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Agency Construction in AI English Language Learning Applications: A Transitivity Analysis of Promotional Discourse

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Abstract—**This study explored how AI tools and human learners are represented in the promotional texts of AI-based English learning applications through quantitative and qualitative methods. The study aims to analyze promotional texts from globally popular applications—Grammarly, QuillBot, Mondly, Lingopie, and ELSA Speak— collected from App Store descriptions and official websites employing Halliday's transitivity system. Quantitatively, the analysis of 148 clauses showed that only three process types were employed: material (83.73%), relational (11.49%), and mental (4.73%). Learners were foregrounded as central actors (83.7%) and beneficiaries (16.3%), while the AI tools were less frequent as actors (56.1%) but appeared more often as instrumental circumstances (24.2%). Qualitatively, three themes emerged: (1) AI tools as active, supportive, and authoritative agents, (2) human learners as autonomous yet dependent agents, and (3) shared agency in which learners remained central doers, but their abilities were consistently enabled by AI tools. These findings highlight how promotional discourse constructs a learner-centered orientation while normalizing AI's authority. The study contributes by illustrating how transitivity analysis can reveal patterns of representation and agency in promotional texts, offering insights for researchers, educators, and developers of AI English learning tools.**

Index Terms—**agency, English learning applications, AI tools, promotional discourse, transitivity analysis**

I. Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) has transformed many sectors, including education. It is capable of providing personalized learning and enhancing accessibility and flexibility (Holmes et al., 2023). According to Chen et al. (2020), AI improves the quality, efficiency, and effectiveness of education by using adaptive systems and smart tutoring. AI helps learners learn at their convenience, reducing geographical and socioeconomic barriers. It also reduces the workload of instructors regarding automated grading and feedback, offering time for them to focus on deeper student engagement (Alsaedi, 2024). Building on these developments, Miller (2025) emphasized the significance of incorporating AI technologies into curricula to foster AI literacy and prepare students for an increasingly technology-advanced educational environment.

In the field of English language learning, AI applications such as Grammarly, QuillBot, Mondly, Lingopie, and ELSA have significantly impacted students' learning process in helping them to strengthen their language skills: writing, reading, listening, and speaking. Applications such as Grammarly and QuillBot are used by learners to help them improve their writing-related task accuracy, focusing on grammar, spelling, punctuation, paraphrasing, and lexical diversity. These tools offer quick feedback, allowing learners to engage in self-directed revision. Mondly, on the other hand, provides interactive classes focused on vocabulary enhancement, phrases, and dialogues, incorporating gamification components such as augmented reality features for increased engagement. Lingopie uses TV series and movies to learn the language in context. ELSA focuses on speaking skills, employing speech recognition to improve pronunciation.

These applications have emphasized in their promotional discourse that they allow students to engage in self-directed learning at their convenience. Such discourse portrays learners as actors with agency controlling their learning process. However, little research has been done on how these applications linguistically represent the agency of learners compared to the agency of the AI applications through the transitivity system. Therefore, this study aims to examine the depiction of AI tools and human learners in the promotional discourse for five AI-powered English learning applications. The purpose of this study is to detect the frequencies of transitivity process types and participant roles assigned to AI tools and human learners in the advertising texts of AI-powered English learning applications, as well as to identify the themes of agency and representation that emerge from the transitivity patterns used.

II. Literature Review

A. English Learning Applications

Recent research has examined the educational advantages of AI applications and the way in which students engage with them in language learning. Llausas et al. (2024), Wulandari et al. (2024), and Ismailia and Novawan (2025) evaluated the advantages and drawbacks of tools like Grammarly and QuillBot. Their findings demonstrated that these applications effectively facilitate ESL/EFL learning, resulting in measurable enhancements in language fluency, improved understanding of syntactic structures, and fewer grammatical errors. Furthermore, they have been proven to enhance students' writing confidence, promote learner autonomy, and mitigate persistent linguistic challenges faced by EFL learners. However, they also raise challenges, including excessive dependence on technologies and insufficient feedback for advanced writing skills (Llausas et al., 2024). Similarly, Mondly promotes autonomy and flexibility. Nushi et al. (2024) reported the gamified elements of Mondly, such as stars, daily lessons, and notifications, enhance motivation and alleviate learner anxiety in contrast to traditional classroom assessments. Mondly's simple design, engaging visuals, and extensive variety of language possibilities render it particularly attractive and advantageous for beginners.

