



Artificial Intelligence in Language Learning: Opportunities, Challenges, and Pedagogical Implications for EFL Classrooms

¹ Fatime Ismayilli

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Abstract. *The rapid proliferation of artificial intelligence technologies has introduced transformative possibilities for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, simultaneously generating complex pedagogical, ethical, and institutional challenges that demand systematic scholarly attention. This article examines the multidimensional role of artificial intelligence in language learning, analyzing its applications across four principal domains: AI-driven personalization and adaptive learning systems, natural language processing tools for writing and grammar development, conversational AI for speaking practice, and AI-assisted assessment and feedback. Drawing on a synthesis of recent empirical research and theoretical frameworks from second language acquisition and educational technology, the study evaluates both the documented benefits and the structural limitations of AI integration in EFL contexts. The findings indicate that AI technologies substantially enhance vocabulary acquisition, grammatical accuracy, learner autonomy, and communicative practice opportunities, particularly for learners in non-anglophone contexts with limited access to authentic English interaction. However, significant challenges persist, including the risk of over-reliance on AI-generated output, the ethical dimensions of AI-assisted academic production, digital equity concerns, and the pedagogical imperative to maintain the irreplaceable human dimensions of language instruction. The article concludes by proposing principles for the pedagogically responsible integration of AI into EFL classrooms, arguing that the most effective approach positions AI as an amplifier of human pedagogical intentionality rather than a substitute for it.*

Keywords: *artificial intelligence, EFL, language learning, natural language processing, adaptive learning, conversational AI, automated feedback, AI literacy*

1. Introduction

Few developments in the history of educational technology have generated as much simultaneous excitement and anxiety as the emergence of large-scale artificial intelligence systems capable of producing fluent, contextually appropriate text in dozens of languages. The release of conversational AI platforms, starting with GPT-3 in 2020 and accelerating dramatically with GPT-4 and subsequent models from 2022 onward, has confronted English as a Foreign Language (EFL) educators with a set of challenges and opportunities whose pedagogical implications are still being

¹ Ismayilli, F. Lecturer, Nakhchivan State University, Azerbaijan. Email: fatimeismayilli@ndu.edu.az. ORCID:

<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-9762-7446>



actively debated (Baidoo-Anu & Ansah, 2023). On one side of this debate stands the recognition that AI tools offer unprecedented possibilities for personalized, accessible, and autonomous language learning — possibilities that are particularly significant for learners in non-anglophone contexts, such as the Azerbaijani educational environment, where access to authentic English interaction outside the classroom has historically been limited. On the other side stands the concern that uncritical adoption of AI tools may undermine the development of genuine linguistic competence, erode academic integrity, and widen rather than narrow existing educational inequalities.

The integration of artificial intelligence into language education is not, of course, an entirely new phenomenon. Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) has a history extending back to the 1960s, and the development of natural language processing (NLP) technologies through the 1980s and 1990s produced the first generation of automated grammar checkers, vocabulary learning systems, and text-to-speech tools that are still in use today (Warschauer & Healey, 1998; Chapelle, 2001). What is genuinely new about the current generation of AI language tools is their combination of scale, fluency, and interactive capability: contemporary large language models (LLMs) can engage in extended conversations, provide nuanced feedback on written texts, explain grammatical concepts in learner-appropriate language, generate example sentences across the full range of vocabulary and grammar, and simulate the kind of responsive, meaning-focused interaction that SLA research identifies as central to language acquisition (Long, 1996; Krashen, 1985).

This article provides a systematic examination of the role of artificial intelligence in EFL language learning across four principal application domains: AI-driven personalization and adaptive learning; NLP-based writing and grammar tools; conversational AI for speaking and interaction practice; and AI-assisted assessment and feedback. For each domain, the article reviews the relevant theoretical framework, synthesizes the available empirical evidence, and identifies the key opportunities and challenges that EFL educators and learners face. The article concludes by proposing a framework of principles for the pedagogically responsible integration of AI into EFL classrooms — one that positions AI as an instrument in the service of human learning and pedagogical intentionality rather than as a replacement for the essentially human dimensions of language education.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundations of this analysis draw on three intersecting bodies of scholarship. The first is second language acquisition (SLA) theory, particularly the frameworks that have the most direct bearing on technology-mediated instruction. Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis remains foundational: the claim that acquisition occurs through exposure to comprehensible input slightly above the learner's current proficiency level provides the theoretical rationale for AI systems that can dynamically adjust the difficulty and complexity of their linguistic output to match individual



