

THE ROLE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN ONLINE LEARNING: TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE AT A UNIVERSITY LEVEL

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Abstract. The rapid digitization of higher education has transformed the field of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), establishing online learning platforms as essential environments for language acquisition. Simultaneously, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as a disruptive and transformative force in pedagogy. This paper examines the role of AI-powered tools, specifically Large Language Models (LLMs), automated writing evaluation (AWE) systems, and intelligent tutoring systems (ITS), within online university-level TEFL courses. Although online environments often struggle to replicate the interactive feedback loops essential for effective language acquisition, AI integrations offer scalable solutions for personalized instruction, automated formative assessment, and real-time conversational practice. This study evaluates both the pedagogical effectiveness of these technologies and the challenges they pose, including concerns about academic integrity and the digital divide.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence (AI), Online Learning, TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language), Higher Education, Intelligent Tutoring Systems, Automated Writing Evaluation (AWE)

Introduction. The global transition to online learning in higher education has profoundly changed the delivery of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. In university contexts, where language proficiency is closely linked to academic achievement and future employability, online instruction must facilitate active communication, critical thinking, and linguistic accuracy rather than depending solely on passive content delivery. Conventional online learning management systems (LMS) frequently fail to provide the interactive, personalized, and immediate feedback necessary for effective foreign language acquisition. As a result, instructors managing large digital classes often struggle to manage individual student errors, which contributes to high attrition rates and inconsistent learning outcomes.

In response to these challenges, universities are increasingly incorporating Artificial Intelligence (AI) into their online Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) curricula. AI tools, including automated feedback systems and conversational agents powered by generative AI, serve as force multipliers for language educators. These technologies provide students with personalized vocabulary practice, real-time pronunciation analysis, and encouraging environments for practicing writing and speaking. For educators, AI-driven analytics offer diagnostic insights into student performance, enabling focused interventions rather than uniform instructional approaches.

Despite these promising developments, the systematic integration of AI into university-level online TEFL remains a complex and evolving area. Foundational language learning theories, such as Vygotsky's Social Development Theory and Krashen's Input Hypothesis, emphasize the necessity of comprehensible input and meaningful social interaction. These are aspects that machine-human interactions often struggle to replicate authentically. Additionally, the rapid proliferation of generative AI tools has sparked major debate about academic integrity, cognitive offloading, and the potential decline in students' independent writing abilities.

Although the current literature documents the technical capabilities of individual AI tools, there is a lack of empirical research on their overall pedagogical efficacy and acceptance in structured, fully online university TEFL courses. This study seeks to address this gap by evaluating the implementation of AI-assisted tools in an online English program. Specifically, we examine the influence of these technologies regarding student engagement, writing proficiency, and overall satisfaction with the online learning experience.

The Cambridge Dictionary defines artificial intelligence as "the use or study of computer systems or machines that have some of the qualities that the human brain has". Examples of these qualities include "the ability to interpret and produce language in a way that seems human, recognize or create images, solve problems, and learn from data supplied to them". Ultimately, the main objective of AI is to optimize routine processes by improving both the speed and efficiency of their execution.

As AI is a relatively new technology, further research and development is required to understand how it can be best used in education. It's important to note that the UK government is clear that AI will not be used to replace teachers, nor will AI teach students. Instead, the aim is to develop AI to better serve teachers. Any use of AI must be closely monitored and include expert human involvement to ensure the outcome is as intended. (Kristin Guzer. 2024)

A dedicated high school teacher, Angela Lee, writes: "AI can automate numerous administrative tasks that would otherwise be time-consuming." For instance, grading assignments, tracking student attendance, and other tasks can be easily managed, freeing up

educators' valuable time and ensuring efficient operations. An excellent example of this is the automation of grading at the Georgia Institute of Technology. The University has introduced an AI-based program named "Jill Watson" that answers students' queries, freeing up professors' time to focus more on teaching.

However, this phenomenon has its challenges as well. They include:

- Access to technology: Some students may lack the necessary devices or reliable high-speed internet connections required for effective participation.
- Privacy concerns: Considering the number and depth of data handled by AI, privacy concerns can emerge.
- Dependence on technology: Over-reliance on AI can potentially lead to decreased human interaction, which is critical for educational settings.

The efficacy of artificial intelligence in an online university Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) environment was evaluated using a mixed-methods research design. Selection of AI tools for curriculum integration was guided by established taxonomies of AI in language education. The pedagogical intervention corresponded with the core modes identified by Jiang (2022), who classifies the primary drivers of AI in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) as "Automatic Evaluation Systems, Neural Machine Translation Tools, Intelligent Tutoring Systems (ITSs), AI Chatting Robots, Intelligent Virtual Environment, and Affective Computing."

