# EFL TEACHING IN THE AGE OF GENERATIVE AI: CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES, AND TEACHER AGENCY

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**Abstract:**
The emergence of generative AI tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, and DeepL Write has triggered a structural transformation in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. While student writing, translation, and revision processes are increasingly mediated by AI, the role of the EFL teacher has come under pressure—both pedagogically and professionally. This study reframes the conversation by foregrounding teacher agency as the critical lens for understanding and navigating the AI turn in language education. It identifies challenges and emerging opportunities for EFL teachers in the age of AI. The paper argues that teachers must not be treated as passive adopters or institutional gatekeepers, but as active designers of AI-mediated learning ecologies. Reclaiming teacher agency is essential to ensuring that AI enhances rather than erodes the pedagogical aims of EFL instruction. The future of AI in language education depends not on technological innovation alone, but on whether educators are empowered to shape its role in meaningful, ethical, and context-responsive ways.

**Keywords:** EFL pedagogy; generative AI; teacher agency; academic integrity; prompt literacy; AI writing tools; dialogic learning; critical AI literacy

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In late 2022, when OpenAI's ChatGPT became widely accessible, classrooms across the world were thrown into confusion (Spindel & Ackerman, 2025). Within weeks, university students were using it to generate essays, translate texts, and even simulate peer responses in discussion forums. Instructors reported receiving assignments that appeared "fluent but not factual," and plagiarism detection systems failed to flag them (Lozić & Štular, 2023). Administrators scrambled to update academic integrity policies, while some institutions briefly banned the use of AI altogether. In the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), where writing, translation, and grammatical accuracy are core pedagogical goals, the implications of generative AI proved especially profound (Jiang, 2022; Mohamed, 2024; Dai & Liu, 2024). Students were no longer just language learners—they were now language managers, capable of outsourcing parts of the learning process to AI systems that could generate near-native output on demand. This shift raised urgent questions: How can teachers assess writing when they cannot be sure who— or what—produced it? What becomes of drafting, feedback, and revision when students can generate polished text in seconds? And most crucially: Where does this leave the teacher?

Much of the emerging discourse has focused on institutional concerns—academic misconduct, policy updates, and tool integration—but these frameworks often treat teachers as functionaries within the system, rather than as pedagogical agents facing an existential shift (Alghamdy, 2023; Kundu & Bej, 2025). This paper argues that the entry of AI into EFL education is not just a matter of technological disruption, but of professional repositioning. The EFL teacher today is asked to operate in an environment where human-authored language is no longer the default, and where pedagogical authority is no longer taken for granted.

What is needed now is not just technical adaptation, but a deeper rethinking of teacher identity, instructional design, and educational values. This article explores three key tensions that AI introduces into EFL pedagogy: epistemological ambiguity, where AI-generated texts blur the line between language and knowledge; assessment dilemmas, where traditional rubrics no longer apply; and emotional-professional disempowerment, where teachers experience anxiety, loss of control, and role confusion. Against this backdrop, the article outlines a set of emerging opportunities—from dialogic writing and prompt literacy to critical AI reading and curriculum innovation—that reposition the teacher as a central mediator in AI-augmented learning. In doing so, it makes the case for reclaiming teacher agency as a necessary condition for meaningful, ethical, and sustainable EFL instruction in the age of intelligent technologies.

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## 2. Challenges for EFL Teaching in the Age of Generative AI

### 2.1 Epistemological Uncertainty

While AI tools like ChatGPT are capable of producing grammatically accurate, coherent, and topically relevant English texts, the underlying generative process is fundamentally statistical rather than epistemic (Kim, 2022). That is, language is not generated based on understanding or verified knowledge, but on probabilistic pattern-matching across massive textual corpora. This creates a troubling ambiguity for both teachers and learners. In traditional EFL writing instruction, especially in academic or argumentative genres, teachers evaluate student writing not merely on linguistic correctness, but on the ability to construct claims, support arguments with evidence, and engage critically with ideas (Kawinkoonlasate, 2019). However, when students use AI to generate responses, they may produce surface-level good English that appears logically structured but lacks critical stance, source evaluation, or original synthesis.

