

Repositioning Artificial Intelligence in English Language Education: Ethical Challenges and Teachers' Role

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Abstract: Although Artificial Intelligence (AI) has been widely recognized for enhancing efficiency, accessibility, and personalized learning in English language education, limited studies have critically examined its ethical implications and the evolving role of teachers in maintaining human-centered learning. This study aims to critically explore the ethical challenges of AI integration and redefine the role of teachers in fostering responsible and humanistic educational practices. Using a qualitative literature review with thematic analysis of peer-reviewed studies published between 2019 and 2025, this research identifies three major themes: (1) the risk of over-reliance on AI in pedagogical processes, (2) the importance of integrating ethical digital literacy into English language teaching, and (3) the transformation of teachers' roles as facilitators, mediators, and ethical guides in AI-supported classrooms. The findings reveal that AI should function as a complementary educational tool rather than a replacement for teachers. Moreover, teachers remain essential in ensuring that AI is used ethically, critically, and in alignment with pedagogical objectives. This study proposes a balanced framework for responsible AI integration that promotes synergy between technological innovation and humanistic pedagogy, offering practical implications for sustainable and ethically informed English language education.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence; English Language Education; Ethics; Teachers; Digital Literacy

INTRODUCTION

The rapid emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has brought tremendous changes across spheres worldwide, and one sector where its development is particularly controversial is education. Such innovations as automated writing evaluators, intelligent tutoring systems, conversational agents, and large language models have become widely adopted and have changed the way language is taught, evaluated, and experienced (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019; Popenici & Kerr, 2017). The advantages of using these innovative technologies are numerous: personalized feedback, individualized learning experiences, and round-the-clock access to learning materials outside class time (Chen et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2021). Thus, the role of AI as an agent of change in the field of English language education cannot be underestimated.

Unfortunately, the enthusiasm for the use of AI in education has obscured many problems related to pedagogy and the ethics of learning. One of the main problems is the dependence on technology, which means that an AI tool will do all the work of developing

language skills without going through the process of thinking (Kasneci et al., 2023; Wollny et al., 2021). The growing prevalence of AI tools for generation after 2022 has created the problem of academic dishonesty due to the possibility of generating essays, translations, and answers without thinking (Cotton et al., 2023; Perkins, 2023). The problems of algorithmic bias, privacy violations, and cultural homogenization caused by AI language generation should also be considered.

In addition to these challenges, the increasing presence of AI in educational settings has led to a substantial change in the perception of the teacher role, since teachers have long been viewed as knowledge deliverers. Nowadays, however, teachers are expected to act as facilitators and mediators who can help learners to benefit from the usage of digital technologies (Holmes et al., 2022; Luckin et al., 2016). Nevertheless, there is sometimes a lack of necessary guidelines for teachers in this matter (Nazaretsky et al., 2022; Luan et al., 2020).

Existing literature has primarily investigated the integration of AI in teaching the English language through one of two different lenses, either by focusing on its instructional-efficacy benefits in terms of learning instructions and personalized feedback (Huang et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2020) or by analyzing its ethical risks and dangers associated with it, like cheating and bias (Cotton et al., 2023; Kasneci et al., 2023). Nevertheless, existing research has tended to explore these two aspects separately, paying little attention to their interactions and interplay, thereby leaving them theoretically underdeveloped. In other words, the literature lacks research on how these two dimensions affect the role teachers are expected to play after introducing AI into the classroom. Moreover, almost no studies provide conceptual frameworks that merge these two dimensions of AI implementation into a single framework and resolve the associated dilemma. Thus, a study that integrates pedagogical and ethical perspectives on AI implementation and redefines teachers' roles is needed. In contrast to the existing literature, this study aims to merge the perspectives mentioned above into a single framework.

The theoretical framework used in this study rests on the concept of responsible AI, which emphasizes the importance of transparency, equity, responsibility, and sustained human intervention in the design and implementation of technological tools for learning (UNESCO, 2021). In this framework, ethical AI is more than just an approach to preventing the abuse of technology; it becomes a pedagogical principle that seeks to safeguard the integrity and independence of learners by ensuring their agency in any process of mediated communication involving AI algorithms. This pedagogical principle is based on humanistic pedagogy, which places the interpersonal interaction between teacher and learner, empathy, and meaning-making at the center of education that cannot be substituted by any algorithm (Holmes et al., 2022). Responsible AI, ethical AI, and humanistic pedagogy – these three theoretical constructs provide the conceptual background for this study to understand the ethical problems posed by AI implementation and rethinking the role of teachers in English language teaching. It is especially urgent since the recent development of generative AI after the launch of ChatGPT in late 2022 has surpassed the capacity for pedagogical theorization and practical recommendations for its ethical application (Cotton et al., 2023).

