

Generative AI in Peripheral University ELT: From Pedagogical Catalyst to Academic Shortcut

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Abstract

Particularly in underfunded peripheral university environments, the increasing use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) in English language teaching (ELT) has heightened discussions about pedagogy, ethics, and evaluation. Few empirical studies have looked at how AI-mediated learning, ethical attitudes, and pedagogical responses develop at resource-constrained institutes in the Global South, particularly in Bangladesh, despite growing scholarship on AI in education. Examining these contexts is important because uneven digital infrastructure, limited institutional guidance, and diverse learner preparedness shape AI use differently from well-resourced settings. Adopting a mixed-method design, this study investigates whether AI functions as a pedagogical catalyst or an academic shortcut by combining interviews, classroom observations, document analysis, and a Likert-scale questionnaire administered to 40 undergraduate students at a peripheral Bangladeshi university. Findings reveal divergent patterns of AI engagement: while some students use AI to enhance language learning and writing, others rely on it for task completion, often normalizing AI-assisted academic outsourcing or concealing its use through paraphrasing without enough cognitive engagement. Teachers increasingly respond by adopting innovative assessment solutions like offline interactive and gamified assessments to enhance authenticity. Drawing on sociocultural theory and critical digital pedagogy, the study contributes a context-sensitive account of AI integration and proposes a conceptual model illustrating two trajectories—empowerment through AI literacy and ethical engagement, and dependency characterized by cognitive disengagement and academic outsourcing.

Keywords: Generative Artificial Intelligence; English Language Teaching (ELT); Peripheral Higher Education; Academic Integrity; AI Literacy; Ethical Disengagement

1. Introduction

The emergence of generative artificial intelligence (AI), particularly large language models such as ChatGPT, has rapidly reconfigured the pedagogical landscape of English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly, these models have been reshaping the classroom practices within ELT domain. In language learning contexts, these tools are increasingly used for grammar correction, vocabulary support, idea generation, drafting, and feedback. These tools provide immediate linguistic support, adaptive feedback, and opportunities for individualized learning, making them powerful mediational instruments within language acquisition processes. Recent scholarship suggests that AI can support learner autonomy and extend opportunities for language practice beyond the classroom by enabling students to interact with language in more immediate and individualized ways (Wei, L. 2023). To be particular, it allows students to experiment with language, refine output, and engage in iterative learning cycles. At the same time, growing concerns have emerged regarding students' overreliance on AI-generated content, the weakening of critical cognitive engagement, and the implications of AI-mediated writing for academic integrity and assessment authenticity.

Contemporary discourse increasingly argues that the “AI problem” in education is often misdiagnosed. Rather than representing a sudden disruption, AI appears to expose deeper, long-standing tensions within higher education systems. These include the performative nature of assessment, the instrumentalization of learning, and the prioritization of output over process (Adamakis & Rachiotis, 2025). In this sense, students' use of AI—whether for assistance or substitution—may be less an act of misconduct and more a rational adaptation to institutional environments that reward efficiency and measurable outcomes. Similarly, broader critical perspectives suggest that students' reliance on AI must be understood within a context of systemic uncertainty, pressure, and shifting expectations regarding the value of education itself (Shi, 2025).

Within ELT classrooms, these tensions are particularly significant because language production functions both as a learning process and as evidence of learner competence (an assessment artifact). While AI tools may support students in developing linguistic accuracy and confidence, they may also encourage forms of task completion that bypass meaningful engagement with learning. Existing research has increasingly highlighted concerns regarding dependency on AI-generated outputs, reduced cognitive involvement, and difficulties in distinguishing between supported learning and academic outsourcing (Tikhonova & Raitskaya, 2023). On one hand, AI tools can function as scaffolds that support learners within their Zone of Proximal Development, enhancing vocabulary, grammar, and fluency. On the other, the same tools enable the outsourcing of linguistic effort, resulting in what may be described as performative/ output focused learning where students submit polished outputs without corresponding internalized competence. This duality complicates conventional understandings of learner autonomy, raising critical questions about whether AI facilitates independence or fosters dependency. Classroom observations in the present study revealed that many learners struggled to generate effective prompts, evaluate AI-generated responses critically, or refine outputs meaningfully. In several cases, students accepted inaccurate or generic responses without verification, suggesting uneven levels of AI literacy and prompting competence.

Although the pedagogical implications of generative AI have been widely discussed across higher education, much of the existing evidence originates from technologically advanced and comparatively well-resourced institutions. Consequently, prevailing assumptions regarding AI adoption, learner engagement, and assessment practices cannot be uncritically generalized to peripheral university contexts, where institutional capacity, digital access, and educational realities differ substantially. Understanding AI use within such contexts therefore requires attention to the socio-institutional conditions that shape how students and teachers engage with emerging technologies.

These dynamics become even more complex in peripheral university contexts such as Bangladesh, where infrastructural limitations, uneven digital literacy, limited institutional guidance, uneven access to technological resources, and rigid assessment-driven learning cultures intersect. In such settings, access to

AI does not necessarily translate into effective or ethical use. Instead, patterns of engagement often reflect broader socio-institutional conditions. Some learners employ AI strategically as a language learning aid (particularly for improving grammar, vocabulary, speaking & writing feedback and organization, while others use it as a shortcut, a concealment mechanism, or even a default mode of task completion with minimal ethical concern. They tend to overrely on AI primarily for rapid task completion, often with limited engagement with the content itself. At the same time, teachers are increasingly confronting challenges related to assessment authenticity, especially when written assignments no longer reliably reflect students' actual linguistic competence. This emerging normalization of AI-mediated substitution signals a shift in academic culture, where traditional notions of authorship, effort, and integrity are increasingly blurred.

As a result, educators in many ELT classrooms are beginning to reconsider traditional assessment practices (as traditional take-home and written assessments become increasingly vulnerable to AI mediation). The growing use of AI-generated writing has encouraged some teachers to adopt alternative approaches, including offline assessments, in-class writing tasks, oral defense activities, collaborative exercises, and gamified classroom practices designed to foreground process, participation, and real-time performance. These pedagogical responses suggest that the challenge of AI in ELT is not merely technological; it also involves broader questions regarding how language learning is evaluated, how authenticity is established, and how students engage with learning processes in increasingly AI-mediated environments.

Despite the rapid growth of scholarship on AI in education, much of the existing literature remains focused on well-resourced institutions in Global North contexts. Comparatively limited attention has been given to how AI-mediated learning practices are developing within peripheral or resource-constrained ELT settings, particularly in South Asian higher education contexts. Furthermore, relatively few studies have examined the relationship between AI literacy, prompting competence, ethical perception, and changing assessment practices within a single analytical framework. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates how students and teachers in a peripheral Bangladeshi university negotiate the opportunities and challenges associated

with AI use in ELT classroom. Moving beyond binary framings of AI as either beneficial or harmful, the study conceptualizes AI engagement as a spectrum shaped by ethical perceptions, institutional structures, and varying levels of digital literacy.