This issue is compounded by the fact that many students themselves may not be fully aware of what constitutes knowledge work in academic writing. In cultures where EFL learners are under pressure to produce correct English, the temptation to equate fluent AI-generated language with acceptable academic output is especially high (Salimi & Shams, 2016). When such output is submitted without acknowledgment or reflection, it becomes difficult for instructors to determine what portion.

### 2.2 Assessment and Integrity Dilemmas

When students can produce fluent and cohesive essays using AI tools with minimal cognitive effort, the written text can no longer be assumed to represent a student's independent linguistic competence or reasoning ability. This problem strikes at the heart of EFL pedagogy, which has long relied on written performance as the primary indicator of language proficiency (Ganapathy et al., 2022). Teachers now face the paradox of assessing artifacts that may not fully belong to the learners themselves. The traditional premise of formative and summative assessment—that the submitted work reflects an individual's linguistic and cognitive development—has become unstable. Even when AI tools are used "responsibly," such as for drafting or error correction, the boundary between assistance and authorship remains blurred. A teacher may appreciate the grammatical accuracy of an AI-polished text but remain uncertain whether it reflects genuine progress in the student's interlanguage development.

The issue extends beyond academic dishonesty in the narrow sense of plagiarism. Many EFL teachers describe a more insidious form of process opacity, in which students use AI to scaffold ideas, reorganize arguments, or translate sentences without acknowledgment (Fathi & Rahimi, 2024). These hybrid forms of writing—partly human, partly machine—defy existing plagiarism detection systems and institutional policies, which are designed for discrete acts of copying rather than co-authorship with algorithms. As a result, teachers must act as moral arbiters without clear ethical guidelines. Some educators adopt blanket prohibitions, banning AI tools altogether, while others experiment with "transparent AI use" policies that require students to document prompts, revisions, and reflections. Yet these local practices remain fragmented and lack institutional support.

### 2.3 Emotional and Professional Disempowerment

While the discourse surrounding AI in education often centers on learner outcomes or institutional readiness, the affective dimension of teacher experience—frustration, anxiety, moral fatigue—is frequently overlooked. Yet it is precisely in this dimension that the professional identity of the teacher is most at risk of erosion. In traditional EFL pedagogy, especially in writing instruction, the teacher has occupied a central position as both language model and intellectual guide (Alhujaylan, 2020). The classroom is not only a site of linguistic transmission but also a space where teachers scaffold students' development of argumentation, voice, and critical literacy. Generative AI challenges this position by offering students alternative pathways to grammatically correct.

This emotional response is not simply a fear of being replaced by machines. Rather, it reflects a deeper crisis of pedagogical legitimacy: if the processes teachers once taught—brainstorming, drafting, revising—can be bypassed by a few AI prompts, then their professional role must be renegotiated. The issue is compounded by institutional ambiguity. In many universities, AI policies are either non-existent or underdeveloped, leaving teachers to act as de facto policymakers in their own classrooms (Chan, 2023). Without clear institutional frameworks or collective guidelines, individual educators are forced to interpret, justify, and enforce AI usage policies on their own. This vacuum of support not only increases teacher stress but also fragments the classroom landscape: what is permitted in one course may be prohibited in another, leading to student confusion and teacher burnout.

## 3. Opportunities for Pedagogical Innovation and Student Engagement

While much of the discourse surrounding generative AI in EFL education has focused on risks—ethical ambiguity, assessment distortion, and professional displacement—it is equally important to consider how this technological shift opens space for pedagogical innovation. Rather than viewing AI as a threat to teaching, it can be understood as a catalyst for reimagining instructional design, student engagement, and the very definition of language competence. However, realizing this potential requires teachers to move beyond tool adoption toward intentional pedagogical reconfiguration. In this section, we argue that the affordances of AI become educationally meaningful only when mediated by human judgment, framed by pedagogical goals, and situated within ethical practices.

