



From Skill Acquisition to Professional Agency: Rethinking EFL Teachers' Professional Development in the Age of AI

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Abstract:

Background: The rapid emergence of artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted tools has begun to reshape English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching practices, raising new questions about teachers' roles, autonomy, and professional growth. While previous research has addressed professional development (PD) needs in traditional and online contexts, limited attention has been given to AI-mediated teaching environments.

Aims: This study aims to explore EFL teachers' perceptions and lived experiences of AI-assisted language teaching, particularly in relation to professional agency, identity, and emerging professional development needs.

Methods: This study adopted a qualitative interpretive phenomenological approach. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 10 experienced EFL teachers who had engaged with AI tools in instructional, assessment, or material development practices. The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis.

Results: The findings reveal that teachers perceive AI as both a pedagogical support and a source of professional tension. While AI enhances efficiency, feedback provision, and instructional design, it also raises concerns related to loss of control, ethical responsibility, assessment validity, and role ambiguity. Teachers continuously negotiate their professional agency and identity when integrating AI into their practices. Furthermore, traditional PD frameworks are found to be insufficient in addressing these challenges.

Conclusion: The study highlights the need to reconceptualize EFL teacher professional development by emphasizing critical AI literacy, ethical awareness, and agency-oriented pedagogical decision-making. Professional development should move beyond technical training to support teachers as reflective and autonomous professionals in AI-mediated educational environments.

Keywords: AI-Assisted Language Teaching, Digital Literacy, EFL Teachers, Professional Development, Professional Identity, Teacher Agency

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent advances in artificial intelligence (AI) have begun to exert a significant influence on educational practices, including the teaching and learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). AI-driven tools, such as automated writing assistants, generative text models, and intelligent feedback systems, are increasingly accessible to teachers and learners, offering new possibilities for instructional design, assessment practices, and learner support (Manoochehrzadeh et al., 2025; Risdianto et al., 2025).

While these technologies promise enhanced efficiency

and pedagogical flexibility, their integration also raises fundamental questions regarding teachers' professional roles, responsibilities, and instructional judgment in AI-mediated learning environments (Poole & Li, 2023; Qamariah & Hercz, 2025).

Research on teacher professional development (PD) has consistently emphasized the importance of equipping educators with the knowledge and capacities required to respond to pedagogical change (Parker & Tang, 2025; Richards & Farrell, 2005). In EFL contexts, PD has traditionally focused on areas such as pedagogy, language knowledge, assessment, classroom management, and materials development (Gu et al., 2022). More recently, the rapid expansion of online and blended instruction (accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic) has highlighted the need for additional competencies related to digital pedagogy, instructional design, and online communication (Isaei & Barjesteh, 2025). Empirical research further suggests that EFL teachers' PD needs vary across instructional modes, underscoring the growing complexity of teachers' professional roles in technology-mediated environments (Isaei & Barjesteh, 2023a).

Professional development has also been widely recognized as a central component of effective language teaching, contributing to teachers' pedagogical

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competence, instructional confidence, and sustained professional growth (X. Sun & Zhang, 2023; Xu & Connelly, 2009). In EFL education, PD is commonly understood as a continuous and multidimensional process through which teachers expand pedagogical knowledge, refine instructional practices, and respond to evolving educational demands (N. Sun & Sun, 2025). Studies have shown that meaningful PD includes both formal learning opportunities, such as workshops and training programs, and informal practices, including reflective teaching, peer collaboration, and self-directed professional learning (Cheng & Wu, 2016).

The increasing presence of AI in language education introduces new dynamics that complicate established understandings of teacher development. On the one hand, AI tools may support teachers by automating routine tasks, generating instructional materials, and offering data-informed feedback. On the other hand, reliance on automated systems may raise concerns related to reduced professional autonomy, diminished instructional judgment, and ethical accountability, particularly in assessment and feedback practices (Yang, 2023). These tensions indicate that teachers' engagement with AI is not merely a technical matter but is deeply connected to their professional identities and sense of responsibility.

