



From Chalkboards to Chatbots: Language Educators' Needs, Struggles, and Adaptation in the AI Era

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Abstract

As artificial intelligence (AI) technologies rapidly evolve, language educators are pressured to integrate AI into their teaching practices. At the university level, especially among first-year students, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers face the challenge of integrating AI tools and maintaining pedagogical effectiveness. Drawing on survey data and semi-structured interviews, the findings reveal that 88% of EFL instructors engage with AI tools in their language classrooms. While teachers report benefits, such as automating materials and enhancing student autonomy, they also report significant barriers. The study highlights the need for AI context specific integration frameworks that reflect the socio-pedagogical EFL contexts. Additionally, the study stresses the importance of considering the cognitive and emotional labor of teachers navigating AI-driven transitions. The findings call for a shift from tool-focused training toward more sustainable localized institutional strategies that support meaningful pedagogical AI implementation. The study adds to the global conversation on AI in language learning education by prioritizing teacher agency, inclusivity, and contextualization.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence integration, emotional labor, language learning pedagogy, post digital education, teacher agency.

1. Introduction

In recent years, artificial intelligence (AI) has rapidly transformed language education, presenting new possibilities and challenges for language educators. Teachers face increasing pressure to integrate AI tools into their pedagogical practices especially in undergraduate EFL contexts. As AI technologies promise benefits such as instant feedback, automated material creation, personalized instruction, and learner autonomy, they also introduce some barriers, including ethical concerns, reliability issues, limited access, and a high demand for teachers' technical and cognitive expertise (Alcívar, Macías, & Vera, [2]; Guo & Wang, [5]; Khasawneh, [8]; Koraishi, [10]). Therefore, first-year university EFL instructors are confronted with the dual responsibility of integrating AI tools that students may independently access while maintaining pedagogical effectiveness. Existing research has investigated the impact of GenAI, such as ChatGPT, on language education at the university level, with particular attention to teacher and student perceptions, pedagogical opportunities, and challenges surrounding AI integration. For instance, Barrett and Pack [4] surveyed both university students and educators on their attitudes toward GenAI in academic writing across six tasks, brainstorming, outlining, writing, revising, providing feedback, and evaluation. The findings revealed that GenAI is most appropriate for supporting idea generation in the initial stages of writing. Teachers voiced concerns about potential misuse such as submitting AI-generated work without disclosure, whereas students demonstrated a higher tolerance for undisclosed GenAI use. The study also highlighted a significant lack of institutional policies and training.

In addition, AlAfnan et al. [1] examined the use of ChatGPT as an educational tool in writing courses, identifying both significant opportunities and challenges. The study found that ChatGPT can function as an effective platform for students. However, it warns that unethical use by students may lead to difficulties for teachers in distinguishing between learner and AI generated work to accurately assess learning outcomes. Hong [6] explored the potential of ChatGPT in foreign language teaching and learning, addressing misconceptions regarding its functioning and limitations. Hong argued that, despite reported concerns regarding academic integrity and assessment, ChatGPT offers valuable



opportunities for pedagogical innovation, such as authentic language use and immediate feedback. Hong [6] supported updating traditional teaching practices to incorporate AI-driven tools. Hong recommends adaptive strategies and responsible use, calling for further studies on AI's impact on learner motivation and teacher workload. Similarly, Kartal [7] provided a comprehensive review of ChatGPT's applications and challenges in language education. The review emphasized strengths such as grammar correction and personalized feedback and learning for diverse proficiency levels. However, Kartal highlighted some concerns such as accuracy limitations, cultural biases, and ethical issues. Kartal also discussed the risk of over-reliance on AI at the expense of meaningful human interactions, encouraging a balanced approach towards AI integration.