On the other hand, ELSA distinguishes itself through its specific pronunciation enhancement capabilities, employing integrated speech recognition technology that ranks it among the top five AI applications globally. While students benefit from significant advantages in pronunciation acquisition, they also face problems in navigation and usability (Nushi & Sadeghi, 2021). Despite these challenges, Arbain et al. (2023) indicated in their comparative research that ELSA's enhanced efficacy, with students exhibiting a 15.21% proficiency improvement against 13% with alternative applications— a statistically significant difference in learning outcomes. Nevertheless, a major obstacle for ESL/EFL learners remains the limited availability of free language learning applications.

B. Promotional Discourse in Education and English Learning Applications

Promotional discourse has been significantly adopted in education. Universities and educational AI applications employ marketing and advertising language to attract students and learners. They employ compelling language to market their programs and applications. Universities increasingly use promotional discourse as a strategic communication strategy to enhance institutional identity and attract potential students (Hoang & Rojas-Lizana, 2015; Al-Qahtani, 2021; Shahnaz & Suleman, 2023). Hoang and Rojas-Lizana (2015) analyzed the linguistic representation of two Australian universities on their official websites. The analysis revealed that the university websites exhibited a promotional discourse reflecting the impacts of globalization and the trend of academic marketing in higher education. This rhetorical strategy is utilized by institutions to strengthen their attractiveness and draw in more students and resources. Similarly, Al-Qahtani (2021) studied the representation of five Saudi universities by analyzing the textual content on their websites. The results demonstrated a systematic promotional discourse centered on prestige and credibility and highlighted how universities controlled the messages presented to their audiences. The findings also showed that the websites displayed a lack of diversity in their depiction of gender and race. In a more recent study, Shahnaz and Suleman (2023) explored university prospectuses in Pakistan to illustrate the impact of marketization on their discourse and representation. The findings showed that although marketing efforts are apparent, old hierarchies persist unaltered. Prospectuses continue to emphasize authority figures and majestic architecture, while students are inadequately represented and seen as lacking agency. This goes in line with the hierarchical cultural norms of Pakistan, which embrace authority, exhibit a significant power distance, and maintain a hierarchical structure.

Regarding English learning, similar trends were found in their promotional discourse. Alkhalil (2018) explored the promotional discourse in English language teaching (ELT) institutes in Saudi Arabia. The data were collected from a corpus of 45 internet advertisements using critical discourse analysis (CDA). The results indicated that institutes promote English as a worldwide language and highlight its benefits for career possibilities, travel, and education to attract potential students. The ads portray English learning as personally powerful, enjoyable, and confidence-boosting. Establishing credentials was the most common rhetorical strategy for persuasion, achieved through the use of the institute's name, logo, and recognized textbooks and teaching methods. Additionally, the results indicated that the use of English as a symbolic language is a convincing method for institutions to demonstrate their proficiency in the language.

In regard to language learning applications, Florez (2024) examined the promotional discourse for language-learning applications and found that it is characterized by personalized, joyful language and design. The promotional materials of the applications highlighted simplicity, fun, and social interaction, depicting language learning as an enjoyable and accessible endeavor that enhances learners' lives. Additionally, their promotional discourse frequently emphasizes the application's significance and reliability by displaying user statistics and success stories from learners, while ensuring an engaging experience. This promotional language corresponds with the broader tendency of educational technology businesses merging instructional assertions with marketing exaggeration. Recently, Tan et al. (2025) conducted a comparative analysis of classroom-based and app-based preschool English instruction in China through the examination of teacher interviews and the promotional discourse of two applications. The findings indicated that the applications consistently portrayed children as independent, self-directed English learners who could study without teacher interference. Applications were promoted as “self-learning” alternatives for professional education, with automatic

