



Education and Humanities

Volume 6



E-ISSN: 2744-2373

mapub.org/mapeh



Education and Humanities



JOURNAL

MAP Education and Humanities

Volume 6

PUBLISHER

MAP - Multidisciplinary Academic Publishing

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Edda Polz, PhD, *University College of Teacher Education in Lower Austria, Baden, Austria*

EDITORIAL BOARD

Mirna Begagić, PhD, *University of Zenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina*

Amna Brdarević Čeljo, PhD, *International Burch University, Bosnia and Herzegovina*

Teodora Popescu, PhD, *1 Decembrie 1918 University, Alba Iulia, Romania*

Marlena Bielak, PhD, *Stanisław Staszic University of Applied Sciences in Piła, Poland*

Ericson Alieto, PhD, *Western Mindanao State University, Philippines*

Yuliya Shtaltovna, PhD, *International School of Management, Germany*

Žana Gavrilovic, PhD, *University of East Sarajevo*

Oscar Yecid Aparicio Gómez, PhD, *Universitat de Barcelona, Spain*

Eva Gröstenberger, PhD, *University College of Teacher Education
in Burgenland, Eisenstadt, Austria*

Nuri Balta, PhD, *Suleyman Demirel University, Kazakhstan*

Barbara Geyer, PhD, *University of Applied Sciences, FH Burgenland, Austria*

Bujar Adili, PhD, *University of Tetova, North Macedonia*

Florian Andrei Vlad, PhD, *University of Constanta, Romania*

E-MAIL

mapeh@mapub.org



Volume 6



E-ISSN: 2744-2373

CONTENTS

- 1 **FRONTSTAGE AND BACKSTAGE BELF EMAIL COMMUNICATION: A CASE STUDY OF A TURKISH BOSNIAN COMPANY**
Elma Dedovic Atlla, Merima Ibranovic-Salihovic, Nizama Spahic
- 14 **CHALLENGES FACED BY HIGH SCHOOL, UNIVERSITY, AND ADULT LANGUAGE LEARNERS WHILE SPEAKING ENGLISH**
Sedina Selimović-Korjenić
- 24 **AQUA VITAE: THE INNER SEASCAPE OF SYLVIA PLATH**
Ajla Smajic
- 40 **THE IMPACT OF FEMALE LEADERSHIP ON ESG PRIORITIES IN SMES: EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FROM BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA**
Marina Ridić; Nedim Celebic, Emir Ganić
- 51 **THE IMPACT OF DRAMA IN LEARNING AND TEACHING LANGUAGE/INTEGRATING DRAMA IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION**
Ajla Medanhodzic
- 61 **ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE POLICIES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION: MANIFESTO FOR CRITICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND A ROADMAP**
Christian M. Stracke, Nurun Nahar, Veronica Punzo, Stefania Massaro, Dimitra Pappa, Annamaria Di Grassi, Senad Bećirović, Paul Hollins, Xenia Ziouvelou, Marjana Prifti Skenduli, Daniel Burgos
- 74 **LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY AND LANGUAGE VARIETIES IN THE EUROPEAN UNION: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTEGRATION AND POLICY**
Ludmila Waschak
- 81 **THE USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN VIENNESE MIDDLE SCHOOLS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY INTO VIENNESE MIDDLE SCHOOLS**
Benjamin Jones
- 109 **PEDAGOGICAL VOICE OR ALGORITHMIC AUTHORITY? A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF AI TUTORS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING**
Ajla Aljović

ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

FRONTSTAGE AND BACKSTAGE BELF EMAIL COMMUNICATION: A CASE STUDY OF A TURKISH-BOSNIAN COMPANY

Elma Dedović-Atilla¹ , Merima Ibranović-Salihović² ,
Nizama Spahić³ 

^{1,2,3} International Burch University, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Elma Dedović-Atilla, International Burch University, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. E-mail: elma.dedovic-atilla@ibu.edu.ba

ABSTRACT

English has assumed the role of a global business lingua franca (BELF) at the turn of the 21st century, with an ever-increasing number of multinational corporations (MNCs) adopting English as either their official corporate language, or, the working language as a natural byproduct of a company's linguascape. This paper investigates the use of English in a business context drawing from the BELF paradigm, i.e. it sets out to compare and contrast the frontstage and backstage English in a multinational organization in written (email) communication, as an answer to a call by Kankaanranta et al. (2018), as this specific kind of study within this genre is still underrepresented and under-researched within the Global South setting.

The emails used in this study were collected from a small-sized Turkish-Bosnian international company based in B&H with a total of 10 employees. The approach adopted for the analysis of the study is discourse-analytical in its essence, supported by corpus analysis instruments. The analysis showed that the backstage English, primarily used among employees for internal communication, is indeed in most cases characterized by BELF features. Conversely, frontstage English, was shown to be aligned more closely with native English norms due to its role in corporate branding and external communication, although showing some variability as well. It is expected that the results of the study will help in understanding English communication nuances within this particular business context and help businesses foster clearer, more effective interactions across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Keywords: BELF, email communication, frontstage English, backstage English



MAP EDUCATION
AND HUMANITIES

Volume 6

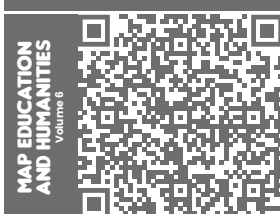
ISSN: 2744-2373 / © The Authors.
Published by MAP - Multidisciplinary
Academic Publishing.

Article Submitted: 06 May 2025
Article Accepted: 16 June 2025
Article Published: 17 June 2025



Publisher's Note: MAP stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

<https://doi.org/10.53880/2744-2373.2025.6.1>



HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Dedović-Atilla E., Ibranović-Salihović M., Spahić N. (2025). **Frontstage and backstage BELF email communication: a case study of a Turkish-Bosnian company.**

MAP Education and Humanities, 6, 1-13. doi: <https://doi.org/10.53880/2744-2373.2025.6.1>



© The Author(s). **Open Access Article**
Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.



Conceptual Background

As a result of complex geographical-historical and sociocultural considerations, towards the turn of the millennium, English has assumed the role of the global language used across different walks of life and for various purposes (Crystal, 2003). Among others, the business sector has witnessed its increasing prevalence throughout the globalization process, with an ever-increasing number of multinational corporations (MNCs) adopting English as either their official corporate language, or, the working language as a natural byproduct of a company's linguascape (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2013). As businesses transcended their mono nature and grew into multinational, multicultural, multilingual and multimodal organizations, or even into (translingual, transcultural and) transnational entities (e.g. Canagarajah, 2020; Räisänen, 2018), the underlying principles of language use within these peculiar workplace environments have come to the forefront of academic research. While acknowledging the interplay between different (both local and global) languages, most research still accentuates and explores the role of English as the lingua franca of the business world (e.g. Alharbi, 2016; Björge, 2007; Dedović-Atilla & Dubravac, 2022; Ehrenreich, 2010; Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010, 2013; Nickerson, 2005; Pullin, 2013; Takino, 2016, 2019, 2020; Yao & Du-Babcock, 2020).

This growing body of research, however, has sprouted from two different conceptual approaches and academic fields: one from the field of international management as a part of business communication studies, where English is seen as one of the instruments to be employed for successful organizational management (e.g., Piekkari et al. 2014); and another one from the field of applied linguistics and sociolinguistics, as a part of English for business purposes paradigm, highlighting underpinning features of usage among users from different linguistic backgrounds (e.g., Ehrenreich 2010; Canagarajah, 2006; Cogo 2012, Pullin, 2010). These two strands of research seem to have gradually converged in terms of studies and pedagogical considerations, as they share the same interests and concerns (Bhatia & Bremner, 2012). One of the resulting theoretical constructs out of this pool of research is the concept of BELF, initially proposed by Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005). The notion, standing for English as a/the business lingua franca, has since been the subject of numerous studies (see the studies in the section ELF and

BELF), generating further insights and expanding the original proposition. This paper draws from this theoretical approach as well: more specifically, it sets out to compare and contrast the frontstage and backstage English in a multinational organization in written (email) communication, as an answer to the call by Kankaanranta et al (2018). This specific kind of study within this genre is still underrepresented and under-researched, particularly in this part of the Global South. Therefore, to bridge this research gap, this present study examines a pool of 125 English emails that a small-sized international Bosnian Turkish real-estate and design company located in B&H has either sent or received.

At this juncture, however, theoretical background and review of previous research in the following areas will be presented to provide a comprehensive introduction and rationale to the study subject: ELF and BELF, email communication in English, and frontstage and backstage English.

ELF and BELF

There have been varying definitions of ELF (English as a lingua franca) that can be, in simple terms, summarized to refer to 'communication in English between speakers with different first languages' (Seidlhofer, 2005, p. 339). All other definitions underscore the same key notions, with the greatest dissenting point in the early stages being whether native English speakers should be included in the mix, with some early scholars excluding the group (e.g., House, 1999). However, today EFL interactions are understood to include both groups (Jenkins, 2006). ELF research is rather vast, and its divergent findings are beyond the scope of this paper; therefore, we will focus here on the quintessential features of ELF in business contexts, i.e. BELF, as this is the setting probed by this study.

BELF is described as a 'neutral and shared communication code' (Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005, p. 404) utilized within the international business community with the main purpose of getting the job done (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010), which implies that it is owned by nobody and everybody, can not be linked to one specific community, rejecting the placement of native English speakers as measuring yardsticks for linguistic competence. Other features of BELF include the following: business-related vocabulary and the shared genre knowledge are crucial, as opposed to general vocabulary and, especially,

grammatical accuracy, as 'a grammatically and lexically "correct" message does not necessarily do the job, but a message with many "mistakes" may do so' (Kankaanranta, 2007, p. 56), thus pointing towards the relevance of the content over the form; dominance of 'let it pass' (Firth, 1996, p. 243) strategy, i.e. linguistic anomalies are ignored, as long as the meaning is clear (e.g., Pitzl, 2005; Rogerson-Revell, 2008); clarity, directness and simplicity are of utmost importance to get the message across (e.g., Cogo, 2016; Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2011; Pullin, 2013); backchanneling is frequently employed (e.g., Björge, 2010; Cogo, 2016); non-verbal communication strategies (e.g., Birlik & Kaur, 2020) and sociocultural competence (e.g., understanding different accents) (Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2011) seem to be critical in constructing a shared meaning; BELF is highly pragmatic, as hybridity, variation, flexibility, fluidity and adaptation are at its very core (Ehrenreich, 2010), and imply strategies such as simplification, code-switching/mixing and/or repetition (Choi, 2014, p. 17); rapport and trust building are pervasive, through strategies such as politeness (Nielsen, 2019), small talk (Cogo & Dewey, 2006); inclusion of local languages (e.g., Ehrenreich, 2010; Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2011; Pullin, 2010, 2013; Virkkula-Räisänen, 2010), or comic relief (e.g., Holmes, 2000, 2006; Kangasharju & Nikko, 2009); finally, accommodation and adaptation strategies (e.g., Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2011; Nielson, 2019), as well as multicultural competence (e.g., Baker, 2009; Räisänen, 2016) also seem to be a part and parcel of BELF interactions. Overall, all these traits point to a shift in understanding English in business settings from a BELF perspective: the focus should not be placed on linguistic competence, but on the (global) communicative competence, where BELF is just one of its integral parts, together with business know-how and multicultural competence (Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2011); in addition, research and interpretation of communicative acts should not be conducted on isolated samples of discourse, as all communication is context-bound, and has to be analyzed as such (e.g., Nickerson, 2005).

The studies yielding these results focused on exploring several communicative genres, including: business face-to-face meetings and video conferences (e.g., Louhiala-Salminen & Charles, 2006; Nikko, 2009; Ehrenreich, 2010; Du-Babcock & Varner, 2008; Du-Babcock & Tanaka, 2010), negotiations (e.g., Charles, 1996; Planken, 2005, Vuorela, 2005), as well as written

communication, which in most cases focused on email communication, as a prevalent form of business written communication in recent times. Therefore, the next section elaborates on earlier research on emails.

Email Communication: Previous Research

Email is recognized as the mainstay of business communication and is the most frequently used mode of communication in both in-house and external communication within the workplace (Guffey and Leowy, 2022). It is estimated that overall e-mail traffic, as the main mode of computer-mediated communication continues increasing 4 percent per year worldwide (The Radicati Group, 2019). Considering its undisputed popularity as a professional communication channel and its uniqueness as a channel that combines speech, writing and electronically mediated properties (e.g., Herring, 2004), numerous studies have been conducted on email communication in English.

Thus, a significant amount of research has been conducted in relation to email style, register, organizational patterns, or lexis and grammar (e.g., Dedović-Atilla & Dubravac 2022; Gains, 1999; Gimenez, 2000; Incelli, 2013; Kankaanranta, 2004; Nickerson, 2000, Rice, 1997, Roshid & al, 2018). Numerous studies investigated speech acts in emails, most frequently requests (e.g., Hofweber & Jaworska, 2022; Pan, 2012; Zhu, 2017). Some research, however, focused more on the interpersonal aspects of email communication, such as politeness, power balance, professional voices, or culture (e.g., Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris 1996, Jensen, 2009; Lindgren, 2014; Millot, 2017, Richard & McFadden, 2016). This study will focus on exploring a few underlying features of BELF emails, including lexicogrammatical features, and email style and structure, within the context of frontstage and backstage email communication as proposed by Kankaanranta et al (2018). The concept is presented in the section below.