Moreover, Kim, Shim, and Shim [9] explored the effectiveness of employing ChatGPT in task-based language learning for Korean learners of English. Results indicated that ChatGPT could design good lesson plans, generate materials, and offer feedback. Nonetheless, limitations included insufficient interactive engagement, assessment issues and risk of bias. Their findings recommend maintaining human oversight and supplementing AI tools with additional resources to achieve comprehensive language learning outcomes. In another study, Amonova, Juraeva, and Khidoyatov [3] explored whether AI represents a threat or an opportunity in EFL educational settings. The authors found that AI enhances language instruction by providing personalized learning, instant feedback, and real-time communication. However, they also cautioned that over-reliance on AI can diminish learners' motivation, critical thinking, and authentic communication skills. Therefore, the impact of AI in language learning depends on balanced integration. In sum, the literature signals a consensus on the high potential of AI implementation in language education but also highlights its shortcomings.

Despite growing evidence that AI offers successful pedagogical benefits in language education, most existing research emphasizes the general potentials and challenges of AI tools rather than the specific contextual needs and struggles of university EFL instructors. Previous studies focused predominantly on broad teacher/learner attitudes, technical affordances, and institutional readiness, overlooking the cognitive and emotional labor required for sustainable AI integration. Therefore, to address this gap the following research attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What are the specific needs, challenges, and adaptive processes experienced by first-year university EFL instructors when integrating AI tools into their classroom practices?
2. How do EFL instructors perceive the cognitive and emotional labor involved in adapting to AI-driven educational environments?

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design and Data Collection Tools

This study employed a mixed methods design to investigate how first-year university level EFL instructors integrate AI tools in their teaching practices and the challenges they encounter. To provide a more holistic understanding of the pedagogical, cognitive, and emotional dimensions of AI integration in EFL contexts, a survey and semi-structured interviews were employed. A questionnaire was administered to all participants and it consisted of open-ended and multiple-choice items designed to elicit information on teaching experience, types of AI tools used, purposes for using these tools (skills such as grammar, vocabulary, writing, etc.), challenges encountered (reliability, ethics, technical and access issues), levels of integration, and perceptions of student attitudes toward AI. It also included items addressing teachers' needs for institutional support, such as training or policy guidelines. In addition, the semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 participants to gain deeper insights into their experiences, attitudes, and concerns about AI integration. The interview protocol allowed for flexibility so that participants could elaborate on issues not captured in the questionnaire. Thus, themes such as perceived pedagogical benefits, barriers to effective integration, ethical and emotional considerations, and expectations for institutional support were explored.

2.2 Participants and Analysis

The participants were 125 first-year university EFL instructors, representing a diverse range of teaching experiences (from 0–2 years to 11+ years) and from different cultural backgrounds. All instructors were teaching undergraduate first-year English courses at the time of the study. From this pool, 20 instructors were purposively selected to participate in follow-up semi-structured interviews. Selection criteria for interviews included representation across different teaching experience levels and degrees of AI usage (e.g., frequent users, occasional users, and non-users). Participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. To protect confidentiality, all responses and interview data were anonymized. The survey was distributed electronically and completed voluntarily by 125 instructors. Following the survey, 20 teachers were contacted via email and invited for semi-structured interviews, which were conducted online. Each interview lasted approximately 10–20 minutes. Quantitative data from the survey were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequency counts, and percentages). Qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews were subjected to thematic analysis to identify recurring themes related to teacher agency, emotional and cognitive labor, and institutional support needs.

3. Findings and Discussion

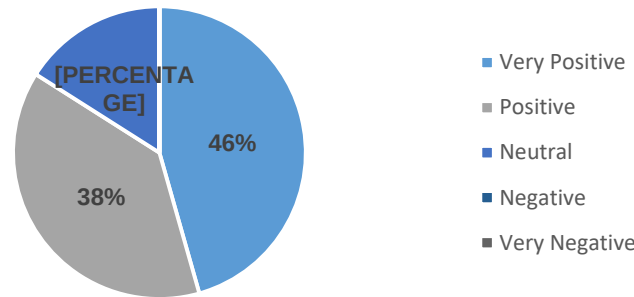
The analysis of survey data and interviews obtained from EFL teachers in the first year of university provided a multi-dimensional view of AI integration in higher education language teaching. In the present study, most instructors (88%) reported using AI tools, with ChatGPT, Grammarly, Gemini, and Quill Bot cited as the most common applications for tasks such as vocabulary development (89%), grammar (86%), reading (63%), and writing instruction (58%). However, AI integration levels varied as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1: Levels of AI Integration in Teaching

