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Self-Directed Learning Through the Use of Character.AI Chatbot for English Learning: A Narrative Inquiry

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Abstract
This study explores the use of Character.AI as a tool for self-directed English learning. Using a narrative inquiry approach, this research investigates the factors that are influencing learners' decisions in adopting and utilizing Character.AI for their learning purposes, as well as their experiences with the utilization in language learning. The data were collected using an online questionnaire for high school students who use Character.AI for their daily English learning. There were 30 participants in this study, sharing the motivations, experiences, and challenges in using Character.AI for their self-directed English learning. The findings from this study show that learners' utilization of Character.AI are aligning with the essential elements outlined by Gibbons. These include elements such as; student control, skill development, self-challenge, self-management, and self-motivation & assessment. From learners' experiences in using Character.AI, they expressed that being able to control their own study schedules and learning intensity was beneficial for them. Overall, learners' experience with Character.AI had a positive result. The study also emphasizes Character.AI's potential to support English language development and suggests that educators and developers explore the integration of AI based technologies as the supplementary tool to foster learner self-directed learning and engagement.

Keywords: Character.AI; self-directed learning; English language learning; AI chatbots; learner autonomy.

INTRODUCTION

Self-directed learning has become an important part of education today especially in language learning, where learners are seeking personalized way to build their skills.

With the rise of technological advancements, AI are now being utilized to support learners in taking charge of their own learning process and aligning it with the ideas introduced by Knowles (1975) on self-directed learning. Knowles describes self-directed learning as a process where individuals take the initiative with or without the help of others. It can be in the form of diagnosing their learning needs, setting goals, finding resources, applying strategies for learning, and assessing their own progress. Nowadays, AI-driven platforms like chatbots are creating new opportunities for learners by offering more flexible, engaging, and personalized learning experiences. These technologies help support self-directed learning by providing interactive and personalized assistance, helping learners to stay focused on track throughout their learning progress. As AI continues to improve, it's making it easier for individuals to take charge of their own learning journey, helping them stay motivated, manage their progress, and access learning resources more effectively in the current digital world.

With various AI-driven platforms, Character.AI has gained recognition for its potential that the platform offers to enhance language learning by having a more personalized learning, interactive experiences to cater to individual needs and preferences. Character.AI brings innovative approach of language practice by using artificial intelligence to stimulate realistic and natural conversations in the language learners want to practice. For learners, being able to chat privately and instantly with an AI chatbot gives themselves a flexible space to explore the language. Learners also encouraged to take initiative and become more active in their learning journey, helping them build confidence and take control of their progress. Another point to note is that Character.AI helps learners to gain some confidence and help them become fluent because learners get to choose topics of conversation according to their preferences and receiving instant feedback without any pressure. Therefore, learners received a sense of independence and confidence which later will benefit their self-directed learning in the language learning.

Previous research by experts has revealed that the important role of technology plays in supporting self-directed learning, especially in the context of language learning. Several studies have researched the effectiveness use of learning platforms, mobile applications, and other digital tools in promoting learning autonomy and engagement that can support self-directed learning. However, there remains a noticeable gap when it comes to understanding how learners are actually using Character.AI for independent English learning, as well as how their interactions with the platform might influence their language development. Therefore, this research seeks to fill the gap by exploring how learners engage in self-directed learning using Character.AI. This research will investigate the motivation behind learners' preference in adopting the platform and examine their experiences with its role in the language learning process. The research focusing on the essential elements of self-directed learning as outlined by Gibbons (2003). The research aims to provide insights into the effectiveness of Character.AI as a tool for self-directed English learning. The findings of this research will add to the discussion on AI-driven platform language learning and provide insights for learners, educators, and

developers on how AI chatbots can be maintained to support independent learning of those language learners. Another point that might be found from the research on how AI platform can increase engagement to keep learners interested in learning, and how the platform help in improving language skills. Thus, this study aims to explore and answer the research questions as follows:

1. What factors influence language learners' decisions to adopt and utilize Character.AI?
2. How was the learners' experience on the utility of Character.AI chatbots in their Self-Directed English learning?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Self-Directed Learning

Long (1994) defines self-directed learning as the cognitive and psychological processes through which learners intentionally guide their own learning to acquire knowledge and develop problem-solving skills. According to Morris (2019), self-directed learning occurs when learners take responsibility for setting their learning objectives and determining the best approaches to meet their perceived educational needs. Similarly, Bartholomew (2019) describes self-directed learning as an active learning process in which individuals take the initiative to utilize available resources and information to enhance their understanding. From the definition of experts above, self-directed learning can be seen as a process that enables learners to create their own learning environment based on their preferences and later will benefits them in achieving academic or personal learning goals. Essentially, self-directed learning is giving learners the freedom to take charge of their own learning. It encourages them to find, assess, and use information in ways that suit their personal goals and learning styles. With fostering self-motivation and adaptability, self-directed learning helps learners become more independent and confident in navigating their own learning process.