Drawing on a mixed-method design combining interviews, classroom observations, document analysis, and questionnaire data, this study explores both student engagement with AI tools and teachers' pedagogical responses to AI-mediated learning practices. In other words, it combines qualitative insights with quantitative data from a Likert-scale questionnaire, the research provides a more comprehensive understanding of both observed practices and underlying attitudes. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

Taken together, the existing literature reveals three important gaps. First, empirical evidence from peripheral and resource-constrained higher education contexts remains comparatively limited, particularly within English Language Teaching (ELT) settings in the Global South (Crompton, H., & Burke, D. 2024). Second, relatively few studies have examined AI engagement by integrating students' learning practices, ethical perceptions, AI literacy, and teachers' pedagogical responses within a single analytical framework. Third, while concerns surrounding AI-assisted learning continue to expand, limited attention has been given to how institutional conditions influence the balance between AI as a pedagogical resource and AI as an academic shortcut. Addressing these gaps, the present study provides a context-sensitive mixed-method investigation of AI use in a peripheral Bangladeshi university.

Against this backdrop, the study is guided by a set of interrelated concerns: it seeks to examine how do students in a peripheral ELT context use or engage with AI tools for both language learning and academic tasks/ assessment tasks, and to identify the patterns of ethical perception and disengagement that characterize such use. It further explores how teachers perceive the impact of AI on learning authenticity and assessment practices, while also investigating the extent to which quantitative patterns derived from questionnaire data align with qualitative observations of AI-mediated behavior. Furthermore, the study

tends to investigate how do differences in AI literacy and prompting competence shape students' engagement with AI-generated content Finally, the study considers what pedagogical and assessment-related responses are emerging in reaction to increasing AI use in ELT classrooms. To present in details, how pedagogical responses-particularly the emergence of offline and gamified assessment strategies- are developing in reaction to the growing influence of AI within classroom practices.

2. Literature Review

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into education, particularly in English Language Teaching (ELT), has generated a rapidly expanding body of scholarship that spans pedagogical affordances, ethical concerns, and institutional implications. While early research predominantly emphasized the transformative potential of AI as a tool for personalized learning, more recent work has begun to interrogate its deeper impact on knowledge production, learner agency, and the very structure of educational systems.

A substantial portion of the literature highlights the pedagogical benefits of AI in language learning. AI-powered tools offer immediate feedback, adaptive learning environments, and opportunities for iterative practice, enabling learners to refine linguistic competence in ways that were previously constrained by classroom time and teacher availability (Zheng et al., 2023). Within a sociocultural framework, such tools can be conceptualized as mediational artifacts that extend learners' engagement within their Zone of Proximal Development, facilitating scaffolded learning through interaction with a more capable "other," even when that other is algorithmic. Similarly, discussions of learner autonomy suggest that AI has the potential to foster self-directed learning by granting learners greater control over pace, content, and feedback mechanisms.

However, this optimistic framing has been increasingly challenged by research that points to the risks of over-reliance and cognitive outsourcing. Rather than enhancing autonomy, AI may create a form of *shpseudo-autonomy*, where learners appear independent but, in practice, delegate significant portions of cognitive effort to technological systems. Studies

focusing on AI-generated writing warn that such practices can lead to diminished critical thinking, superficial engagement with content, and an erosion of authorship (Tikhonova & Raitskaya, 2023). This it raises fundamental questions about the nature of learning itself: if linguistic output can be generated without corresponding cognitive processing, the relationship between performance and competence becomes deeply unstable.

Taken together, these perspectives reveal an unresolved tension within contemporary AI-in-education scholarship. While one body of research conceptualizes generative AI as a pedagogical scaffold capable of promoting learner autonomy and personalized language development, another emphasizes its potential to encourage cognitive outsourcing, superficial engagement, and dependency. Rather than representing contradictory findings, these perspectives suggest that the educational value of AI is contingent upon how learners interact with the technology, the pedagogical environments in which it is embedded, and the extent to which critical AI literacy is developed (Kasneci et al., 2023; Mollick & Mollick, 2023; Tlili et al., 2023).

Parallel to these pedagogical concerns is a growing critique of how academic integrity is conceptualized in the age of AI. Much of the institutional response to generative AI has centered on preventing “cheating” through detection tools, restrictive policies, or attempts to design AI-resistant assessments. Yet, emerging scholarship argues that such approaches are both insufficient and conceptually limited. Rather than treating AI as an external threat, researchers suggest that its widespread use reveals deeper structural issues within higher education. In particular, the dominance of assessment models that prioritize measurable outputs over meaningful learning has created environments where the use of AI as a shortcut becomes not only possible but rational (Costa, 2025).

From this perspective, the problem is not merely that students are using AI inappropriately, but that existing educational systems incentivize such behavior. When learning is framed as performance—something to be completed, evaluated, and graded—students may prioritize efficiency over engagement. AI, in this context, becomes a tool that aligns perfectly with these

expectations, enabling the rapid production of acceptable outputs with minimal effort. This interpretation shifts the focus from individual misconduct to systemic design, suggesting that academic integrity cannot be addressed without rethinking the broader pedagogical and assessment frameworks in which students operate.

These contrasting perspectives indicate that academic integrity in the age of generative AI should not be understood solely through the binary of ethical versus unethical behaviour. Instead, recent scholarship increasingly frames integrity as a pedagogical and institutional issue shaped by assessment design, learning cultures, and students' perceptions of educational value. This shift moves the discussion beyond AI detection toward the broader challenge of cultivating responsible and reflective AI use within higher education.

Further deepening this critique, some scholars argue that the current discourse around AI reflects a broader crisis in higher education. Rather than being a disruptive anomaly, AI functions as a mirror that exposes existing contradictions, including tensions between innovation and control, autonomy and surveillance, and knowledge creation and credentialism (**Katsamakas, 2024**). In this view, students' engagement with AI is shaped not only by immediate academic demands but also by wider socio-economic and institutional conditions. The normalization of AI use—whether for learning or substitution—may therefore signal a shift in how students perceive the value and purpose of education itself.

Empirical accounts from higher education contexts further illustrate the scale and complexity of these issues. Reports from university settings indicate widespread use of AI among students, often accompanied by limited enforcement mechanisms and institutional reluctance to penalize misconduct due to administrative and economic pressures. In some cases, educators report being unable or unwilling to fail students despite clear indications of AI-generated work, raising concerns about the long-term credibility of academic qualifications. Such dynamics contribute to what has been described as a “performative” academic environment, where the primary objective is the completion of tasks rather than the development of knowledge or skills.