feedback (e.g., “amazing” or “try again”) and gamified prizes. However, classroom teaching emphasized professionalism, with educators using EFL expertise, research-informed pedagogy, and embodied activities. Lessons adhered to organized sequences and child-centered materials, facilitating responses to children's interests and developmental requirements. Thus, the researchers called for a careful balance and integration of both approaches; classroom teaching ensures quality and responsiveness, while applications enhance accessibility. Similarly, Nusra (2025) explored advertising discourse for Bangladeshi e-learning entrepreneurs' language to advertise their platforms. The results indicated that entrepreneurs used formal and informal registers and code-switched between Bangla and English to appear authoritative but relatable change agents. They employ motivational narratives, rhetorical questions, and emotive appeals to position themselves as mentors, advisers, and guarantors of success. Students are discursively constituted as active but dependent actors who must enroll, practice, and endure. Entrepreneurs as opportunity providers and learners as responsible agents reflect neoliberal self-reliance and market-driven success. Visuals, testimonies, and interactive behaviors help entrepreneurs discursively and socially establish their authority in cultural narratives of hard labor, social mobility, and national progress.

C. Halliday’s Transitivity Framework

Halliday’s (1994) Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is a linguistic theory that views linguistic structures as functional selections that are influenced by context and communication intentions. SFL conceptualizes language as a social semiotic system, indicating that it is predominantly a resource for constructing meaning within social contexts (Koller, 2020). Within SFL, Halliday (1985) provided the systemic functional grammar (SFG), which emphasizes the analysis of grammar alongside the semantic meaning they express at the clause level. Halliday (1978) classified the meaning that we can make through language into three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The ideational metafunction relates to human experience and concerns with clauses as representations. The interpersonal metafunction relates to the social world, while the textual metafunction relates to what is written or said, particularly the organization of information within a text (Halliday & Webster, 2014).

The central grammatical system of the ideational metafunction is transitivity. The transitivity system helps in investigating how actions, events, and relationships are represented in grammar at the clause level. It focuses on three elements: processes, participants, and circumstances. Processes are represented by verbs describing the types of activities. Participants are concerned with the entities involved in these processes and represented by the nominal groups. Circumstances offer additional contextual information related to time, manner, or place and are represented by adverbial or prepositional phrases (Saldanha & O’Brien, 2014). Halliday (1994) identified six process types: material, mental, relational, existential, behavioral, and verbal. The material processes relate to action and doing, including two participants: an actor, who performs the action, and a goal that is affected by the action. The relational processes describe a state of being or possession, categorized into attributive and identifying processes, involving two participants: a carrier and an attribute. The mental processes encode the processes of sensing, cognition, perception, or affection, involving two participants: a sensor and a phenomenon. According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), the material, mental, and relational processes are the main processes, and the other three, existential, behavioral, and verbal, are minors placed between these major processes. The existential process is placed between relational and material processes, the behavioral process is positioned between material and mental processes, and the verbal process is situated between mental and relational processes (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The existential processes express the existence of an entity, involving one participant: an existent. The behavioral processes relate to physiological and psychological behaviors, involving a behavior that performs the action, such as staring and dreaming. The verbal processes represent the acts of saying, involving two participants: a sayer and a verbiage. Thus, the transitivity system, including the processes along with participants and circumstances, provides a framework to reveal how language is used to represent human experiences, agency representations, and shape social reality.

D. Transitivity System in Education and English Learning Applications Discourse

Transitivity analysis provides a strong framework for investigating how language choices carry meanings. It has been extensively utilized across various discourse forms, including political (Alhumsi & Alsaedi, 2023), advertising (Alsaedi, 2024), and educational discourses. It has been widely utilized in the realm of education to examine agency and how learners are represented in different educational genres, such as students’ written essays (Ignatieva et al., 2021), course syllabi (Alhumsi et al., 2024), and academic textbooks (Salsabila et al., 2023). Language in education not only mirrors social roles and identities but also actively shapes them. Ignatieva et al. (2021) performed an investigation of 80 academic papers written by students in three different disciplines. The results revealed various disciplinary patterns, with material processes being predominant in literature, verbal processes more frequently utilized in history, and relational processes applied in geography, illustrating how each field represents agency and interprets knowledge and experience.