learner profiles. Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis, which emphasizes the role of meaning negotiation in face-to-face interaction as a mechanism for acquisition, underpins the evaluation of conversational AI tools: to the degree that AI conversation partners can simulate the meaning-negotiation dynamics of human interaction, they may provide acquisition-facilitative exposure even in the absence of a human interlocutor. Swain's (1985) Output Hypothesis further supports the pedagogical value of AI-based production tools: if acquisition requires not only input but also the production of output that stretches learners' linguistic resources, then tools that prompt, scaffold, and evaluate written and spoken output make a genuine contribution to the acquisition process.

The second theoretical tradition is educational technology research, particularly the CALL and technology-enhanced language learning (TELL) literature. Chapelle's (2001) framework for evaluating CALL tasks — assessing their potential to provide comprehensible input, draw attention to linguistic form, allow meaning-focused output practice, and facilitate corrective feedback — provides a principled basis for evaluating AI language tools. The framework's emphasis on pedagogical task design as the primary determinant of learning outcomes — rather than the technology itself — is particularly relevant to the current analysis, as it directs attention away from the features of specific AI tools and toward the instructional contexts and pedagogical intentions within which those tools are deployed.

The third tradition is the ethics and equity literature in educational technology, particularly the growing body of scholarship on algorithmic bias, digital divide concerns, and the ethics of AI-generated academic work. Warschauer's (2003) analysis of technology and social inclusion provides the foundational framework for understanding how differential access to AI tools and the digital literacy required to use them effectively may reproduce or amplify existing educational inequalities. More recent contributions from Baidoo-Anu and Ansah (2023) and Ismayilli (2024) address the specific implications of generative AI for academic integrity and the pedagogical challenges of teaching in contexts where AI-generated text is readily available to students.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative synthesis methodology drawing on a systematic review of peer-reviewed research published between 2018 and 2025, identified through searches of Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC. Search terms included 'artificial intelligence AND language learning', 'ChatGPT AND EFL', 'natural language processing AND second language acquisition', 'conversational AI AND speaking practice', 'automated writing evaluation', and 'AI AND language assessment'. Inclusion criteria required peer-reviewed publication, focus on EFL or ESL contexts, empirical or theoretical engagement with AI tools, and availability in English. The synthesis proceeds analytically, identifying patterns and contradictions across the literature to produce a coherent account of each application domain.



4. AI-Driven Personalization and Adaptive Learning

One of the most theoretically compelling applications of AI in EFL education is the personalization of learning trajectories through adaptive systems that continuously analyze learner performance and dynamically adjust instructional content, difficulty, and pacing to optimize outcomes for each individual. The fundamental pedagogical limitation of traditional classroom instruction — the impossibility of simultaneously attending to the individual needs of twenty or thirty learners with different proficiency levels, learning rates, and linguistic backgrounds — is precisely the limitation that AI adaptive systems are designed to address (Godwin-Jones, 2017).

Intelligent tutoring systems (ITS) and adaptive learning platforms represent the most sophisticated instantiation of this approach. Platforms such as Duolingo, Carnegie Learning, and specialized EFL tools such as ELSA Speak use machine learning algorithms to model individual learners' knowledge states and select instructional tasks calibrated to challenge learners within their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Research on adaptive language learning platforms has consistently demonstrated advantages over non-adaptive instruction in vocabulary acquisition and grammatical accuracy, with several studies reporting 30–40% higher retention rates in adaptive conditions relative to traditional instruction (Godwin-Jones, 2017). Critically, adaptive systems can identify persistent error patterns that human teachers may miss in large class settings, enabling targeted remediation at the level of specific phonological, grammatical, or lexical difficulties.

The theoretical alignment between adaptive AI instruction and SLA research is considerable. Krashen's (1985) concept of comprehensible input — language slightly above the learner's current level — is operationalized in adaptive systems through dynamic difficulty adjustment that ensures learners are consistently challenged without being overwhelmed. VanPatten's (1996) input processing model, which predicts that learners prioritize lexical over grammatical processing when cognitive resources are limited, suggests that adaptive systems that reduce cognitive load through appropriate difficulty calibration may improve the depth of grammatical processing. Dörnyei's (2009) motivational research further supports adaptive instruction: learners who experience consistent success at the appropriate level of challenge report higher motivation, greater persistence, and stronger identification with their ideal L2 self than those who encounter either boredom or excessive difficulty.