Professional identity is closely intertwined with professional development, as teachers' beliefs about who they are and what they do shape how they interpret pedagogical change and engage in learning opportunities. Research on teacher learning emphasizes that meaningful PD involves emotional, cognitive, and reflective dimensions rather than simple compliance with externally imposed requirements (Yan & Yang, 2019). From this perspective, professional development is conceptualized not merely as skill acquisition but as an ongoing process of identity negotiation and agency formation in response to emerging pedagogical and ethical demands.

AI-assisted language teaching presents challenges that extend beyond those associated with earlier educational technologies (Zhou et al., 2024). Unlike conventional digital tools, AI systems are capable of generating instructional content, providing automated feedback, and influencing pedagogical decision-making in ways that blur the boundaries between teacher expertise and machine support (Yang, 2023). As a result, EFL teachers are increasingly positioned not only as users of technology but also as evaluators of AI-generated output, ethical decision-makers, and mediators between learners and intelligent systems. These shifts suggest that existing PD frameworks (often focused on technical skill acquisition) may be insufficient for addressing the deeper professional implications of AI integration.

Teacher agency provides a valuable lens for understanding these emerging challenges. Agency refers to teachers' capacity to act purposefully and

autonomously within their professional contexts, making informed instructional decisions grounded in pedagogical knowledge, ethical judgment, and contextual awareness (Borg et al., 2022). When AI tools assume instructional functions traditionally associated with teaching (such as explaining language forms, generating practice activities, or providing feedback) teachers may experience tensions between efficiency and control, innovation and responsibility, or support and dependency. These tensions are embedded in teachers' professional beliefs, values, and self-conceptions rather than being purely technical concerns (Yusop et al., 2025).

Despite growing scholarly interest in AI in language education, much of the existing research has focused on learner outcomes or tool effectiveness, with comparatively limited attention given to teachers' lived experiences of AI integration. In particular, there remains a lack of qualitative research examining how EFL teachers negotiate professional agency and identity in AI-mediated instructional contexts and how these negotiations reshape their professional development needs. PD initiatives that overlook teachers' sense of agency risk promoting instrumental or compliance-oriented approaches rather than fostering meaningful professional growth.

Rather than evaluating the effectiveness of AI tools, the present study foregrounds EFL teachers' lived experiences and meaning-making processes as they engage with AI-assisted language teaching. This interpretive focus allows for an in-depth examination of how teachers understand, negotiate, and position themselves in relation to AI within their professional contexts. Given the subjective, contextual, and experiential nature of these issues, a qualitative approach is required to capture the nuanced ways in which teachers interpret AI-mediated instructional practices and their implications for professional agency and development.

Accordingly, the present study adopts an interpretive phenomenological approach to explore EFL teachers' perceptions and experiences of AI-assisted language teaching, with particular attention to professional agency, identity, and emerging PD needs. By extending prior research on EFL teacher development into the domain of AI-mediated instruction, this study seeks to contribute to a more holistic and agency-oriented understanding of professional development in contemporary language education.

Guided by the aim of exploring EFL teachers' experiences with AI-assisted language teaching and its implications for professional development, the present study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do EFL teachers perceive the role of AI-assisted tools in language teaching and learning?

RQ2: How do EFL teachers experience the impact of AI-assisted language teaching on their professional agency and instructional decision-making?

RQ3: What tensions, concerns, or challenges do EFL teachers report when integrating AI into their teaching practices?

RQ4: What new professional development needs emerge from EFL teachers' engagement with AI-mediated language teaching?

2. MATERIAL AND METHOD

2.1 Research Design

The present study adopted a qualitative interpretive phenomenological design to explore EFL teachers' lived experiences of AI-assisted language teaching and its implications for professional agency, identity, and professional development. Interpretive phenomenology is particularly appropriate for research that seeks to understand how individuals make sense of complex and evolving phenomena within their professional lives. Rather than aiming to produce objective generalizations, this approach foregrounds participants' subjective meanings, interpretations, and reflections as they engage with AI-mediated instructional practice.

Given that professional agency and identity are deeply experiential and context-dependent, an interpretive orientation allowed the researchers to move beyond surface descriptions of technology use and examine how teachers perceived, negotiated, and evaluated their roles in relation to AI. This design aligns with the study's focus on meaning-making processes and complements previous qualitative research on EFL teachers' professional development while allowing for deeper engagement with emerging pedagogical and ethical tensions.