In a similar vein, Alhumsi et al. (2024) examined the transitivity analysis of seven English course syllabi, determining that material processes comprised 68% of all process occurrences, much more than mental, relational, or verbal processes. This frequency analysis indicated the representation of students’ agency and emphasized the action-oriented focus in syllabi. The study also revealed an absence of existential processes, indicating that the texts rarely convey information as abstract existence and instead prioritize active representations. Similarly, Salsabila et al. (2023)

investigated transitivity in two English textbooks to reveal gender disparities in agency. Males in textbooks were represented as active participants in business, travel, and other activities and portrayed as strong and rational. However, females were marginalized and only appeared in activities related to traditional women's roles. Thus, males were actors, while females were found in fewer agentive roles. This pattern is identical to the traditional representations and consistent with the broader gender-biased content. These studies used transitivity analysis to reveal the construction of the learner's agency and power dynamics through grammar.

With the rapid rise of AI and learning applications, researchers also analyzed technology discourse to examine the agency construction of AI tools as non-human actors. Heaton et al. (2024) explored how linguistic choices construct ChatGPT as an actor to clarify implications regarding trust and blame via agency and transitivity. The data was gathered from 88,058 tweets regarding ChatGPT during its launch. The findings indicated that 87% of tweets depicted ChatGPT as an agent possessing human-like abilities, illustrated by phrases such as "ChatGPT writes," "ChatGPT explains," and "ChatGPT says." This personalization granted authoritative agency to ChatGPT while also raising questions regarding trust. Only 13% of tweets depicted ChatGPT as a passive tool under the influence of human developers, using terms like "trained" and "released." Consequently, users emphasized ChatGPT's role in content production, information dissemination, and influence by using personalization and agency metaphors. However, users eventually altered their perception of it as a creative actor, concentrating instead on its limitations, such as committing errors and fabricating references. The evolving representations of agency complicate the distinction between ChatGPT as a tool or an actor, obscuring the identification of whom to trust, blame, and hold accountable.

In a similar vein, Heaton et al. (2023) examined public discourse on Twitter regarding the 2020 A-Level grading system in the UK, which replaced traditional examinations with automated computations during the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 18,239 tweets were examined to uncover the attribution of blame and agency. The findings demonstrated that the algorithm was shown as an active social agent possessing decision-making authority (e.g., "the algorithm is going to screw you"), thereby shifting accountability to the technology itself. The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation was depicted as a crucial social actor, serving as both the owner and operator of the algorithm, often held accountable for its shortcomings through dynamic verbs such as "ignored" and "created." The UK government was depicted as possessing active agency, highlighting its failures and reluctance to take action, as in "the government failed you." In contrast, students were portrayed passively as victims, lacking agency in the discourse. Thus, the findings showed how linguistic selections, especially transitivity and personalization, influenced perceptions of agency in public discussions. In a recent study, Huang and Gadavanij (2025) examined the discourse about artificial intelligence in Education by investigating 100 news articles. The results indicated that corporate leaders (41%) and government officials (21%) predominantly influenced the discourse, whereas parents and students represented merely 11%. Government and corporate entities were mobilized as leaders and facilitators of state objectives, while public actors were rendered inactive as mere recipients. The findings also showed corporate-parental discourses co-occurring, which risks commercial interests over educational equity. This connection decreased after 2021 due to government efforts to restrict educational commercialization.

To this end, although researchers have widely applied transitivity analysis to examine different educational discourses, limited studies have explored how AI is represented in the discourse of learning applications. More specifically, no study, to the best of our knowledge, has investigated the promotional discourse of AI-powered English learning applications using the transitivity system as the analytical tool. To address this gap, the current study examines the promotional discourse of five AI-powered English learning applications to discover the agency construction of learners vs. AI tools using transitivity analysis. The following research questions guide the study:

1. What are the frequencies of transitivity process types and participant roles assigned to AI tools and human learners in the promotional texts of AI-powered English learning applications?
2. What are the themes of agency and representation that emerge from the transitivity patterns?

III. Methodology

To explore how AI tools and human learners are represented in the promotional texts of AI-based English learning applications, this study utilized qualitative and quantitative approaches. The quantitative approach was employed to analyze transitivity patterns, focusing on the frequency of process types and participant roles. To provide deeper insights, a qualitative approach was used to explore agency and interpretive use of transitivity processes.