Frontage and backstage English within "English as a Corporate Language" paradigm

In their proposition of the frontstage and backstage English dichotomy comprising an MNO's corporate language, Kankaanranta et al (2018) rely on Goffmanian (1959) dramaturgical metaphor of human social encounters with the language being at the core of interactions. The authors develop two

representations of English as corporate language. The frontstage English is seen as the official language and is characterized by the following: it represents the voice of the company; standard English as a native language (ENL) is a given; it is instrumental for corporate image and implies top-down approach (determined by the native speaker norm and the corporate management); it is typically used in one-way external communication. Conversely, the backstage English is seen as the working language and involves the following: it is used among individual MNC employees and is normally seen in two-way internal communication where the meaning can be negotiated; it emerges from bottom-up communication and is highly context-bound and it reflects linguistic, cultural and professional backgrounds of its users. Thus, the authors suggest that the frontstage English is ENL English, which is usually seen in public genres directed to an outside audience, such as corporate websites, news, and official releases (e.g., social media content), while backstage English is essentially BELF (seen in regular email in-house exchange). As no research has been done to test this proposition so far in the Global South context, this study would like to contribute to this conceptual paradigm exploration and investigate the email genre only, by focusing on two types of emails: the official ones sent out to the outside public by the company or received as the official letters by others (e.g., email marketing emails and announcements) and the unofficial ones used among the company employees.

Research Methodology

The emails used in this study were collected from a small-sized construction and real estate international company based in B&H with a total of 10 employees. The data covered a filtered selection of a total of 125 emails written in English in the period from 2021 to 2022 that were provided to us by the company's top management. Due to the sensitive nature of ongoing business operations and the issue of confidentiality, the company was not willing to provide emails dated after 2022. Out of this pool, 38 emails were the official one-way emails sent to/received from the outside, while the remaining 87 involved in-house communication (54) and external communication with outside partners (33). The participants involved in the email interaction were two upper management Turkish employees, one middle-management Turkish employee, five Bosnian employees, one entry-level Paraguayan employee, and one Cypriot.

Research questions

The present study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the characteristic lexicogrammatical and stylistic features of backstage BELF email communication?
2. What are the characteristic lexicogrammatical and stylistic features of frontstage BELF email communication?

The approach adopted for the analysis of the study is discourse-analytical, supported by corpus analysis instruments. Thus, the study uses a mix of qualitative and quantitative techniques with the purpose of strengthening the data reliability and enhancing the accuracy of the interpretation. At this juncture, it is important to note that due to confidentiality concerns, all personal names were replaced by pseudonyms, while the names of the company/projects/products etc. were replaced by XXX. However, all linguistic uses, such as grammatical and typographical errors, were retained in their original form, as being critical to the analysis.

Analysis and Discussion

As noted earlier, in the following sections, we will focus on cross-examining possible similarities and differences between frontstage and backstage English measured against several features of BELF, as corroborated by the previous pool of research in order to answer the research questions.

RQ1: Features of Backstage BELF Email Communication

In terms of lexicogrammatical features, earlier research on BELF highlighted a relative insignificance of grammatical accuracy, as long as it does not interfere with overall communication and business goal (e.g., Dedović-Atilla & Dubravac 2022; Kankaanranta, 2007). Investigation of the email corpus in our study at the backstage level seems to confirm this, as different linguistic deviations were found, such as: a missing linking verb or incorrect tense use (see examples 1a, 1b, 1c); wrong or missing prepositions (see examples 2a, 2b, 2c, 2d); misplaced demonstrative pronoun use or omitted objective case personal pronouns (see examples 3a, 3b, 3c); modifier and noun singular/plural incongruence (see examples 4a, 4b) ill-formed degrees of adjective use (see examples 5a,

5b); misplaced or missing articles (see examples 6a, 6b); a generic use of a vocabulary item for all parts of speech with the focus on meaning, and not on lexical category (see examples 7a).

1a. My WhatsApp number XXXXXXXX ; 1b. The link is not opening; 1c. I have to sent letters to the Ministry;

2a. We are waiting your final price; depending of; 2b. It was a pleasure to meet you at last weeks fair; 2c. We present it to your information; 2d. If you agree these terms;

3a. this informations; 3b. We sent you yesterday; 3c. to send us that the detailed documentation what we mentioned above;

4a. boxes design and sizes, 4b. the following document;

5a. send me your number so we can communicate fast; 5b. this is best product;

6a. we provide the range of glues; 6b. make short explanation;

7a. In continue I send you the terms we can offer;

Besides grammar, non-compliance with other parts of writing mechanics was noticed as well. Thus, some spelling mistakes were detected (see examples 8a, 8b, 8c, 8d, 8e), as well as wrong capitalization (see examples 9a, 9b, 9c). A number of punctuation errors at a sentence level were spotted as well, thus creating sentence fragments (see example 10a); run-on-sentences (see example 11a) and split comma cases (see example 12a). Other punctuation anomalies included a missing terminating punctuation point (see example 13a) or a redundant punctuation point (see example 14a); missing pausing points, mostly when addressing someone, or with sentence interrupting or introductory elements (see examples 15a, 15b) or misplaced points (see example 16a).

8a. available; 8b. interested; 8c. then (instead of than); 8d. graphics; 8e. nacional;

9a. Dear mr. Smith; 9b. catalog in English; 9c. In addition, Please share the list, I sent You;

10a. Specify your minimum order quantities. and send your price list;

11a. And as we talked we are waiting your final price for us;

12a. I am looking forward to your feedback, best regards;

13a. can you please send me pfd file, we are waiting;

14a. Thank you!!!; I can send it;

15a. Also we are waiting; 15b. Josphe please send;

16a. list the following.

Finally, when it comes to lexis, some awkward unnatural collocations and sentence structures were used (see examples 17a, 17b, 17c).

17a. we will be more happy to send you design with offer; 17b. As we agreed In line with the future information; 17c. when I paid the account.

Regarding all of the listed inaccuracies, several interesting points need to be made at this juncture. Firstly, the corpus analysis has shown a varying frequency of different kinds of errors. Thus, for example, some types of errors were surprisingly comparatively rare, especially the ones related to grammar, such as: wrong verb use (17), singular/plural incongruence (18), or adjective use (24), while others were much more frequent: punctuation errors were extensive (133), as well as rare or not commonly used collocations and phrases (89). When it comes to the former, it is rather surprising that some of the tendencies noticed in some earlier studies that included email analysis as well (e.g., Dedović-Atilla & Dubravac 2022), seemed not to apply here. As an illustration, no generic present verb was noticed to be used for all verb tenses; moreover, present perfect was used significantly as well, as opposed to the prevalent past simple tense use that was noticed in the previous research. These data seem to point toward a gradual shift in email communication even within in-house communication: it seems that many employees whose language proficiency is not high, based on the overall language assessment of their written production, might be employing different electronic tools such as grammar-spell check apps or translation tools that provide grammatically correct content, but fail to always create the best combination of native-like natural-sounding lexical structures. In addition, punctuation mistakes seem

to be rather high, indicating that interlocutors seem to be less focused on their importance. Although this seems to reflect a gradual and logical change in the way users seem to increasingly employ different, rather fast and user-friendly tools to improve their writing skills, there are still many instances where they clearly do not. This was noticed especially in the short one or two-line emails that seem to confirm, answer or request something (which would be difficult to misinterpret). Here is an illustration: (see examples 18a, 18b).

18a. *Ok. Tell me when you give. 18b. We are also waiting your answer.*

Secondly, in agreement with some previous research (e.g., Kantabutra, 2018; Rogerson-Revell, 2010), no repair strategies, i.e. instances of correcting or pointing towards a mistake were a common thing, but rather Firth's (1996) 'let it pass' strategy was employed, which was also expected considering the examined written mode of communication with no real-time interaction. There were cases, however, when additional clarification was required through repetitive inquiries, but these were always regarding the content that was either incomplete or unclear, and not regarding the language itself. Thus, the significance of the accuracy of content over the accuracy of grammar seems to be corroborated once again in BELF settings (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010), as seen in the examples (see examples 19a, 19b, 19c).

19a. *One, you mentioned a "door lettering" and we don't know what this is. Is the door going to have some sort of a design that we should work on?*

19b. *Dear Mr. Andreas,*

Thank you for your detailed answers and information. However, we could not see the detailed design information we requested from you in your e-mail. Please share them with us so that the detailed dimensions are clear.

19c. *Our demands regarding the design were as follows;*

- *All of the products included in the promotional brochure; box design documents (with clear dimensions to be specified)*

- *Dimensions of Product X (done)*

The same email was followed by another one a few days later (see example 20a).

20a. *Dear Mr. Andreas,*

Are there any developments regarding the information we expect from you?

Finally, in terms of the nature of all types of errors made, it seems that, quite naturally, many of them result from the L1 negative transfer (Scott, 1966). Thus, for example, capitalizing the initial letter in the pronouns such as You/Your by a Bosnian interlocutor seems to be a negative transfer from the Bosnian Language where second singular pronoun is capitalized when addressing somebody with respect; using a semi-colon instead of the colon before a list was noticed to be a recurring pattern used by a Turkish correspondent – a grammatical feature of the Turkish language; omitting or using wrong prepositions reflecting the L1 structure seem to be present among different speakers (i.e. discuss about – used by a Bosnian interlocutor; we will go there together with Rua, to mean: Rua and I will go there together – used by a Turkish professional); finally, articles seem to be a problematic point with speakers of lower competence who do not have the same concept in their L1, thus making it difficult to use it appropriately (e.g., Bosnian).

In terms of the emails' style and tone, it is important to reflect on the email structure first, as it directly reflects the tone of the message. Drawing from Zhu's (2012) adaptation of Blu-Kulka's (1989) conceptualization of email parts, consisting of openings, closings, supporters and speech acts, we can conclude that backstage emails were really diverse: ranging from containing some form of all the elements (79), the ones without the closing (19), and the ones without the supporters and closings (21), to the ones that contained only head acts (6). The openings themselves were eclectic as well, and included forms such as: (see examples 21a, 21b, 21c, 21d, 21e, 21f, 21g, 21h, 21i, 21j, 21k). Closings ranged from: (see examples 22a, 22b, 22c, 22d, 22e, 22f, 22g).

21a. *Dear Mr. Smith; 21b. Dear John; 21c. Hi John; 21d. Hey there; 21e. John; 21f. Warm regards; 21g. Dear; 21h. Hello Miss. Jane; 21i. Good morning/afternoon; 21j. Merhaba (a salutation in Turkish used with a full-time non-Turkish Bosnian employee); 21k. Respected Mr. Smith;*

22a. *Greetings*; 22b. *(Best/Kind) regards*; 22c. *Thank you*; 22d. *Sincerely*; 22e. *Iyi calismalar*; 22f. *Lijep pozdrav / Saygılarımla / Best regards* 22g. *Ciaoo*.

What seems conspicuous with the expressions above is that some of these are ENL greeting conventions, while others are less so. Thus, the expression (see example 23a) was used by a Bosnian, which is a direct translation of the introductory greeting normally used in the Bosnian language (see example 24a), while it is considered to be antiquated in English among NSs, but is still used among certain groups (e.g., in parts of Asia). (See example 25a) is also unusual in the opening and was used by an Indian. An opening and closing in their first LI was used by a Turkish speaker in correspondence with a Bosnian, while a multilingual closing (in Turkish, Bosnian, and English) was used by the same Bosnian in the correspondence with the mentioned Turk.

23a. *Respected*

24a. *Poštovani*

25a. *Warm regards*

All these expressions seem to confirm that there is a high level of hybridity in terms of style in the backstage English, and that the inclusion of another language is accepted, especially in openings and closings, reflecting a person's national and cultural background and identity.

RQ2: Features of Frontstage BELF Email Communication

When it comes to the frontstage language and lexicogrammatical features, several trends can be deduced based on the examined corpora. First, frontstage emails surprisingly varied in their accuracy, but overall were considerably more accurate and professional than backstage emails. Thus, out of 38 emails that were sent as announcements, promotional emails offering their services for the first time, or as introduction emails, 23 were adequately proofread and conformed to the ENL immaculate standards and included both native speakers (UK and US), but also non-native speakers (UAE, Poland, Germany, Paraguay). Conversely, a substantial number of emails (11) seemed to attempt to adhere to formality, professionalism and important lexicogrammatical features of NL standards, but still contained grammatical mistakes as the following: a missing comma in a conditional

sentence (7) – (see example 26a); a split comma (13) – (see example 27a); preposition errors (12) – (see examples 28a, 28b), pronoun misplacement (6) – (see example 29a), and other stylistically awkward structures (14), (see examples 30a, 30b, 30c). It is also interesting to note that some of these mistakes were contained in official company catalogues attached to emails (see examples 31a, 31b). Individuals in this group came from Turkey, Cyprus, Poland, Bulgaria, Germany, India, and Italy. Finally, the remaining frontstage emails (4) mirrored the BELF email features, containing both grammatical, lexical, and stylistic anomalies (see examples 32a, 32b) and included interlocutors from Turkey, Spain, and Bulgaria.