From various definitions of self-directed learning by experts above, one of the most significant key ideas that stands out is the learners' ability to take charge of their own learning. In this way, learners can decide what goals they want to reach, pick the right materials, choose strategies that work best for them, and figure out how to measure their own learning progress. To develop self-directed learning, learners need to build self-awareness. This involves understanding one's own strengths, weaknesses, and preferred ways to learn. Learners can develop this awareness through self-reflection or by having meaningful conversations with teachers or friends, both of which can lead to a more effective and personalized learning journey. In this study, self-directed learning is defined as a comprehensive process where learners take full responsibility for managing their own learning. This involves identifying what they need to learn, choosing and applying strategies that suit their goals, and regularly reflecting on their progress. Other than that, self-directed learning also help learners develops problem solving skills and

fosters an environment where learners take an active role in shaping their own educational experiences.

The Elements of Self-Directed Learning

Self-directed learning involves several key elements that enable learners to take charge of their learning, build independence, and reach their academic goals. Many researchers have examined these components to better understand how learners can guide their own progress effectively. Garrison (1997) proposed a theoretical model which highlighting three essential dimensions of self-directed learning: self-management, self-monitoring, and motivation. While these elements are often explored separately, they are deeply interconnected in practice. Together, these elements support learners in engaging with their learning in a more meaningful and independent way. Similarly, Gibbons (2003) outlines the essential elements of Self-Directed Learning as follows:

Table 1. *The Essential Elements of SDL*

Elements of Self-Directed Learning	Description in Self-Directed Learning context
Student Control	Students are encouraged to take the lead in their own learning, while also shifting the focus from teacher-led instruction to a more independent learning. This element helps them grow into more responsible individual because students can build their confidence in learning.
Skill Development	Students learned to develop practical skills and habits that they can use in real life; setting goals, planning, and following through on their tasks.
Self-Challenge	Students are encouraged to step out of their comfort zone and aim higher, whether it's in areas they already know or completely new challenges.
Self-Management	Students also gain important life qualities from doing self-directed learning such as confidence, courage, and determination which help them stay focused and productive well beyond the classroom.
Self-Motivation and Self-Assessment	By setting their own goals, seeking feedback, and evaluating their learning progress, they stay motivated to keep improving and reaching their full potential.

Artificial Intelligence

The concept of Artificial Intelligence was first introduced by John McCarthy in 1956, who defined it as 'the science and engineering of making intelligence'. John described AI as a field closely related to using computers to simulate human intelligence. Wang (2019) described AI as a technology that can handle cognitive learning tasks and problem-solving, utilizing advanced innovations like machine learning and neural networks. Additionally, in the book Artificial Intelligence, Phillips (2020) references

Russel and Norvig's perspective, defining AI as the study of intelligent agents. AI is a system that are designed to perceive their environment and take actions to increase their chances of achieving success. These agents continuously analyze their surroundings and make decisions that enhance their effectiveness in solving complex problems.

The use of Artificial Intelligence in education has brought significant changes to education by making it more accessible, personalized, and efficient. AI-driven tools, like intelligent tutoring programs, adaptive learning platforms, and language based chatbots are commonly used to deliver instant feedback and customize learning experiences to fit each individual learners' needs. Research in this area have presented diverse perspectives on how AI is being integrated into educational settings. Nguyen (2024) highlights the powerful role AI can play in transforming the future of education. The study shows that AI-driven tools are more capable to personalize learning experiences, assist grading, and tracking learners' engagement in the context of language learning. Similar to this, Singh et.al (2024) also discusses how AI-driven tool can assess learners' data to find out their strengths, weaknesses, and learning preferences. In the study, it found that such platforms are able to provide personalized content and exercises to meet individual learning needs. Additionally, Patel and Sharma (2023) explore the use of AI in providing real-time feedback, facilitating self-paced learning, and improving accessibility to educational resources, especially for language learners. These studies are highlighting how AI has the potential to transform education by making learning more efficient, boosting student engagement, and addressing the varied needs of different learners.