An interpretive phenomenological orientation was adopted because the study seeks to understand how EFL teachers make sense of AI-assisted language teaching within their professional lives rather than to test predefined hypotheses or measure behavioral outcomes. This approach acknowledges that professional agency and identity are not fixed constructs but are continuously shaped through experience, reflection, and contextual interaction. Reflexive thematic analysis was employed as a flexible analytic method compatible with interpretive phenomenology, allowing for the identification of shared patterns of meaning across participants' accounts while maintaining sensitivity to individual perspectives. The emphasis on reflexivity recognizes the active role of the researchers in meaning construction and supports a transparent and coherent analytic process.

2.2 The Participants

The participants were experienced EFL teachers working in language institutes and higher education contexts who had engaged with AI-assisted tools in their teaching practices. Purposeful sampling was employed to ensure that participants had direct or indirect experience using AI tools such as automated writing assistants, AI-generated instructional materials, or AI-supported feedback systems.

A total of 10 EFL teachers participated in the study. Their teaching experience ranged from approximately 5 to 15 years, and all held at least a Master's degree in TEFL or a related field. Participants were selected based on their willingness to reflect critically on their teaching experiences and their exposure to AI-mediated practices, whether through institutional initiatives or self-directed experimentation. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, at which point no substantially new insights were emerging from the interviews.

Thematic saturation was considered to have been reached when successive interviews no longer yielded substantively new codes or insights relevant to the research questions. By the ninth interview, recurring patterns related to professional agency, identity tensions, ethical concerns, and professional development needs had become well established. The tenth interview confirmed and elaborated these existing themes rather than introducing new dimensions, indicating that analytic sufficiency had been achieved within the scope of the study.

To protect participants' identities, pseudonyms were used throughout the study, and identifying details were removed from the interview transcripts. To provide contextual transparency, Table 1 presents an overview of the participants' demographic and professional backgrounds. These characteristics are reported descriptively to situate the findings rather than to support statistical generalization.

As shown in Table 1, the participants represented a range of teaching experiences and instructional contexts, including both university and private language institute settings. Levels of prior exposure to AI tools varied from basic familiarity to extensive use, allowing for diverse perspectives on AI-assisted language teaching.

This diversity enriched the data by capturing how teachers at different career stages and with varying degrees of technological engagement negotiate the pedagogical, professional, and ethical implications of AI integration. Importantly, the table is intended to contextualize the findings rather than to imply representativeness or generalizability, consistent with the interpretive phenomenological orientation of the study.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Participants

Participant	Gender	Teaching Experience (Years)	Teaching Context	Prior Exposure to AI Tools
P1	Female	6-10	University	Moderate
P2	Male	11-15	University	Basic
P3	Female	6-10	Private institute	Moderate
P4	Male	16-20	University	Extensive
P5	Female	11-15	Privat institute	Basic
P6	Male	6-10	University	Moderate
P7	Female	16-20	University	Extensive
P8	Male	11-15	Private institute	Moderate
P9	Female	6-10	University	Basic
P10	Male	20+	University	Moderate

2.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which allowed participants to articulate their experiences, concerns, and reflections in their own words. Semi-structured interviews were considered suitable for this study as they provided a balance between guiding the discussion toward key research areas and allowing participants the freedom to introduce issues they perceived as important.

The interview protocol focused on five broad areas:

- 1) teachers’ experiences with AI-assisted tools,
- 2) perceived changes in instructional roles and responsibilities,
- 3) issues related to professional autonomy and decision-making,
- 4) ethical, pedagogical, and emotional tensions associated with AI use, and
- 5) perceived professional development needs arising from AI integration.

Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online, depending on participants’ availability and preferences. Each interview lasted between 45 and 70 minutes and was conducted in a supportive and non-evaluative atmosphere. With participants’ consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. To enhance accuracy and credibility, participants were allowed to review their transcripts and clarify or modify their responses if they wished.

Thematic saturation was considered to have been reached when successive interviews no longer yielded substantively new codes or insights relevant to the research questions. By the ninth interview, recurring patterns related to professional agency, identity tensions, ethical concerns, and professional development needs had become well established. The tenth interview confirmed and elaborated these existing themes rather than introducing new dimensions,

indicating that analytic sufficiency had been achieved within the scope of the study.