26a. *If you have any questions about price and distribution please feel free to contact me*

27a. *Thanks for stopping by our booth at X, it was nice to meet you*

28a. *soon as you advise detailed information what you need*; 28b. *once you informed details,*

29a. *We will pick up you*

30a. *We have certainly a good interest to cooperate with you*; 30b. *Please consider us at your availability*; 30c. *discuss anything further in case of interest*

31a. *graduated of*; 31b. *We focus at our corporate ideals*

32a. *I see Your company staff soon*; 32b. *Look forward meeting you, I send you now*

It is also important to notice at this juncture that it was noticed that the same person (as was in the case of the top Turkish manager) can switch between BELF in-house communication to an ENL communication standards in their outward communications, pointing towards the importance of accommodation and adaptability, which is often emphasized as an inherent feature of BELF interactions.

In terms of email structure, 33 emails contained some form of all the elements, 4 were without the closing, and 1 was without the supporters and closings, with no emails containing only head acts. All of the emails contained openings and closings in at least English, while some (7) also had additional greetings/closings in the native

language of the company the email originates from (see examples 33a, 33b, 33c).

33a. *Merhaba*; 33b. *Hola*; 33c. *Selam aleykum*.

It should be noted here that the attitude towards the importance of adhering to ENL standards seems not to be endemic to countries, but rather individual companies and their perception of the role of English proficiency in the company image and success, as different companies from the same country varied in their stance and practice on this.

Conclusion

Through a detailed analysis of a sample of business emails, the proposition of frontstage and backstage Englishes occupying different roles within companies seems to be corroborated.

The analysis showed that the backstage English, primarily used among employees for internal communication, is indeed characterized by flexibility, adaptability and efficiency rather than strict grammatical correctness. Moreover, the flow in email correspondence seems to indicate that while errors in grammar, vocabulary, and punctuation are common, they do not interfere with understanding. (The only instances of clarification requests were related to misunderstanding of content, critical for business operations.) Instead, communication is shaped by shared business knowledge and pragmatic competence, where getting the message across is more important than adhering to native English norms. Additionally, the study further shows that in these kinds of multilingual international BELF settings, the influence of cultural and professional backgrounds on email conventions, such as greetings and closings is also present, showing that multicultural backgrounds, partial code-switching and inclusion of local languages seems to be a standard BELF feature in email communication as well. Additionally, code-switching between BELF and ENL standards confirmed the significance and presence of accommodation strategies, further solidifying the context-bound and highly situation-specific use of English in BELF settings. Furthermore, the study suggests that even the structure of emails as is often lax, as not all emails adhered strictly to including all the formal email elements. This seems to be aligned with earlier research that highlights patterns of hybrid and flexible language use and genres, as well as localized adaptations.

Conversely, frontstage English, according to Kankaanranta's proposition, is expected to align more closely with native English norms due to its role in corporate branding and external communication. Our research shows that in the majority of cases this seems to be the case and that there are much higher standards for this kind of linguistic English output. However, variability still exists, as some emails were shown to maintain a high level of linguistic, stylistic, and structural accuracy, while signs of non-standard grammar and style crept into others. This suggests that while some multinational companies prioritize polished and fully proofread English in their public image, others still adopt a more relaxed BELF-oriented approach even in outward-facing communication.

Finally, the study also shows that, unlike in some of the earlier research, there seems to be an increasing reliance on digital tools like spell-check and translation software, which can improve grammatical accuracy but sometimes result in unnatural phrasing.

By investigating frontstage and backstage English in corporate email communication within a specific Global South context, this study aimed to provide more insight into understanding nuances of international business communication related to English language use. However, future more in-depth research is required to account for differences in frontstage settings between the companies and to answer the question of whether this is rather a highly individualistic decision depending on the company's management sensitivity to language issues and public image, or it might have something to do with the domains these companies operate in, considering that the examined company and its partner companies they communicated with are involved in construction, design, and real estate. Perhaps a broader range of companies might be examined to see if there might be differences in terms of the companies' fields of work. Additionally, future research could further explore the role of AI tools in shaping business communication and how BELF strategies evolve in response to gigantic shifting workplace trends, as the sample of the emails that were used in this research was written between 2021 and 2022. In this regard, it would be interesting to see how the AI tools transformed email communication in the last couple of years, and whether BELF written email communication now adheres more closely to ENL communication standards in all communication contexts.

References

- Alharbi, N. (2016). *Business English as a lingua franca in Saudi multinational corporations: Qualitative investigation of communicative strategies and orientations to use in international workplaces* (Doctoral thesis). King's College London. <https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/en/studentTheses/business-english-as-a-lingua-franca-in-saudi-multinational-corpor>
- Baker, W. (2009). The cultures of English as a lingua franca. *TESOL Quarterly*, 43(4), 567–592. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1545-7249.2009.tb00187.x>
- Bargiela-Chiappini, F., & Harris, S. (1996). Requests and status in business correspondence. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 28(6), 635–662. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166\(96\)89191-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166(96)89191-0)
- Bhatia, V. K., & Bremner, S. (2012). English for business communication. *Language Teaching*, 45(4), 410–445. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444812000171>
- Birlik, S., & Kaur, J. (2020). BELF expert users: Making understanding visible in internal BELF meetings through the use of nonverbal communication strategies. *English for Specific Purposes*, 58, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2019.10.002>
- Björge, A. K. (2007). Power distance in English lingua franca email communication. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 17(1), 60–80. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1473-4192.2007.00133.x>
- Björge, A. K. (2010). Conflict or cooperation: The use of backchannelling in ELF negotiations. *English for Specific Purposes*, 29(3), 191–203. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2009.04.002>
- Canagarajah, A. S. (2006). Negotiating the local in English as a lingua franca. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 26, 197–218. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0267190506000109>
- Canagarajah, S. (2020). Transnational work, translanguaging practices, and interactional sociolinguistics. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 24(5), 555–573. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josl.12440>
- Charles, M. (1996). Business negotiations: Interdependence between discourse and the business relationship. *English for Specific Purposes*, 15(1), 19–36. <https://doi.org/10.1016/0889-4906%2895%2900029-1>
- Choi, S. (2014). *Cross-cultural job interview communication in Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) contexts: A corpus-based comparative study of multicultural job interview communications in world maritime industry* (Doctoral thesis). University of Birmingham. <https://etheses.bham.ac.uk/id/eprint/5328/1/Choi13PhD.pdf>
- Cogo, A. (2016). 'They all take the risk and make the effort': Intercultural accommodation and multilingualism in a BELF community of practice. In L. Lopriore & E. Grazi (Eds.), *Intercultural Communication: New Perspectives from ELF* (pp. 365–383). Roma: Roma TrE-Press. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/288642519_They_all_take_the_risk_and_make_the_effort_intercultural_accommodation_and_multilingualism_in_a_BELF_community_of_practice
- Cogo, A., & Dewey, M. (2006). Efficiency in ELF communication: From pragmatic motives to lexicogrammatical innovation. *Nordic Journal of English Studies*, 5(2), 59–93. <https://doi.org/10.35360/NJES.12>
- Cogo, A., & Dewey, M. (2012). *Analysing English as a lingua franca: A corpus-driven investigation*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Crystal, D. (2003). *English as a global language* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511486999>
- Dedović-Atilla, E. & Dubravac, V. (2022). *Reconceptualizing English for International Business Contexts: A BELF Approach and its Educational Implications*. Bristol, Blue Ridge Summit: Multilingual Matters. <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781800416024>
- Du-Babcock, B., & Tanaka, H. (2010). Turn-taking behavior and topic management strategies of Chinese and Japanese business professionals: A comparison of intercultural group communication. *Proceedings of the 75th Annual Convention of the Association for Business Communication*. [https://www.academia.edu/7440196/Turn-taking_Behavior_and_Topic_Management_Strategies_of_Chinese_and_Japanese_Business_Professionals_A_Comparison_of_Intercultural_Group_Communication](<https://www.academia.edu/7440196/Turn>

- Du-Babcock, B., & Varner, I. (2008). Intercultural business communication in action: Analysis of an international videoconference. In D. Starke-Meyerring & M. Wilson (Eds.), *Designing Globally Networked Learning Environment* (pp. 156–169). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Ehrenreich, S. (2010). English as a business lingua franca in a German multinational corporation: Meeting the challenge. *Journal of Business Communication*, 47(4), 408–431. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021943610377303>
- Ehrenreich, S. (2016). English as a lingua franca (ELF) in international business contexts: Key issues and future perspectives. In K. Murata (Ed.), *Exploring ELF in Japanese Academic and Business Contexts: Conceptualisation, Research and Pedagogic Implications* (pp. 135–155). New York: Routledge.
- Firth, A. (1996). The discursive accomplishment of normality: On 'lingua franca' English and conversation analysis. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 26(2), 237–259. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166\(96\)00014-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166(96)00014-8)
- Gains, J. (1999). Electronic mail—A new style of communication or just a new medium? An investigation into the text features of e-mail. *English for Specific Purposes*, 18(1), 81–101. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0889-4906\(97\)00051-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0889-4906(97)00051-3)
- Gimenez, J. C. (2000). Business e-mail communication: Some emerging tendencies in register. *English for Specific Purposes*, 19(3), 237–251. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0889-4906\(98\)00030-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0889-4906(98)00030-1)
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Doubleday.
- Guffey, M. E., & Loewy, D. (2022). *Essentials of Business Communication* (11th ed.). Cengage Learning.
- Herring, S. C. (2004). Computer-mediated discourse analysis: An approach to researching online behavior. In S. A. Barab, R. Kling, & J. H. Gray (Eds.), *Designing for Virtual Communities in the Service of Learning* (pp. 338–376). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511805080.016>
- Holmes, J. (2000). Doing collegiality and keeping control at work: Small talk in government departments. In J. Coupland (Ed.), *Small Talk* (pp. 32–61). Harlow: Pearson Education. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315838328-3>
- Holmes, J. (2006). Sharing a laugh: Pragmatic aspects of humor and gender in the workplace. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 38(1), 26–50. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2005.06.007>
- Hofweber, J., & Jaworska, S. (2022). Polite impoliteness? How power, gender and language background shape request strategies in English as a Business Lingua Franca (BELF) in corporate email exchanges. *Journal of English as a Lingua Franca*, 11(2), 223–253. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jelf-2022-2085>
- House, J. (1999). Misunderstanding in intercultural communication: Interactions in English as a lingua franca and the myth of mutual intelligibility. In C. Gnutzmann (Ed.), *Teaching and Learning English as a Global Language* (pp. 73–89). Tübingen: Stauffenburg.
- Incelli, E. (2013). Managing discourse in intercultural business email interactions: A case study of a British and Italian business transaction. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 34(6), 515–532. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2013.807270>
- Jenkins, J. (2006). Current perspectives on teaching World Englishes and English as a lingua franca. *TESOL Quarterly*, 40(1), 157–181. <https://doi.org/10.2307/40264515>
- Jensen, A. (2009). Discourse strategies in professional e-mail negotiation: A case study. *English for Specific Purposes*, 28(1), 4–18. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2008.10.002>
- Kangasharju, H., & Nikko, T. (2009). Emotions in organizations: Joint laughter in workplace meetings. *Journal of Business Communication*, 46(1), 100–119. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021943608325750>
- Kankaanranta, A. (2004). English as a corporate language: Company-internal e-mail messages written by Finns and Swedes. In *Conference on Communication in the Workplace*, Uppsala, Sweden, April 6, 2004. https://www.academia.edu/7701425/English_as_a_corporate_language_Company_internal_e_mail_messages_written_by_Finns_and_Swedes