Chatbot

As artificial intelligence continues to advance and become a part of daily life, chatbot have emerged as one of its most well-known and commonly used applications. Chatbot is artificial intelligence program that purposedly designed to facilitate communication, provide assistance, and enhance learning experiences. Brennan (2006) states that chatbot as a computer program designed to provide services through dialogue-based interactions. Muniasamy and Alasiry (2020) similarly describe chatbots as an efficient technology that supports communication and learning by delivering information in an interactive and user-friendly way. Xu (2024) adds that AI leads to positive outcomes, demonstrating improvement in academic performance, motivation, engagement, and learning progression through adaptive learning and personalized feedback. In line with these perspectives, chatbots act as virtual assistants by delivering conversational responses and supporting its users in managing information. Their structured dialogues capabilities also allow them to be integrated into intelligent tutoring systems, offering language learners opportunities to enhance their self-directed learning.

Character.AI

As more people use chatbots, their design and functionality have improved. With continuous development, chatbots become smarter and more adaptable for any kind of purposes. Chatbots' users can now enjoy conversations that are interactive, natural and

also can customize their interactions to suit their individual preferences. An example for this development is Character.AI, which takes chatbot interactions to the next level by creating human-like interaction in form of conversations with its users. Character.AI uses neural language models to produce the text which allowing users to engage in conversational with both any characters that existed before and also other options such as custom created characters. This approach enhances the overall interactivity and creates a more engaging experience for each user. Character.AI allows users to design and personalize characters with unique personalities, communication styles, and areas of knowledge. By customizing the character, it makes interaction feel more tailored and engaging for user's preferences. By giving users, the freedom to create and design characters of their own, Character.AI not only encourages creativity but also helps users feel more in control of their conversations, enabling more meaningful and personalized conversation that reflect learners' interests and needs. After being able to interact with custom-made characters, users will experience more personal and meaningful. Other than casual chat, Character.AI also provides the flexibility to use such as roleplaying, creative storytelling, or language learning. This approach enhances the sense of immersion while also offering the freedom to explore different types of interactions that align with each user's unique interests and preferences.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses narrative inquiry to examine learners' experiences with Self-directed English learning through Character.AI. A total of 30 participants were selected whom had relevant experience using the platform of language learning. The questionnaire was distributed online such as X and TikTok. For data analysis, both descriptive and thematic analysis were used in this research. Descriptive analysis was applied to the close-ended responses, calculating the mean scores of the Likert scale responses to determine learners' experience. This provided a numerical representation of participants' engagement with Character.AI. Meanwhile, thematic analysis was used to examine the open-ended responses, identifying patterns and recurring themes related to learners' SDL experiences.

FINDINGS

The findings are connected to the research question and are based on the data collected through questionnaires, and interviews involving participants of English learners who use Character.AI as a tool for language learning.

1. Factors influencing language learners' decision to adopt and utilize Character.AI

To gain a deeper understanding of the factors that influence language learners' decisions to adopt and utilize Character.AI as a tool for learning English, the researcher developed a questionnaire consisting of 13 statements.

Table 2. The result of questionnaire on factors influencing learners on the use of Character.AI

Indicator	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)	Mean

Student Control	43%	38%	18%	0%	81%
Skill Development	33%	46%	10%	0%	73%
Self- Challenge	33%	50%	16%	0%	79%
Self-Management	43%	40%	23%	0%	85%
Self-Motivation & Self-Assessment	43%	44%	11%	0%	82%

This questionnaire is based on Gibbons (2003) Essential Elements of Self-directed Learning, which include Student Control, Skill Development, Self-challenge, Self-management, Self-motivation, and Self-Assessment. Gibbon's framework in this research will provide a comprehensive perspective on the elements that shape self-directed learning. The elements of self-directed learning by Gibbons help to examine whether the platform of Characte.AI can enhance learners' ability to take control of their learning, develop new skills, and stay motivated throughout the process. By integrating these elements, the questionnaire aims to explore not only the reasoning behind learners' decisions to use Character.AI but also their overall experience with the platform as a tool for self-directed English learning. Table 2. presents participants' responses across five self-directed learning elements in using Character.AI. Student Control received a mean score of 81%, highlighting its private and accessible feature for learners to practice English. Skill Development scored 73%, reflecting its role in boosting learners' confidence and facilitating natural conversational practice. Self-Challenge scored 79%, indicating that Character.AI encourages learners to engage in complex situations, think critically, and improve their English skills. Self-Management had the highest score at 85%, highlighting its effectiveness in helping learners control their study schedules and intensity in learning. Lastly, Self-Motivation & Self-Assessment scored 82%, demonstrating Character.AI's role in maintaining motivation and providing valuable feedback. From the result, it can be seen that the highest score to influence learners utilize Character.AI was in Self-Motivation & Self-Assessment, with consistent motivation and feedback utilization as key factors. The finding suggests that learners view Character.AI as a tool that help improve their motivation and confidence, which significantly influences their decision to use it for English learning. To gain deeper of this result, follow-up interviews were conducted with three participants to better understand the factors that shaped their engagement with Character.AI.