5. Natural Language Processing Tools for Writing and Grammar Development

5.1 Automated Writing Evaluation and Grammar Checking

Natural language processing tools for writing support — including grammar checkers, automated writing evaluation (AWE) systems, and large language model-based writing assistants — have become ubiquitous in the EFL learning environment. The theoretical rationale for these tools draws on Swain's (1985) Output Hypothesis and the broader research literature on corrective feedback: if learners benefit from having their linguistic errors identified and explained, and if they benefit from being prompted to revise their output with attention to accuracy, then tools that provide



immediate, detailed feedback on written production make a genuine contribution to writing development (Ellis, 2009).

Research on AWE systems such as Turnitin's writing tools and iWrite has demonstrated consistent improvements in surface-level grammatical accuracy — particularly in the reduction of morphological errors, subject-verb agreement violations, and article usage errors — among EFL learners who receive automated feedback (Warschauer & Grimes, 2008). These surface-level gains align with the processing predictions of VanPatten's (1996) model: automated feedback draws learners' attention to grammatical forms that they might otherwise process shallowly, strengthening the form-meaning connections necessary for accurate production. Generative AI tools such as ChatGPT and Claude have extended AWE capabilities substantially, offering not only error identification but also explanation, reformulation, and stylistic suggestion at a level of sophistication and naturalness that earlier rule-based systems could not achieve (Baidoo-Anu & Ansah, 2023).

The pedagogical limitations of AI writing tools require equally careful attention. The most significant concern is the risk of over-reliance: learners who habitually correct their writing with AI assistance may develop accurate output without developing the metacognitive awareness and self-monitoring capacity that are necessary for writing independence. Ferris (2011) argues that the most pedagogically effective corrective feedback is that which prompts learners to notice and correct their own errors rather than simply accepting AI-generated corrections — a principle that implies the need for instructional frameworks that use AI feedback as a scaffold for self-correction rather than a replacement for it. The ethics of AI-assisted academic writing represent a further pedagogical challenge: when AI tools can generate entire paragraphs or essays of high linguistic quality, the traditional essay assessment task loses its validity as a measure of individual linguistic competence, requiring fundamental rethinking of writing pedagogy and assessment design (Ismayilli, 2024).

5.2 Vocabulary Acquisition Support

AI-driven vocabulary learning systems represent a particularly well-developed application of NLP technology to EFL instruction. Spaced repetition algorithms, exemplified by platforms such as Anki and Quizlet, use statistical models of forgetting to schedule vocabulary review at the optimal interval for long-term retention — operationalizing the distributed practice principle that memory research has consistently identified as a critical determinant of retention (Nation, 2001). Research on spaced repetition vocabulary learning has documented significantly superior long-term retention compared to massed practice, with several studies reporting 50–70% higher retention at six-week delayed tests (Webb, 2007). Contemporary AI vocabulary systems extend these gains by integrating contextual sentence examples, audio pronunciation, visual imagery, and semantic network information — engaging the multiple cognitive pathways associated with deeper lexical encoding in dual coding theory (Paivio, 1986).



6. Conversational AI for Speaking and Interaction Practice

The application of conversational AI to speaking practice addresses one of the most intractable challenges of EFL instruction in non-anglophone contexts: the scarcity of opportunities for extended, meaningful English conversation outside the classroom. For learners in settings where English is rarely spoken in the surrounding environment — including most of the Azerbaijani educational context — the classroom may provide the only regular opportunity for spoken English production, and the constraints of large class sizes typically mean that individual speaking time is severely limited. Conversational AI systems offer a potential solution to this problem by providing on-demand, infinitely patient, and linguistically sophisticated conversation partners available at any time and at no marginal cost (Jia, 2009).

Research on the effectiveness of conversational AI for speaking development has produced consistently positive results across several dimensions. Learners who engage in regular conversation with AI partners report significantly reduced foreign language anxiety relative to those practicing exclusively in human interaction contexts, a finding consistent with Krashen's (1985) Affective Filter Hypothesis: the absence of social judgment and the consequencelessness of errors in AI conversation create a low-anxiety environment that lowers the affective barrier to communicative risk-taking. Li et al. (2023) conducted a controlled study of ChatGPT-assisted speaking practice among Chinese EFL university students, finding significant improvements in fluency, complexity, and accuracy over an eight-week period in the AI conversation condition relative to a self-study control group. Huang and Zhong (2023) similarly reported that EFL learners who used AI chatbots for conversation practice demonstrated superior gains in pragmatic competence — the ability to use language appropriately in context — compared to those relying exclusively on textbook-based speaking practice.