One promising direction lies in the development of prompt literacy—the ability to design, evaluate, and iteratively refine instructions given to AI systems (Hwang et al., 2023). In many EFL classrooms, writing has long been treated as a product-oriented task, assessed on final drafts and fixed rubrics. With AI, students can now generate

entire paragraphs or essays from a single prompt, but often without understanding how prompt phrasing shapes output. Teachers can intervene here by guiding students to treat prompts not as static queries, but as rhetorical acts. For instance, asking learners to compare two different AI outputs—one generated from a vague prompt ("Write about climate change") and one from a specific, genre-aware prompt ("Write a persuasive letter to a government official arguing for climate action using two statistical references")—opens space for discussing genre, audience, and stance. In this sense, the classroom shifts from a site of production to a site of critical prompting and negotiation, with teachers facilitating reflection on language, purpose, and power in human–AI interaction.

Generative AI also creates opportunities for redefining writing as a dialogic and recursive process. Traditionally, many students approach writing as a one-shot task, especially in exam-oriented contexts where drafting and revision are under-emphasized. With AI, students can engage in iterative feedback cycles—not only with peers and teachers, but also with the machine. Teachers can structure assignments that require students to submit the AI prompt they used, the output they received, and a written reflection explaining what they accepted, revised, or rejected and why. This "AI-in-the-loop" pedagogy reframes writing as a co-evolutionary process, where human authorship is not eclipsed, but dynamically negotiated. Such assignments also surface students' metalinguistic awareness (Xiao et al., 2025).

Another underutilized opportunity lies in teaching critical reading through AI-generated texts (Yusuf et al., 2024). In many EFL programs, reading instruction still focuses on comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. But as students increasingly encounter AI-generated summaries, explanations, or paraphrases, they must learn to critically evaluate these outputs—not just in terms of correctness, but in terms of bias, tone, and epistemic credibility. For example, teachers can assign a task where students use an AI model to summarize a controversial topic, then compare that summary with a scholarly article or human-written editorial. Through such activities, AI becomes not only a tool for generation but a textual object for critique, enabling discussions of framing, omission, and language ideology. This approach aligns with the goal of developing AI-critical literacies, equipping students to read not only texts, but also the systems that produce them.

AI integration also invites rethinking assessment and curriculum design. Rather than banning AI from writing tasks, educators can redesign assignments to foreground process over product (Su & Zhong, 2022). For example, a task might ask students to co-author an argumentative essay with ChatGPT, annotate the parts generated by AI, and then reflect on the epistemic value of those contributions. Rubrics can be adapted to assess not just linguistic accuracy, but students' ability to make ethical decisions about AI use, justify revisions, and reflect on learning strategies. These changes shift the locus of evaluation from isolated output to transparency, decision-making, and authorship ethics—areas where human agency is central.

Finally, AI allows for expanded access to multimodal and multilingual expression, especially in contexts where students struggle with confidence or fluency. Teachers can design creative projects where students use AI to brainstorm video scripts, translate poetry across languages, or simulate dialogue in different registers. These tasks empower learners to move fluidly between roles—writer, editor, translator, curator—positioning AI as an assistive partner rather than a substitute. More importantly, such tasks reposition the teacher as a designer of learning ecologies rather than as a dispenser of correct English. It is in this shift—from correction to curation, from authority to facilitation—that the most exciting opportunities for EFL pedagogy may lie.

## 4. Reclaiming Teacher Agency in AI-Mediated Language Education

Amid the proliferation of generative AI in EFL classrooms, a recurring concern is that teachers are being gradually marginalized—not by administrative decision, but by structural drift. As students turn to AI for writing, translation, and even content generation, the teacher's authority as linguistic expert, feedback provider, and learning facilitator appears to be diluted. Yet this presumed erosion of teacher power is not inevitable. On the contrary, the emergence of AI in language education reveals a latent opportunity to reclaim and reconfigure teacher agency—not by resisting technology, but by reshaping its use through human pedagogical judgment, ethical framing, and institutional advocacy.

