

EFL TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES IN THE AGE OF AI: INSIGHTS FROM HIGHER EDUCATION

QIANYI WAN

MACAU UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY, EMAIL: z7726.edu.cn@outlook.com

HAILONG ZHANG

RUSSIAN PRESIDENTIAL ACADEMY OF NATIONAL ECONOMY AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION
EMAIL: sharedemali@outlook.com

TENGFEI LIU

LANGFANG NORMAL UNIVERSITY, EMAIL: 1071910@lfnu.edu.cn

Abstract:

The rapid integration of AI tools into educational contexts is transforming the landscape of EFL instruction, particularly in higher education. While student-centered studies have explored how learners utilize AI-based writing and translation technologies, less attention has been paid to teachers' perspectives and pedagogical responses. This study investigates EFL university instructors' perceptions and classroom practices regarding AI language tools, using a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design. Survey data were collected from 146 EFL instructors across diverse institutions, followed by semi-structured interviews with 15 selected participants. Quantitative findings suggest that most teachers view AI tools such as ChatGPT and Grammarly as useful for improving linguistic accuracy and reducing student anxiety, yet express concerns about plagiarism, overreliance, and diminished learner autonomy. Qualitative analysis further reveals three dominant orientations toward AI—facilitators, cautious integrators, and resisters—shaped by pedagogical beliefs, institutional clarity, and perceived control over student learning. Although AI integration remains partial and uneven, many teachers are actively negotiating its role in their instructional design.

Keywords:

AI in education; EFL teachers; higher education; teacher perceptions; AI writing tools; ChatGPT; digital pedagogy; mixed-methods research

1. INTRODUCTION

The accelerated development of artificial intelligence (AI), particularly large language models (LLMs) such as OpenAI's ChatGPT, Google's Gemini, and open-source models like Mistral or LLaMA, is fundamentally reshaping how language is produced, mediated, and taught in educational contexts. For English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education in higher education, this shift is not merely technological but epistemological — reconfiguring what it means to write, translate, think, and learn in English (Zhang, 2022). AI-powered tools now offer students instantaneous grammatical correction, stylistic refinement, translation, content generation, and even scaffolded academic writing assistance (Son, 2018; Mohamed, 2024). As these tools become embedded in learners' daily academic routines, EFL educators are increasingly compelled to confront a dual challenge: adapting their pedagogy to integrate AI meaningfully while safeguarding core educational values such as critical thinking, originality, and linguistic agency. The rise of AI thus presents both a pedagogical opportunity and an existential inquiry into the role of the human teacher in a partially automated classroom.

While scholarship on AI and language education is growing, the existing literature has disproportionately focused on students as users, often framing AI tools as enhancers of learning outcomes. Recent studies have examined how EFL learners utilize AI for improving writing fluency, translation accuracy, vocabulary acquisition, and revision practices (Yin et al., 2024; Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2024). Findings suggest that AI tools can foster learner autonomy, increase engagement, and reduce language anxiety, especially in academic writing contexts. However, these same tools can also lead to overreliance, plagiarism, or a superficial understanding of linguistic forms. Despite these nuanced findings, EFL teachers are often positioned in the background—assumed to be either passive adopters or gatekeepers resisting technological change. Their pedagogical philosophies, classroom strategies, and ethical dilemmas are underrepresented in the research discourse. This omission is problematic because teachers' beliefs and practices fundamentally shape how AI is framed, introduced, and regulated in educational institutions (Li et al., 2023).

Furthermore, existing studies on teacher perceptions of AI in education often adopt a technocentric lens, emphasizing technical affordances or barriers (e.g., lack of training or infrastructure), rather than attending to the socio-cultural, institutional, and epistemic dimensions of AI integration. For example, few studies have examined how teachers' disciplinary orientations (e.g., writing vs. translation), institutional policies (e.g., AI usage guidelines), or affective orientations (e.g., fear, enthusiasm, skepticism) mediate their engagement with AI. The intersection of language ideology, digital literacy, and professional identity remains largely unexplored. Moreover, in non-English dominant higher education systems—such as those in East Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America—EFL teachers face an added complexity: negotiating global AI tools that reflect Anglo-centric linguistic norms while attempting to foster locally meaningful pedagogies. In such contexts, understanding teachers' lived experiences with AI is crucial to formulating equitable and context-sensitive strategies for technological integration.