At the same time, the literature increasingly points toward the need for pedagogical adaptation rather than prohibition. Traditional written assessments, particularly take-home assignments, are widely recognized as vulnerable to AI mediation. In response, educators have begun experimenting with alternative forms of assessment, including oral examinations, process-based evaluation, and interactive or experiential tasks. These approaches aim to reintroduce authenticity, emphasizing not just the final product but the learning process itself. Gamified and in-class assessments, in particular, are gaining attention as potential strategies to engage students actively while reducing opportunities for uncritical AI use.

Another critical dimension emerging in the literature is the issue of digital and epistemic inequality. While AI is often framed as a democratizing technology, access to tools does not guarantee meaningful or critical use. Students with higher levels of digital literacy and linguistic competence are more likely to use AI strategically, as a tool for refinement and learning. In contrast, others may rely on it uncritically, reproducing outputs without understanding or engagement. This uneven distribution of skills and awareness risks exacerbating existing inequalities, particularly in peripheral or under-resourced contexts where institutional support and guidance are limited.

Recent scholarship has also expanded the discussion beyond questions of AI adoption toward AI literacy, responsible AI use, and assessment redesign. Rather than asking whether AI should be permitted in educational settings, researchers increasingly argue that learners must develop the critical competencies required to evaluate, question, and use AI-generated knowledge responsibly. Parallel discussions within posthuman and sociomaterial perspectives further suggest that AI should be understood as a participant in evolving learning ecologies rather than merely an external technological tool (Bayne, 2015). Collectively, these developments signal a shift from technology-centred debates toward more human-centred and context-sensitive approaches to AI integration in education (Ng et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2023; Perkins, Furze, Roe, & MacVaugh, 2024).

Despite the growing body of research, there remains a notable gap in studies that examine AI use within peripheral educational contexts, especially in the

Global South. Much of the existing literature is based on well-resourced institutions, where infrastructure, policy frameworks, and digital literacy levels differ significantly from those in countries like Bangladesh. As a result, current understandings of AI in ELT may not fully capture the complexities of contexts characterized by resource constraints, institutional ambiguity, and diverse learner profiles.

This study seeks to address this gap by situating AI use within the specific socio-pedagogical realities of a *Bangladeshi peripheral university*. By integrating qualitative insights with quantitative data, it moves beyond generalized claims to provide a context-sensitive analysis of how AI is actually experienced, interpreted, and utilized by both students and teachers. In doing so, it contributes to a more nuanced and critically grounded understanding of AI in ELT—one that recognizes it not merely as a technological tool, but as a phenomenon deeply embedded in broader educational, social, and institutional dynamics.

Theoretical Framework

This study is primarily informed by **Sociocultural Theory (SCT)** and the principles of **Critical Digital Pedagogy**, which together provide a conceptual lens for understanding students' engagement with generative artificial intelligence (AI) in English Language Teaching (ELT). Rather than viewing AI merely as a technological innovation, these perspectives emphasize how learning is mediated by social, cultural, and technological tools and shaped by broader educational contexts.

From a sociocultural perspective, learning is understood as a socially mediated process in which cognitive development occurs through interaction with cultural artifacts and more capable others (Vygotsky, 1978). Within this framework, generative AI can function as a mediational tool capable of supporting learners' development by providing feedback, linguistic scaffolding, and opportunities for iterative learning within the learner's Zone of Proximal Development. At the same time, sociocultural theory also highlights that meaningful learning depends on active participation and internalization rather than simple task completion. Consequently, AI may

either facilitate genuine learning or encourage cognitive outsourcing when learners rely on generated outputs without critical engagement.

Complementing this perspective, Critical Digital Pedagogy provides a framework for examining the ethical and pedagogical implications of AI integration in higher education. Rather than focusing solely on technological adoption, this perspective encourages critical reflection on issues of learner agency, academic integrity, digital inequality, and institutional responsibility. It recognizes that digital technologies are embedded within broader social and educational structures that shape how they are accessed, interpreted, and used (UNESCO, 2023; Eaton, 2024).

Bringing these perspectives together enables the present study to interpret AI engagement not simply as a matter of technological use, but as a context-dependent educational practice influenced by learners' AI literacy, ethical perceptions, institutional conditions, and assessment design. These theoretical perspectives also inform the interpretation of the study's conceptual model, which illustrates divergent trajectories of AI integration characterized by either learner empowerment or cognitive dependency.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-method design to investigate patterns of AI use, ethical perception, and pedagogical response and examine AI-mediated learning and assessment practices within a peripheral English Language Teaching (ELT) context in Bangladesh. The decision to adopt a mixed-method approach was informed by the complexity of the phenomenon under investigation. While qualitative methods enabled an in-depth exploration of students' experiences, perceptions, and classroom behaviors related to AI use, the quantitative component provided broader attitudinal patterns regarding AI engagement, ethical perception, and assessment practices. Collecting both forms of data during the same research phase allowed for comparison, triangulation, and a more contextually grounded interpretation of emerging patterns.

The rationale for combining qualitative and quantitative approaches lies in the need to capture both the *depth* of lived experiences and the *distribution* of attitudes and behaviors across a broader student cohort. While qualitative methods allow for nuanced exploration of how and why students and teachers engage with AI, the inclusion of a Likert-scale questionnaire provides measurable patterns that enable triangulation and strengthen the study's analytical robustness.

The study was guided by the assumption that students' engagement with AI tools cannot be understood solely through survey-based responses or observational data alone. Rather, the integration of interviews, classroom observations, document analysis, and questionnaire responses was intended to capture the interaction between reported attitudes, observed practices, and pedagogical responses within actual classroom settings. The design and interpretation of the findings were guided by Sociocultural Theory and Critical Digital Pedagogy, which informed both data interpretation and the development of the study's conceptual model.

3.2 Research Context

The study was conducted at a private university located outside the major metropolitan educational centers of Bangladesh. The institution may be characterized as a peripheral university context due to a combination of infrastructural limitations, uneven digital access, varying levels of English proficiency among students, and limited institutional policy regarding AI integration in academic work. English foundation courses at the university typically include students from diverse socio-economic and educational backgrounds, many of whom are first-generation university learners or graduates of Bengali-medium educational institutions.

At the time of the study, the increasing availability of generative AI tools such as chatgpt had begun to influence classroom practices, assignment completion, and student learning behaviors. However, formal institutional guidelines regarding AI use in academic work remained limited, leaving individual teachers to negotiate classroom responses independently. This context provided an appropriate setting for investigating how students and teachers

navigate emerging AI-mediated learning practices within a resource-constrained ELT environment.

3.3 Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the research objectives. The study involved two participant groups:

- 40 undergraduate students enrolled in English foundation courses
- 6 ELT instructors involved in teaching, classroom assessment, and student writing evaluation

Student participants represented varying levels of English language proficiency and differing levels of familiarity with digital technologies and AI tools. Informal classroom interactions and questionnaire responses suggested substantial variation in students' ability to use AI strategically, particularly in relation to prompting practices, revision strategies, and evaluation of AI-generated responses.