- Kankaanranta, A. (2007). Business communication in BELF. *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*, 70(1), 55–59. <https://doi.org/10.1177/108056990707000109>
- Kankaanranta, A., & Louhiala-Salminen, L. (2010). 'English? – Oh, it's just work!': A study of BELF users' perceptions. *English for Specific Purposes*, 29(3), 204–209. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2009.06.004>
- Kankaanranta, A., & Louhiala-Salminen, L. (2013). What language does global business speak? The concept and development of BELF. *Iberica*, 26, 17–34. <https://revistaiberica.org/index.php/iberica/article/view/271/260>
- Kankaanranta, A., Karhunen, P., & Louhiala-Salminen, L. (2018). "English as corporate language" in the multilingual reality of multinational companies. *Multilingua*, 37(4), 331–351. <https://doi.org/10.1515/multi-2017-0077>
- Kankaanranta, A., & Planken, B. (2010). BELF competence as business knowledge of internationally operating business professionals. *Journal of Business Communication*, 47(4), 380–407. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021943610377301>
- Kankaanranta, A., Louhiala-Salminen, L., & Karhunen, P. (2015). English in multinational companies: Implications for teaching 'English' at an international business school. *Journal of English as a Lingua Franca*, 4(1), 125–148. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jelf-2015-0010>
- Kantabutra, N. (2018). Negotiating the meaning: BELF pragmatics in Thai international corporations (Doctoral dissertation). University of Southampton. <https://eprints.soton.ac.uk/426443/>
- Kingsley, L. (2013). Language choice in multilingual encounters in transnational workplaces. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 34(6), 533–548. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2013.807271>
- Lindgren, S. (2014). Politeness in BELF communication: A study on directness strategies and formality in professional e-mail communication (Master's thesis). Stockholm University. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Politeness-in-BELF-Communication-%3A-A-Study-on-and-Lindgren/60ed18e5a8ec9dfb7608fe7940cf192602bc590d>
- Louhiala-Salminen, L., & Charles, M. (2006). English as the lingua franca of international business communication: Whose English? What English? In J. Palmer-Silveira, M. Ruiz-Garrido, & I. Fortanet-Gomez (Eds.), *Intercultural and International Business Communication* (pp. 27–54). Bern: Peter Lang.
- Louhiala-Salminen, L., & Kankaanranta, A. (2011). Professional communication in a global business context: The notion of global communicative competence. *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, 54(3), 244–262. <https://doi.org/10.1109/TPC.2011.2161844>
- Louhiala-Salminen, L., Charles, M., & Kankaanranta, A. (2005). English as a lingua franca in Nordic corporate mergers: Two case companies. *English for Specific Purposes*, 24(4), 401–421. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2005.02.003>
- Louhiala-Salminen, L., & Charles, M. (2006). English as the lingua franca of international business communication: Whose English? What English? In J. Palmer-Silveira, M. Ruiz-Garrido, & I. Fortanet-Gomez (Eds.), *Intercultural and International Business Communication* (pp. 27–54). Bern: Peter Lang.
- Millot, P. (2017). Inclusivity and exclusivity in English as a Business Lingua Franca: The expression of a professional voice in email communication. *English for Specific Purposes*, 46, 59–71. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2016.12.001>
- Nickerson, C. (2000). *Playing the corporate language game: An investigation of the genres and discourse strategies in English used by Dutch writers working in multinational corporations* (Vol. 15). Rodopi. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004483842>
- Nickerson, C. (2005). English as a lingua franca in international business contexts. *English for Specific Purposes*, 24(4), 367–380. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2005.02.001>
- Nickerson, C., & Camiciottoli, B. C. (2013). Business English as a lingua franca in advertising texts in the Arabian Gulf: Analyzing the attitudes of the Emirati community. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 27(3), 329–352. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1050651913479930>

- Nielsen, T. H. (2019). Norwegian business professionals' need for and use of English as a Business Lingua Franca (BELF) in multinational corporations. *HERMES – Journal of Language and Communication in Business*, 59(1), 109–122. <https://doi.org/10.7146/hjlc.v59i1.117020>
- Nikko, T. (2009). Dialogic construction of understanding in cross-border corporate meetings. (Doctoral Dissertation) *Acta Universitatis Oeconomicae Helsingiensis*. Helsinki School of Economics. <https://epub.lib.aalto.fi/pdf/diss/a351.pdf>
- Pan, C. (2012). Interlanguage requests in institutional e-mail discourse. In M. Economidou-Kogetsidis & H. Woodfield (Eds.), *Interlanguage Request Modification* (pp. 119–161). John Benjamins. <https://doi.org/10.1075/pbns.217.05cat>
- Petterson, L. (2015). Writing business emails in English as a lingua franca: How informal can you be? (Bachelor's thesis). Stockholm University. <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:820243/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
- Piekkari, R., Welch, D., & Welch, L. (2014). *Language in international business: The multilingual reality of global business expansion*. Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781784710996>
- Pitzl, M. L. (2005). Non-understanding in English as a lingua franca: Examples from a business context. *Vienna English Working Papers*, 14(2), 50–71. https://archiv-anglistik.univie.ac.at/fileadmin/user_upload/dep_anglistik/%20weitere_Uploads/Views/Views0502ALL_new.pdf
- Planken, B. (2005). Managing rapport in lingua franca sales negotiations: A comparison of professional and aspiring negotiators. *English for Specific Purposes*, 24(4), 381–400. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2005.02.002>
- Pullin, P. (2010). Small talk, rapport, and international communicative competence: Lessons to learn from BELF. *Journal of Business Communication*, 47(4), 455–476. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021943610377307>
- Pullin, P. (2013). Achieving 'comity': The role of linguistic stance in business English as a lingua franca (BELF) meetings. *Journal of English as a Lingua Franca*, 2(1), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jelf-2013-0001>
- Räsänen, T. (2016). Finnish engineers' trajectories of socialisation into global working life: From language learners to BELF users and the emergence of a Finnish way of speaking English. In P. Holmes & F. Dervin (Eds.), *The cultural and intercultural dimensions of English as a lingua franca* (pp. 157–179). Multilingual Matters. <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781783095100-011>
- Räsänen, T. (2018). Translingual practices in global business: A longitudinal study of a professional communicative repertoire. In G. Mazzaferro (Ed.), *Translanguaging as everyday practice* (pp. 149–174). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-94851-5_8
- Rice, R. P. (1997). An analysis of stylistic variables in electronic mail. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 11(1), 5–23. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1050651997011001001>
- Richard, E. M., & McFadden, M. (2016). Saving face: Reactions to cultural norm violations in business request emails. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 31(2), 307–321. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-015-9414-9>
- Rogerson-Revell, P. (2008). Participation and performance in international business meetings. *English for Specific Purposes*, 27(3), 338–360. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2008.01.003>
- Rogerson-Revell, P. (2010). "Can you spell that for us nonnative speakers?": Accommodation strategies in international business meetings. *Journal of Business Communication*, 47(4), 432–454. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021943610377304>
- Roshid, M. M., Webb, S., & Chowdhury, R. (2022). English as a business lingua franca: A discursive analysis of business e-mails. *International Journal of Business Communication*, 59(1), 83–103. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2329488418808040>
- Scott, J., & Pavlenko, A. (2008). *Crosslinguistic influence in language and cognition*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203935927>
- Seidlhofer, B. (2005). Key concepts in ELT: English as a lingua franca. *ELT Journal*, 59(4), 339–341. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/cci064>
- Takino, M. (2016). Negotiating the challenges of using English in business communication: Listening narratives of Japanese BELF users (Doctoral dissertation). University of Southampton. <https://eprints.soton.ac.uk/385224/>

Takino, M. (2019). Becoming BELF users: The learning process of business users of English and its conceptualization. *Journal of English as a Lingua Franca*, 8(2), 235–267. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/jelf-2019-2020>

Takino, M. (2020). Power in international business communication and linguistic competence: Analyzing the experiences of nonnative business people who use English as a business lingua franca (BELF). *International Journal of Business Communication*, 57(4), 517–544. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2329488417714222>

The Radicati Group. (2019, April). Email market, 2019–2023. <https://www.radicati.com>

Virkkula-Räisänen, T. (2010). Linguistic repertoires and semiotic resources in interaction: A Finnish manager as a mediator in a multilingual meeting. *Journal of Business Communication*, 47(4), 505–531. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0021943610377315>

Vuorela, T. (2005). How does a sales team reach goals in intercultural business negotiations? A case study. *English for Specific Purposes*, 24(1), 65–92. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2003.09.005>

Yao, Y., & Du-Babcock, B. (2020). English as a lingua franca in China-based workplace communication. *Ibérica*, 39, 345–370. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17398/2340-2784.39.345>

Zhu, W. (2012). Polite requestive strategies in emails: An investigation of pragmatic competence of Chinese EFL learners. *RELC Journal*, 43(2), 217–238. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688212449936>

Zhu, W. (2017). A cross-cultural pragmatic study of rapport-management strategies in Chinese and English academic upward request emails. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 17(2), 210–228. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2016.1253707>

ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

CHALLENGES FACED BY HIGH SCHOOL, UNIVERSITY, AND ADULT LANGUAGE LEARNERS WHILE SPEAKING ENGLISH

Sedina Selimović-Korjenić¹ 

¹ International Burch University, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Sedina Selimović-Korjenić, International Burch University, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. E-mail: sedina.selimovic@ibu.edu.ba

ABSTRACT

Speaking is generally considered an important indicator of foreign language proficiency, as it requires the ability to produce language in real-time and to communicate effectively with others. Being able to speak a language well means being able to use the appropriate grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation to express oneself clearly, which is not an easy task, and students face many difficulties trying to develop this language skill. The current study aimed to explore the difficulties faced by high school, university, and adult language learners while speaking English. The study is an empirical qualitative study in which the researcher used a semi-structured interview to collect data from 15 participants, 5 from each of the above-mentioned groups. The findings were sorted and analyzed into three categories of difficulties faced by students while speaking in English. The findings revealed that some of the main problems language learners experience while speaking in English are nervousness, lack of confidence, anxiety, lack of vocabulary, fear of being criticized by peers, grammar, and lack of fluency and vocabulary. This study suggested that creating a positive and supportive learning environment, empowering learners to take control of their learning, and providing ample opportunities for practice and interaction are key strategies for improving language learning outcomes.

Keywords: speaking skills, writing skills, difficulties, causes, classroom



MAP EDUCATION
AND HUMANITIES

Volume 6

ISSN: 2744-2373/ © The Authors.
Published by MAP - Multidisciplinary
Academic Publishing.

Article Submitted: 10 May 2025
Article Accepted: 18 June 2025
Article Published: 19 June 2025



Publisher's Note: MAP stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

<https://doi.org/10.53880/2744-2373.2025.6.14>



HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Selimović-Korjenić S. (2025). **Challenges Faced by High School, University, and Adult Language Learners While Speaking English.**

MAP Education and Humanities, 6, 14-23. doi: <https://doi.org/10.53880/2744-2373.2025.6.14>



© The Author(s). **Open Access Article**
Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.



Introduction

The English language in the 21st century has become an essential component of the educational curriculum in most countries where it is used as a second or foreign language according to Akbari (2015), as well as Richards and Renandya (2002). The authors suggest that the widespread use of English as a global language, advancements in technology, and the rise of the internet have led to a growing demand for English language education around the world. Thus, English has become the primary language used in international business, science, and diplomacy, so individuals who are proficient in English have an advantage in the global job market and have greater access to information and opportunities.

English language education in Bosnia and Herzegovina can be traced back to the early 20th century when Bosnia and Herzegovina was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. English was introduced as a foreign language in schools during this period, along with German and French. After World War II, English continued to be taught in schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with a focus on developing reading and writing skills. During the period of Yugoslavia, English language education was expanded, with English becoming a mandatory subject in secondary schools (Imamovic & Delibegovic Dzanic, 2016).

Following the breakup of Yugoslavia and the Bosnian War in the 1990s, there was a renewed emphasis on English language education in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as the country sought to rebuild its economy and integrate into the global community. Nowadays, English is typically introduced as a foreign language in primary school, which starts at the age of six (Imamovic & Delibegovic Dzanic, 2016). English language education is then continued in high school, where it is a mandatory subject and is typically taught for two to three hours per week (Ministry of Education, 2016). The focus is on developing the four language skills – reading, writing, speaking and listening – as well as grammar and vocabulary (Delić et al, 2024). At the university level, English is also an important language of instruction, particularly in programs related to international business, tourism, and other fields that require the knowledge of English. Many universities in Bosnia and Herzegovina offer English language courses for students who need to improve their language skills, as well as language certificate programs such as TOEFL and IELTS. It is often supplemented

by language schools and private tutoring, which provide additional opportunities for learners to practice and develop their language skills.

However, learning EFL can present a number of challenges for non-native speakers, acquiring fluency in speaking being one of them (Rahnama et al., 2016). Speaking is often considered the most important and difficult skill for EFL learners to develop because speaking requires learners to combine a range of skills, including pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and fluency, in real-time conversation with others (Celce-Murica, 2001). Some of the most common difficulties according to Dimayati and Mudjiono (2010) are a lack of confidence, hesitation to speak, teachers' attitudes, lack of concentration, and fear of making mistakes. Akbari (2016) addressed these problems mainly to the limited exposure to the language, inadequate language instruction, insufficient motivation, anxiety, lack of confidence, limited grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary knowledge. However, we still have no study which analyzed difficulties faced in particular by students in this part of Europe.

Taking into consideration the importance of English in Bosnia and Herzegovina, being able to speak fluently is one of the goals for many people, and researching potential difficulties therefore might lead to the improvement of teaching methods. The present study, thus, attempted to explore the difficulties faced by different age groups, namely high school, university, and adult language learners while speaking English using an empirical qualitative study in which the researcher used a semi-structured interview to collect data.

Literature review

The analysis of speaking skill development has been extensively explored in various contexts, including language learning, education, communication studies, psychology, and linguistics. Speaking is one of the four major language skills, along with listening, reading, and writing, and its development is considered crucial for effective communication (Lonkar, 2017).

In language learning, speaking skills are often a central focus, as learners need to be able to communicate effectively in the target language. Speaking skills have been extensively explored in second language acquisition research, with a particular emphasis on the role of factors such as proficiency level, language input, motivation, and anxiety (Ghafar & Raad, 2023).

In educational contexts, speaking skills are often assessed through oral presentations, debates, and other forms of spoken communication. The development of speaking skills is considered important for academic success, as well as for career readiness.

It is important to mention that speaking challenges are faced at different educational levels, such as with primary school students, secondary school students, university level students as well as adults. The challenges will further be addressed by mentioning different studies that were done so far.

Speaking Difficulties Faced by High School Learners

To start with, as previously introduced, the speaking challenges are faced at different levels, but this study deals with three groups, namely, high school, university and adult language learners, and therefore only these groups will be taken into consideration. When it comes to the first group, high school students, there are several scholars (Al-Jarf, 2010; Riza, & Nasir, 2012; Wang, 2014; Shi & Liu, 2015) who have explored the difficulties faced by them. They have identified several key challenges that high school students face when speaking English. These challenges include difficulty with pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, as well as anxiety or nervousness. These challenges are understandable, if we take into consideration their age, and it feels natural to have such feelings. Studies supporting these claims are briefly represented in the further paragraphs.

