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Foreword

Artificial Intelligence in EFL and Academic Writing: Pedagogical, Ethical, and Critical Perspectives from Global Higher Education

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Artificial intelligence (AI), particularly generative and multimodal systems, is rapidly transforming English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education and academic writing in higher education. AI tools are increasingly used for drafting, feedback, assessment, translation, and language practice, offering new opportunities for personalized learning and instructional support. At the same time, their growing presence raises critical pedagogical, ethical, and epistemological questions related to authorship, learner autonomy, academic integrity, and the nature of academic literacy. This special issue brings together empirical studies, classroom interventions, qualitative inquiries, and systematic reviews to provide a comprehensive and context-sensitive examination of how AI is reshaping language learning and academic writing.

The studies included in this special issue represent diverse higher education contexts, including Saudi Arabia, China, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, Morocco, Malaysia, Philippines, Ukraine, Slovakia, India, and Vietnam. This international coverage highlights the importance of examining AI integration within multilingual, culturally diverse, and often under-researched educational settings, where institutional readiness, policy development, and teacher support remain uneven.

A central focus of the special issue is the pedagogical impact of AI tools on learners' motivation, engagement, and language development. Several studies show that AI-based feedback and tutoring systems, such as ChatGPT and other AI tutors, can enhance students' confidence, reduce anxiety, and support more consistent learning behaviors. Learners particularly value the immediacy, personalization, and accessibility of AI feedback, which can compensate for limited instructional time and large class sizes. Empirical findings across multiple contexts indicate improvements in sentence structure, vocabulary use, grammatical accuracy, text organization, and descriptive writing when AI tools are integrated into classroom practice in a guided and pedagogically structured manner.

Beyond short-term learning outcomes, this special issue also examines the mechanisms through which AI supports writing development. Research drawing on technology acceptance and self-regulated learning frameworks demonstrates that perceived usefulness, ease of use, and positive attitudes toward AI significantly influence students' intentions to use these tools, which in turn predict writing performance. Importantly, learners' self-regulation strengthens the impact of AI use, suggesting that effective integration depends not only on system features but also on students' capacity to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning.

Assessment and feedback practices constitute another important theme. Comparative evidence indicates that AI-based tools can provide writing evaluations comparable to traditional assessments while demonstrating greater sensitivity in identifying specific linguistic errors. These findings highlight the potential of AI to serve as a supplementary assessment and feedback resource, particularly in large-scale EFL writing classes.

At the same time, the contributions consistently emphasize that AI use is reshaping the nature of academic writing itself. Linguistic analyses of student texts reveal recurring patterns associated with AI assistance, such as highly standardized structures, over-explicit cohesion, and a polished but impersonal academic style. While such features may enhance surface-level clarity and accuracy, they can also obscure students' authorial voice and limit the development of argumentation and rhetorical depth. Studies of students' independent use of ChatGPT further demonstrate contrasting writing practices, ranging from process-oriented engagement with AI across planning and revision stages to product-oriented reliance on AI-generated texts and text "humanizing" features.

Ethical and critical dimensions of AI use form a unifying strand throughout the special issue. Several classroom-based investigations show that students initially demonstrate limited ability to evaluate the reliability, bias, and academic suitability of AI-generated content. However, targeted instructional interventions—such as comparing human and AI texts, validating sources, detecting bias, and engaging in reflective and critique-based writing, significantly enhance students' critical AI literacy and evaluative judgement. These findings position AI not only as a learning support tool but also as a powerful resource for developing critical thinking and academic responsibility.

Complementing student-focused research, several studies address institutional and professional perspectives. Research with doctoral students and university teachers reveals that unclear institutional guidelines, uneven supervisory practices, and limited professional training contribute to uncertainty surrounding ethical AI use in academic writing and publishing. Teachers generally express positive attitudes toward the pedagogical potential of AI, yet simultaneously emphasize the need for institutional readiness, clear policies, and ethical frameworks. Studies in bilingual and CLIL contexts further indicate that while educators possess strong functional digital skills, explicit preparation for AI literacy, integrating technical, pedagogical, and ethical dimensions, remains limited.

The special issue also includes systematic reviews that situate these empirical findings within broader debates on human and machine authorship, stylistic homogenization, audience perception, and the growing difficulty of distinguishing between human and AI-generated texts across both literary and academic genres. These reviews highlight persistent concerns about cultural representation, originality, and the authority of AI-generated discourse, underscoring the need for research-informed pedagogical and policy responses.

Importantly, several contributions adopt a critical stance toward unreflective adoption of AI. Classroom-based qualitative research highlights emerging patterns of learner dependency and reduced intellectual effort, underscoring that convenience and automation may undermine sustained engagement with language and ideas when instructional guidance is limited. Related studies on multimodal AI systems, translation tools, and discipline-specific writing similarly report both linguistic benefits and risks, including over-reliance, homogenization of academic voice, and reduced learner agency.

Overall, the studies in this special issue demonstrate that AI can meaningfully support EFL learning and academic writing when embedded within pedagogically principled, ethically grounded, and critically oriented instructional designs. Rather than positioning AI as a replacement for teachers or traditional literacy practices, the contributions collectively conceptualize AI as a mediational resource whose educational value depends on human guidance, institutional responsibility, and learners' capacity for critical and self-regulated engagement. This special issue, therefore, advances a human-centered and context-sensitive perspective on AI in language education, offering empirical evidence and pedagogical insights to inform future research, curriculum design, and policy development in higher education.

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