Teacher participants were selected based on their direct experience with AI-related classroom challenges, including suspected AI-generated assignments, shifts in assessment practices, and changing patterns of student engagement. All participating instructors had experience teaching writing-focused or language-development courses at the undergraduate level.

To preserve anonymity, pseudonyms were used during transcription and reporting, and no identifying institutional or participant information was included in the study.

3.4 Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected over a three-month period through four complementary instruments: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, document analysis, and a Likert-scale questionnaire. The use of multiple instruments was intended to strengthen evidentiary depth and allow comparison between reported perceptions and observed classroom practices.

3.4.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with both students and teachers to explore patterns of AI use, perceptions of academic integrity, prompting practices, and changing assessment experiences. Interviews followed a flexible protocol that allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences while maintaining alignment with the study's central themes.

Student interviews focused on:

- purposes of AI use,
 - prompting strategies,
 - reliance on AI-generated outputs,
 - revision practices,
 - and perceptions of ethical acceptability
- Teacher interviews explored:
- experiences with AI-mediated assignments,
 - perceptions of assessment authenticity,
 - identification of AI-generated writing,
 - and pedagogical adaptations in response to increasing AI use.

Each interview lasted approximately 7–10 minutes. Interviews were conducted primarily in English, although participants occasionally shifted to Bengali for clarification or elaboration. Notes and partial transcriptions were produced following the interviews for thematic analysis.

3.4.2 Classroom Observations

Non-participant classroom observations were conducted across 10 class sessions to examine how AI-related practices emerged within actual learning environments. Observations focused on:

- student interaction with AI tools during classroom activities,

- prompting behavior,
- dependence on AI-generated responses,
- teacher reactions to suspected AI use,
- and shifts toward alternative assessment practices.

Particular attention was given to students' ability to formulate prompts and evaluate AI-generated outputs critically. In several observed instances, students entered broad or unclear prompts, accepted inaccurate responses without verification, or struggled to refine AI outputs meaningfully. These observations contributed significantly to the identification of uneven AI literacy and prompting competence as emerging analytical themes.

Field notes were recorded during and immediately after observed sessions to document classroom interaction patterns where using AI was allowed, assessment practices, and recurring behavioral tendencies.

3.4.3 Document Analysis

Document analysis was conducted using 25 selected student assignments and written classroom tasks. The purpose of this analysis was not to definitively "detect" AI-generated writing, but rather to examine patterns suggestive of AI mediation and to compare written output with students' demonstrated classroom performance.

The analysis focused on: linguistic consistency, abrupt shifts in writing proficiency, generic or formulaic responses, evidence of revision and personalization, and discrepancies between submitted writing and oral explanation.

Particular attention was paid to whether students appeared to critically engage with AI-generated content or simply reproduce outputs with minimal modification.

3.4.4 Questionnaire

A structured Likert-scale questionnaire was administered to all 40 student participants. The questionnaire consisted of 25 statements measured on a five-point scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree.” The items were designed to explore: frequency and purpose of AI use, perceptions of AI as a learning aid or shortcut, ethical attitudes toward AI-generated content, levels of dependency, awareness of AI limitations, and perceptions of assessment practices.

The questionnaire was developed based on recurring issues identified in the emerging literature on AI in education and refined to reflect the realities of the local ELT context. Prior to administration, several items were informally reviewed for clarity and comprehensibility among a small group of students outside the primary participant pool.

The questionnaire items were developed through a review of recent literature on generative AI, AI literacy, academic integrity, and AI-assisted learning in higher education. Several items were adapted from previously validated instruments examining students' AI use and ethical perceptions, while others were contextualized to reflect the realities of English Language Teaching (ELT) in a peripheral Bangladeshi university.

Prior to full administration, the questionnaire underwent informal pre-administration with a small group of students comparable to the target participants to assess question clarity, readability, and completion time. Feedback resulted in minor linguistic refinements without altering the substantive content of the instrument. To enhance content validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by two experienced academics specializing in applied linguistics and educational technology, whose feedback informed minor revisions to wording, clarity, and contextual relevance prior to administration.

Because the questionnaire was designed primarily as an exploratory descriptive instrument comprising multiple thematic dimensions rather than a single psychometric scale, the emphasis was placed on content validity and contextual relevance rather than internal consistency estimation.

3.5 Data Analysis

3.5.1 Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data from interviews, classroom observations, field notes, and document analysis were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. Analysis proceeded through several stages:

1. repeated familiarization with the data,
2. initial descriptive coding,
3. grouping of related codes,
4. development of broader thematic categories,
5. and refinement of themes through cross-comparison of data sources.

Interview transcripts, classroom observation notes, and documentary materials were analysed using a reflexive thematic analysis approach. Initial open coding was conducted to identify recurring concepts related to AI use, ethical perception, learning practices, and pedagogical responses. Similar codes were then iteratively grouped into broader categories through constant comparison, allowing higher-order themes to emerge inductively while remaining informed by the study's theoretical framework. To enhance analytical credibility, coding decisions were revisited throughout the analysis to ensure consistency and conceptual coherence across multiple data sources.

Coding focused on recurring patterns related to:

- AI-supported learning practices,
- academic outsourcing,
- prompting difficulties,
- uneven AI literacy,
- ethical perception,
- strategic paraphrasing,
- and pedagogical adaptation.

Themes were developed inductively from recurring classroom and interview patterns rather than being imposed entirely in advance. Triangulation across interviews, observations, questionnaire responses, and assignment analysis was used to strengthen interpretive consistency. Illustrative participant quotations were selected to represent recurrent themes rather than isolated opinions.

3.5.2 Quantitative Analysis

Questionnaire data were analyzed using descriptive statistical procedures, including:

- frequency distributions,
- percentage analysis,
- and mean response trends.

The quantitative findings were used primarily to identify broader attitudinal patterns and to compare these patterns with qualitative observations. Rather than functioning as a standalone statistical investigation, the quantitative component supported the interpretation and contextualization of the qualitative findings.

Given the exploratory nature of the study and the relatively small sample size ($n = 40$), quantitative analysis primarily employed descriptive statistics to summarize patterns of AI use, ethical perceptions, and assessment preferences. This approach was considered appropriate for identifying emerging trends within the selected institutional context rather than testing causal relationships or generating statistically generalizable findings. The quantitative results were subsequently triangulated with qualitative evidence to strengthen the credibility and interpretive depth of the overall analysis.

3.6 Integration of Data

Integration of qualitative and quantitative findings occurred during the interpretation stage. Patterns identified through thematic analysis were compared with questionnaire trends to examine areas of convergence and

divergence. For example, students' self-reported perceptions regarding ethical acceptability and AI dependency were examined alongside observed classroom behaviors and assignment practices. Similarly, reported confidence in AI use was compared with observed difficulties in prompting and critical evaluation of AI-generated responses.