This study seeks to fill these gaps by centering the perceptions, concerns, and practices of EFL teachers working in higher education institutions amidst the growing presence of AI language tools. It asks: How do EFL teachers conceptualize the role of AI in language learning? What pedagogical strategies do they employ to integrate or resist AI-mediated practices? And how do institutional, cultural, and individual factors shape these practices? Drawing on mixed-methods data from survey responses and in-depth interviews, this study foregrounds teachers' voices in the emerging discourse on AI in language education. In doing so, it contributes to a more balanced understanding of AI integration—one that goes beyond technical feasibility and includes ethical complexity, pedagogical adaptation, and teacher agency. The findings aim to inform future policy, curriculum design, and professional development initiatives that prepare EFL educators not merely to use AI, but to critically shape its educational impact.

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design (Creswell et al., 2006) to explore EFL teachers' perceptions, concerns, and classroom practices regarding AI language tools in higher education. The research was conducted in two phases: a quantitative phase involving an online questionnaire administered to a broad sample of EFL university instructors, followed by a qualitative phase involving semi-structured interviews with a subset of respondents. This design was selected to first capture generalizable trends and patterns, and then to deepen the interpretation of those findings through contextualized narratives and reflections. The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods allowed the researchers to examine not only what teachers believed and practiced but also why they made those choices. The design also facilitated the triangulation of data sources, enhancing the validity and robustness of the results.

2.2 Participants

Participants were EFL university instructors teaching in higher education institutions across mainland China. A multi-stage purposive sampling approach was used. In the quantitative phase, an invitation to participate in the survey was distributed via email lists, professional educator networks, and academic social media platforms (e.g., WeChat, WhatsApp, Telegram, LinkedIn). Inclusion criteria required that participants (1) be currently teaching English as a foreign language at the tertiary level, and (2) have at least minimal exposure to or awareness of AI-based language tools (e.g., Grammarly, ChatGPT, DeepL).

A total of $N = 146$ valid responses were collected. The sample included instructors from both public and private universities, with diverse teaching experience (1–30 years), age range (25–60), and disciplinary focus (academic writing, translation, reading, speaking, etc.). In the qualitative phase, 15 participants were selected using maximum variation sampling to ensure a range of attitudes toward AI (e.g., supportive, cautious, resistant), based on their survey responses. These participants were then invited for in-depth online interviews via Tencent meeting.

2.3 Data collection

Data collection occurred over a two-month period. The online survey instrument included three main sections: demographic background, Likert-scale items on perceptions and attitudes toward AI tools in education, and multiple-choice and open-ended items on specific classroom practices. The attitude scale, adapted from prior technology acceptance and teacher belief frameworks (e.g., TAM, UTAUT), measured constructs such as perceived usefulness, pedagogical impact, ethical concerns, and perceived threat to teaching autonomy. The classroom practices section assessed frequency of AI tool use, the types of tools integrated (e.g., text generation, grammar correction, translation), and contexts of use (e.g., student writing assignments, in-class exercises, feedback mechanisms). The instrument was reviewed by two experts in applied linguistics and one educational technology specialist to ensure content validity and was piloted with 10 EFL instructors for clarity. Internal consistency reliability for the attitude and practice scales yielded Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.82 and 0.78, respectively, indicating satisfactory reliability.

Following the survey, semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom or Microsoft Teams with the 15 selected participants. Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with informed consent. The interview protocol was designed to elicit deeper insights into how teachers interpret the role of AI in language teaching, the specific strategies they employ or reject, the institutional and personal factors that influence

their decisions, and their visions for the future of AI-integrated pedagogy. The interviews were conducted in English or in the participants' native language, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized to protect confidentiality.

