INTEGRATING AI WRITING ASSISTANTS INTO THE ESL CURRICULUM: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR TEACHERS

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Abstract

The rise of AI-powered writing assistants like Grammarly, QuillBot, and ChatGPT is transforming the landscape of English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction. While students increasingly rely on these tools for writing tasks, teachers are often left navigating the opportunities and risks of integrating AI into classroom practice. This study explores ESL teachers' perceptions, practices, and challenges when incorporating AI writing tools into the curriculum. Through a mixed-methods approach involving a teacher survey and follow-up interviews, the study identifies pedagogical benefits such as personalized feedback, learner autonomy, and classroom efficiency, alongside challenges including ethical concerns, student overreliance, and insufficient professional development. The article argues that thoughtful integration of AI tools, supported by clear institutional policies and teacher training, is essential for maximizing their benefits in ESL writing instruction. Practical recommendations and implications for future research are also provided.

Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly influencing education worldwide, particularly in the domain of second language instruction. One significant advancement is the rise of AI-powered writing assistants that offer real-time feedback on grammar, coherence, vocabulary, and structure. Tools such as Grammarly, QuillBot, and more recently, ChatGPT, are increasingly being adopted by language learners seeking support with their writing. In ESL classrooms, where writing poses unique linguistic and cognitive challenges, such tools hold great potential.

However, the integration of AI tools into educational settings is not without complications. Teachers face multiple uncertainties: How can they integrate AI tools pedagogically? What guidance should they offer students? How do they address academic integrity and overreliance? This study aims to explore these questions from the perspective of ESL teachers. It focuses on the opportunities AI writing assistants offer, the practical and ethical challenges they present, and what support systems are needed for their responsible and effective use.

Literature Review

AI in education has attracted increasing attention, particularly since the development of accessible generative AI tools like ChatGPT. Studies show that AI tools can support second language writing by providing grammar corrections,

vocabulary enhancement, and sentence rephrasing (Li, 2023). Research by Huang and Nguyen (2024) highlights that AI tools can also facilitate idea generation, reduce writing anxiety, and support student autonomy.

Nevertheless, other researchers caution against overdependence on such tools. Patel (2023) emphasizes ethical concerns, particularly regarding originality, plagiarism, and the potential erosion of critical thinking skills. Teachers may also feel uncertain about how to integrate AI without compromising pedagogy or assessment standards. Despite the growing presence of AI in student writing practices, limited research exists on how ESL teachers navigate its use in their classrooms. This study seeks to fill that gap by focusing on the teacher's perspective.

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was used to capture both broad trends and in-depth insights. A questionnaire was distributed to 30 ESL teachers working at universities and language institutes in urban and semi-urban areas. The survey included both closed and open-ended questions on AI tool usage, attitudes, perceived benefits and drawbacks, and institutional support.

To complement the survey data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 8 volunteer teachers. The interviews aimed to explore individual experiences, classroom practices, and specific cases of AI integration. Thematic analysis was applied to qualitative data, while descriptive statistics were used for quantitative analysis.

Findings and Discussion

Analysis of the data revealed four major themes: perceived benefits, practical challenges, ethical concerns, and the need for professional development.

Perceived Benefits: Teachers noted several advantages of using AI writing assistants in ESL instruction. These include immediate grammar correction, enhanced vocabulary, structured feedback, and increased student confidence. Some teachers reported that students felt more motivated to revise their writing when using Grammarly or ChatGPT.

Practical Challenges: Despite the advantages, teachers faced challenges in effectively integrating AI tools. Some lacked technical knowledge, while others reported limited access to reliable internet or institutional support. Teachers also expressed concern about managing AI use in assessments and ensuring students developed real writing skills, not just editing habits.

Ethical Concerns: A recurring issue was academic integrity. Teachers noted that some students submitted AI-generated texts as their own, raising concerns about plagiarism. They also questioned the extent to which students learned writing as a skill if AI was doing much of the cognitive work.

Need for Professional Development: The majority of participants expressed a strong need for training on how to use AI tools pedagogically and ethically. They recommended workshops, sample lesson plans, and institutional guidelines on responsible AI usage.

Conclusion

AI writing assistants offer valuable support in ESL writing education, particularly in enhancing feedback quality, reducing teacher workload, and supporting learner autonomy. However, without proper guidance, these tools may lead to student overreliance, academic dishonesty, and reduced teacher control over writing instruction. Teachers need structured training, institutional policies, and pedagogical strategies to make informed decisions about AI integration. Future research should focus on long-term outcomes of AI-supported writing instruction and the development of AI literacy among both students and educators.

Table 1: Summary of Teacher Responses on AI Integration in ESL Writing

The table below summarizes key themes identified from the survey responses of 30 ESL teachers, along with the frequency of responses across the sample.

Theme	Subcategory	Number of Mentions (n=30)
Perceived Benefits	Grammar and vocabulary improvement	22
Perceived Benefits	Faster writing feedback	18
Practical Challenges	Lack of teacher training	20
Practical Challenges	Inconsistent access to tools	14
Ethical Concerns	Overreliance by students	19
Ethical Concerns	Risk of plagiarism	17
Support Needed	Guidelines and policy	21
Support Needed	Professional development workshops	24

Figure 1. Key themes from interview data showing teacher concerns and recommendations.

Interviews with 8 ESL instructors revealed deep concerns about overreliance on AI tools. Teachers stressed the importance of building student awareness about when and how to use such tools. Many recommended integrating AI literacy into writing instruction explicitly. Several also emphasized the emotional and motivational benefits of AI feedback, especially for lower-proficiency learners.

References

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