2.4 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, following a flexible and iterative process of familiarization, coding, theme development, and refinement. Reflexive thematic analysis was chosen because it emphasizes the active role of the researcher in interpreting data and is well-suited to exploring complex constructs such as agency, identity, and professional tension.

The analysis began with repeated readings of the interview transcripts to achieve immersion in the data. Initial codes were generated inductively, capturing meaningful segments related to teachers’ perceptions of AI, professional roles, decision-making processes, and PD needs. Rather than applying predetermined categories, codes were allowed to emerge from the data while remaining informed by the study’s conceptual focus. Next, related codes were examined and grouped into broader themes that reflected shared patterns of meaning across participants’ accounts. These themes were continuously reviewed and refined by comparing transcripts, with attention to both convergent and divergent experiences. Throughout the analysis, reflexive memo-writing was used to document analytic decisions and researcher interpretations, ensuring transparency and coherence in the theme development process.

The interview data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, following an iterative and interpretive process consistent with an interpretive phenomenological orientation. Analysis proceeded through six interconnected phases:

- 1) data familiarization, 2) initial coding, 3) code refinement and clustering, 4) theme construction, 5) theme review and naming, and 6) interpretive synthesis.

All interview transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve deep familiarity with participants' accounts. Initial coding was conducted inductively, focusing on segments of data that captured participants' experiences, meanings, concerns, and reflections related to AI-assisted language teaching, professional agency, identity, and professional development. Codes such as loss of control, time efficiency, ethical uncertainty, and filtering AI output were generated directly from the data.

Although the coding process was primarily manual and interpretive, NVivo 12 was used to support data management, organization of transcripts, and maintenance of an analytic audit trail. Importantly, NVivo was not used to automate analysis or generate themes; rather, it functioned as an organizational tool to enhance transparency, traceability, and systematic comparison across cases. All interpretive decisions regarding coding, theme development, and meaning-making remained researcher-driven and were guided by phenomenological principles.

Following initial coding, related codes were examined and clustered into broader categories (e.g., AI as support, AI as disruption, agency preservation strategies). These categories were then iteratively refined into themes that captured shared patterns of meaning across participants' lived experiences. Throughout this process, themes were reviewed against the full data set to ensure coherence, distinctiveness, and analytic depth.

Reflexive memo-writing accompanied all stages of analysis. Memos documented analytic decisions, emerging interpretations, and the researchers' evolving assumptions, thereby supporting reflexivity and methodological transparency.

Consistent with interpretive phenomenological research, reflexivity was treated as an integral component of the analytic process. The researchers acknowledge their professional backgrounds in EFL education and teacher development, which informed both their interest in the topic and their sensitivity to issues of agency and identity. Rather than attempting to bracket these perspectives entirely, reflexive engagement involved critically examining how prior experiences and theoretical commitments shaped interpretations. Ongoing memo-writing and iterative comparison across participant accounts were used to ensure that themes remained grounded in participants' lived experiences rather than researcher assumptions.

2.5 Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

This study was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of Islamic Azad University, Ayatollah Amoli Branch (Approval No. 2025-141). All participants provided written informed consent before taking part in the research. This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments. Additionally,

several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the study:

Prolonged engagement with the data, careful transcription, and iterative analysis contributed to credibility. Member checking was conducted by inviting participants to review their interview transcripts, allowing them to confirm the accuracy of their accounts. In addition, the use of rich, contextualized descriptions supports transferability by enabling readers to evaluate the relevance of the findings to other EFL contexts. Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research process. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained before data collection. Participants were assured of confidentiality and informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence. All data were stored securely and used solely for research purposes.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Result

The analysis of interview data revealed a set of interconnected themes illustrating how EFL teachers experience AI-assisted language teaching and negotiate its implications for professional agency, identity, and professional development. Although participants generally acknowledged the practical benefits of AI tools, their narratives reflected a nuanced mixture of acceptance, concern, and ongoing negotiation. Four major themes emerged from the data: 1) AI as Pedagogical Support and Professional Disruption, 2) Negotiating Professional Agency in AI-Mediated Teaching, 3) Professional Identity Tensions and Ethical Concerns, and 4) Emerging Professional Development Needs Beyond Technical Skills

These four themes, with some quotes from the participants, are discussed in the following sub-sections.