From the interview, learners agreed that Character.AI has the ability to keep them engaged especially for their quick and responsive interactions, which makes practicing English more enjoyable and interactive. Character.AI's prompt replies help maintain a smooth flow of conversation, encouraging learners to stay actively involved in their learning. One participant shared, "*Saya pernah chat dengan salah satu karakter yang memang tugasnya mengoreksi grammar saya ketika menulis. Dari situ saya sedikit-sedikit belajar dan sangat membantu untuk melatih diri*" which translates to, 'I once chatted with one of the characters using prompt to correct my grammar when writing. From there, I learned some of it, and became very helpful for training myself.' Another participant stated that

"*Balasan mereka tidak itu-itu saja walaupun mereka aslinya robot, jadi kalau diajak chat malah asik dan seru kayak manusia*" which translates to, 'Their answers aren't monotone even though they're robots. Chatting with thema are like talking to a real person and its fun.' From the interview, learners considered Character.AI's quick responses as useful for not only keeping them engaged but also for building their self-assessment skills. Learners are not relying on direct corrections like from teachers in the classroom, but they are encouraged to reflect on their input by comparing it with the chatbot's replies. This interaction will help them better understand and improve their English in real time. This interactive exchange interaction encourages self-assessment from learners, making Character.AI's role as a motivating tool for self-directed learning. Participants emphasized that the chatbot's skill to make fast and engaging replies makes their conversations feel more smooth, natural, and enjoyable. The platform's interactive design helps learners stay interested and motivated, while its fast replies allow them to keep their continuous practice. As learners follow the chatbot's use of language, they begin to reflect on their own, which later will also support their growth in fluency and confidence in English learning. These factors highlight why many learners choose Character.AI as an ideal tool for self-directed English learning.

2. Learners' experience on the utility of Character.AI chatbot in their Self-Directed Learning

The questionnaire is from 12 statements that are designed to examine learners' experiences while using Character.AI for their self-directed English learning. The questions were structured based on Chapelle's (2001) framework for evaluating the platform's effectiveness, which includes six key indicators: (1) Language Learning Potential, (2) Learner Fit, (3) Meaning Focus, (4) Authenticity, (5) Impact, and (6) Practicality.

Table 3. The result of questionnaire on learners' experiences using Character.AI

Indicator	**Strongly Agree (%)**	**Agree (%)**	**Disagree (%)**	**Strongly Disagree (%)**	**Mean**
Language Learning Potential	51%	31%	16%	0%	82%
Learner Fit	36%	41%	21%	0%	77%
Meaning Focus	25%	46%	26%	0%	73%
Authenticity	33%	47%	20%	0%	78%
Impact	33%	40%	26%	0%	76%
Practicality	43%	40%	16%	0%	81%

Table 3. presents participants' responses across six key indicators regarding their experience with Character.AI in self-directed English learning. With an average score of 82%, the findings suggest that learners highly appreciate the flexibility to customize or personalized their English practice. They value the ability to adjust difficulty levels and

concentrate on specific language skills that align with their individual learning needs. In another indicator, learner fit received 77% average score stating that Character.AI helps users develop complex expressions in communicating and are able to respond quickly. It means that the platform also enhances the fluence and sentence structure skills for learners. Meaning focus received 73% mean score suggests that while some learners seek challenging conversation with the bot, other learners also appreciate the meaningful communication with more suitable context to offers. Authenticity received 78% which reflects that learners find the conversation with Character.AI feel realistic, it allows learners to use real-life language use like in a daily life conversation. In indicator of impact, it received 76% mean score. It emphasizes how Character.AI work in fostering self-reflection and helping learners to identify their strengths and weaknesses. Lastly, practicality indicator scored 81%, suggesting that learners appreciate the accessibility, ease of use, and flexibility in fitting into their self-directed learning routines. The data highlights Character.AI's adaptability, with learners valuing its flexibility, authenticity, and practicality in maintaining meaningful language learning. This supports Character.AI's role as a valuable tool for self-directed English learning. To gain deeper understanding of these findings, follow-up interview was conducted to explore learners' experiences in more detail.