This integrative process enabled a more nuanced understanding of how AI-mediated learning practices were experienced and negotiated within the observed ELT context.

3.7 Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Several measures were adopted to strengthen the trustworthiness of the study. The use of multiple data sources allowed for triangulation across interviews, observations, documents, and questionnaire responses. Repeated engagement with classroom settings and cross-comparison of participant responses helped reduce reliance on isolated observations or single-source interpretations.

All participants were informed about the purpose of the study prior to participation, and informed consent was obtained before data collection. Participation was voluntary, and participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential and would not affect their academic standing or professional responsibilities. To protect anonymity, all identifiable information was removed during analysis and reporting.

Given the sensitivity surrounding AI use and academic integrity, particular care was taken to create a non-punitive research environment in which participants could discuss their experiences openly without fear of disciplinary consequences. AI tools were used only for limited linguistic refinement during manuscript preparation; all data collection, interpretation, coding, and analytical decisions remained the responsibility of the researchers.

4. Findings

The findings of this study reveal that AI engagement in the observed peripheral ELT context is neither uniform nor binary. Instead, it exists along

a **spectrum of practices**, shaped by ethical perception, learning intention, and contextual constraints. The integration of qualitative data (interviews, observations, document analysis) with quantitative findings (Likert-scale responses) allows for a layered understanding of how students position AI within their academic practices and how teachers respond to these evolving dynamics.

4.1 AI as a Learning Scaffold: Strategic and Development-Oriented Use

A segment of students demonstrated **purposeful and reflective engagement** with AI tools, using them as scaffolds to enhance language learning rather than replace cognitive effort. These learners reported using AI for:

- Grammar correction
- Vocabulary enhancement
- Idea generation
- Draft refinement.

Interview responses suggest that such students perceived AI as a *supportive tutor*, particularly valuable in contexts where teacher feedback is limited or delayed. One participant noted:

“It helps me improve my sentences... I usually write first, then check with AI and see what I did wrong.”

In two observed classes, students were allowed to use AI and they frequently checked AI outputs on their phones before submitting short writing tasks. They engaged in **iterative writing processes**, often comparing their own drafts with AI-generated suggestions and making selective revisions.

Quantitative data supports this pattern. A majority of respondents (approximately **62%**) agreed or strongly agreed with statements indicating that AI helps them *learn better English*, while **57%** reported using AI to *improve their own writing rather than replace it*. These responses suggest that a significant proportion of students recognize AI’s pedagogical value when used critically.

However, even within this group, the depth of engagement varied. While some students actively interrogated AI outputs, others relied on surface-level corrections, indicating that *strategic use does not always equate to deep learning*. Nonetheless, this category aligns with the notion of AI functioning within the learner's Zone of Proximal Development, acting as a mediational tool that supports linguistic development.

These findings are broadly consistent with international research demonstrating that generative AI can function as an effective learning scaffold when learners engage critically with AI-generated feedback rather than relying on it uncritically (Kasneci et al., 2023; Tlili et al., 2023). Similar patterns have also been reported across higher education contexts, where AI supports language development, idea generation, and self-regulated learning, while simultaneously requiring pedagogical guidance to prevent superficial engagement.

4.2 AI Literacy, Prompting Practices, and Uneven Engagement

One of the recurring patterns observed across interviews, classroom observations, and assignment analysis was the uneven nature of students' AI literacy and prompting competence. Although many students had access to generative AI tools such as ChatGPT, access itself did not necessarily translate into effective or strategic engagement. Significant differences emerged in how students formulated prompts, interpreted AI-generated responses, revised outputs, and evaluated the accuracy or relevance of generated content.

Classroom observations revealed that a considerable number of students relied on highly generalized or incomplete prompts when interacting with AI systems. In several observed instances, students entered short commands such as "write paragraph," "give answer," or "summarize this" without providing contextual details, audience awareness, linguistic constraints, or task-specific instructions. As a result, the generated responses were often generic, repetitive, or partially unrelated to the intended task. Despite these limitations, many students accepted the first AI-generated response with minimal modification or critical evaluation.

This tendency was particularly noticeable among students with lower English language proficiency and weaker academic writing backgrounds. Some students appeared to assume that grammatically polished output automatically indicated accuracy or quality. During follow-up discussions, several participants acknowledged that they frequently struggled to determine whether AI-generated responses were contextually appropriate or factually reliable. One student remarked:

“Sometimes the answer looks very smart, but actually it does not match the question fully. Still many students use it because the language looks advanced.”

Another participant explained:

“If the first response is difficult or confusing, I usually copy another answer instead of changing the prompt because I do not really know how to ask properly.”

Then another added, “Sir, I asked the question to chatgpt and could not find any satisfactory answer but when you did, it worked. Maybe you know it better, that’s why!”

These findings suggest that students’ interaction with AI tools was shaped not only by ethical choices or convenience, but also by varying levels of prompting competence and evaluative ability. In many cases, students lacked the metalinguistic awareness necessary to refine prompts iteratively, identify inaccuracies, or adapt generated responses meaningfully to assignment requirements. Rather than engaging in extended interaction with AI systems, many students relied on one-step prompting practices that prioritized speed and task completion over learning engagement.

Teacher interviews further reinforced these observations. Several instructors noted that students often perceived AI use as a shortcut to polished language without fully understanding the content being produced. One instructor observed:

“Some students can submit sophisticated-looking writing, but when asked to explain the same ideas orally, they struggle significantly. It becomes clear that they are depending on the output without processing it.”

Another teacher highlighted that stronger students tended to interact with AI more strategically:

“Students with better English proficiency usually know how to modify prompts, ask follow-up questions, and improve the response. Others just copy whatever appears first.”

This disparity indicates that AI engagement within the observed ELT context was not uniform. Instead, students’ ability to benefit from AI tools appeared closely connected to their existing linguistic competence, digital familiarity, and critical awareness. In this sense, AI did not simply function as an equalizing educational resource. Rather, it often reproduced or intensified existing differences in academic preparedness and communicative ability.

Document analysis also reflected these uneven interaction patterns. Some assignments demonstrated evidence of selective revision, personalization, and adaptation of AI-generated material, while others contained abrupt shifts in vocabulary level, generic phrasing, or inconsistent argumentative structure. In several cases, students were unable to explain sophisticated lexical choices or organizational patterns appearing in their own submitted work, suggesting limited engagement with the generated content itself.

Taken together, these findings indicate that AI-mediated learning practices within the observed peripheral ELT context were characterized by uneven engagement rather than uniform technological competence. While some students used AI as a supplementary learning resource, others struggled to interact with it critically or strategically. The findings therefore complicate simplistic assumptions that AI access automatically enhances learning outcomes. Instead, they point toward the growing importance of AI literacy, prompting competence, and critical evaluative skills as emerging dimensions of language learning and assessment in AI-mediated educational environments.