As such, existing research critically examines the ethical dilemmas of AI implementation in English language education and redefines the role of teachers in ensuring humanistic and

responsible practices in education. Through a qualitative literature review and thematic analysis, this paper proposes a balanced framework for responsible AI implementation that fosters synergies between technology and humanistic teaching practices. The findings of this paper will help ELE specialists and policymakers understand how to implement AI ethically and sustainably. In this paper, the term "responsible AI implementation" is defined as the pedagogical and ethical implementation of AI technologies that enhances learning and preserves learners' autonomy, critical thinking, ethical digital literacy, and the essential role of teachers.

METHOD

Research Design

A qualitative literature review using thematic analysis has been employed in this research to critically analyze the ethical issues associated with the use of AI in English language education and the changing nature of teachers' roles. A qualitative literature review was chosen as a suitable methodology because it involves generating conceptual insights from diverse academic perspectives on emerging educational problems rather than measuring statistical impacts (Grant & Booth, 2009; Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2016). As the research issue of this paper involves developing an integrative perspective on the ethical implementation of AI technology in English language education, this methodology is well-suited.

Data Sources

The literature on the topic of relevance was found in the largest academic databases Scopus, ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), Google Scholar, and Taylor & Francis Online. These databases were chosen because they provide broad coverage of academic journals and books in education and applied linguistics. The literature was found by using a few sets of keywords, such as (1) "AI" and "English Language Education"; (2) "AI integration" and "EFL" or "ELT"; (3) "AI ethics" and "language learning"; (4) "teacher role" and "AI" and "education"; and (5) "digital literacy" and "language teaching." All sources that were found were organized in the Mendeley reference management software.

The following criteria of selection of literature have been used: (a) peer-reviewed articles published in academic journals, book chapters, and technical reports from 2019 until 2025; (b) literature on the topic of the use of AI in language education, ethical issues in educational technology, and digital professional development of teachers; and (c) literature written in English. Exclusion criteria included the following: (a) papers of conference proceedings if they did not provide the full text; (b) opinion papers without any scientific basis; and (c) papers exclusively focused on other topics.

Data Collection Procedures

The data collection process was conducted through several stages. At first, the relevant literature was gathered by searching four large-scale academic databases: Scopus, ERIC, Google Scholar, and Taylor & Francis Online, employing specific sets of keywords associated with the terms "artificial intelligence," "English language education," "AI ethics," "teacher's role," and "digital literacy." Furthermore, the collected literature was filtered using the inclusion and exclusion criteria specified for this study. While filtering, duplicates and

unrelated literature were rejected. After that, the remaining literature was analyzed based on title, abstract, and full-text analyses to assess its relevance to the purpose of this study. The selected literature served as the primary source for thematic analysis. In turn, as this study followed a qualitative literature review methodology and did not conduct a systematic review, this step aimed to provide transparency and conceptual relevance rather than an exhaustive literature search, in accordance with PRISMA guidelines (Snyder, 2019). To improve the validity of the analysis, the selected literature was continually reviewed and compared during the coding stage to align the identified themes with the research aims.

Data Analysis

In this case, thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006) was conducted in accordance with six stages developed by the authors of this framework. Thematic analysis is chosen because it helps identify and interpret recurring concepts across the literature, thereby developing broader conceptual insights rather than merely summarizing previous studies' findings. The process started with a preliminary reading of each article to understand its basic message and findings. Next, each article was coded manually to identify concepts relevant to AI ethics, digital literacy, and the changing roles of teachers. Then, the identified codes were grouped into larger categories based on conceptual similarity, and the resulting clusters were compared across the literature to determine which were internally consistent and distinct from one another. Thus, the process of clustering and recluster was going on until the three main themes were found repeatedly in the examined literature. Finally, these themes were defined and named. They can be found in the Findings and Discussion section.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Three main themes have been identified as a result of the thematic analysis, which are linked to the ethical implementation of the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in English Language Education: (1) the threat of AI's over-reliance in the pedagogical process, (2) the significance of embedding ethical digital literacy within English language education and (3) the evolution of teachers' role as facilitators and mediating ethical agents in AI-based classes. Overall, these themes provide a comprehensive understanding of how AI technology can be implemented ethically while maintaining a humanistic pedagogical approach. Below is a detailed discussion of the three themes in separate sections.