2.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative survey data were analyzed using SPSS 28.0. Descriptive statistics were computed to examine central tendencies and frequency distributions of teacher attitudes and practices. Correlational analyses were conducted to explore relationships between variables such as teaching experience, age, perceived digital literacy, and levels of AI tool integration. Multiple linear regression analyses were performed to identify significant predictors of AI tool adoption in the classroom. Additionally, one-way ANOVA was used to investigate group differences in perceptions based on variables such as academic discipline and institutional type. Missing values were handled using pairwise deletion to preserve sample size in inferential tests.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze interview transcripts, following the six-phase approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Coding was conducted in NVivo 14. Two researchers independently coded a subset (20%) of the interviews to enhance inter-coder reliability, reaching a Cohen's kappa coefficient of 0.84, indicating strong agreement. Themes were then integrated with the quantitative findings to provide a richer and more nuanced account of EFL teachers' lived experiences and pedagogical negotiations in the context of AI. The triangulated insights allowed for a robust interpretation of how technological, institutional, and cultural factors intersect to shape teachers' engagement with AI tools in higher education.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Teachers' General Attitudes toward AI Language Tools

Quantitative analysis revealed that most EFL teachers in the study exhibited a cautiously optimistic attitude toward the use of AI language tools in higher education. As shown in Table 1, the majority of respondents (68.5%) agreed or strongly agreed that AI tools such as ChatGPT or Grammarly could support students' academic writing, especially at the drafting or revision stage. A smaller portion (26.7%) held neutral views, while only 4.8% expressed strong opposition to AI use in the classroom.

Teachers generally perceived AI as helpful for improving surface-level linguistic accuracy, such as grammar and vocabulary, but were less convinced of its role in developing students' higher-order thinking or originality. For instance, while 72.6% agreed that AI reduced student anxiety about writing, only 38.4% believed that it helped students think more critically. The highest concern centered around academic integrity, with 81.5% of participants expressing at least moderate concern that students might use AI to bypass learning. Likewise, 65.8% worried that reliance on AI could reduce students' long-term language competence.

Table 1. Summary of EFL Teachers' Attitudes toward AI Language Tools (N = 146)

Survey Item	M	SD	% Agree/Strongly Agree
AI tools help students improve linguistic accuracy (e.g., grammar, vocab)	4.21	0.66	68.5%
AI reduces student anxiety during writing tasks	4.03	0.72	72.6%
AI supports the development of critical thinking	3.12	0.84	38.4%
I am concerned about AI being used for plagiarism	4.41	0.58	81.5%
AI tools may lower students' motivation to learn language independently	4.19	0.61	65.8%

These quantitative trends were reinforced by qualitative interview findings. Many teachers acknowledged the benefits of AI, especially in reducing student stress and assisting with initial drafts. However, they also expressed deep ambivalence about its long-term impact on learner autonomy. For instance, Participant T11 commented: *"When students first encounter academic writing, AI can give them some confidence—but I'm worried they'll start relying on it like a crutch instead of developing their own voice."*

Similarly, Participant T5 raised ethical concerns:

"I've had students turn in entire essays written by ChatGPT. The line between assistance and academic dishonesty is getting very blurry."

These quotes illustrate a shared tension between the perceived short-term affordances and the longer-term pedagogical risks associated with AI integration in EFL contexts.

3.2 AI Integration in Classroom Practice

The survey also examined the degree to which AI language tools were being incorporated into participants' teaching practices. Among the 146 respondents, approximately 59.6% reported occasionally integrating AI tools into their courses, while 21.9% used them frequently. However, 18.5% reported that they had never incorporated

AI in any form into their instruction. Usage patterns varied by tool type and teaching purpose. As shown in Table 2, the most common instructional uses included grammar correction (68.5%), academic writing feedback (53.4%), and generating prompts or ideas (47.9%). Notably, only 21.2% of teachers used AI tools to teach translation skills, and just 15.1% reported allowing students to use AI tools during exams or graded assignments.