Riza and Nasir (2012) conducted a study involving 60 high school students in Pakistani classrooms and found that students face challenges in speaking English due to factors such as a lack of exposure to English outside of the classroom, limited speaking opportunities, and a lack of interest in the language. Similar to this Makewa et al. (2013) carried out a study in secondary schools located in Dodoma, Tanzania, involving 300 students (131 female and 169 male) to examine their self-assessed proficiency in English. The research focused on various factors that might influence students' speaking skills, including access to learning resources, classroom practices, anxiety levels, learner attitudes, and motivation. Findings indicated that students rated their English-speaking abilities as moderate. Additionally, the study revealed a statistically significant relationship between these influencing factors and students'

perceived language competence, with attitude, classroom engagement, and motivation emerging as the most impactful.

Furthermore, Chua and Chong (2016) conducted a case study involving 60 high school students and found that speaking anxiety is a common problem among students in the Malaysian school, and that factors such as fear of negative evaluation, lack of confidence, and inadequate preparation are the main causes of speaking anxiety.

Speaking Difficulties Faced by University-level Learners

However, it seems that not only high school students have these problems, and speaking difficulties were also found among university-level students. Scholars (Brown & Larson-Hall, 2012; Chand, 2021; Faiz & Salehi, 2012; Hsu & Wang, 2015; Zhang & Zhang, 2016) who have explored the difficulties faced by university-level students have revealed that this group usually faces with problems such as language proficiency, anxiety, self-confidence, phrasal verbs, and other aspects of native-like proficiency in their speaking skills. If these problems were compared with the previous group, we can conclude that anxiety, fluency, and vocabulary are common among two groups.

When it comes to this group, Bahadur Chand (2021) researched the challenges faced by university-level learners while speaking English and came to the conclusion that students faced difficulties such as pronunciation, fluency, grammar patterns, anxiety. These challenges were due to the fear of making mistakes which led to hesitation to speak. Also, some of the other reasons were mother tongue, teaching methods, and classroom interaction.

Additionally, Alam and Ashrafuzzaman (2018a) conducted a study with undergraduate students to explore the challenges of developing speaking skills through classroom interaction among English as a foreign language (EFL) learners. The study aimed to identify the various challenges that EFL learners face when trying to develop their speaking skills in the classroom, with a particular focus on classroom interaction. The study found that EFL learners face a range of challenges when it comes to developing their speaking skills through classroom interaction. Some of the main challenges identified include a lack of confidence, limited

vocabulary, difficulty understanding and using grammar correctly, and anxiety about making mistakes. Learners also reported feeling inhibited in the classroom, particularly if they were not given enough opportunities to speak or if they felt self-conscious about their language abilities.

In addition, Heriansyah (2012) made research to identify the main problems faced by Indonesian EFL learners from various backgrounds, including university students and professionals when developing their speaking skills. The study found that two of the main problems faced by Indonesian EFL learners when developing their speaking skills were a lack of vocabulary and a fear of making mistakes. The learners often struggled to find the right words to express their ideas, and this led to a lack of fluency and coherence in their speaking. Additionally, many learners reported feeling self-conscious about their language abilities and were afraid of making mistakes when speaking in front of others.

Similarly, Anandari (2015) did a research study on the anxiety experienced by Indonesian EFL students in speech production. The study aimed to investigate the level of anxiety experienced by Indonesian EFL students during oral presentations and to identify the sources of anxiety that contributed to their level of anxiety. A total of 60 participants were recruited from an EFL class at an Indonesian university. The findings of the study indicated that the majority of participants experienced moderate to high levels of anxiety during oral presentations. The sources of anxiety identified by the participants included fear of making mistakes, fear of negative evaluation, lack of confidence in English proficiency, and lack of preparation time.

Lastly, Nakhlah (2016) conducted a study to explore the speaking difficulties experienced by (EFL) learners and the underlying causes of these difficulties. A total of 120 EFL learners from a university in Jordan participated in the study. The findings of the study indicated that the most common speaking difficulties experienced by EFL learners were pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency, and grammar. The study also found that anxiety and lack of confidence were significant factors that contributed to these difficulties. Furthermore, the study identified other factors that may contribute to speaking difficulties, such as limited exposure to English outside the classroom, inadequate teaching methods, and lack of motivation.

Speaking Difficulties Faced by Adult Learners

The last group taken into consideration was the adult language learners. What is interesting is that the final group shares similar challenges as previous groups. Adult language learners face certain difficulties speaking in English, such as anxiety, pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency and similar (Arda, 2013; Kucuk & Sesen, 2018; Liu & Brantmeier, 2016; Nguyen, 2021).

It can be seen that high school, university and adult language learners face problems in speaking English such as anxiety, pronunciation, fluency and vocabulary.

When it comes to adult language learners, Arda (2013) conducted a study on EFL learners' difficulties in speaking English involving 120 Turkish EFL adult learners and found that Turkish EFL learners face difficulties in speaking English due to factors such as a lack of confidence, limited vocabulary, and a fear of making mistakes.

Similarly, Kucuk and Sesen (2018) conducted a study on difficulties encountered by adult EFL learners in speaking English involving 150 adult EFL learners and found that the main difficulties faced by adult EFL learners in speaking English include a lack of vocabulary, anxiety, pronunciation errors, and difficulty in constructing sentences.

Lastly, Nguyen (2021) conducted a study on speaking difficulties faced by Vietnamese adult learners of English involving 50 Vietnamese adult learners of English. The author found that the main difficulties faced by Vietnamese adult learners of English in speaking include a lack of vocabulary, grammar errors, and pronunciation problems. Additionally, the author found that the learners face challenges in speaking fluently and accurately due to the influence of their native language and lack of exposure to English-speaking environments.

To our knowledge, no similar research was conducted in the Bosnian EFL context. As for the process of learning English and factors influencing students' proficiency, some studies were done (Bećirović et al., 2017; Brdarević-Čeljo & Asotić, 2017; Delić et al., 2018; Habibić & Dubravac, 2016).

Taking all of these into consideration and due to a lack of research on speaking difficulties in English in the Bosnian context, the current study attempts to fill a gap in the current literature. Thus,

its goal is to investigate the speaking difficulties faced by 15 Bosnian learners of English.

Methodology

Aim of the research and research questions

The current study aimed to explore the difficulties faced by high school, university, and adult language learners while speaking English. The study is an empirical qualitative study in which the researcher used a semi-structured interview to collect data from 15 participants, 5 from each of the above-mentioned groups.

The research questions for this study were as follows:

1. What are speaking difficulties faced by Bosnian high school students?
2. What are speaking difficulties faced by Bosnian university level students?
3. What are speaking difficulties faced by Bosnian adult language learners?

Participants

This study was conducted among high school students, university students, and adult language learners from Sarajevo Canton, using a qualitative research design. All of the participants study/work, and live in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and all of them are of Bosnian nationality. All of the participants were able to speak English. High school students and university students were chosen from high schools and universities in Sarajevo Canton, while adult language learners were chosen from the Cultural Centre King Fahd.

High school students have English as a regular subject in schools. A similar situation is for university students who usually have some English lessons in certain semesters. When it comes to adult learners, they learn English in English language courses provided at Cultural Centre King Fahd. Fifteen participants, five from each group were sampled using purposive sampling procedures, who were fluent and successful in English language learning but also those who were not successful and fluent in English language learning. Their success in language learning was evaluated based on their grades and test results when it comes to adult learners.

It is important to mention that all of them at some point in their lives were attendees of language courses which are provided by Cultural Center King Fahd, where the researcher had the opportunity to observe their presentation skills and spoken fluency many times.

Table 1:
Information about participants

Participants	Age group	Gender	Level of knowledge
Participant 1	High school	Female	Intermediate
Participant 2	High school	Male	Pre-intermediate
Participant 3	High school	Male	Pre-intermediate
Participant 4	High school	Male	Elementary
Participant 5	High school	Female	Elementary
Participant 6	University	Female	Pre-intermediate
Participant 7	University	Female	Intermediate
Participant 8	University	Female	Intermediate
Participant 9	University	Male	Pre-intermediate
Participant 10	University	Female	Pre-intermediate
Participant 11	Adult	Female	Intermediate
Participant 12	Adult	Female	Pre-intermediate
Participant 13	Adult	Male	Pre-intermediate
Participant 14	Adult	Female	Intermediate
Participant 15	Adult	Male	Pre-intermediate

Instrument

To collect the data, this study used semi-structured interviews with the participants. The interview consisted of twenty-three questions in total, with many sub-questions for each of these. The questions used in the interviews focused on the problems students face while they speak English. The researcher focused on problems such as personal problems, social problems, and linguistic problems. Interview questions were developed using sections: Speaking difficulties faced by the students and possible causes of difficulties. Researcher adopted a semi-structured interview from Chand's (2021) study. The questions included participants' gender, age, place of living, and level of education for the general questions part. When it comes to other parts of questions, they were about difficulties they face in speaking English, their feelings while speaking, fear of being criticized, fear of making mistakes, acquisition of new words, the influence of

native language, and the use of English language in classroom but also outside the classroom.

Data collection

Students were interviewed based on semi-structured interview protocols. The interview was conducted online using Google Meets, as well as face-to-face in the objects of the Cultural Centre King Fahd. With the participants' permission, the interview was audio recorded. The interviews were conducted in the Bosnian language so that the participants would feel more comfortable, and they did not have to focus their attention on grammar and pronunciation, as well as to get the accurate data as much as possible. Each interview took from twenty to thirty minutes depending on the participants' answers.

Later on, the interviews were transcribed and translated into English to form themes from their answers. Based on that, data were categorized into difficulties faced by high school students, university students, and adult language learners while speaking in English.

Data analysis

The data collected for this study from conducted interviews can be further categorized into three main categories, and they are Speaking Difficulties faced by high school students, Speaking Difficulties faced by university students, and Speaking Difficulties faced by adult language learners. The representation of these categories is analyzed and displayed in the following lines.

Speaking Difficulties faced by high school students

Out of 5 participants, the most common personal problems were hesitation to speak and anxiety. One of them reported *"Yes, of course, I feel nervous when talking to someone, and it depends on the situation"* [P1]. Similarly, the other one added *"Sometimes I can't even remember some words, I start describing and suddenly I need some words. Then I become nervous"* [P4]. One of them even mentioned, *"I speak English only when I have to"* [P3].

When it comes to social problems, some of the most common among all participants were fear of being criticized by peers, fear of making mistakes, and pronunciation. Seems that high school students are not afraid of being criticized by teachers as

much as they fear being criticized by peers. Also, fear of making mistakes and pronunciation often prevents them from speaking and writing.

In addition, when it comes to linguistic problems, as it is displayed in the table below, some of the problems are fluency, the influence of native language, grammar, and spelling. One of the participants reported, *"sometimes I think a little more about grammar"* [P2], and similarly with another participant *"Before, there were a lot of problems with grammar, but now is better"* [P1]. When it comes to writing, spelling seems to be the major problem among this group of participants.

Table 2:

Difficulties of Speaking faced by high school students

Personal problems	Hesitation to speak
	Anxiety
Social problems	Fear of being criticized by peers
	Fear of making mistakes
	Pronunciation
Linguistic problems	Fluency
	Native language
	Grammar
	Spelling

Speaking Difficulties faced by university students

The second group of participants used for interviews was university students. The results are similar to those of high school students, but in addition, it seems that university students face more additional problems. The most common personal problems were nervousness when speaking to other people/can't remember words, lack of confidence, hesitation to speak when being around a big group of people, shyness, and dissatisfaction with current knowledge.

Regarding dissatisfaction with current knowledge one of the participants said *"I find a difficulty in speaking English, it is because I'm not satisfied with my skills to communicate exactly the way I want to"* [P6]. Nervousness, one of the participants added *"Sometimes I feel nervous when I have to speak with other people. I'm not sure if I*

know all the reasons" [P8]. Lack of confidence also plays a huge role in preventing university students to speak "I don't feel confident while I'm speaking English, it's because I am always around people who know English better than me. I feel like they will judge me" [P7]. In addition to these, hesitation also prevents students from speaking "Even I would rather write in English than speak" [P9].

When it comes to social problems, some of the most common among all participants were fear of being criticized, fear of being judged by other classmates, and pronunciation. Similar to high school students, university students also fear that someone from their peers will judge them, "My fear comes from other people, they judged others because of not knowing English very well" [P7]. The fear of being criticized by the teacher is not as big as that of being criticized by students "Well I appreciate when my teacher corrects me, but when someone else criticizes me it's pretty uncomfortable" [P10].

Lastly, when it comes to linguistic problems, as it is displayed in the table below, some of the problems are fluency, lack of vocabulary, grammar, spelling, and prepositions. Some of the students believe that they can't be as fluent as native speakers, and one of them answered that he/she faces problems with fluency "Actually I do, we can't be that fluent in English, but I'm working on it" [P7].