4.3 AI as an Academic Shortcut: Conscious Outsourcing and Cognitive Disengagement

In contrast, a substantial portion of students engaged in **direct academic outsourcing**, using AI to generate complete assignments with minimal or no personal input. This pattern was consistently observed across interviews, classroom behavior, and document analysis.

Teachers reported encountering assignments that were:

- Structurally flawless
- Linguistically advanced beyond the student's known proficiency
- Lacking coherence when students were asked to explain their work

One instructor remarked:

"Some students submit perfect writing, but when asked, they cannot explain even one sentence."

Document analysis revealed instances where students submitted AI-generated content **verbatim**, often without removing formatting markers or making any edits—what was described as *"without a single cursor touch."*

Quantitative findings reinforce this trend. Approximately **48%** of respondents admitted (agree/strongly agree) that they have used AI to complete assignments when they were under time pressure or lacked understanding. Additionally, **41%** indicated that they sometimes rely on AI to *finish tasks quickly*, rather than to learn.

This category reflects a form of **cognitive disengagement**, where learning is replaced by task completion. Students in this group do not necessarily lack awareness of AI's implications but prioritize efficiency over engagement. Their behavior aligns with a performative model of education, where success is measured by submission rather than understanding.

Category	Percentage (%)
AI supports learning	62%
AI use under time pressure	48%
AI not perceived as misconduct	58%
AI use is normalized	61%
Ability to evaluate AI accuracy	38%

Figure 1: Key Patterns of AI Use and Perception Among Students

To further examine the relationships among the major dimensions of AI engagement, Spearman's rank-order correlation analysis was conducted using composite scores for the five thematic constructs. The analysis revealed moderate positive associations between AI literacy and ethical perception, suggesting that students with stronger critical understanding of AI demonstrated greater awareness of the ethical implications of its academic use. AI literacy was also positively correlated with learning-oriented AI use, indicating that students with higher AI literacy were more likely to employ AI as a pedagogical support rather than merely as a task-completion tool. Furthermore, support for assessment reform was positively associated with both AI literacy and learning-oriented AI use, reinforcing the qualitative findings that increasing AI engagement necessitates pedagogical adaptation and more authentic assessment practices. [This rank-order analysis data is available in a data repository and would become available upon request]

4.4 AI as a Veil: Strategic Paraphrasing and Concealment Practices

Between the extremes of learning-oriented use and outright outsourcing lies a third category: students who use AI as a **concealment mechanism**. These

learners are aware of institutional expectations and potential scrutiny, and therefore adopt strategies to mask AI involvement.

Common practices include:

- Paraphrasing AI-generated content
- Rewriting selected sections
- Combining AI output with minimal personal input

One student explained:

“I don’t copy directly. I change some words and sentences so it looks like mine.”

This group demonstrates a form of **strategic compliance**, where the objective is not learning, but avoiding detection. Unlike the “shortcut” group, these students exhibit a degree of awareness regarding academic norms, yet this awareness does not translate into ethical engagement.

Quantitative data reflects this pattern. Around **52%** of respondents agreed that *modifying AI-generated content makes it acceptable to submit*, indicating a widespread perception that **paraphrasing legitimizes AI use**. This reveals a critical misunderstanding of authorship and originality.

From an analytical perspective, this category is particularly significant because it blurs the boundary between acceptable assistance and academic misconduct. It also highlights how students internalize institutional expectations in ways that prioritize *appearance over authenticity*.

4.5 Ethical Disengagement and the Normalization of AI Use (“Que Sera Sera” Attitude)

Perhaps the most striking finding is the emergence of **ethical indifference** among a segment of students. Rather than actively justifying or concealing AI use, these learners exhibit a *detached, normalized attitude*, treating AI as an inevitable and unproblematic part of academic work.

This can be described as a **“Que sera sera” orientation**, where students neither strongly defend nor critically reflect on their use of AI. Instead, they adopt a pragmatic stance:

“Everyone is using it. So it’s normal.”
“If it helps, why not use it fully?”

Such responses suggest a shift from rule-based ethics to **situational pragmatism**, where behavior is guided by perceived norms rather than institutional principles.

Quantitative findings strongly support this observation. Nearly **58%** of respondents indicated that they do not consider using AI-generated content as *serious misconduct*, while **61%** agreed that AI is now a “normal part of student work.” This indicates a **collective normalization** of AI-mediated practices.

This ethical normalization is not necessarily rooted in ignorance but appears to be shaped by:

- Lack of clear institutional guidelines
- Inconsistent enforcement
- Perceived irrelevance of traditional academic norms

As a result, ethical boundaries become fluid, and AI use is integrated into everyday academic routines without significant moral deliberation.

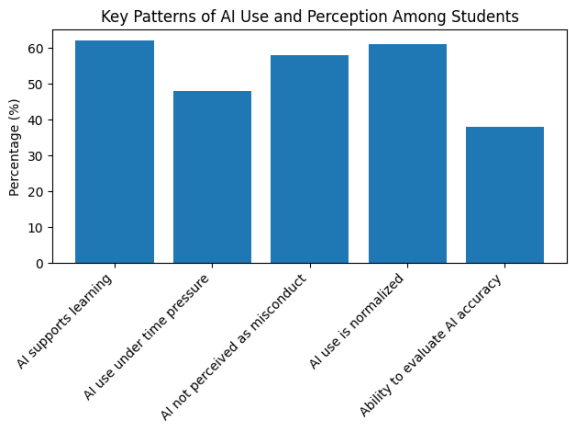


Figure 2: Key patterns of AI use and perception among students, highlighting the coexistence of high AI use and normalization with comparatively lower levels of critical evaluation ability.

The present findings also resonate with emerging international scholarship suggesting that concerns surrounding academic integrity extend beyond plagiarism to encompass broader issues of cognitive outsourcing, learner agency, and responsible AI use (Eaton, 2024; UNESCO, 2023). Rather than viewing AI solely as an academic threat, recent studies increasingly emphasize the importance of cultivating ethical AI literacy through assessment redesign and institutional policy.

4.6 Digital Divide and Uneven AI Literacy

Another key finding concerns the **uneven distribution of AI literacy** among students. While access to AI tools is relatively widespread, the ability to use them effectively and critically varies significantly.

Some students demonstrated:

- Awareness of AI limitations
- Ability to evaluate and refine outputs
- Strategic integration into learning processes

Others, however:

- Relied on AI without understanding content
- Failed to detect inaccuracies
- Used AI as a default solution without reflection

Quantitative data reveals this disparity. While **65%** of respondents reported frequent use of AI tools, only **38%** expressed confidence in their ability to evaluate the accuracy of AI-generated content. This gap between usage and critical competence highlights a form of **functional dependency**.