Over-Reliance on AI and the Erosion of Pedagogical Depth

One of the main ethical problems identified in the thematic analysis was over-reliance on AI technology. The problem is characterized by growing concern that excessive reliance on artificial intelligence may hinder learners' cognitive engagement in the language acquisition process. According to Wollny et al. (2021), students who used AI to correct their written assignments demonstrated much poorer revision strategies than those whose feedback was mediated by teachers, suggesting that AI could interfere with metacognitive efforts in language learning. Similarly, Kasneci et al. (2023) emphasized cognitive offloading as a systemic issue related to the use of AI technology in the absence of pedagogy.

Unlike previous works that were more concerned about the didactic role of AI and pedagogical guidance required (Popenici & Kerr, 2017), the analyzed literature reveals a

growing tendency to regard overreliance on AI as a pedagogical problem per se. Recent research shows that a high level of dependence on AI is directly linked to a lack of appropriate pedagogical guidance on when and to what extent AI should be employed in language education (Luan et al., 2020; Nazaretsky et al., 2022). This evidence suggests that AI should not be considered the main subject teaching agent, but just another educational instrument that has to serve pedagogical goals.

This has specific implications for English language learning. Learning a language is an inherently social, iterative, and cognitively challenging process. It follows that technologies that aim to expedite or enhance the accuracy of the process avoid all three components. Specifically, as per Cotton et al. (2023), the introduction of ChatGPT saw a notable rise in cases of academic misconduct through the use of AI-powered tools, with students submitting AI-generated texts as their own work. The problem was discussed further in Perkins (2023), as current methods for identifying this kind of cheating prove insufficient, and institutional responses to the phenomenon lag considerably behind technological development. Pedagogically speaking, AI-powered tasks in English class should be carefully designed to retain, rather than circumvent, the productive struggle inherent in language learning, e.g., by requiring learners to explain or edit AI-generated text rather than submit it.

Ethical Digital Literacy as a Pedagogical Imperative

The thematic analysis identified ethical digital literacy as a second major theme emerging across the reviewed literature. According to the findings, ethical integration of AI in English Language Education requires more than just learners' technical skill in using AI tools; it also requires critical evaluation of AI content and ethical decision-making in language learning. The problem was observed by Akçapınar et al. (2019), who argued that many students lack the relevant competences to evaluate AI-generated texts in terms of potential biases and cultural presuppositions about reliability. The assumption is supported by Zawacki-Richter et al. (2019), who discovered after conducting a systematic review on AI in HE that usually no special attention was paid to the development of critical thinking regarding the functions of AI technologies.

In contrast to previous research, which focused mainly on inadequate digital literacy among students (Akçapınar et al., 2019; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019), the current thematic analysis highlights that the main issue is the lack of pedagogical perspectives that incorporate ethical digital literacy in English language instruction. As noted by Huang et al. (2021), when the group of EFL learners received explicit guidance in how to critically evaluate the corrections suggested by AI, they were able to develop their skills of revising texts on their own and detecting errors in their writing much more effectively than learners using AI without being provided with any guidance. These results indicate that the problem is not related to AI, but rather to the lack of pedagogical frameworks that could make its usage ethical and constructive for learning languages. Media literacy teaches that the uneducated consumption of media results in ignorance among citizens (Buckingham, 2019), and similarly, the unregulated use of AI makes people less linguistically independent.