3.1.1 AI as Pedagogical Support and Professional Disruption

Participants consistently described AI-assisted tools as pedagogical supports that enhanced efficiency, particularly in lesson planning, material development, and feedback provision. Teachers emphasized that AI reduced preparation time and helped manage workload pressures, especially in large classes.

One participant noted, "AI helps me prepare faster. I can get ideas for activities or examples in a few seconds, which used to take much longer before." Another teacher similarly observed, "With large classes, it's almost impossible to give detailed feedback. AI helps me handle the pressure, at least at a basic level."

Despite these benefits, teachers also experienced AI as a source of professional disruption. Several participants expressed discomfort with the extent to which AI outputs influenced instructional direction and pedagogical authorship. As one teacher reflected,

“Sometimes I feel I’m not designing the lesson anymore—I’m choosing from what AI gives me.” Another added, “It’s useful, but it also changes how much of the lesson feels like mine.”

These accounts illustrate how AI simultaneously functioned as a practical resource and a destabilizing force, prompting teachers to negotiate efficiency gains alongside concerns about pedagogical ownership.

3.1.2 Negotiating Professional Agency in AI-Mediated Teaching

Professional agency emerged as a central concern across interviews, with teachers emphasizing the importance of maintaining control over instructional decisions. Participants frequently framed AI as acceptable only when used selectively and critically.

One participant stated, “I use AI as a reference, but the final decision should always be mine.” Another reinforced this position by noting, “AI can suggest many things, but I have to filter them. Otherwise, I don’t feel like I’m really teaching.” A third teacher explained, “If I don’t check and adapt what AI produces, I feel I’m giving up my responsibility.”

However, agency was not experienced solely as an individual choice. Several participants described external pressures that complicated their autonomy, particularly student expectations and institutional norms. As one teacher explained, “When students know AI is available, they expect you to use it. Saying no sometimes feels like you’re behind the times.”

These findings suggest that professional agency in AI-mediated teaching is relational and context-dependent, shaped by institutional expectations, student perceptions, and teachers’ own professional values.

3.1.3 Professional Identity Tensions and Ethical Concerns

AI integration prompted significant identity-related tensions, particularly regarding teachers’ sense of expertise and instructional authority. Participants expressed concern that AI-generated feedback and explanations could undermine their professional role.

One teacher remarked, “If students think AI knows everything, then what is my role as a teacher?” Another observed, “Sometimes students trust AI feedback more than mine, even when I explain my reasons.” A third participant added, “It makes you question where your expertise fits when a machine can generate answers so quickly.”

Ethical concerns further intensified these tensions. Teachers reported uncertainty about assessment

fairness, authorship, and academic integrity, often in the absence of clear institutional guidance. As one participant stated, “There are no clear rules. Sometimes I feel I’m making ethical decisions alone.” Another echoed this sentiment, noting, “We’re expected to be responsible, but we’re not given clear policies.”

These accounts highlight how AI integration affected teachers’ emotional, ethical, and identity-related positioning within their professional roles.

3.1.4 Emerging Professional Development Needs Beyond Technical Skills

Across interviews, participants emphasized that professional development related to AI should extend well beyond technical training. While basic operational knowledge was viewed as necessary, teachers consistently highlighted the need for pedagogical, ethical, and reflective support.

As one participant summarized, “Learning how to use AI is easy. Learning how to use it responsibly as a teacher is much harder.” Another teacher stressed, “We need spaces to talk about our concerns, not just workshops that show us new tools.” A third participant noted, “Professional development should help us decide when not to use AI.”