Table 3:
Difficulties of Speaking faced by university students

Personal Problems	Nervousness when speaking to other people/can't remember words Lack of confidence Hesitation to speak when being around a big group of people Shyness Dissatisfaction with current knowledge
Social Problems	Fear of being criticized Fear of being judged by other classmates Pronunciation
Linguistic Problems	Fluency Lack of vocabulary Grammar Spelling Prepositions

Speaking Difficulties faced by adult language learners

The third and last group of participants used for this study were adult language learners. Their difficulties were similar and almost the same as those of high school students and university students, but in comparison, the number of their problems was much higher. The most common personal problems were communication with other people, insecurity, nervousness, fast communication, lack of confidence, hesitation to communicate, lack of knowledge, and shyness. They seem to struggle with fear of speaking as one of the participants said "Yes. Fear blocks me. I speak quietly so they don't hear me" [P11]. Also, fast communication makes them uncomfortable, "Speed is a problem for me, I need more time to concentrate. By relaxing and concentrating, I mostly solve the problem" [P13]. In addition, shyness is also one of the problems "I'm always ashamed" [P12].

Table 4:
Difficulties of Speaking and Writing faced by adult language learners

Personal Problems	Communication with other people Insecurity Nervousness Fast communication Lack of confidence Hesitation to communicate Lack of knowledge Shyness
Social Problems	Fear of being criticized by peers Pronunciation
Linguistic Problems	Lack of vocabulary Fluency Grammar Native language Accuracy Spelling

When it comes to social problems, some of the most common among all participants were fear of being criticized by peers and pronunciation.

Similar to high school and university students, adult language learners feel fear of being criticized by peers rather than teachers *"I am more afraid of the environment than the teacher"* [P12]. They tend to avoid using new words if they are not sure how to pronounce them *"I avoid words I don't know how to say because others won't understand me"* [P14].

Lastly, when it comes to linguistic problems, they are a lack of vocabulary, fluency, grammar, native language, accuracy, and spelling. Most of the participants reported problems with spelling, and one of them said *"I write poorly because I don't know how to spell correctly"* [P15].

Discussion

This study explored the difficulties faced by high school students, university students, and adult language learners while speaking in English. Some of the difficulties discussed in the study were anxiety, nervousness, hesitation to speak, lack of confidence, fear of being criticized, lack of vocabulary, fluency, grammar, and similar.

The study showed that the difficulties faced by high school students, university students, and adult language learners are similar, and as the group is older the number of these difficulties increases. For example, all of them had problems with anxiety, hesitation to speak, nervousness and similar which were part of personal problems. Moving on to the social problems, common for all 3 groups is that they are afraid of being criticized by peers. When it comes to linguistic problems, some common for all of them were fluency, lack of vocabulary and grammar.

When it comes to high school students, this study is in line with Chua and Chong's (2016) case study with 60 high school students that found speaking anxiety a common problem among students in the Malaysian school, and that factors such as fear of negative evaluation, lack of confidence, and inadequate preparation are the main causes of speaking anxiety.

As for the university students, the study is in line with Alam and Ashrafuzzaman's (2018a) study of challenges of developing speaking skills through classroom interaction among EFL learners. The study confirmed that EFL learners face a range of challenges when it comes to developing their speaking skills through classroom interaction. Some of the main challenges identified include

a lack of confidence, limited vocabulary, difficulty understanding and using grammar correctly, and anxiety about making mistakes.

The data confirmed Heriansyah's (2012) study with Indonesian EFL learners. Similarly, the study found that some of the problems faced by EFL learners when developing their speaking skills were a lack of vocabulary and a fear of making mistakes. Also, the learners often struggle to find the right words to express their ideas, and this leads to a lack of fluency and coherence in their speaking. Additionally, many learners were afraid of making mistakes when speaking in front of others.

Anandari's (2015) research study on the anxiety experienced by Indonesian EFL (English as a Foreign Language) is also in line with this study. Similarly, the sources of anxiety identified by the participants included fear of making mistakes, fear of negative evaluation, and lack of confidence in English proficiency.

In addition, Nakhallah's (2016) study of speaking difficulties experienced by (EFL) learners, was confirmed. The findings of the study indicated that the most common speaking difficulties experienced by EFL learners were pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency, and grammar, which was the case for this study as well. The study also found that anxiety and lack of confidence were significant factors that contributed to these difficulties, which is confirmed in this study as well.

Although Bahadur Chand (2021) found that teacher, and classroom environment, such as the use of methods, and books are the causes for difficulties that students experience while speaking English, this was not the case for the current study due to the fact that none of the participants reported dissatisfaction with neither language teachers nor methods or books used.

When it comes to adult learners, the study confirmed Arda's (2013) study on EFL adult learners' difficulties in speaking English as it found that adult learners face difficulties in speaking English due to factors such as a lack of confidence, limited vocabulary, and a fear of making mistakes.

It is also in line with Kucuk and Sesen's (2018) study on difficulties encountered by adult EFL learners in speaking English as the data revealed that the main difficulties faced by adult EFL learners in speaking English include a lack of vocabulary,

anxiety, pronunciation errors, and difficulty in constructing sentences.

Lastly, it found out the same outcomes as Nguyen's (2021) study on speaking difficulties faced by Vietnamese adult learners of English as the author found that the main difficulties faced by Bosnian adult learners of English in speaking include a lack of vocabulary, grammar errors, and pronunciation problems.

Conclusion

The study aimed to explore the difficulties faced by high school, university, and adult language learners while speaking English using an empirical qualitative study in which the researcher used a semi-structured interview to collect data. Due to the fact that a lot of data was gathered, unfortunately it was impossible to incorporate all of them into this paper.

Speaking is usually regarded as one of the most difficult skills to acquire by EFL learners, and that was the case for language learners in Sarajevo Canton as well. According to the research data, learners got three major speaking difficulties such as personal problems, linguistic problems, and social problems. Hesitation to speak, anxiety, fear of being criticized by peers, fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence, lack of knowledge, pronunciation, grammar, and lack of vocabulary, were just some of them.

Taking into consideration the importance of English language in the world and in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well, being able to speak fluently is one of the goals for many people, and researching these difficulties therefore will lead to the improvement of teaching methods.

This study suggested that creating a positive and supportive learning environment, empowering learners to take control of their learning, and providing ample opportunities for practice and interaction are key to improving language learning outcomes. Practical implications of this study include informing curriculum designers and language instructors about the specific challenges learners face at various educational levels, allowing for targeted pedagogical strategies. One limitation of this study is the small sample size and its restriction to Sarajevo Canton, which may affect the generalizability of findings. Future research could expand to other regions or employ a mixed-methods approach.

References

Akbari, Z. (2015). Current challenges in teaching/learning English for EFL learners: The case of junior high school and high school. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 199, 394–401. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.07.524>

Akbari, Z. (2016). The study of EFL students' perceptions of their problems, needs and concerns over learning English: The case of MA paramedical students. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 232, 24–34. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2016.10.006>

Alam, M. A., & Ashrafuzzaman, M. (2018a). Challenges of developing speaking skill through classroom interaction of EFL learners. *Prime University Journal*, 12(1), 45–67.

Alam, M. A., & Ashrafuzzaman, M. (2018b). Challenges of developing speaking skill through classroom interaction of efl learners. *Prime University Journal*, 12(1), 45–67. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332155144>

Asmali, M., & Sayın, S. D. (2021). Language Learning Attitudes of Young Learners: Differences between Syrian Refugee Learners and Turkish Learners. *Acta Paedagogica Vilnensia*, 47, 25–38.

Bahadur Chand, A. (2021). Challenges Faced by Bachelor Level Students While Speaking English. *Indonesian Journal of English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics*, 6(1).

Bećirović, S., Brdarević Čeljo, & A., Sinanović, J. (2017). The use of metacognitive reading strategies among students at international Burch university: A case study. *European Journal of Contemporary Education*, 6.

Brdarević-Čeljo, A., & Asotić, M. (2017). The Influence of Social Context, Grade Level and Gender on the Use of Language Learning Strategies in Primary Schools. *Imperial Journal of Interdisciplinary Research (IJIR)*, 3(12), 7–14.

Delić, H., Bećirović, S., & Brdarević-Čeljo, A. (2018). Effects of grade level and gender on foreign language learning process in Bosnian high schools. *International Journal Of Educational Policy Research And Review*, 5(6). doi: 10.15739/ijepr.18.010

- Delić, H., Dedović-Atilla, E., Džanković, A., & Kapukaya, M. B. (2024). Verbal anglicisms with suffix endings -ova-, -a-, and -ira- in the Bosnian language – The frequency of use and the knowledge of their meaning. *ExELL*, 12(2), 255–275. <https://doi.org/10.51558/03-4858.2024.12.2.255>
- Guzman, A. B. D., Albela, E. J. A., Nieto, D. R. D., Ferrer, J. B. F., & Santos, R. N. (2006). English language learning difficulty of Korean students in a Philippine Multidisciplinary University. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 7(2), 152–161.
- Ghafar, Z.N., & Raad, B. (2023). Factors Affecting Speaking Proficiency in English Language Learning: A general overview of the speaking skill. *Journal of Social Science (JoSS)*, 2. <https://doi.org/10.57185/joss.v2i6.107>
- Ganasegeran, K., Al-Dubai, S. A., Qureshi, A. M., Al-Abed, A. A. A., Am, R., & Aljunid, S. M. (2012). Social and psychological factors affecting eating habits among university students in a Malaysian medical school: a cross-sectional study. *Nutrition journal*, 11, 1-7.
- Heriansyah, H. (2012). Speaking problems faced by the English department students of Syiah Kuala University. *Lingua Didaktika*, 6(1), 37–44.
- Habibić, A., & Dubravac, V. (2016). Grammar Acquisition in Bosnian EFL Classrooms. *Pismo*, 4, 114–142.
- Imamović, A., & Delibegović Džanić, N. (2016). The status of English in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Past and present. *Multilingual Matters* 19–35. <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781783095971-004>
- Le, M. D., Nguyen, H. T. M., & Burns, A. (2021). English primary teacher agency in implementing teaching methods in response to language policy reform: A Vietnamese case study. *Current Issues in Language Planning*, 22(1–2), 199–224.
- Makewa, L., Role, E., & Tuguta, E. (2013). Students' Perceived Level of English Proficiency in Secondary Schools in Dodoma, Tanzania.
- Ministry of Education. (2016). Nastavni plan i program. Srednja škola za stručno obrazovanje i obuku. Četverogodišnji program. Predmet: Engleski jezik (I strani jezik). https://mon.ks.gov.ba/sites/mon.ks.gov.ba/files/engleski_jezik__srednje_skole_za_strucno_obrazovanje_i_obuku_-_cetvrti_stepen.pdf
- Lonkar, C. (2017). Activity based learning programme for speaking skill development. *Scholarly Research Journal for Interdisciplinary Studies*, 4–35.
- Nakhalah, A. M. M. A. (2016). Problems and difficulties of speaking that encounter English language students at Al Quds Open University. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention*, 5(12), 96–101.
- Saad, I. (2017). The Role of Cooperative Learning Method in Teaching of Science Subject at Elementary School Level: An Experimental Study. *Bulletin of Education and Research*, 39(2), 1–17.

ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

AQUA VITAE: THE INNER SEASCAPE OF SYLVIA PLATH

Ajla Smajić¹ 

¹ International Burch University, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Ajla Smajić, International Burch University, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. E-mail: ajla.smajic@stu.ibu.edu.ba

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the profound and almost mystical connection between Sylvia Plath as a person and the element of water. It traces its presence across prose and personal history but takes her poetry as the biggest focus. Water emerges as a central motif in Sylvia Plath's work from childhood to adulthood as it is filled with emotional and transformative themes. This draws on biographical insights and highlights how her experienced were shaped by the metaphors of water in comfort and loss. In her work, water is depicted as a dual force, it is healing and secure while also being fear and a tool of destruction. Works such as "Tulips", "Crossing the River" and "Mirror" are examined to showcase the depth of the seascape which fills her life. In particular, the transitions, transformations, the conscious and the unconscious lines of life. The paper finds that Plath's use of water imagery not only enriches the emotional depth of her writing but also offers insight into her own world. The personal combines with the natural element to show the ways Sylvia Plath lived her life. Ultimately, the paper argues that understanding Plath's connection to water provides a deeper appreciation of her literary legacy and herself.

Keywords: Sylvia Plath, water imagery, water symbolism, psychological imagery, symbolism of nature



MAP EDUCATION
AND HUMANITIES

Volume 6

ISSN: 2744-2373 / © The Authors.
Published by MAP - Multidisciplinary
Academic Publishing.

Article Submitted: 06 July 2025
Article Accepted: 09 September 2025
Article Published: 10 September 2025



Publisher's Note: MAP stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

<https://doi.org/10.53880/2744-2373.2025.6.24>



HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Smajić A. (2025). *Aqua Vitae: The Inner Seascape of Sylvia Plath*.

MAP Education and Humanities, 6, 24-39. doi: <https://doi.org/10.53880/2744-2373.2025.6.24>



© The Author(s). **Open Access Article**
Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.



