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ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING: OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES, AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of artificial intelligence (AI) in English language teaching (ELT) in higher education, with particular attention to its pedagogical opportunities, instructional barriers, and ethical implications. The study employs an analytical-descriptive literature review design based on selected scholarly sources on AI-assisted language learning, learner autonomy, and digital pedagogy. The review indicates that AI can support English language development through adaptive learning pathways, immediate feedback, individualized practice, and enhanced opportunities for speaking and listening. At the same time, the literature identifies major challenges, including academic integrity risks, the digital divide between teachers and students, overreliance on automated systems, and the possible reduction of meaningful human interaction in the classroom. The findings suggest that AI should not be interpreted as a substitute for the teacher, but rather as a pedagogical tool that requires ethical regulation, critical supervision, and balanced methodological integration. The article concludes that the future of ELT depends on a productive synergy between technological innovation and human pedagogical expertise.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, English language teaching, adaptive learning, learner autonomy, digital literacy, academic integrity, higher education

INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence has become one of the most influential technological developments affecting contemporary education, including English language teaching (ELT). AI-powered tools such as grammar checkers, automated writing evaluators, speech-recognition systems, and conversational chatbots are increasingly shaping how English is taught, practiced, and assessed in higher education. As digital technologies become more deeply integrated into classroom practice, educators are required to reconsider the relationship between technological efficiency and sound pedagogy (Ganeesh & Rani, 2023; Luckin, 2018).

Within ELT, AI is often associated with personalization, speed, and learner support. It can provide immediate responses to learner errors, offer individualized exercises, and create low-pressure environments for repeated language practice. At the same time, its growing use raises important concerns about academic integrity, unequal digital competence, and the possible weakening of teacher-guided interaction and critical thinking (Idham et al., 2024).

The aim of this article is to analyze the role of artificial intelligence in ELT by identifying its major opportunities and challenges and by discussing the conditions under which it can be integrated in a pedagogically responsible manner. The article addresses three questions: what opportunities AI offers to English language teaching, what barriers complicate its implementation, and how AI can be used ethically and effectively in university-level language education.

METHODS

This study is based on an analytical-descriptive literature review. Rather than collecting primary empirical data, it synthesizes and interprets selected scholarly works on artificial intelligence in ELT, learner autonomy, and digital pedagogy. The reviewed sources were chosen because they directly address either pedagogical benefits or instructional and ethical challenges related to AI-assisted language learning (Benson, 2011; Ganeesh & Rani, 2023; Idham et al., 2024; Luckin, 2018).

The analysis was carried out in three stages. First, the studies were examined in order to identify recurring themes in the discussion of AI use in language education. Second, the identified themes were grouped into two broad categories: opportunities and challenges. Third, the findings were interpreted critically to formulate a balanced perspective on AI integration in ELT. As a review-based study, the article does not claim statistical generalizability; instead, it aims to provide a conceptual synthesis that may support future empirical inquiry and classroom practice.

RESULTS

Adaptive and Personalized Learning One of the most frequently discussed advantages of AI in ELT is its capacity to support adaptive learning. Unlike traditional classroom instruction, which often applies the same pace and materials to all learners, AI-driven platforms can analyze student performance and adjust tasks in real time. This allows instruction to become more individualized and helps students focus on their specific linguistic weaknesses and strengths (Ganeesh & Rani, 2023).

Immediate Feedback and Assessment The literature also emphasizes the importance of immediate feedback. Automated systems can identify grammatical, lexical, and mechanical errors as they occur, allowing learners to revise their work without waiting for delayed teacher correction. Such feedback may improve accuracy and reduce routine assessment pressure on instructors, especially in writing-intensive language courses (Ganeesh & Rani, 2023).

Support for Speaking, Listening, and Learner Autonomy AI-powered conversational tools and speech-based applications can provide repeated opportunities for speaking and listening practice. For learners who experience anxiety in face-to-face communication, these tools offer a lower-risk space for experimentation and rehearsal. In addition, AI may strengthen learner autonomy by making support available beyond classroom hours and by enabling students to work at their own pace, which aligns with broader understandings of autonomous language learning (Benson, 2011; Ganeesh & Rani, 2023).

Digital Divide, Academic Integrity, and Reduced Human Interaction At the same time, the reviewed studies identify significant barriers. A major concern is the digital divide between teachers and students: many learners are already comfortable using new technologies, while some instructors lack the digital literacy needed to guide AI use critically and ethically. The literature also points to risks of overreliance on automated systems, superficial learning, and academic dishonesty when AI is used to generate assignments or answers without sufficient reflection. In addition, excessive dependence on AI may reduce meaningful teacher-student interaction, which remains essential for intercultural, pragmatic, and affective dimensions of language learning (Idham et al., 2024; Luckin, 2018).

DISCUSSION

The reviewed literature demonstrates that AI has considerable pedagogical value in ELT, particularly when it is used to personalize instruction, accelerate feedback, and expand opportunities for language practice. These functions are especially relevant in higher education settings, where student needs are diverse and where digital tools are increasingly part of everyday learning environments. In this respect, AI can be seen as a facilitator of learner-centered education rather than merely a technical novelty (Ganeesh & Rani, 2023).

However, the value of AI depends less on the technology itself than on the pedagogical framework within which it is used. If instructors are not prepared to evaluate, regulate, and contextualize AI tools, these tools may deepen educational inequalities and weaken the instructional process. The digital divide identified in recent research therefore represents not only a technical problem but also a professional development challenge for teachers (Idham et al., 2024).

The findings also reinforce the argument that AI should not replace the teacher. Language learning involves cultural interpretation, emotional support, ethical guidance, and critical engagement—areas in which human pedagogical judgment remains irreplaceable. Luckin (2018) argues more broadly that AI should be used to extend human intelligence rather than to displace it; this principle is particularly relevant in ELT, where communication is inseparable from human meaning-making. Likewise, Benson's (2011) discussion of learner autonomy suggests that autonomy does not mean isolation from the teacher, but rather structured support that helps learners assume greater responsibility for their learning.

From this perspective, the most productive model is a balanced one: AI can support repetitive, adaptive, and data-driven aspects of language learning, while teachers remain central in designing tasks, interpreting learner needs, fostering critical literacy, and safeguarding academic integrity. Such a model allows institutions to benefit from technological innovation without sacrificing the human dimension of language education.

CONCLUSION

Artificial intelligence is reshaping English language teaching by expanding the possibilities for adaptive instruction, immediate feedback, and independent language practice. At the same time, its integration into higher education raises substantial pedagogical and ethical challenges, including academic integrity risks, overdependence on automation, reduced human interaction, and unequal digital preparedness among educators and learners. The analysis presented in this article shows that AI should be incorporated into ELT not as a substitute for the teacher, but as a pedagogical tool that requires critical supervision and ethical use.

Ultimately, the future of ELT depends on a productive synergy between human expertise and technological innovation. Further research should therefore move beyond broad conceptual discussions and investigate the classroom-based effects of AI on specific language skills, learner autonomy, teacher practices, and intercultural communication in diverse educational contexts.

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