AI Integration Level	Count	%
Moderately integrated	62	49.6%
Lightly integrated (Only experimenting)	42	33.6%
Heavily integrated (AI is a core part of my teaching)	9	7.2%
Not integrated	12	9.6%
Total	125	100%

As presented in Table 1, only 7.2% reported that they were heavily integrating AI into their teaching, almost half (49.6%) did so moderately, more than a third (33.6%) integrated it lightly or are still experimenting, and 9.6% reported not integrating AI in their teaching. In addition, EFL teachers reported the following benefits of using AI tools, time saving (87%), improved lesson quality (70%), personalized learning (56%), enhanced student engagement (75%), and instant feedback (50%). The high rate of AI tool usage among first-year EFL teachers suggests a shift in instructional paradigms. Educators are no longer experimenting with AI; many are embedding it within their daily teaching practices. However, most instructors situated their AI integration at a moderate or light level suggests that this transformation is an ongoing process. In addition, when EFL teachers reflected on their first-year students' attitudes toward AI tools, 45.6% perceived their students as very positive, 38.4% as positive, 16% as neutral and no negative perceptions were reported, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Fig.1. Teacher Perceptions of Students' Attitudes Toward AI Tools



These results imply that learners are generally receptive to the integration of AI into the language learning environment. These findings suggest a near-universal awareness and a positive position toward integrating AI technologies into language instruction in line with previous studies such as Barrett and Pack [4] who argued that recent language learners are not only prepared for but may expect AI enriched learning environments.

In addition, the findings indicated that first-year university EFL teachers faced specific challenges, including cognitive and emotional labor, in adapting to AI-driven educational environments. The findings will be discussed below in Sections 3.1 and 3.2.

3.1. Specific Needs, Challenges, and Adaptive Processes in AI Integration

To achieve the first research objective, the specific needs, challenges, and adaptive processes experienced by first-year university EFL instructors when integrating AI tools into their classroom practices were explored. The Results from both the teacher survey and semi-structured interviews indicated that AI use is widespread among first-year university EFL instructors, yet their needs and challenges are context-dependent. The findings are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Teacher Needs and Challenges

Category		Survey Data
Needs	training/ workshops	80%
	access to paid tool subscriptions	68%
	clear guidelines/ policies	66%
	peer collaboration	29%
Challenges	accuracy/ reliability concerns	61%
	ethical concerns (e.g. plagiarism)	58%
	limited access/ infrastructure	29%
	lack of support with technical difficulties	45%

First-year university EFL instructors reported several significant needs and challenges when integrating AI tools into their teaching practices. The most prominent need was for targeted training and workshops, with 80% of EFL teachers indicating this as essential for them to be capable of effectively integrating AI into their language teaching. In addition, 68% of the instructors noted that restricted functionality in AI tools can impede meaningful classroom use and highlighted the necessity for access to paid AI tool subscriptions. Clear institutional guidelines and policies were also important, as indicated by 66% of the instructors. EFL teachers demanded written institutional policies detailing ethical use, privacy, and responsible pedagogy. Collegial support and peer collaboration was identified as a need by 29% of the EFL teachers. Teachers valued opportunities to share best practices and collaborate with their colleagues.

Challenges reported by the instructors reflected multiple facets of AI integration such as accuracy and reliability. Around 61% raised their concerns about the accuracy and reliability of AI-generated content. They discussed occasional hallucinations or unreliable outputs from AI tools, which sometimes required supplementary checks or manual corrections. Also, 58% of teachers voiced apprehension about ethical concerns such as plagiarism, inappropriate learner dependence, and other misuses of AI. Another challenge reported by 29% of the teachers was limited infrastructure and inconsistent internet availability in classrooms. Additionally, technical difficulties are experienced by 45% of the instructors. Adaptive processes emerged as EFL teachers tried to balance the benefits of AI integration in their language classrooms with the challenges they faced. Instructors gradually integrated AI tools and tailored the integration based on classroom readiness and institutional support. Teachers also encouraged introducing first-year students to AI tools during orientation to foster responsible usage and autonomous language learning. EFL instructors expressed their aspirations for future developments, such as curriculum-specific chatbots and broader institutional vision in line with language learning objectives. The findings confirm previous findings reported by AlAfnan et al. [1] and Kartal [7] and Kim, Shim, and Shim [9].