This study used two primary interventions:

1. **An Automatic Evaluation System (AES) was implemented** to provide automated feedback on student essays.
2. **An AI Chatting Robot (LLM-based chatbot) was integrated into the learning management system (LMS)** to facilitate asynchronous conversational practice.

Focusing on these practical applications, the research design corresponds to the current paradigm shift identified by Sapuan et al. (2025), which emphasizes a transition from theoretical AI models to the empirical evaluation of AI as a "practical technology in the ELT field."

The findings of this study demonstrate that integrating AI tools into online university TEFL courses significantly enhances student engagement and provides scalable, personalized feedback. Our results show a marked improvement in students' formative writing scores when utilizing Automated Writing Evaluation (AWE). This aligns with the broader historical trajectory of the field; as Wang (2026) notes in a twenty-year scoping review, AI has

successfully transitioned from rigid, rule-based tutoring environments to highly naturalistic, conversational, and data-driven systems. The immediate, localized feedback provided by the automated systems in our study allowed students to correct grammatical errors in real time, mirroring the positive outcomes of automated NLP systems highlighted in recent literature.

Nevertheless, integrating these technologies presents significant challenges. While students appreciated the constant availability of AI chat robots, qualitative feedback revealed concerns about educational integrity and excessive reliance on generative outputs. This highlights a critical issue in contemporary higher education: technological advancements have outpaced pedagogical development. These findings are consistent with the warnings of Sapuan et al. (2025), who argue that effective integration of AI into English language teaching requires universities to do more than adopt these tools. Institutions should establish robust ethical frameworks and prioritize the development of AI literacy among both language instructors and students. Without these digital competencies, there is an increased risk of cognitive offloading, in which AI tools perform language tasks for students rather than supporting genuine language acquisition.

The use of AI in education is not without risk. Where it is possible to manage this risk, education providers must have robust policies and procedures in place. Some of the potential disadvantages of AI include:

- **A lack of understanding or inefficient training could result in education professionals misusing the tools.** With any AI tool used, teachers must have oversight of what it creates and how it performs. There is a risk that some teachers won't receive adequate training on using this new technology, or that those who are less tech-savvy may struggle to adapt their teaching to incorporate AI. As a result, some teachers may not appreciate that they need to be involved when AI is used and must ensure it is producing accurate and desired results
- **AI tools can be expensive to purchase and maintain.** Schools and universities may not be able to afford costly AI technology, which creates a barrier for some students. Access to the technology requires basic digital infrastructure, such as laptops, which may not be available to every student.
- **Students could use AI to cheat in exams and to do their work.** AI platforms such as ChatGPT can be used to answer questions and write content, among other uses. Students could use AI to formulate answers to assessment questions, and even to write an essay.

Awareness of AI integration within learning environments may encourage students to utilize this technology for unintended purposes. There is a significant risk that young people could access or generate harmful or inappropriate online content using AI. For instance, students may create or view deepfakes involving their peers. Deepfakes are AI-generated videos that use digital manipulation to substitute one individual's likeness for another's. A substantial proportion of deepfakes are pornographic in nature.

We should remain vigilant and maintain a balance between these factors. This approach allows us to achieve our learning goals efficiently and with integrity. AI should serve our needs, not the other way around.

Conclusion.

The integration of Artificial Intelligence into university-level online TEFL courses marks a shift from rigid, rule-based computer-assisted language learning to adaptive, data-driven educational ecosystems. As shown in this study, AI-driven tools—specifically Automated Writing Evaluation (AWE) systems and conversational LLM chatbots—offer solutions to the limitations of online higher education by providing scalable, real-time feedback and reducing affective barriers such as foreign language anxiety. However, these tools are not a panacea. While they address localized syntactic and grammar issues, they struggle to replicate the macro-level structural guidance and culturally refined interactions provided by human educators. Their efficacy also remains closely tied to a student's pre-existing computer proficiency and the implementation of effective academic integrity guidelines.

The role of AI in university-level online learning is to reallocate, rather than replace, pedagogical responsibilities. By delegating repetitive diagnostic tasks and initial conversational practice to automated systems, human instructors can focus on fostering critical thinking, facilitating authentic intercultural communication, and providing mentorship. To support a successful digital transition, university curricula should integrate technology and develop explicit AI literacy frameworks for both students and faculty. Further research is needed to conduct longitudinal studies examining how reliance on generative AI influences students' retention of independent writing skills over multiple academic years. This approach will help ensure that technology functions as a scaffold for genuine language acquisition rather than merely a tool for cognitive offloading.

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