Five promotional texts were taken from five AI-powered English learning applications: Grammarly, QuillBot, Mondly, Lingopie, and ELSA Speak. Data were primarily collected from App Store descriptions. When the application is not found in the App Store (e.g., ELSA Speak), the promotional text was taken from the official website. All texts were combined into a single dataset and analyzed. Rather than app-by-app comparison, the focus was to identify overall transitivity patterns and participants' representation across these tools. These five applications were selected because of their global popularity and accessibility. For example, Grammarly is used by more than 30 million daily users (Roza, 2025). In addition, the five applications collectively targeted different English language skills, such as reading, writing, listening, speaking, and comprehension. Lastly, limiting the analysis to five applications produced a dataset that is both comprehensive enough to detect transitivity patterns and focused enough to enable in-depth examination.

For analysis, the five texts were segmented into clauses. A total of 148 clauses were analyzed using Halliday's transitivity system to identify process types, participants, and circumstances (see Table 1). Where texts included fragments or imperatives, implied subjects or verbs were noted in brackets for clarity (e.g., the phrase "Install today" was analyzed by indicating that the actor is [you] implied). The frequencies of process types and participants were counted using Microsoft Excel.

TABLE 1
PROCESS TYPES AND PARTICIPANT ROLES

Process type	Semantic meaning	Participant roles	Example	Process analysis
Material	Doing/ Happening	Actor, Goal	She chased the cat.	She (*actor*) chased (*material process*) the cat (*the goal*)
Mental	Sensing/ Thinking/ Feeling	Sensor, Phenomenon	She remembered the appointment.	She (*sensor*) remembered (*mental process*) the appointment (*Phenomenon*)
Verbal	Saying	Sayer, Verbiage	He asked a question.	He (*sayer*) asked (*verbal process*) a question (*the verbiage*)
Behavioral	Behaving	Behaver	She smiled.	She (behaver) smiled (behavioral process)
Existential Relational	Existing	Existent	There was a storm last night.	Was (*existential process*); a storm (*Existent*); last night (*circumstance*)
	Being/ Describing	Carrier, Attribute	She is happy.	She (*carrier*) is (*relational process*) happy (*attribute*)
	Being/ Identifying	Identified, Identifier	She is the leader.	She (*identified*) is (*relational process*) the leader (*identifier*)
	Having	Possessor, Possessed	They have a restaurant.	They (*possessor*) have (*relational process*) a restaurant (*possessed*)

To enrich the quantitative findings from transitivity analysis, thematic analysis was also conducted to critically examine the representation of AI tools and human learners. Thematic analysis involved coding the data to identify relevant themes and providing in-depth descriptions (Creswell, 2013). Thus, by combining both quantitative and qualitative methods, this study offered a comprehensive view of how AI tools and human learners are represented in the promotional texts of AI English learning applications.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Quantitative Part

The five promotional texts contained 148 clauses. Table 2 presents a sample of transitivity analysis for selected clauses rather than the entire dataset.

TABLE 2
SAMPLE ANALYSIS OF PROCESS TYPES IN THE PROMOTIONAL TEXTS

Clause	Participant	Process	Participant	Circumstance
Grammarly for Safari is your always-on assistant for clearer, more compelling communication.	Carrier (Grammarly)	Relational (is)	Attribute (your always-on assistant)	For Safari; For clearer, more compelling communication
It helps you	Actor (It)	Material (helps)	Goal (you)	-
Brainstorm ideas	Actor (you-implied)	Material (brainstorm)	Goal (ideas)	-
Grammarly does more than correct mistakes	Actor (Grammarly)	Material (does)	Goal (more than correct mistakes)	-
Grammarly works right where you do—in your browser	Actor (Grammarly)	Material (works)	-	Right where you do; In your browser
You do (embedded clause)	Actor (you)	Material (do)	-	-
With Mondly, you'll take your English skills to the next level	Actor (you)	Material (will take)	Goal (your English skills)	With Mondly; To next level
Strict but caring,	Carrier (ELSA-implied)	Relational (is-implied)	Attribute (strict but caring)	-
The ELSA AI Coach pays close attention to every bit of progress	Sensor (ELSA AI Coach)	Mental (pays attention)	Phenomenon (every bit of progress)	-

To answer the first research question— "*What are the frequencies of transitivity process types and participant roles assigned to AI tools and human learners in the promotional texts of AI-powered English learning applications?"* — the analysis revealed that only three process types were employed in the promotional texts: material, relational, and mental — while verbal, behavioral and existential processes were absent. Table 3 displays the frequency distribution of each process type.