Agency, in this context, must be understood not as a static personal trait, but as a context-sensitive capacity for action shaped by institutional structures, cultural discourses, and available tools (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015). In AI-mediated classrooms, teacher agency becomes visible in moments where instructors make decisions about how, why, and under what conditions AI tools are used. These decisions range from the design of AI-integrated assignments, to the facilitation of student reflection, to the negotiation of classroom norms and academic integrity. Importantly, agency is not merely about adoption or resistance, but about interpretation and orchestration—the teacher's ability to embed AI use within pedagogical values and learning goals.

However, exercising this kind of agency requires institutional support. Many teachers today face a double bind: they are expected to integrate AI creatively, yet are given no formal training or policy guidance on its ethical boundaries. This leaves them vulnerable to student pushback, professional risk, and emotional burnout. To reclaim agency, institutions must move beyond reactive policy statements or prohibitive guidelines. Instead, they should invest in teacher-centered AI development ecosystems, including:

(1) collaborative curriculum design spaces where teachers co-create AI-integrated syllabi;
(2) cross-disciplinary communities of practice for discussing AI-related dilemmas;
(3) flexible policy frameworks that allow for contextualized decision-making at the classroom level.

Furthermore, reclaiming agency requires rethinking professional development. Traditional models of teacher training often treat technology as a skill set to be "acquired" through workshops. But in the case of AI, the deeper challenge lies not in mastering tools, but in engaging critically with their assumptions, limitations, and social effects. As such, professional learning must include opportunities for teachers to reflect on their own values, examine the epistemologies embedded in AI outputs, and experiment with alternative forms of pedagogy. For example, an AI training session for EFL instructors should not only demonstrate how to use ChatGPT for generating writing prompts, but also invite discussions on how AI constructs "neutral" English (Startari et al., 2025), how bias appears in algorithmic outputs, and how students can be taught to notice these patterns.

Crucially, teacher agency also extends into the policy-making arena. Given the rapid pace of AI adoption, institutional guidelines are often developed by administrative units with little input from educators on the ground. This risks producing top-down policies that are either overly restrictive or detached from classroom realities. Teachers must be recognized not just as implementers, but as co-constructors of AI governance within educational institutions. Their lived experiences, classroom observations, and ethical judgments are essential for crafting policies that are both workable and principled.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The emergence of generative AI marks a turning point in EFL education, not merely as a technological event but as a pedagogical reconfiguration. As this article has argued, AI challenges many of the foundational assumptions that have shaped language teaching—about what counts as knowledge, how writing should be evaluated, and what role the teacher should play in facilitating learning. These challenges are not hypothetical or distant; they are already present in classrooms, affecting how teachers interpret student work, design assessments, and negotiate their own professional identities.

Yet alongside these disruptions lie profound opportunities. When intentionally integrated into pedagogy, AI can open new spaces for process-based writing, dialogic learning, and critical literacy. It can shift the focus of EFL instruction from product to process, from correctness to communication, from authority to co-construction. However, such transformations cannot be left to chance or technological momentum. They require teacher agency—not only in adapting classroom practice, but also in shaping institutional policy, ethical frameworks, and pedagogical vision.

To move forward, EFL institutions and educators must adopt a dual orientation: critical and creative. Critically, we must interrogate the assumptions embedded in AI outputs and challenge the reductive use of AI as a shortcut to "good English." Creatively, we must design new forms of learning where AI is not an end-point generator but a collaborator in inquiry, reflection, and meaning-making. This demands more than training; it demands a re-professionalization of the language teacher—a repositioning that affirms their central role in navigating this new epistemic landscape.

The future of EFL teaching in the age of AI will not be determined by the technology itself, but by how teachers choose to engage with it. Whether AI becomes a force for pedagogical flattening or flourishing depends on whether we empower educators to act not as passive users, but as active architects of AI-augmented learning. That work begins now.

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