Teachers identified priority PD needs such as evaluating AI-generated content, addressing ethical challenges in assessment, and maintaining professional agency. Importantly, participants favored dialogic and collaborative PD formats that supported reflection and shared sense-making rather than tool-focused training sessions. Importantly, many teachers expressed a desire for dialogic and reflective PD formats, such as discussion-based workshops and collaborative inquiry, rather than tool-focused training sessions. This reflects a shift toward viewing PD as a space for professional sense-making rather than skill transmission. To synthesize the findings, Figure 1 presents a conceptual representation of EFL teachers’ negotiated engagement with AI-assisted language teaching. Rather than depicting linear relationships, the figure illustrates how AI functions as a mediating force that simultaneously supports and challenges teachers’ pedagogical practices, professional agency, and identity, giving rise to evolving professional development needs.



Figure 1. EFL teachers' negotiated engagement with AI-assisted language teaching

Figure 1 conceptualizes EFL teachers' negotiated engagement with AI-assisted language teaching as a dynamic and non-linear process. Rather than depicting AI as a neutral instructional tool, the figure positions AI as a mediating force that simultaneously supports pedagogical practice and introduces professional tension. As illustrated, AI-assisted tools contribute to increased efficiency, material generation, and feedback support; however, these affordances intersect with teachers' professional agency and identity by influencing instructional decision-making and perceptions of pedagogical authorship.

The figure highlights how teachers' agency is continuously negotiated as they evaluate, filter, and adapt AI-generated content in response to contextual demands, institutional expectations, and ethical considerations. These negotiations, in turn, shape teachers' professional identities, particularly in relation to expertise, authority, and responsibility. Ethical concerns surrounding assessment validity, academic integrity, and accountability further intensify this process. Emerging professional development needs are shown as an outcome of this ongoing negotiation rather than as a fixed endpoint. The model emphasizes that PD needs to extend beyond technical competence to include critical AI literacy, ethical judgment, and reflective pedagogical decision-making. By linking empirical findings with theoretical constructs of agency and identity, Figure 1 illustrates how AI-mediated teaching reshapes professional learning as a process of continuous sense-making rather than skill acquisition.

3.2 Discussion

This section interprets the findings of the present study in relation to existing research on EFL teacher professional development, teacher agency, and

technology-mediated language education. Rather than conceptualizing AI-assisted language teaching as a purely technical innovation, this discussion situates teachers' experiences within broader professional, identity-related, and institutional contexts. By drawing on recent empirical and conceptual studies, particularly those addressing professional development and teacher agency, the section highlights areas of convergence and divergence between this study and prior research, while also demonstrating how AI introduces qualitatively new demands on EFL teachers' professional learning and meaning-making. Each research question is addressed in turn to ensure analytical clarity and coherence.

Rather than functioning as a neutral tool, AI is positioned as an influential presence that both supports and disrupts teachers' instructional decision-making. Professional development needs emerge from teachers' ongoing negotiation of these interrelated dimensions within AI-mediated educational contexts.

Regarding the first research question of the study (RQ1: How do EFL teachers perceive the role of AI-assisted tools in language teaching and learning?), the findings indicate that teachers generally perceived AI as a pedagogical support that enhances instructional efficiency and reduces workload, especially in relation to material development, lesson planning, and feedback provision.

This perception aligns with recent studies reporting that AI tools are often welcomed for their instrumental value in supporting classroom practice and easing time-related pressures (e.g., Manoocherzadeh et al., 2025; Risdianto et al., 2025). Similarly, N. Sun and Sun, (2025) found that AI tools can foster teachers' engagement with self-directed professional learning by offering immediate

pedagogical assistance and access to instructional ideas. These converging findings suggest that, at a functional level, AI is largely viewed as beneficial and supportive within EFL teaching contexts.

At the same time, the present findings reveal an important contrast with earlier technology-related research. Unlike digital platforms or online teaching tools discussed in earlier CALL literature (e.g., Baran & Correia, 2014; Compton, 2009), AI was not perceived as a neutral or peripheral resource. Instead, teachers described AI as actively shaping pedagogical processes by influencing lesson structure, feedback practices, and instructional pacing. This perception suggests a qualitative shift in how technology is positioned in teaching, as AI appears to exert a more agentive role in pedagogical decision-making. Consequently, teachers' evaluations of AI extended beyond usefulness to include concerns about pedagogical ownership, authorship, and control.