1. Introduction

Literary exploration is usually a wide and deep endeavor. If it had to be compared to a body of water, it would certainly only be fit to compare it to the ocean. It comes as no surprise that water symbolism remains as the element which survives in its use and resurgence amongst authors. It does not matter if they write poems, essays or novels. Water remains an element as powerful in writing as it is in nature. Sylvia Plath is no exception. Sylvia Plath stands as a lighthouse and a tempest in the middle of such a busy environment because her recurring element and motif is precisely water. It makes up her poetic landscape which continues to resonate emotionally and symbolically (Rose, 1991). This comes as no surprise because it flows through her verses. Water as an element exists in her poems and prose; in her personal letters and journals; and even in interviews she has given to the lucky few because we are only able to hear a limited number of her voice recordings. In this paper, we embark on a journey to explore the profound significance of water inside of her work and life in a similar way that two currents come to meet one another.

For Sylvia Plath, renowned for her confessional poetry and haunting prose, life and art were intimately intertwined. Plath grappled with personal demons, including mental illness and complicated relationships, before tragically ending her life at the age of thirty. Yet, from the depths of her despair emerged a body of work that continues to captivate and confront readers with its raw intensity, unflinching honesty and a special kind of lucid nature (Badia, 2011). Because water was such an integral part of her, one cannot help but wonder if water is the main cause of lucidity, honesty and intensity as raw as the sea currents in her works.

At the heart of Plath's oeuvre lies a fascination with water—an elemental force that embodies life and death, creation and destruction, personal and objective. From the tranquil depths of rivers and lakes to the tumultuous expanse of the ocean, water serves as a powerful metaphor for the complexities of human existence and human identity. Through its fluidity and mutability, Plath captures the ebb and flow of emotion while also capturing the cyclical nature of experience. Northrop (1976) directly mentioned her works and the constant flux of identity (with myths) that change the same way waters flow.

In "Aqua Vitae," we delve into the depths of Plath's poetic landscape - or seascape in this case. Exploring how water comes to shape her own understandings and our understandings of her is a popular topic. Drawing upon close readings of her poetry and prose, as well as insights from literary criticism and biographical analysis, we uncover the multifaceted meanings of water in Plath's works. Its role as a symbol of rebirth and renewal to its association with despair and dissolution and even the way the water comes to be named or conceptualized in the writer's own words. Gill (2008) showed that water emerged as a central motif that reflects the complexities of Plath's psyche, nature, consciousness and the human condition at large.

As we embark on this voyage of exploration, readers are invited to join us in unraveling the enigmatic depths of Sylvia Plath's poetic seascape.

1.1 Overview of Sylvia Plath's Life and Literary Career

Sylvia Plath was born on October 27, 1932, in Boston, Massachusetts, to Otto Plath and Aurelia Schober Plath. She called herself unquestionably American but did not hide her German-Austrian ties. Plath grew up in a household that valued education and intellectual pursuits. Not only did her father serve as an object of her poetry, but he also served as a major influence in her future path. His influence on her identity was major.

Plath excelled academically and demonstrated a remarkable talent for writing from a young age. She published her first poem at the age of eight and continued to pursue her literary ambitions throughout her schooling and even after.

In 1950, Plath enrolled at Smith College on a scholarship, where she thrived academically and immersed herself in various literary and creative pursuits. At Smith, Plath proved just how talented she was. It was during her time at Smith that Plath experienced a pivotal moment in her literary development when she won a guest editorship at "Mademoiselle" magazine's annual college issue in 1953. These experiences would come to inspire her only novel "The Bell Jar". (You will notice that, while this novel is unquestionably amongst her most famous works, The Bell Jar is not a subject in this paper. This paper focuses on her poems, letters and interviews. While The Bell Jar will not be explicitly analyzed, it is a subject of some essays and references used in this paper. This comes as no

surprise since the novel features plenty of watery imagery.)

In 1953, Plath graduated *summa cum laude* from Smith College with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English. She ended up marrying Ted Hughes and they had two children together.

1.2 Literary Themes

Throughout her life, Sylvia Plath explored a wide range of themes. These themes often reflected her personal experiences, emotional struggles, and intellectual inquiries. This managed to make her work deeply introspective and psychological. Several recurring themes can be identified in Plath's writing, each offering insight into her complex worldview and artistic vision. Themes that reoccurred were identity and self-exploration, mental illness and psychological struggles, nature and the natural world, dynamics inside of different relationships along with death, life and transcendence. Britzolakis (1999) examined this use of water imagery in Plath's grief and exploration of identity. While Gould (2000) gave a critic to Christina's approach to the way she was presenting her ideas, he did not disagree with them.

These recurring themes offer a glimpse into the multifaceted nature of Sylvia Plath's literary vision, revealing the depth and complexity of her artistic exploration. Examining these thematic threads is quite fun and rewarding, which is why they influenced specific sections. As we analyze the poems, we will start to see how it all comes together. We will also investigate how exactly Sylvia loved to see the water forms. Beyond that, we will pinpoint the confessional in specific poems as Rosenblatt (1979) connected water imagery to Plath's exploration of the self, even on a personal level.

1.3 Roots of Sylvia's Connection to Water

Before that, we have to pinpoint where this fascination with water came from. Throughout her career, the poetess mentioned the natural world as her starting point of inspiration. While her approach did change, and she grew with time, themes of water stayed persistent. In *A Disturbance in Mirrors* (1988), Pamela J. Annas argues that Sylvia Plath's concept of herself changed between her early and late poetry and that those changes are reflected in changes in her imagery. She states that, at first, Sylvia Plath used natural imagery to cross the borders so that she might redefine herself.

She said that in later poems, this natural imagery was replaced with bureaucratic things. Offices, hospitals and concentration camps are some of the examples. Pamela used this to demonstrate how Plath came to be increasingly more isolated. While that certainly may be true, what stayed consistent throughout her earlier and later works is precisely water and spaces that came to embody it. She did not abandon this natural world and this natural wonder; she expanded on it. She found new ways to use it and was able to make water take on varied purposes and symbolism. (On my personal copy of the *Bell Jar*, the critic Stephen Wall from the *Observer* found this as her unwinking intelligence). So, rather than considering it [this natural imagery], as abandoned, we must recognize how it was situated throughout the years.

1.4 Further Context & Confessional Poetry

Sylvia Plath is often associated with the genre of confessional poetry, a style characterized by its intensely personal and autobiographical subject matter. Emerging in the mid-20th century, confessional poets, such as Anne Sexton, sought to explore themes of trauma, mental illness, and personal turmoil through candid self-expression and introspection. Plath's poetry is notable for its confessional elements, as she grappled with her own experiences of emotional upheaval, existential despair, and the complexities of identity. The term was first used by M. L. Rosenthal and his mind conjured up the term to suit a period of Robert Lowell's career. In this period, Lowell turned to themes of deep exploration on matters such as: sexual guilt, mental hospitals, what confinement meant and alcoholism. These themes were developed in such a way that they pointed to the poet himself rather than an external entity. Rosenthal was careful in his limitations on who exactly this term applied to, but he did explicitly name Plath as one of the confessional poets. He said that she would put the speaker herself (the speaker is almost always undoubtedly a female in her poems), and this speaker would have shame, vulnerability in many aspects of life. He called this an embodiment of her civilization. Sylvia Plath, undoubtedly, deserves to have her name among this category. There are different critiques and interpretations for that but what matters more is that we proof from the poetess herself about being confessional.

Three months before Sylvia Plath died, she did an interview with BBC's Peter Orr. In fact, it is one of the few recordings of her voice that exist

today. Without knowing it perhaps, she explicitly explained her poetic disposition towards the confessional rather than anything else. Among one of the questions that were posed to her, because he was naturally curious, Peter asked about her inspirations. The exact words of the interview are transcribed below.

Peter asked, "Do your poems tend now to come out of books rather than come out of your own life?"

Sylvia Plath responded:

"Oh, no, no, I wouldn't say that at all. I think that my poems come out immediately out of sensuous and emotional experiences I have. But I must say I cannot sympathize with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or a knife, or whatever it is. I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying, like madness, being tortured, this sort of experience... with an informed and an intelligent mind... personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and mirror-looking, narcissistic experience. I believe it should be relevant... to the larger things, the bigger things." (Plath, 1962, 02:30)

This is not to say that every single poem Sylvia Plath wrote is confessional. She was too prolific of a writer for her to only be a master of just one trade. Besides her own words on the matter, we need to remember that Rosenthal's estimation was widely accepted. But the first to challenge it directly was Ted Hughes himself. He saw her use of autobiographical details as sort of an emblematic way to approach writing. Marjorie Perloff claimed that Sylvia Plath's details lacked reality and that was one of the main reasons why she should not be compared to Lowell's work. Naturally, there is always space for critique and disagreement but the way these critiques sound reminds one of the way certain people argue that Virginia Woolf does not use stream of consciousness just because it is not similar (or exact) enough to the way James Joyce used it in *Ulysses*. Confessional poetry (and having the status of a confessional writer) can be done in plenty of ways. In the same interview question above, we find out why Sylvia Plath's confessional style differs from Lowell's. Her confessional poetry has layers to it. Sometimes it is easy to spot. At other times, the confessions sneak in so subtly that they

are just one raindrop in a downpour. Sylvia Plath herself could not relate to the narcissistic uses of confessional poetry. Her writing is different from Lowell's precisely because she chose for it to be that way.

Stream of consciousness or confessional poetry is never done in just one specific way. Exploring it with this in mind is certainly a perspective that opens up room for more possibilities rather than just "a kind of shut-box". The beauty of her poetry lies in both the surface of the seascape she provides us with and inside it, and all the way to very bottom of it.

1.5 Brief Introduction of Analysis

The poems that will be analyzed in this paper are *Tulips*, *Dark Wood Dark Water*, *Crossing the Water*, *Tale of a Tub*, *Mirror*, *Daddy*, *Love Letter* and *Medusa*. The seascape she presented in these poems is full of variety. For each poem - we will look at how/which of the categories it applies to. The outlined categories being: nature and the natural world; relationship dynamics; life, death and rebirth; and the self and the social commentary. Sometimes the poem falls into more than one category but while these are mentioned, the overarching one is where it will be placed. We will look at what the water signifies in each poem, how it is described, what the environment is and how it shapes up the broader contexts. Briefly, sometimes it will be mentioned which organisms and items exist inside the seascape and if they also serve as a metaphor.

2. Theoretical Background

Sylvia Plath's poetry uses water with remarkable density and psychological resonance, while having broader themes of identity, death, rebirth, danger, and self-reflection. Her engagement with water extends far, drawing on deep literary, psychoanalytic, and mythological traditions. With this she is able to express many experiences. Some of those experiences are: vitality, fear, dissolution, purification, and transformation (Gottler, 1975; Ocsovai, 2019).

2.1 Water as Rebirth and Purification

Plath frequently situates water as a purifying and regenerative force. In the critical essay "The poetics of Water in Sylvia Plath's oeuvre," scholars detail Plath's attraction to water's dual function as both a healer and a marker of life cycles. It is no surprise as water is a motif with mythological

roots as it separates life and death, the conscious and unconscious. Poems like "Crossing the Water" exemplify how transitions across water symbolize movement from one psychological state to another, echoing rituals of cleansing, baptism, and rebirth. In her own writing, this element becomes paradoxically a source of comfort and of yearning for escape. (Renaux, 1998).

2.2 Water as Danger and Annihilation

Plath's water symbolism is deeply ambivalent. The element often connotes threat, dissolution, and death. This entire force of destruction is intimately bound up with the poet's personal history and her own emotional life. In "The syntax of water, darkness and death in Sylvia Plath's poetry", Renaux (1998) presents the analysis of "Crossing the Water" and reveals water as a liminal space. That is, a space between the known and the unknown. Imagery of black lakes, funerary boats, and mythic crossing recur, marking water as a passageway. This theoretical or metaphorical door leads to transformation, but it is not free of ambiguity or something that lurks beneath it all. In addition, Ketab (2020) mentions how the sea, in works such as "Tulips," can incarnate the poet's own wishing for oblivion or suicide. Yet, still as paradoxical as ever, the poet finds freedom in the disappearing act.

2.3 Water as Reflection and Identity

Plath's symbolization of water is also tightly bound to the act of self-reflection and then the identities that come to be formed. In her poem "Mirror," the water's surface (a lake, replacing the mirror) is an arena. She uses it to search, fight and realize things about herself. With this it serves both as a literal and figurative reflection. This consistent motif points to the shifting, sometimes unreliable nature of identity. Like lake's depth, it starts resonating with Plath's larger poetics. It is used to explore psychological depth, alienation, aging and healing. (Novi & Nishi, 2019).

3. Literature Review

Scholars frequently reference Gaston Bachelard's *Water and Dreams* to interpret Plath's connection to water. In Gaston's work, themes of transition, death, and the unconscious are deeply intertwined with inner shapes and metaphors that authors create with language. Renaux S. (1998) highlights how the poet's imagery (such as the black lake, funerary boat, and water lilies)

evoke both darkness and subtle hope. This in turn, reflects a liminal space between life and death. This symbolism aligns with Bachelard's view of water as a mutable substance representing destiny and transformation.

In addition to poetry, water symbolism permeates Plath's novel *The Bell Jar*, where it mirrors the protagonist's mental state. The fluid, often turbulent water images correspond to the psychological instability. Water is able to shift from chaotic to frozen forms in her writing, symbolizing despair, and even stasis. This dynamic use of water imagery underscores Plath's engagement with nature as a force that can move in many directions.