Furthermore, this dimension of the topic could be elaborated through examining data privacy and algorithmic transparency. Namely, several of the reviewed articles (e.g., Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019, and Chen et al., 2020) point out that learners and teachers are

unaware of the process of how this kind of data is collected, stored, and possibly exploited for commercial gain, which represents an ethical issue in the context where a vulnerable group (students) is under consideration. Opposite to earlier research where the problems of data privacy were viewed as purely technical ones, the recent literature discusses the data privacy problems as an educational ethical issue, which requires pedagogical discussion. The shift in focus implies that the language teacher has to start questioning the AI technology used, not only whether "this AI gives correct grammar feedback?", but also "what is the purpose of this AI technology, and what does it know about me?". This dimension implies that the topic of ethical digital literacy, including bias recognition, source evaluation, and data privacy, should become an integral part of English language education.

The Transformation and Repositioning of Teachers' Roles

The thematic analysis revealed the role transformation of teachers as the third theme. The results show that the inclusion of AI systems does not make the role of teachers any less important; rather, it reinterprets it as one of facilitation, ethical mediation, and human-centered guidance in the process of AI-facilitated education. In support of this statement, it is important to mention the research done by Holmes et al. (2022). It has been mentioned there that rather than rendering teachers redundant, the development of AI highlights the importance of those qualities of humans that cannot be replicated in any way and will remain unique to humans, such as empathy, moral judgment, relational awareness and assessing the needs of the students sensitively. It is relevant to compare this finding with the findings of Luckin et al. (2016).

Contrary to previous studies that viewed teachers primarily as facilitators of AI-enabled learning experiences, the existing literature emphasizes their role as ethical actors in mediating and regulating the responsible use of AI. For instance, according to the findings presented by Nazaretsky et al. (2022), teachers who perceived themselves as ethical actors who regulated AI usage and delineated the boundaries for the acceptable use of AI ensured higher critical thinking skills and effective incorporation of AI into the learning process of their students compared to the teachers who had a passive approach towards AI usage.

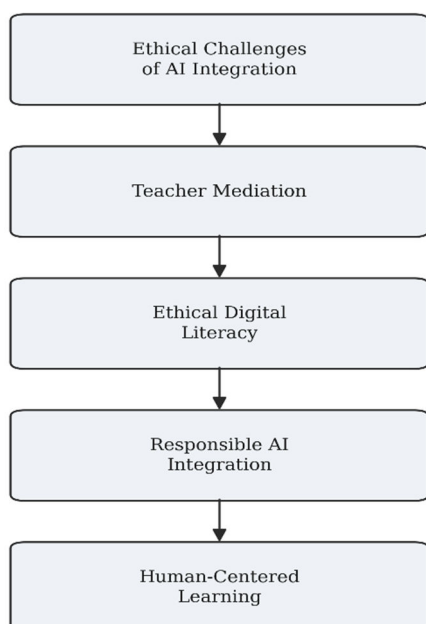
Also, the literature review indicates a conflict between institutional encouragement to integrate AI into teachers' practices and the lack of professional development programs that help teachers integrate AI critically. For example, according to Luan et al. (2020), English language teachers face very low self-efficacy regarding their competence in using AI technologies at work, even as their institutions expect them to use AI. Unlike earlier research on AI professional development, which assumed it was primarily concerned with developing technical competence, it is now suggested that teacher professional development should encompass two types of competence when working with AI. In particular, teachers should not only learn how to work with AI technologies but also better understand their capabilities and limitations in education (Popenici & Kerr, 2017; Chen et al., 2020). Human aspects of learning, such as motivation, trust, and connection, cannot be replaced by any machine, no matter how sophisticated it is (Holmes et al., 2022; Kasneci et al., 2023). This theme has implications for theory in that models of professional development for teachers should no longer rely solely on a technological notion of AI competency but on a dual-competency approach in which technology and ethical mediation are both integral aspects of the teacher's role in AI-enhanced classrooms.

Toward a Balanced Framework for Responsible AI Integration

As one may see from the three themes mentioned above, they are interconnected and related; in particular, their interrelationship makes the problem of the responsible use of AI technologies in EFL education a challenging issue. The over-dependence on AI technologies (Theme 1) is both a result of and a cause of a certain deficit in digital ethics (Theme 2), as students cannot evaluate AI-generated information critically, and their dependence only grows as a result. All these problems, in turn, create additional obstacles for the teachers (Theme 3); therefore, their role as ethical mediators and critical facilitators becomes essential. It can be represented as a progressive framework, as shown in Figure 1, in which ethical challenges are solved through teacher mediation, which, in turn, is based on ethical digital literacy and leads to the responsible use of AI technologies and, consequently, human-centered learning.