With respect to the second research question (RQ2: How do EFL teachers experience the impact of AI-assisted language teaching on their professional agency and instructional decision-making?), the findings demonstrate that professional agency in AI-mediated contexts is experienced as fluid and continuously negotiated. Teachers did not describe a complete loss of agency, nor did they portray AI as inherently empowering. Rather, agency was maintained through selective, critical engagement with AI tools, a finding that aligns with relational and ecological views of teacher agency (Gu et al., 2022). These studies emphasize that agency is shaped by contextual conditions, institutional expectations, and professional identities rather than residing solely within individual teachers.

The present findings also resonate with (Isaee & Barjesteh, 2023b) study on EFL teachers' professional development needs, which showed that teachers' instructional decision-making is often constrained by contextual and institutional factors rather than individual willingness or competence. In both studies, teachers reported tensions between pedagogical ideals and external expectations, particularly in technology-mediated teaching environments.

However, the current findings extend this line of research by demonstrating that AI intensifies these tensions, as teachers must negotiate not only institutional pressures but also algorithmically generated pedagogical suggestions that influence classroom practices. In contrast to more optimistic technology adoption narratives that portray digital tools as inherently empowering (e.g., (Kang & Yang, 2022; Li & Gu, n.d.; Yan & Yang, 2019), the findings suggest

that AI can simultaneously support and constrain teachers' instructional autonomy.

Regarding the third research question (RQ3: What tensions, concerns, or challenges do EFL teachers report when integrating AI into their teaching practices?), the findings highlight pronounced tensions related to professional identity and ethical responsibility. Teachers expressed concerns about the potential erosion of their expertise and instructional authority, particularly when students appeared to place greater trust in AI-generated feedback than in teacher judgment. This finding is consistent with research on teacher identity and emotions, which suggests that shifts in instructional roles can provoke uncertainty and emotional strain (Dewaele & Jiang, 2020; X. Sun & Zhang, 2023).

However, the present study adds a critical dimension by showing that AI's capacity for content generation and feedback directly intersects with core domains of teaching, such as assessment, authorship, and professional accountability. Unlike earlier digital tools that primarily altered modes of delivery, AI was perceived as intervening in judgment-based pedagogical practices traditionally associated with teacher expertise. This observation supports findings in recent EFL research showing that technological shifts can destabilize teachers' professional authority and emotional security when core instructional practices are affected (Agrawal, 2025). Ethical concerns related to academic integrity, fairness, and responsibility were particularly salient, and participants reported limited institutional guidance for addressing these challenges, echoing recent findings by (Nazim & Alzubi, 2025).

In relation to the fourth research question (RQ4: What new professional development needs emerge from EFL teachers' engagement with AI-mediated language teaching?), the findings strongly suggest that teachers conceptualize professional development as extending beyond technical competence. While familiarity with AI tools was viewed as necessary, participants consistently emphasized the importance of pedagogical judgment, ethical awareness, and reflective decision-making. This perspective aligns with longstanding critiques of transmission-oriented professional development models in language education (Borg, 2018; Li & Gu, n.d.), which argue that effective PD must engage teachers' beliefs, identities, and professional agency.

Importantly, these findings closely mirror those reported by Isaee and Barjesteh, (2023a), who found that EFL teachers value professional development as an ongoing, reflective, and dialogic process rather than a series of isolated training events. In both studies, teachers emphasized the need for collaborative spaces that allow them to share experiences, articulate concerns, and

critically reflect on their practices. The present study extends this insight by showing that AI-mediated teaching amplifies these needs, foregrounding ethical reasoning, professional judgment, and identity negotiation as central components of meaningful professional development. Recent research further supports this interpretation, as studies by [Poole & Li, \(2023\)](#) and [Zhou et al. \(2024\)](#) demonstrate that teachers' technology-related PD needs increasingly involve pedagogical and reflective dimensions rather than operational skills alone.

Taken together, the findings suggest that AI-assisted language teaching functions as a catalyst for re-examining foundational assumptions about teaching, professionalism, and development in EFL contexts. While AI offers clear pedagogical advantages, it also challenges teachers to renegotiate their roles, responsibilities, and boundaries of professional judgment. In contrast to earlier technological innovations that could be more easily assimilated into existing pedagogical frameworks, AI demands deeper professional reflection and institutional support ([Barjesteh & Isaee, 2024](#)). These insights underscore the need for professional development frameworks that position teachers not merely as users of technology, but as reflective, autonomous, and ethically engaged professionals navigating increasingly complex, AI-mediated educational environments.