3.2. Cognitive and Emotional Labor in Adapting to AI-Driven Educational Environments

Transitioning to AI-enhanced language instruction is not just a technical matter for teachers but requires significant cognitive and emotional investment. The findings revealed that 80% of EFL teachers felt they needed further training or support to navigate new AI technologies. They also frequently described the process of AI integration as demanding. They noted that learning new tools, staying updated with new developments and adapting lessons for AI-supported learning required continuous effort. EFL teachers discussed the overwhelming trouble of designing ethical and effective lessons that do not replace critical thinking skills and interpersonal communication. They also highlighted the cognitive effort required for monitoring and guiding students to use AI. Emotionally, teachers reported feelings of stress, anxiety, uncertainty, responsibility, hope and optimism. They said that the rapid changes in AI and the evolving expectations caused stress and anxiety, especially with the absence of support and guidelines. Many teachers felt responsible and an increased burden to safeguard learners' creativity, ethical awareness, and motivation. However, EFL teachers expressed enthusiasm for AI's potential in enhancing engagement and individualized learning. They saw themselves as key players and agents in shaping a successful and culturally sensitive AI educational environment. EFL teachers called for ongoing workshops, collaboration, and clear policy frameworks to help alleviate the pressures of engaging with AI recent developments. Teachers stressed that AI successful integration depends on fostering both teacher and student agency within localized, context-aware strategies. These findings directly align with Hong's [6] findings that language educators are increasingly turning to AI tools to enhance their practice regardless of pedagogical, emotional, and infrastructural uncertainty.

In sum, the findings show a comprehensive portrait of an academic department in transition. The teachers are actively adopting AI tools, using them frequently, and observing positive student responses. Although the teachers' enthusiasm for AI adoption is high, they do not feel fully equipped to manage the pedagogical, technical, or ethical complexities associated with AI integration. This highlights a significant issue that necessitates intervention: although language teachers demonstrate readiness to adopt change, they are frequently compelled to do so in the absence of sufficient guidance. In this respect, the findings stress the emotional and cognitive labor involved in navigating AI-driven transitions. Teachers are reconfiguring their identities, strategies and pedagogical philosophies to adapt new AI tools. Moreover, the teachers' lack of awareness regarding departmental AI policies need careful consideration. Teachers need to be aware of the institution's frameworks for ethical AI use, data privacy, and quality assurance to avoid any inconsistent expectations or potential risks. The findings also call attention to the need for context-specific AI integration models. For example, in the Saudi EFL context, frameworks for AI use need be tailored to cultural sensitivities, linguistic priorities, and institutional missions. Such findings underscore the importance of understanding the contextual, emotional, and organizational dimensions of AI implementation in higher education.



4. Conclusion

As AI becomes embedded in language teaching and learning practices, first-year university instructors navigate a critical period in language education. The present study explored AI integration among EFL instructors at the university level, focusing on the extent of tool adoption, the pedagogical roles AI currently plays, the challenges instructors face, and the support structures available to them. Drawing on survey data and semi-structured interviews, the analysis reveals an academic environment marked by high AI adoption rates, enthusiastic experimentation, and positive student reception, but also by diverse levels of integration. Moreover, the study highlights the substantial cognitive and emotional labor demands of teachers when adapting pedagogically and professionally in rapidly evolving AI-driven environments. EFL teachers are implementing new AI tools, rethinking their pedagogical identities, and promoting responsible, inclusive, and context-sensitive approaches to AI use in language classrooms. Teacher agency and voice are essential in shaping equitable and effective AI integration models. Finally, the findings underscore the necessity of empowering teachers and supporting learner engagement, autonomy, and ethical awareness of AI tools. The study contributes to the broader conversation on AI integration in EFL educational contexts by advocating for policies and practices that prioritize both AI advancement and the well-being of teachers and students.

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