Figure 1

A Balanced Framework for Responsible AI Integration in English Language Education



It is evident from Figure 1 that the model places teacher mediation at its very center since it is the only aspect out of the three that can actually interfere with the others: teachers can intervene when students overuse AI, and teachers are the ones who convert abstract ethical digital literacy to the practice of teaching in the classroom. Over-reliance on technology and digital literacy cannot regulate itself; thus, it needs a human mediator for decision-making, which is why the model places teacher mediation at its structural center rather than as a marginal factor. The responsible use of AI becomes the final product of the proposed model. It is clear from the results that responsible use of AI is not a natural quality of the technology per se but arises from a continuous interaction between teacher mediation and the ethics of digital literacy. This is the human factor that will decide whether the combination of AI and learners in a single unit will actually lead to learning outcomes or just create an illusion of them. Any efforts aimed at addressing only excessive AI use, only

the problem of a lack of digital literacy skills, or only the problem of teacher competence alone will be futile. The message conveyed by the information above is that an all-around approach should be taken, in which AI is seen as a supplementary educational technology rather than a substitute for teachers.

In addition, the review takes care of the research gap identified in the Introduction. Prior academic studies dedicated to the use of AI in ELE have concentrated on one of two aspects, either on the possible benefits of the implementation of AI in the process of foreign language teaching or on the ethical problems that might arise in connection with such an implementation, but very seldom have both these aspects been analyzed together in the context of one research. The thematic analysis presented in the current paper has shown that these two aspects cannot be considered independently from each other since the ethical problems arising from the implementation of AI in ELE are, indeed, pedagogical problems, and vice versa, the pedagogical benefits of using AI are, essentially, an ethical problem associated with ownership of AI, its mediation, and the ultimate consumer. The novelty of the current study lies precisely in the integration of these two aspects of AI in ELE, which were previously studied separately and have never been brought together with respect to the mediation of teachers in such an explicit manner.

CONCLUSION

In this study, the ethical issues related to the use of AI technology in English Language Education were examined critically, and a new paradigm for teachers was defined to develop responsible and humane education. Through thematic analysis, three key themes were revealed: (1) the possibility of overuse of AI technology in pedagogical processes, (2) the necessity to incorporate ethical digital literacy in teaching English, and (3) the changing roles of teachers as facilitators and mediators in AI classrooms.

From the above discussion, it is clear that AI is best used as a supplementary educational tool rather than a substitute for educators. The value of AI in education lies more in the way it is mediated rather than in the AI technology itself. Based on the findings discussed above, this research study puts forward a model of responsible integration of AI that makes the mediation of the teacher the structural link between digital literacy and responsible classroom use. The above conceptual contribution differs from previous studies on AI that considered the two aspects separately.

The research results yield numerous practical implications for various stakeholders involved in ELT. In particular, from the perspective of teachers, the study reveals the necessity of acquiring dual competence, which will involve not only understanding how to use AI technology but also being able to provide students with instructions on how to work with AI responsibly. At the same time, for curriculum developers and materials writers, one should emphasize the importance of integrating ethical digital literacy into everyday language classes, which entails evaluating AI-generated material critically, accounting for biases, and working with data responsibly. Finally, for policymakers and institutions, the study underscores the importance of developing discipline-specific guidelines on the use of AI, providing professionals with appropriate professional development, and ensuring curricular space for ethical digital literacy.

From these results, for the successful implementation of AI in English language education, it is not important whether the technology used is innovative; it is much more

important how teachers mediate this tool in terms of its ethical and pedagogical implementation.

First, there are several limitations in the current study. This work is not a systematic literature review; it is a qualitative review that aims to synthesize concepts rather than statistical results. Therefore, the results of the study cannot be generalized and cannot reflect all educational contexts, disciplines, and geographic locations. Also, as AI technologies rapidly develop, some conclusions about particular applications of AI can change in the future.

Further research may be carried out to explore the temporal development of teachers' mediation of AI through longitudinal classroom research across different EFL contexts with varying technological resources. Future studies should also be conducted in designing pedagogical frameworks for promoting ethical digital literacy and the perception of teachers and learners about the responsible use of AI in real classrooms.

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