TABLE 3
FREQUENCIES OF TRANSITIVITY PROCESS TYPES IN PROMOTIONAL TEXTS OF AI ENGLISH LEARNING APPLICATIONS

Process Type	Frequencies	Percentage
Material	124	83.78%
Relational	17	11.49%
Mental	7	4.73%
Total	148	100%

Note: Percentages are calculated from the total number of clauses (N=148).

The material process was the most frequently used, dominating 83.78% of the clauses. The relational process ranked second (11.49%), while the mental process was the least frequent, accounting for only 4.73%.

The heavy reliance on material processes indicated that these promotional texts were action-oriented, focusing on performance, achievements, and capability rather than thinking or feeling (mental), saying (verbal), or being (relational). Through material processes, AI tools were represented as instruments of action and empowerment. They "*Help*", "*generate*", "*build*", "*sharpen*", "*offer*", "*revolutionize*", "*make*", "*give*", "*analyze*", and "*evaluate*". On the other hand, human learners were positioned as active agents who "*learn*", "*write*", "*read*", "*practice*", "*communicate*", "*apply*", "*improve*", and "*master*". This construction presented language learning and acquisition as a goal-oriented process, in which both AI tools and learners were described in terms of specific actions and outcomes.

Although relational processes were less frequent, they were used to assign attributes to AI tools and the learning process (e.g., *Grammarly for Safari is your always-on assistant*; *Quillbot is a free AI writing assistant*; *ELSA is a fun and engaging app*; *ELSA gets smarter*; *Learning a new language has become more accessible*). Thus, relational processes fostered credibility by positioning the applications as smart and trustworthy assistants. Lastly, the minimal use of mental processes showed that perception and cognition did not play a central role in this promotional discourse.

In addition to process types, the analysis examined participant roles assigned to AI tools and human learners (see Table 4). The results revealed that human learners dominated as actors (83.7%), indicating that the promotional texts represented learners as the primary active agents. In contrast, AI tools were less frequent as actors (56.1%), though they appeared more visibly as goals (19.7%) and circumstances (24.2%), where they served as instruments or resources (e.g., *with Mondly*; *through role-plays and personalized AI feedback*). When learners were depicted as goals (16.3%), they were beneficiaries of AI tools (e.g., *It [AI tool] helps you*). Importantly, learners were never depicted as circumstances, which reinforced their central role as active participants. Moreover, learners were assigned a total of 92 roles across the texts, compared with 66 roles for AI tools. This distribution reflects how the promotional texts foregrounded the learners and reinforced their centrality and visibility. To sum up, the promotional texts emphasized a learner-centered orientation: learners were active agents and beneficiaries, while the AI tools were portrayed as supportive assistants and instruments facilitating the learning process.

TABLE 4
PARTICIPANT ROLES IN PROMOTIONAL TEXTS OF AI ENGLISH LEARNING APPLICATIONS

Participant	Actor	Goal	Circumstance	Total
AI Tool	37 (56.1%)	13 (19.7%)	16 (24.2%)	66 (100%)
Learner	77 (83.7%)	15 (16.3%)	0 (0.0%)	92 (100%)

Note: Percentages indicate the distribution of roles within each participant's total roles.

These findings are in line with previous research that employed transitivity in promotional discourse. For example, Nugraheni et al. (2023) also reported the use of material, relational, and mental processes in promotional texts with the absence of verbal, behavioral, and existential processes. Similarly, Nugraheni et al. (2023) and Alsaedi (2024) observed the use of material process as the dominant process in advertisements. Finally, although Zapata et al. (2025) analyzed calibrated AI-generated feedback rather than promotional texts, their results are relevant to this study in showing how linguistic choices shape the roles assigned to learners. Similar to the promotional texts analyzed in this study, they found that the prominent use of material processes portrayed learners as active doers rather than passive recipients, emphasizing the centrality of learners.