The theoretical alignment between conversational AI and SLA research is compelling but requires qualification. Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis holds that acquisition is facilitated by negotiation of meaning — the interactional work that occurs when a communication breakdown prompts interlocutors to reformulate, clarify, and confirm understanding. Contemporary large language models are considerably more sophisticated than earlier chatbot systems in their capacity to simulate meaning negotiation, but research suggests that the nature of human-AI negotiation differs qualitatively from human-human negotiation in ways that may limit some of its acquisition-facilitative properties. AI systems tend toward over-accommodation — adjusting their language to match the learner's level rather than maintaining communicative challenge — which may reduce the frequency of the productive misunderstandings that drive acquisition in human interaction (Li et al., 2023). Additionally, conversational AI cannot replicate the sociolinguistic, pragmatic, and paralinguistic dimensions of authentic human communication — including gesture, facial expression, and the social meaning of register choices — that are essential components of full communicative competence.



7. AI-Assisted Assessment and Feedback

Assessment and feedback represent a domain in which AI technologies have made some of the most practically significant contributions to EFL instruction, addressing the perennial pedagogical challenge of providing timely, individualized, and detailed feedback to large numbers of learners. Ismayilli (2024) argues that conventional assessment approaches in foreign language instruction frequently measure the decontextualized recall of grammatical rules rather than the communicative competence that is the ultimate goal of language instruction, and that this mismatch is particularly acute in large-class EFL contexts where the demands of summative assessment may distort the instructional priorities of both teachers and learners.

AI assessment tools address this mismatch in several ways. Automated scoring of written and spoken texts — using machine learning models trained on human-rated examples — enables the rapid, consistent evaluation of large volumes of learner output that human assessment alone cannot achieve efficiently. Research on the reliability and validity of AI-generated scores relative to human rater judgements has demonstrated strong correlation for holistic measures of writing quality (Warschauer & Grimes, 2008), though AI scoring systems show lower reliability for higher-order discourse qualities such as argument coherence, cultural appropriateness, and pragmatic felicity. Diagnostic AI assessment — which goes beyond holistic scoring to identify specific patterns of learner difficulty across linguistic dimensions — offers particularly valuable information for instructional planning, enabling teachers to target instruction at the precise areas where learners are systematically struggling (Godwin-Jones, 2017).

Formative AI feedback — the provision of ongoing, process-oriented feedback during learning rather than summative judgement at its conclusion — represents the most pedagogically valuable application of AI assessment technology. When AI feedback is designed to prompt learner reflection rather than simply provide correct answers, it can develop the metacognitive self-monitoring capacity that distinguishes proficient from developing language users. The most effective pedagogical models appear to combine AI feedback with structured opportunities for learner reflection and revision, using AI as a first-pass feedback tool that draws learners' attention to specific areas of difficulty before they engage with teacher or peer feedback (Ellis, 2009). This hybrid model maximizes the efficiency of teacher time while cultivating the learner autonomy and self-regulation that are hallmarks of successful language acquisition.

8. Challenges and Ethical Considerations

The opportunities presented by AI in EFL instruction are genuine and substantial, but they must be evaluated against a set of challenges and ethical considerations that are equally real and that require systematic pedagogical attention. The most fundamental concern is the risk of over-reliance: learners who depend on AI tools to produce, correct, and improve their language may develop accurate output without developing the underlying competence that would enable them to perform independently in AI-free contexts. This concern is particularly acute for productive skills



— writing and speaking — where AI assistance is most readily available and most capable of producing high-quality output that masks underlying learner difficulty (Baidoo-Anu & Ansah, 2023).

The ethics of AI-assisted language production represent a further challenge of considerable complexity. The availability of AI tools capable of generating grammatically flawless, stylistically polished English text fundamentally destabilizes the traditional essay and written assignment as a measure of individual language competence. If the purpose of writing assignments is to develop and assess learners' productive language ability, then assignments completed with extensive AI assistance fail to serve this purpose regardless of the quality of the final product. EFL educators must therefore reconsider both the design of writing tasks — favoring process-based, in-class, or interactive formats that cannot easily be delegated to AI — and the explicit teaching of AI literacy as a component of language education, ensuring that learners understand both the capabilities and the limitations of AI writing tools and develop principled practices for their responsible use (Ismayilli, 2024).