This uneven AI literacy reinforces existing educational inequalities, where more **सक्षम** students benefit from AI as a learning tool, while others become increasingly dependent on it for task completion.

4.7 Teacher Perceptions and the Crisis of Assessment Authenticity

Teachers consistently reported a growing **crisis of authenticity** in assessment practices. Traditional written assignments, particularly take-home tasks, were widely perceived as unreliable indicators of student ability.

Key concerns included:

- Inability to distinguish AI-generated vs human writing
- Mismatch between written submissions and oral performance
- Erosion of trust between teachers and students

One instructor stated:

“We are no longer sure what we are assessing—the student or the machine.”

This uncertainty has led to increased skepticism toward written work and a growing reliance on alternative evaluation methods.

4.8 Pedagogical Adaptation: Shift Toward Offline and Gamified Assessment

In response to these challenges, teachers reported experimenting with **offline, in-class, and gamified assessment strategies**. These approaches aim to:

- Reduce dependence on AI tools
- Capture real-time student performance
- Reintroduce engagement and interaction into assessment

Examples include:

- In-class writing tasks
- Oral defense of assignments
- Game-based language activities
- Collaborative problem-solving exercises

Teachers noted that these methods not only limit AI misuse but also **increase student participation and motivation**. However, they also acknowledged practical constraints, such as time limitations and large class sizes.

In the periphery we think, the goal isn't just to "use AI," but to ensure AI doesn't widen the gap between the wealthy and the marginalized. By focusing on **pedagogical recalibration**, we put the human teacher back at the center of the experience.- A teacher noted.

In many peripheral areas of Bangladesh, the "digital divide" is real, but AI can still be leveraged creatively without requiring every student to have a high-end laptop. Teacher as the AI Gateway,Offline-First AI Tools,Critical Media Literacy & Assessment shift can really do the trick.- Another teacher remarked.

Quantitative data indirectly supports this shift. A majority of students (**67%**) agreed that they perform differently in *in-class or interactive tasks compared*

Generative AI in Peripheral University ELT: From Pedagogical Catalyst to Academic Shortcut to take-home assignments, suggesting that such formats may better reflect actual competence.

Comparable pedagogical responses have been documented in universities across Australia, Europe, and North America, where educators increasingly employ authentic, process-oriented, and in-class assessments to preserve meaningful learning while accommodating responsible AI use (Perkins et al., 2024). The convergence of these findings suggests that although institutional contexts differ, concerns regarding assessment authenticity have become a shared challenge across diverse higher education systems.

5. Synthesis Of Findings

Taken together, the findings reveal that AI engagement in this context is shaped by a complex interplay of:

- **Learning intention (scaffold vs shortcut)**
- **Ethical perception (engagement vs indifference)**
- **Strategic behavior (veil/paraphrasing)**
- **Institutional conditions (assessment design, policy gaps)**
- **AI Literacy Gap**

Rather than a simple dichotomy, AI functions simultaneously as:

- **A pedagogical resource**
- **A performance optimization tool**
- **A concealment mechanism**
- **A normalized academic practice**

At the same time, teachers are actively renegotiating their pedagogical approaches, indicating that the impact of AI is not unidirectional but part of an evolving educational ecosystem, and all may adapt for the greater good.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study complicate dominant narratives surrounding artificial intelligence (AI) in English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly those that frame the issue in binary terms of benefit versus misuse. Viewed through the combined lenses of Sociocultural Theory and Critical Digital Pedagogy, these findings demonstrate that AI functions not merely as a technological tool but as a socially mediated educational resource whose impact depends on learners' agency, institutional context, and pedagogical design. Rather than positioning AI as either an educational facilitator or an academic threat, the results indicate that AI operates as a force shaped by students' habits, institutional constraints, and assessment design. This suggests something important: AI is not just introducing new challenges but amplifies and exposes pre-existing tensions within educational systems. Although the quantitative findings are exploratory and should not be generalized beyond the study context, they provide useful empirical patterns that, when interpreted alongside qualitative evidence, offer a more nuanced understanding of AI engagement within peripheral university ELT settings.

One of the most significant contributions of this study lies in its identification of **ethical Complacency as a normalized orientation** rather than an exceptional behavior. The emergence of a “Que sera sera” attitude among students suggests a shift away from rule-based academic integrity toward a more pragmatic, situational ethic. This aligns with broader critiques in the literature which argue that students' engagement with AI cannot be reduced to individual moral failure. Instead, it reflects an adaptive response to systems where learning is increasingly instrumentalized and where outcomes are often prioritized over processes. In such environments, the use of AI as a shortcut becomes not only possible but rational. High levels of AI use and normalization coexist with limited ability to evaluate AI accuracy.

Some even don't know to operate or use proper prompt for the best possible output that creates uneven access and operation more worst.

Closely related to this is the phenomenon of **performative learning**, where students prioritize the production of acceptable outputs over the internalization of knowledge. The widespread use of AI for task completion—particularly under time pressure—demonstrates how learning has, in many cases, been

reduced to a form of performance optimized for evaluation. This resonates with concerns raised by Tikhonova and Raitskaya (2023), who highlight how AI-generated writing destabilizes the relationship between authorship and competence. In the present study, this disconnect is particularly evident in cases where students submit linguistically sophisticated work but are unable to explain or reproduce it independently.

However, the findings also reveal that student engagement with AI is not uniformly superficial. A subset of learners demonstrates **strategic and development-oriented use**, employing AI as a scaffold to enhance their linguistic competence. This supports sociocultural interpretations of AI as a mediational tool capable of extending learners' Zone of Proximal Development. Yet, even within this group, the depth of engagement varies, suggesting that the presence of AI alone does not guarantee meaningful learning. Instead, its effectiveness depends on the learner's ability to critically interact with the tool—an ability that is unevenly distributed across the student population.

This unevenness brings into focus the issue of **epistemic inequality**, particularly within peripheral educational contexts. While AI is often framed as a democratizing technology, the findings suggest that access alone does not ensure equitable outcomes. Students with higher levels of digital literacy and linguistic competence are better positioned to leverage AI productively, while others become dependent on it for task completion. This reinforces existing disparities rather than mitigating them, supporting arguments that technological adoption without adequate pedagogical support can exacerbate inequality rather than reduce it.

The concept of **peripherality** is central to understanding these dynamics. In the context examined, institutional ambiguity, limited regulatory frameworks, and resource constraints contribute to a learning environment where AI use is neither clearly guided nor effectively monitored. This lack of structured integration allows both productive and problematic uses of AI to proliferate simultaneously. As a result, AI becomes a **contested pedagogical actor**, shaped not only by its technical capabilities but also by the absence of coherent institutional responses.