To conclude, the quantitative data provided a descriptive overview of process types and participant roles. The following section examines the qualitative dimension with particular attention paid to the themes of agency and representation that arose from these patterns.

B. Qualitative Part

To answer the second research question— "*What are the themes of agency and representation that emerge from the transitivity patterns?*" —three primary themes emerged from data: (1) AI tools as active, supportive, and authoritative agents, (2) human learners as autonomous and dependent agents, and (3) shared agency.

(a). First Theme: AI Tools as Active, Supportive, and Authoritative Agents

Although AI tools appeared less frequently as actors compared to human learners, they were consistently represented as active agents performing different actions such as "*generate*", "*build*", "*sharpen*", "*revolutionize*", and "*make*". The repeated use of the verb "*help*"— alongside verbs such as "*enable*" and "*support*"— constructed AI tools as intelligent and expert mentors providing technological support to learners. Even when functioning as goals or circumstances, AI

tools served as instruments or resources that enhanced learners' productivity and made language learning "*easier*", "*faster*", and "*fun and rewarding*".

Beyond supportive agency, AI tools were also framed as authoritative assistants possessing superior knowledge and technical power. They "*evaluate*", "*correct mistakes"*, and "give *immediate detailed feedback*". In addition, AI tools were attributed with qualities typically associated with human teachers. For example, ELSA was described as "*strict but caring*", able to "*pay close attention*", and even as "*getting smarter*". Such descriptions reflected a teacher-student relationship in which the AI tool has not only the role of a supportive mentor but also the authority traditionally held by the teacher.

It is worth mentioning that this agency— whether supportive or authoritative— was often backgrounded or embedded. Examples such as "*Grammarly supports originality with built-in plagiarism*", "*Grammarly works right where you do—in your browser offering real-time feedback as you type*", "*Grammarly adapts to your goals as you write*", and "*enjoy QuillBot… everywhere you write online"* illustrated how these tools are seamlessly integrated into learners' daily activities. This embedded integration normalized and reinforced AI's accepted authority in English language learning.

(b). Second Theme: Human Learners as Autonomous and Dependent Agents

Across the five promotional texts, human learners dominated as actors (83.7%), carrying out the essential tasks of education such as learning, writing, reading, practicing, applying, improving, and mastering. This positioning portrayed learners as autonomous, central agents, and decision-makers, accountable for their learning, personal growth, and self-development. In addition, the use of imperative verbs combined with consumerist prompts (e.g., *Install today*; *get instant access*; *try our two free AI rephraser modes*) framed learners as active consumers. This usage of the imperative form with an implied "you" strategically addressed learners/customers directly, drawing their attention and persuading them to take an action and install the applications.

However, when depicted as goals, learners frequently appeared as beneficiaries of AI services (e.g., *helps you*; *putting you in control*; *reminds you*; *enables you*). Learners also never appeared in circumstance roles. This means they were never backgrounded, which further emphasized their autonomy and visibility.

This dual representation created a paradoxical agency. On one hand, learners were portrayed as autonomous actors responsible for their learning experience. On the other, their abilities and development were framed as dependent on AI tools. Phrases such as "*works right where you do—in your browser", "as you type*", and "*everywhere you write online"* highlighted the seamless integration of AI into learners' routines, while simultaneously making this dependency invisible.

(c). Third Theme: Shared Agency

The analysis of the first two themes suggested that the promotional texts of AI English learning applications constructed a model of shared or distributed agency. Human learners were the primary actors (83.7%) in the learning experience, carrying out a wide range of tasks such as installing, accessing, writing, reading, practicing, and applying. Their centrality and visibility were reinforced by their absence from circumstance roles and by the large number of roles assigned to them (92) compared to AI tools (66).

At the same time, when AI tools were actors, they were represented as enablers and helpers who guided and supported learners (*helping you*, *putting you in control*). Their influence extended beyond facilitating action to shaping learners' affective states, as in "*Boost your confidence by getting instant feedback…from Mondly" and* "*Stay motivated with interactive games and challenges*". Even when backgrounded as circumstances, AI tools remained integral as instruments and the resources that learners relied on to enhance their performance.