Table 2. Reported Uses of AI Tools in EFL Teaching Practices

Instructional Use	% of Teachers Reporting Use
Grammar correction / proofreading	68.5%
Writing feedback (structure, clarity)	53.4%
Generating ideas / essay prompts	47.9%
Reading comprehension / summarization	33.6%
Translation support	21.2%
AI-assisted exam writing or assessment tasks	15.1%

Interview findings revealed three dominant pedagogical orientations toward AI integration: facilitators, cautious integrators, and resisters. Facilitators actively used AI to redesign their course materials and feedback processes. For example, Participant T2 stated:

“I encourage students to use ChatGPT in the pre-writing phase. Then we critically evaluate the AI’s suggestions in class. It becomes a kind of writing dialogue.”

Cautious integrators adopted a more regulated approach. Participant T8 described setting explicit boundaries:

“I let them use Grammarly but only for the second draft. For the first draft, they have to write without any digital help so I can see their raw thinking.”

Conversely, resisters expressed a deliberate decision to exclude AI tools entirely from their teaching, citing institutional uncertainty or pedagogical reservations. As Participant T13 explained:

“There’s no clear policy in our department, and I don’t want to open the door to something I can’t fully control. Right now, I just tell students to avoid it.”

These variations suggest that AI integration is shaped not only by individual attitudes but also by teaching philosophy, departmental guidelines, and perceived control over students’ learning behavior.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight a complex and evolving landscape in which EFL teachers in higher education are negotiating the pedagogical and ethical implications of AI language tools. Quantitative survey results indicated a generally positive but cautious attitude toward AI, with the majority of teachers recognizing its value in improving linguistic accuracy and reducing student anxiety, particularly in writing tasks. At the same time, concerns about academic integrity and overreliance on AI for language learning were prominent. These tensions mirror what Selwyn (2022) describes as the “ambivalence of educational technology”—a recognition of both its instrumental benefits and its potentially corrosive effects on deeper forms of learning. The relatively low endorsement of AI’s contribution to critical thinking development suggests that many teachers continue to view AI tools as peripheral supports rather than central instruments of cognitive engagement.

The study also found that while AI is being cautiously adopted in classroom practice, its integration varies considerably across contexts. Teachers reported frequent use of AI for grammar correction and writing support, but less so for more complex tasks such as translation or assessment. This selective integration indicates a form of pedagogical instrumentalism—teachers are willing to use AI to streamline technical aspects of instruction but remain hesitant to engage with it at deeper levels of curriculum design or formative evaluation. These findings are consistent with recent work by Kohnke and Moorhouse (2022), who found that EFL instructors often position AI as a “writing assistant” rather than a co-educator. Our qualitative data suggest that this reluctance may be rooted in institutional uncertainty, ethical ambiguity, and differing levels of digital literacy among faculty members.

The typology of “facilitators,” “cautious integrators,” and “resisters” emerging from interview data reflects broader patterns in technology acceptance research (e.g., UTAUT model; Venkatesh et al., 2003; Dwivedi et al., 2019), but it also reveals more nuanced factors at play. For example, facilitators tend to use AI dialogically—encouraging students to critically engage with AI-generated outputs—whereas resisters cite lack of institutional policy or concerns over control and authenticity. Importantly, these orientations do not necessarily map neatly onto age or teaching experience; rather, they appear to be mediated by teachers’ underlying beliefs about language learning and authorship (Lai et al., 2022; Chien et al., 2014). This underscores the need to move beyond demographic predictors and instead focus on teacher cognition, affect, and agency as key mediators of AI integration. Taken together, the findings point to the necessity of developing AI literacy frameworks tailored for EFL educators. Such frameworks should go beyond tool-based technical training and address pedagogical design, critical evaluation of AI outputs, and strategies for teaching students about appropriate and ethical AI use. Moreover, institutions must articulate clear policies regarding AI use in learning and assessment, providing both structure and flexibility to support diverse teaching approaches. Ultimately, AI is not a neutral tool—it brings with it epistemological and ethical assumptions that must be unpacked, critiqued, and contextually negotiated by teachers. In the age of AI, the role of the EFL teacher is not diminished, but rather transformed: from content

deliverer to critical mediator, from sole knowledge authority to co-navigator of human-machine interaction in language education.