3.2.1 Implications

The findings of this study have important implications for teacher education and institutional policy. AI integration in EFL contexts requires professional development programs that go beyond technical training and instead emphasize critical AI literacy, ethical decision-making, and reflective pedagogical practices. Institutions should also provide clear guidelines regarding the ethical use of AI in teaching, assessment, and feedback to support teachers in navigating emerging challenges.

3.2.2 Research Contributions

This study contributes to the growing body of research on AI in language education by foregrounding teachers' lived experiences rather than focusing solely on technological effectiveness or learner outcomes. It extends existing literature on EFL teacher professional development by introducing an agency- and identity-oriented perspective in AI-mediated contexts. Furthermore, the study highlights AI as a transformative force that reshapes not only instructional practices but also professional meaning-making

3.2 Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The small, purposive sample limits the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study relies on self-reported data, which may be influenced by

participants' subjective interpretations. The cross-sectional nature of the study also does not capture how teachers' perceptions and practices evolve over time.

3.2.4 Recommendations

Future research should explore AI integration in EFL teaching using longitudinal and mixed-methods designs to better understand changes in teachers' professional development over time. Further studies are also recommended to examine the role of institutional policies and leadership in shaping teachers' engagement with AI. In practice, it is recommended that professional development programs incorporate collaborative and reflective approaches that allow teachers to critically engage with AI-related challenges.

4. CONCLUSION

This study explored EFL teachers' lived experiences with AI-assisted language teaching, focusing on its implications for professional agency, identity, and professional development. The findings demonstrate that teachers' engagement with AI is characterized by continuous negotiation. While AI-assisted tools were widely valued for enhancing efficiency and reducing workload, they also introduced tensions related to instructional control, ethical responsibility, and professional self-concept.

By foregrounding teachers' experiences, the study extends research on EFL teacher professional development by showing that AI integration introduces challenges that cannot be addressed through technical training alone. Teachers' concerns centered on pedagogical judgment, accountability, and professional authority, highlighting AI as a contextual force that reshapes teaching practices and professional meaning-making.

From a policy and institutional perspective, the findings underscore the need for clear guidelines on ethical AI use in assessment, feedback, and authorship. Educational institutions and policymakers should support professional development models that prioritize critical AI literacy, reflective practice, and teacher agency rather than narrow tool-based competence. Providing structured spaces for dialogue, ethical deliberation, and collaborative inquiry can help teachers navigate AI-mediated teaching with confidence and responsibility.

Despite these contributions, the study is not without limitations. As a qualitative investigation based on a purposive sample, the findings are context-specific and are not intended to be statistically generalizable. Future research could build on these insights through longitudinal designs that examine how teachers' perceptions and practices evolve over time, or through mixed-methods approaches that combine qualitative insights with larger-scale survey data. Further investigation is also needed into the role of institutional policies and leadership practices in shaping teachers' experiences of AI integration and professional learning.

Future research could build on these findings through longitudinal or mixed-methods designs that examine how teachers' relationships with AI evolve over time and how institutional policies shape professional learning. Overall, responsible AI integration in EFL education depends not only on technological innovation but also on empowering teachers as reflective, autonomous, and ethically engaged professionals.

In conclusion, AI-assisted language teaching presents both opportunities and challenges for EFL teachers. While AI has the potential to enhance instructional efficiency and support pedagogical practice, it simultaneously raises critical questions about professional agency, identity, and ethical responsibility. Addressing these complexities requires professional development approaches that empower teachers as reflective, autonomous, and ethically grounded professionals who can navigate the demands of an increasingly AI-mediated educational landscape with confidence and discernment.

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6. AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

All authors contributed equally. Conceptualization, H.I.; methodology, H.B.; software, M.M.; validation, H.B.; formal analysis, M.M.; investigation, H.I.; resources, H.I.; data curation, H.I.; writing—original draft preparation, H.I.; writing—review and editing, M.M.; visualization, H.B.; supervision, H.B.; project administration, H.I. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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