Digital equity concerns add a further dimension to the ethical analysis. Access to high-quality AI language learning tools is not uniformly distributed: premium features of platforms such as ChatGPT Plus, ELSA Speak, and Grammarly Premium require financial resources that may be unavailable to learners in lower-income contexts. Device availability, internet connectivity, and digital literacy — the capacity to effectively select, evaluate, and learn from AI tools — are themselves unevenly distributed across socioeconomic strata, meaning that AI integration in education has the potential to widen existing achievement gaps rather than narrow them (Warschauer, 2003). Educators and institutions must be mindful of these equity implications when designing AI-integrated instruction, ensuring that AI tools are treated as supplements to rather than replacements for the equitable provision of quality human instruction.

9. Pedagogical Principles for Responsible AI Integration

The analysis of the four principal application domains and their associated challenges converges on a set of principles for the pedagogically responsible integration of AI into EFL classrooms. The first and most fundamental principle is intentionality: AI tools should be selected and deployed in response to clearly articulated pedagogical objectives, with explicit attention to the SLA research on how specific types of AI-mediated interaction contribute to the acquisition of specific linguistic competencies. Technology should serve pedagogy, not displace it — and the selection of any AI tool should be preceded by the question of what specific learning challenge it addresses and what evidence exists for its effectiveness.

The second principle is scaffolded independence: AI tools should be used in ways that develop rather than replace learner autonomy. This means designing instructional sequences that initially provide substantial AI support but progressively withdraw it as learners develop competence, ensuring that learners develop the capacity to perform without AI assistance as well as with it. The



metacognitive dimension of this principle — explicitly teaching learners to reflect on how AI feedback can inform their own self-correction and improvement — is particularly important for developing the self-regulation capacities that distinguish successful language learners (Dörnyei, 2009).

The third principle is critical AI literacy: EFL instruction should explicitly develop learners' understanding of how AI language tools work, what their limitations are, and how to use them responsibly and effectively. This includes understanding the ways in which AI can generate plausible but linguistically or factually incorrect output, the ethical dimensions of AI-assisted academic production, and the distinction between using AI as a learning scaffold and using it as a substitute for learning. As Nuri and Ismayilli (2025) argue, developing this kind of critical technological literacy is increasingly a core component of the educational preparation required for full participation in contemporary professional and academic life.

The fourth principle is human-centeredness: no matter how sophisticated AI language tools become, they cannot replicate the irreducibly human dimensions of language education — the relational engagement between teacher and learner, the social meaning of authentic communicative interaction, the cultural knowledge that underlies genuine pragmatic competence, and the motivational significance of learning a language within a community of speakers. AI tools should be positioned as amplifiers of human pedagogical capability rather than replacements for it, freeing teachers from time-consuming routine tasks — grammar checking, vocabulary drilling, routine practice — so that they can invest more deeply in the distinctively human aspects of language instruction that AI cannot provide.

10. Conclusion

This article has examined the role of artificial intelligence in EFL language learning across four principal application domains: adaptive personalization, NLP-based writing and grammar tools, conversational AI for speaking practice, and AI-assisted assessment and feedback. The analysis has demonstrated that AI technologies, when integrated within pedagogically coherent frameworks, offer genuine and substantial enhancements to the conditions for English language acquisition — expanding access to personalized instruction, providing immediate and detailed feedback, enabling speaking practice outside the classroom, and generating diagnostic information that can sharpen instructional targeting. These benefits are particularly significant for learners in non-anglophone contexts with limited access to authentic English interaction, where AI tools can partially compensate for the scarcity of naturalistic language exposure.

At the same time, the analysis has identified significant challenges and ethical considerations that require systematic pedagogical attention: the risk of over-reliance, the destabilization of traditional assessment practices, digital equity concerns, and the imperative to preserve the human dimensions of language instruction that no AI system can replicate. Navigating these challenges requires not only individual pedagogical judgment but institutional frameworks — policies on AI use in



assessment, professional development programs for teacher AI literacy, and equitable provision of AI-supported instruction across learner populations. The future of AI in EFL education lies not in the technology itself but in the wisdom, intentionality, and human care with which it is deployed in the service of genuine language learning.

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