Another key insight emerging from the study is the role of **strategic compliance**, particularly among students who use AI as a veil through paraphrasing and partial modification. This behavior indicates that students are not entirely unaware of academic norms; rather, they are negotiating these norms in ways that prioritize plausibility over authenticity. This aligns with the notion that students are adapting to perceived expectations rather than internalizing ethical principles. Such practices blur the boundaries between acceptable assistance and misconduct, making traditional definitions of academic integrity increasingly difficult to sustain.

Importantly, the study also highlights that the impact of AI is not limited to student behavior but extends to **pedagogical practices and teacher agency**. The reported shift toward offline, in-class, and gamified assessments reflects an emerging effort among educators to reclaim control over the learning process and restore authenticity in evaluation. These adaptations suggest that the challenge of AI is fundamentally pedagogical rather than purely technological. By redesigning assessment formats to emphasize process, interaction, and real-time performance, teachers are attempting to realign evaluation with actual competence.

However, these responses are not without limitations. Constraints such as large class sizes, limited time, and institutional inertia may hinder the widespread adoption of alternative assessment models. Moreover, the move toward AI-resistant assessment raises important questions about sustainability and scalability, particularly in resource-constrained environments. It also risks framing AI as something to be avoided rather than integrated thoughtfully into pedagogy.

When these findings are considered together, a more complex picture emerges. The findings suggest that AI is not simply transforming ELT but **reconfiguring the conditions under which learning is produced, evaluated, and understood**. The distinction between learning and performance is becoming increasingly blurred, and traditional markers of competence are losing their reliability. In this context, the role of educators shifts from content delivery to the design of learning environments that can accommodate, rather than resist, technological change.

Ultimately, the study underscores the need to move beyond reactive approaches focused on detection and prevention. Instead, there is a pressing need for **proactive, context-sensitive pedagogical frameworks** that integrate AI into the learning process while maintaining ethical clarity and educational integrity. Such frameworks must account for the realities of peripheral contexts as to resource constrained settings, where institutional support may be limited and where students navigate complex socio-economic and academic pressures.

While the present findings align with broader international discussions on generative AI in higher education, the study also demonstrates that AI integration within peripheral universities is shaped by context-specific institutional realities, including uneven digital infrastructure, limited policy guidance, and disparities in AI literacy. Consequently, strategies developed in well-resourced educational settings cannot be transferred uncritically to peripheral contexts without considering local pedagogical, technological, and socio-economic conditions.

7. Conclusion and Implications

What is perhaps most concerning is not the use of AI itself, but how easily it aligns with existing assessment practices. However, this study set out to examine how artificial intelligence (AI) is being engaged, interpreted, and negotiated within a peripheral ELT context. The findings demonstrate that AI use cannot be adequately understood through binary distinctions such as beneficial versus harmful or ethical versus unethical. Instead, AI emerges as a **multi-functional, context-sensitive phenomenon**—simultaneously operating as a scaffold for learning, a shortcut for task completion, a veil for concealment, and a normalized component of academic practice.

A central conclusion of this study is that **ethical disengagement is not incidental but increasingly normalized**. Many students do not perceive uncritical AI use as a serious violation, reflecting a shift from principle-based academic integrity toward pragmatic, outcome-oriented behavior. This shift is closely tied to the broader **performative nature of contemporary education**, where success is often measured through submission and grading rather than genuine cognitive development. In such environments, AI becomes a logical extension of existing practices rather than a disruptive anomaly.

At the same time, the study highlights that AI use is **stratified rather than uniform**. While some learners engage critically and use AI as a developmental tool, others rely on it unreflectively, leading to cognitive dependency. This uneven engagement underscores the presence of **epistemic inequality**, where differences in digital literacy and linguistic competence shape the extent to which students benefit from—or become dependent on—AI technologies. In peripheral contexts, these disparities are further intensified by limited institutional guidance and infrastructural constraints.

Another key finding is the emergence of **pedagogical adaptation among teachers**, particularly the shift toward offline, in-class, and gamified assessment strategies. These responses indicate that educators are actively attempting to restore authenticity and realign assessment with actual competence. However, such adaptations also reveal the limitations of

traditional assessment models and the need for more sustainable, scalable solutions that move beyond reactive measures.

Taken together, the study suggests that AI is not merely influencing ELT practices but is actively **reconfiguring the epistemological foundations of learning and assessment**. The boundary between learning and performance is increasingly blurred, and the reliability of conventional indicators of competence is being fundamentally challenged.

Implications

For Teachers:

Educators might think of moving beyond prohibition-based approaches and instead design **AI-integrated, process-oriented assessments** that emphasize critical engagement. Incorporating AI literacy into classroom instruction is essential to help students understand not only how to use AI tools but how to evaluate and engage with them responsibly.

For Institutions:

There is an urgent need for **clear, context-sensitive policies** that address AI use without resorting to simplistic bans. Institutions must invest in teacher training, assessment redesign, and the development of frameworks that balance innovation with accountability.

For Policy Makers:

In peripheral contexts, addressing **digital inequality** is crucial. Access to AI must be accompanied by efforts to build digital competence and critical awareness. Policies should support pedagogical innovation while recognizing the structural constraints faced by under-resourced institutions.

For Research:

Future studies should continue to explore AI use through **contextually grounded, mixed-method approaches**, particularly in underrepresented regions. There is also a need for longitudinal research examining how sustained exposure to AI influences learning trajectories, cognitive development, and academic norms over time.

In the peripheral classrooms of Bangladesh- where aspiration intersects with constraint- as many struggles even economically to afford devices and other relevant items, AI does not merely assist language learning; it reshapes the very conditions under which learning is performed, evaluated, and understood. Its presence demands not resistance alone, but a **critically informed pedagogical recalibration**- one that restores meaning to learning while engaging responsibly with the realities of technological transformation.

Ultimately, the challenge facing higher education is not whether generative AI should be adopted, but how institutions can cultivate AI-literate, ethically responsible learners while preserving authentic learning within increasingly AI-mediated educational environments.

Limitations & Future Scope of Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings. First, the study was conducted within a single peripheral university in Bangladesh using a relatively small sample of undergraduate students, which limits the statistical generalizability of the quantitative findings. Second, the study reflects a context-specific institutional environment characterized by uneven digital infrastructure, localized pedagogical practices, and resource constraints that may differ from other higher education settings. While these contextual characteristics strengthen the study's contribution to Global South scholarship, caution should be exercised when transferring the findings directly to more technologically advanced or institutionally diverse contexts.

Future research should extend this line of inquiry by undertaking longitudinal investigations that examine how students' AI literacy, ethical perceptions, and learning practices evolve over time as generative AI becomes increasingly embedded within higher education. Comparative studies involving multiple universities across peripheral and metropolitan contexts would also provide valuable insights into how institutional environments influence AI adoption, assessment practices, and pedagogical innovation. Additionally, future research may explore discipline-specific patterns of AI use and evaluate the effectiveness of AI literacy interventions in promoting responsible and ethical engagement with generative AI.

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[Appendices & Data are available on request]