5. CONCLUSION

This study investigated how EFL teachers in higher education perceive and engage with AI-based language tools, particularly in the context of writing instruction. Through a sequential mixed-methods design combining survey data from 146 university instructors and interviews with 15 participants, the study revealed that teachers hold a cautiously positive stance toward AI technologies. They acknowledge the value of tools such as ChatGPT and Grammarly in supporting students' linguistic accuracy and reducing writing anxiety. However, they also expressed deep concerns about issues of academic integrity, overreliance, and the erosion of learner autonomy. These findings reflect a broader pedagogical ambivalence that characterizes AI integration in language education—a tension between embracing innovation and preserving the integrity of human-centered learning.

In terms of classroom practice, the results showed that AI integration is uneven and context-dependent. Most teachers use AI in limited and task-specific ways, such as grammar correction and revision assistance, while fewer employ it for more advanced tasks like translation or assessment. The qualitative data further revealed a spectrum of engagement, with some teachers actively experimenting with AI as a collaborative tool, others cautiously regulating its use, and some deliberately resisting its inclusion altogether. These differences appear to be shaped less by demographic variables and more by pedagogical beliefs, institutional clarity, and perceived control over student learning processes.

Importantly, the findings underscore the need for a more systematic and pedagogically grounded approach to AI integration in language education. Professional development programs should be designed not only to enhance teachers' technical competence but also to cultivate their critical digital literacy, helping them reflect on the ethical, cultural, and cognitive dimensions of AI-assisted learning. Institutional policies must also evolve to provide clear, adaptable guidelines that empower educators while safeguarding academic standards.

REFERENCES

1. Chien, S. P., Wu, H. K., & Hsu, Y. S. (2014). An investigation of teachers' beliefs and their use of technology-based assessments. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 31, 198-210.
2. Creswell, J. W., Shope, R., Plano Clark, V. L., & Green, D. O. (2006). How interpretive qualitative research extends mixed methods research. *Research in the Schools*, 13(1), 1-11.
3. Dwivedi, Y. K., Rana, N. P., Jeyaraj, A., Clement, M., & Williams, M. D. (2019). Re-examining the unified theory of acceptance and use of technology (UTAUT): Towards a revised theoretical model. *Information systems frontiers*, 21(3), 719-734.
4. Kohnke, L., & Moorhouse, B. L. (2024). An exploration of microlearning as continuous professional development for English language teachers: Initial findings and insights. *Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning*, 1-17.
5. Kohnke, L., & Moorhouse, B. L. (2022). Facilitating synchronous online language learning through Zoom. *Relc Journal*, 53(1), 296-301.
6. Lai, C., Wang, Q., & Huang, X. (2022). The differential interplay of TPACK, teacher beliefs, school culture and professional development with the nature of in-service EFL teachers' technology adoption. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 53(5), 1389-1411.
7. Li, Z., Guan, P., Li, J., & Wang, J. (2024). Comparing online and offline Chinese EFL learners' anxiety and emotional engagement. *Acta Psychologica*, 242, 104114.
8. Mohamed, A. M. (2024). Exploring the potential of an AI-based Chatbot (ChatGPT) in enhancing English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching: perceptions of EFL Faculty Members. *Education and Information Technologies*, 29(3), 3195-3217.
9. Selwyn, N. (2022). The future of AI and education: Some cautionary notes. *European Journal of Education*, 57(4), 620-631.
10. Son, J. B. (2018). Technology in English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching. *The TESOL encyclopedia of English language teaching*, 1-7.
11. Venkatesh, V., Morris, M. G., Davis, G. B., & Davis, F. D. (2003). User acceptance of information technology: Toward a unified view. *MIS quarterly*, 425-478.
12. Yin, X. (2024, September). A critical thinking-oriented approach in English as a foreign language (EFL) writing: Using ChatGPT as an ideal peer. In *Proceedings of the International CALL Research Conference* (Vol. 2024, pp. 327-332).
13. Zhang, W. (2022). The role of technology-based education and teacher professional development in English as a foreign language classes. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 910315.