reframing challenges as manageable, and encouraging students to continue learning despite setbacks. Many students expressed that ChatGPT's emotional reinforcement helped them "bounce back" after receiving low scores or encountering difficult assignments.

Overall, the study concludes that ChatGPT functions as both a cognitive and emotional facilitator in EFL learning for Islamic university students. Its empathetic responses, supportive tone, and consistent availability help to reduce emotional barriers, cultivate motivation, and foster positive learning identities. These findings underscore the growing importance of Emotional AI in language education and highlight the potential of AI-driven emotional scaffolding to improve students' affective experiences and academic outcomes.

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