For language learning potential, the platform's customization allows users to adjust difficulty levels based on their proficiency and confidence, with a mean score of 82% "*Dulu awal main pernah nyoba karakter anime kerajaan. Itu lumayan susah karena aku gak tau bahasa yang dipakai kerajaan (dalam) bahasa Inggris, tapi aku coba iseng-iseng jawab dengan kemampuan sendiri nanti lama-lama respond mereka juga menyesuaikan walaupun jadi aneh kalau dibaca*" which translates to 'When I first started using it, I tried chatting with a royal-themed character. It was quite difficult because I didn't know the formal language used in English, but I just tried to respond with my own level. Over time, their responses also adjusted, even though it sometimes sounded a bit weird when I read them.' And followed by another participant, "*Iya, saya bisa menyesuaikan sesuai kemampuan. Misal terlalu susah bahasanya, nanti saya coba chat lagi dengan bahasa informal. Otomatis mereka akan mengikuti balasan kita*" which translates to 'Yes, I can adjust it (the level) by myself. If it's too hard, I can keep it simple using informal languages. Automatically, they will follow my respond and start using informal languages too.' Learners mentioned that when trying to hold more serious or complex conversation that requiring formal English, they faced some difficulties at first. However, they noticed that the chatbot's responses adapted over time, allowing them to learn at a pace that felt right for them. Many also appreciated being able to shift between casual and formal language, with the chatbot naturally adapting its tone to follow along. These findings confirm that Character.AI provides a personalized learning experience, helping learners improve their English in a way that is both comfortable and engaging.

DISCUSSION

The first research question looked into what drives learners to use Character.AI for their self-directed English learning. The results aligned with Gibbons's framework (2003), which highlights the importance of motivation, independence, and access to resources. A major influence was learners' intrinsic interest in technology and its educational potential, which made the learning process more engaging. Yuan et al. (2023) found that chatbots in EFL classrooms encouraged students' willingness to communicate and improved their speaking skills. Similarly, Character.AI provides a personalized and interactive space where learners can practice English at their own pace, adjust the difficulty of the conversations, and receive instant feedback or responses. Character.AI's adaptability and ability to create real-life scenarios enhance motivation, making it an effective tool for continuous language improvement.

The second research question focused on learners' experiences in using Character.AI for their self-directed English learning. The results revealed that most learners had positive impressions of the platform, appreciating its interactive, adaptive, and engaging feature. Chapelle's (2001) framework supports these findings, emphasizing learner fit and linguistic characteristics. The chatbot's realistic conversations motivated learners to use more complex sentence structures and provided a personalized learning experience. Similarly, Liu et al. (2022) also found that AI chatbots help learners' engagement and help student interested in learning over time. In the same way, Character.AI's dynamic design keeps learners motivated, build their confidence, and creates a comfortable environment for English practice which also making it a valuable tool for continuous self-directed learning.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

In conclusion, this study shows how Character.AI can support self-directed learning by giving learners opportunities to practice language skills a fun, interactive and engaging way to practice their language learning. The findings suggests that Character.AI's accessibility, engagement, and personalized interaction play important roles in why learners utilize it. For learners' experiences were mostly positive, as they found Character.AI useful for enhancing fluency, confidence, and conversational skills. However, since it doesn't provide corrective feedback, learners found Character.AI more effective as a supplementary tool rather than a replacement for traditional learning methods. When learners don't receive clear feedback, they may feel struggle to recognize their own mistakes, which later can be habits if it is not addressed. Because of this, Character.AI may not be the best option as a main learning tool, especially when compared to learning with a teacher, tutor, or even practicing with friends in person.

Based on the conclusion, there are a few suggestions to help improve Character.AI to become more effective for self-directed English learning. Learners are encouraged to use the chatbot as a supplementary tool rather than making it a primary tool for language learning. Learners can also combine it with more structured learning methods that can lead to more language development progress. Developers should consider adding corrective feedback and adaptive learning features to improve user

experience. Future research should explore the long-term impact of AI chatbots, compare them with other digital tools, and explore how effective they are for learners with different backgrounds and English skill levels.

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