Thus, learners were consistently portrayed as the primary doers of action, but under the guidance and with the help of AI tools. The learners' agency was amplified, but it was dependent on the use of AI tools. This interdependence constructed a theme of shared agency in which AI systems enhanced learners' abilities without replacing them. The promotional texts thereby strategically balanced the empowerment of AI tools with the preservation of learners' central role, ensuring that human agency was not overshadowed.

These findings align with previous research on promotional discourse across English learning platforms and institutional websites. Although this study is grounded in CDA and guided by Halliday's transitivity system, the three themes also resonate with Fairclough's (1995, 2001) neoliberal education (as cited in Nusra, 2025). Fairclough described English learning as a market activity in which learners are framed as customers and education (English language learning) is commodified as a product. Self-improvement is not only represented as personal growth but also as a demand, where individuals are expected to continually enhance their skills to remain competitive in the job market.

The promotional texts in this study reflected this ideology by positioning learners as active agents/customers and decision-makers responsible for their self-development. This was achieved through the repeated use of the material process "*improve*", alongside other processes such as "*master*", "*achieve*", "*refine*", "*strengthen*", and "*boost*". Success in English learning was portrayed as dependent on AI tools, with learning framed as *"fun"*, *"easier"*, and *"faster",* and framed within a discourse that treated it as a purchasable service. These findings are consistent with previous studies by Florez (2024), Nusra (2025), and Alkhalil (2018), who also found neoliberal ideologies in promotional discourse of English language learning.

The theme of shared agency identified in this study was also discussed in previous research, though in a different way. Alm (2024) used the same term, while Godwin-Jones (2024) referred to it as *distributed agency*. Several studies have also raised concerns that over-reliance on AI may diminish learner agency, as passively adopting AI outputs can affect learners' critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Llausas et al., 2024; Wah, 2025). In response, the notion of shared agency has been proposed as a solution. According to Alm (2024) and Godwin-Jones (2024), human-technology interaction created a complementary form of agency in which AI tools empower learners and facilitate language learning, while learners remain responsible for recognizing AI's limitations, critically evaluating its outputs, and adapting them to their own objectives.

Finally, it is important to note that the theme of shared agency discussed in this study reflected a discursive balance in promotional texts, where learners were positioned as central agents and AI tools functioned as enablers. Although this differs from how Alm (2024) and Godwin-Jones (2024) conceptualized shared agency in pedagogical contexts, there are resonances between the two perspectives. In both cases, agency is framed as complementary, with human learners and AI tools collaborating rather than replacing one another.

V. Conclusion

This study utilized quantitative and qualitative methods within a CDA framework, guided by Halliday's transitivity system, to explore how AI tools and human learners are represented in the promotional texts of five AI-powered English learning applications. Through CDA guided by Halliday's transitivity system, this study answered two questions. In response to the first question, the quantitative analysis revealed that only three process types were employed— material (83.73%), relational (11.49%), and mental (4.73%)— with material process dominating. Learners were foregrounded as central actors (83.7%) and beneficiaries (16.3%), while the AI tools were portrayed as supportive actors (56.1%) and instrumental circumstances (24.2%). In addressing the second question, the qualitative analysis presented three primary themes: (1) AI tools as active, supportive, and authoritative agents, (2) human learners as autonomous and dependent agents, and (3) shared agency. Taken together, these findings showed that agency is framed as complementary, with learners positioned as the primary doers of action, but consistently supported and enabled by AI tools.

This study has several limitations. This study examined five promotional texts from five popular applications, considered collectively rather than app-by-app. Future research could expand the dataset and adopt a comparative approach, examining how different applications frame AI and learners' agency, including those targeting specific skills such as writing. In addition, since promotional texts are dynamic and regularly updated, longitudinal studies are required to track changes over time. Finally, this study analyzed only written discourse; a multimodal approach would provide insights into how textual and visual elements can interact to shape representation and agency.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to understanding how linguistic choices in marketing construct public perceptions of language learning and learner agency. It also offers practical implications: advertisers should carefully consider how their messages shape notions of agency; app developers should empower rather than diminish learners' roles (Tan et al., 2025); and educators should guide students in using AI tools critically, raising awareness of both their potential and their limitations (Nusra, 2025). Future investigations can therefore enrich our knowledge of how AI-mediated language learning is framed and how learners' agency is shaped in diverse contexts.

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