Biographical and psychological readings further emphasize Plath's lifelong fascination with the sea, tracing back to childhood experiences by the Atlantic coast. In her essay "Ocean 1212-W," Plath expresses a magnetic, almost dangerous attraction to the ocean, symbolizing both a desire for self-discovery and an encounter with mortality (Burger, 2001). This personal connection informs her poetic use of water as a metaphor for unconscious depths and existential boundaries.

Sylvia Plath's symbiosis with water is not only a poetic motif but also a significant theme within the broader academic space that discusses her work. Scholars present her use of water within modernist and confessional poetry. They interpret it as a symbol of emotional turbulence, existential questioning, and the fluid boundaries between self and other (Bassnett, 2003). Critical perspectives highlight how Plath's water imagery intersects with themes of identity and transformation, echoing wider feminist concerns and herself as a woman. (Showalter, 1977; Gilbert & Gubar, 2020). As stated before, water is read as a site of both creativity and destructive danger. This aligns with analyses that emphasize how Plath's water metaphors are by no means conventional. Instead, they break away from regular meanings and have multiple layers left for interpretation that challenge fixed binaries. Sometimes (as will be evident from the specific poem analyses), life and death, rebirth and destruction, sanity and insanity all meet in one (Alqaryouti et al., 2025). In this way, Plath's seascape is deeply embedded within ongoing scholarly conversations that explore the complexities of her work. This helps us see water not only as a literary device used by Sylvia, but also as an emblem that moves with the artist herself.

4. Methodology

The paper employed a qualitative research design, specifically literary analysis, to explore Sylvia Plath's use of water imagery and its symbolic significance in her poetry. This approach involved close reading and interpretation of textual elements to uncover underlying themes and meanings related to water as a motif. Data sources include Plath's own poems, as well as some essays. To conduct this, the following poems were chosen: "Tulips", "Dark Wood, Dark Water", "Crossing the Water", "Tale of a Tub", "Mirror", "Daddy", "Love Letter", and "Medusa", as well as relevant biographical and critical texts. Through systematically collected texts, verbal data was analyzed with identified recurring water-related symbols and their contextual implications within Plath's work. The guiding research questions focused on: How does she use water (and language) to convey personal and psychological themes? Which poems exist as a combination of many themes in one and which stand alone for only one meaning? How does the motifs or symbol of water show up in her work, and how does it reflect her inner experiences or commentary? The selection criteria for these poems centered on representativeness. The poems were published across a number of years and highlight her diverse thematic concerns and interest. They include identity and self-perception, relationships and familial bonds, and the interplay between external environments and internal states. The poem *Tulips* explores recovery in a hospital and rebirth. *Dark Wood, Dark Water* and *Crossing the River* explore transience with nature's symbols. *Tale of a Tub* uses sharp precision to give societal commentary of a woman surrounded by water. *Mirror* presents 'sea life' briefly and explores the relationship with aging through an object. *Love Letter* explores relationships and communication as well as struggles that exist between the two. *Medusa* uses a myth to present a complicated relationship between a mother and a daughter that is filled all around with water. *Daddy* explicitly mentions her father in water and goes on to describe how her life force is being sucked away by men. Content analysis was used to categorize and interpret these symbols, supported by theoretical frameworks from literary criticism and psychoanalytic theory and philosophy texts. To ensure credibility, the analysis was cross-checked with existing scholarly interpretations and mythological studies. This method allows for a nuanced understanding of how water functions to create the emotional and existential elements of the seascape.

5. Analysis and Discussion

This section explores and presents the various elements within specific poems. It considers the imagery, language, and tone used by Sylvia while presenting close examination of the specific parts that have to do with water imagery. It aims to uncover the deeper meanings and emotional states embedded in the texts based on how they form her seascape. The discussion highlights how water turns into a poetic feature that brings overall impact and significance. Specific themes and interpretations of the poems will be addressed in sub parts of the analysis.

5.1 Nature and the Natural World

Dark Wood, Dark Water (Plath, 1960, pp. 37–38) was chosen as the poem to represent the marvel Sylvia Plath had for the world around her. There are accounts of her expressing how much she loved nature in her interviews and written words to her friends. When she was at her lowest, she would look for ways to reconnect with nature. (Think for example about the story of when she found out about her husband's infidelity, and she spent the whole night sitting and looking at the moon before trying to chase it.) The poem that best represents her admiration of water as simply one of nature's miracles and something to behold is precisely *Dark Wood, Dark Water*.

This poem was chosen at the start just to showcase how hard it is to not find a dual meaning to her works which use water imagery. Even poems that seem lighter or more observational, ultimately gravitate toward deeper themes like spiritual transformation. Even when Plath describes the surface of the water with shine in which miracles occur, the poem circles back. Through *Dark Wood, Dark Water* we get a glimpse of Sylvia Plath's marvel at water as a thing that is simply meant to exist but also hide things inside of itself as more time passes by. There are trees and wood inside this space. There is a ram's horn that stands in the open. There is pewter. Water outlasts the one who looks at it, so the speaker is not important here. Including pewter reminds us of that. Pewter is an old alloy found in ancient Egypt and ancient Rome. The natural object she describes is both ancient and new for the way it moves. All of this is especially demonstrated with the lines:

"From the archaic

Bones of the great trees.

Blue mists move over"

Bones are archaic but the blue mists will continue to move over them no matter how much time passes. The reason this poem was used in this section is because there is an appreciation for eternal quality towards water when it does not fulfill roles of rebirth or destruction. Because water means so many things to Sylvia Plath and that is exactly what gives it eternity in her writing. Both as an unquenchable source for her poetic ways and as an object to be admired in her eyes.

Yes, Sylvia's descriptions of water are often nuanced and dual, it does not mean that she did not appreciate the natural world itself in her writings.

5.2 Relationship Dynamics

There are three major relationships that shaped the life of Sylvia Plath. Ted Hughes, her mother and her father. For the sake of showcasing how taking away water from Sylvia Plath's writing would mean taking away the very dynamics of her life, all three relationships will be explored through different poems, albeit in different capacity. Water imagery as element was present in her descriptions of them all.

(The reason why her relationship with Ted Hughes was not explored more in the opening section is because that exploration fits better here and shall be started off with him.) It is a known fact that her own husband burnt her last diary and certain poems for his own personal views. Besides that, he was also the editor of her poetry collections, and his power was so large that he would take out and include poems as he saw fit. This position came to him because he was also friends with, and respected by, publishers in charge. It is no wonder that such a power couple inside of literature has been the fascination of many. However, Sylvia Plath's own life, both before and after death, has remained as a tool for people to scrutinize, scandalize and write about. It remains colored by sexist interpretations and undervaluing. Sylvia Plath fans and Ted Hughes fans rarely get along for these reasons. It often seems like both figures fell into demise and the question of 'Who was responsible?' continues to echo. The book, „Red Comet: The Short life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath (2020)“ by Heather Clark is perhaps the most comprehensive and valuable biography we have with the careful nature of examining this remarkable woman and her relationships.

While *Mirror* will be analyzed further in the following sections, something that must be mentioned is how the poem relates to Ted Hughes. *Mirror* came as a reply to Ted Hughes' "Pike" (Hughes, 1967, pp. 38–39) and "Pike" came as a response to Plath's poem "All the Dead Dears". It is a sequence of responses between the literary couple that lasted for five years in total. Simply put, images that are evoked from these back-and-forth conversations give us more insight into their life. The fish that Sylvia Plath's describes is not a predator or a bringer of violence while Ted Hughes presents a more violent side and gives us perspectives of a fisherman. The very role that exists for hunting fish and for showcasing how domination plays out. If Sylvia Plath constantly describes herself as a fish and Ted Hughes loves using hunters of nature to lure something in, this itself talks about the unbalanced way in which they lived life together.

In *Love Letter* (Plath, 1981, pp. 162), we get another exploration of their relationship dynamic. The speaker, written in first person, is Sylvia Plath herself. She dedicated this poem to Ted. It is rather interesting to view the way in which she writes about romantic love and how it had the power to change her. Even more so, if we were to compare it to Ted's own "Love Song" (Hughes, 1998, pp. 9–10). Both poems were written in the 1960s. The speaker thanks and puts their lover on a pedestal. This person was able to change them, this person was able to define them and make them know themselves. Once again, water imagery plays a crucial role in the way Sylvia Plath views herself and her emotions when describing all of this. Angels themselves cry with her; her cheeks of basalt (volcanic rock) were washed away and purified by the tears. Water found ways to clean something and then it froze. Suddenly there was ice on each dead head. Water came to be associated with dead things once again.

"My cheeks of basalt. They turned to tears,
Angels weeping over dull natures,
But didn't convince me. Those tears froze.
Each dead head had a visor of ice."

Then, there is a question of what happens once the speaker leaves this state. The speaker does not become or stay ice. The speaker does not simply walk. She pours herself out like a fluid and comes to be with birds and stems of plants. She moves like water, flowing freely and enjoying nature itself.

Water becomes transient again. Moves between states and animals and plants. Water imagery is effervescent in both definitions of the word.

“I shone, mice-scaled, and unfolded

To pour myself out like a fluid

Among bird feet and the stems of plants.”

And once this shift does take place, how does the speaker move again? Do they fly? No, rather, they float. We can see the gentleness of floating. The speaker goes through the seasons and transforms from a rock into a new entity. At the very end, she floats and is as pure as ice. Water and its states play a purifying and a transformative role. And they take on the mantle of a gift.

“Floating through the air in my soul-shift

Pure as a pane of ice. It’s a gift.”

As opposed to most poems, while with unbalanced power scales and dynamics, this poem happens to be much lighter and hopeful than most of Sylvia’s other poetry. It belongs to post-war explorations. Regarding Pamela J. Annas’ claim (1988), we can see that Sylvia did not abandon water as a tool that fulfills many purposes, she just situated it differently.

The poem chosen to represent how water imagery seeps into the relationship Sylvia had with her mother is *Medusa* (Plath, 1981, pp. 149–150). Once again, we have disillusionment and fragmentation. Plath uses surreal imagery and fragmented syntax to capture a sense of disorientation and alienation. It has themes of female anger, sexuality, and the struggle for autonomy. Most would expect these exasperated cries to center around a male figure (especially considering how these are popular for her relationship with the two men mentioned before) or a male-dominated world. However, Sylvia centers them and the exploration of herself around a Medusa-like figure instead. Medusa stands out for a unique blend of horror and eroticism while also presenting fear and longing. We find out just how the speaker (once again, Sylvia Plath, it is certainly confessional) feels in neurotics about this alluring and frightening figure. Something very important to note is that Sylvia Plath wrote this as a ‘hate’ poem in 1962 towards her own mother. Even if this is not a hate poem centered towards men, it is still radical in breaking societal standards. The speaker feels entrapment by her

very mother who gets equated to a controversial figure in Greek mythology. Medusa is the only mortal one out of three sisters, and she has grown to be a symbol of female resistance in the world because of the abuse Zeus inflicted upon her. (For this very reason, Medusa tattoos are a symbol that survivors use when getting tattoos).

The tone of this confessional poem never changes from start to finish. There is a vast force at work. And this force is the sea. As opposed to most of the other poems analyzed, this is the first time we have a description of the sea as *lacking* something. This sea is incoherent to the listener. The water imagery works as a blockade. The nearest point of departure gets through the force of the tide.

“Off that landspit of stony mouth-plugs,

Eyes rolled by white sticks,

Ears cupping the sea’s incoherences,

You house your unnerving head”

Both Sylvia and her mother get associated with water in the poem. The Medusa-like figure is always there, and she is water that moves. With such an expression we can see how tense and turbulent this relationship really is. And Sylvia herself has a water rod that is dazzling. When she gets suffocated the most, the sea is not an escape. The medusa-like figure manages to travel over this body of water, so the blockade was not fully functional. The mother streamed to her. To further make us feel suffocation Sylvia uses placenta. Because of the extremity of the situation the placenta is fat and red and inescapable. It is quite marvelous the way Sylvia Plath mixes Christian imagery with mythological imagery.

“In any case, you are always there,

Tremulous breath at the end of my line,

Curve of water upleaping

To my water rod, dazzling and grateful,

Touching and sucking.

I didn’t call you.

I didn’t call you at all.

Nevertheless, nevertheless

You steamed to me over the sea,
Fat and red, a placenta"

The speaker refuses to have much to do with the medusa figure, even rejecting to take parts of it for sustenance. But where does the speaker exist? In a confined space, in a limited space. Sylvia Plath once again equates herself to water because she encapsulates herself in a bottle. She mimics the way water takes on the form of whatever it is poured into.

"I shall take no bite of your body,
Bottle in which I live,"

At the very end, the Medusa-like figure still tries to intrude inside of the limited personal space the speaker has. And the figure turns into a tentacle. This marks a creation of a monster danger in a watery space. Medusa is full of water symbolism and how Sylvia uses it to show us the figure of her mother as the one that protects, then to the one that fails to protect. And then, it also shows the transformative to the intrusive.

At first, this paper did not wish to touch upon the dynamic between Sylvia Plath and her father due to how popular of a topic it is, so the analysis of it will be very brief compared to the other two relationships. Sylvia Plath mentions her father and water together in her poetry. The most famous example is the poem "Daddy" (Plath, 1965, pp. 12-13) where she directly references her father with imagery connected to the ocean.

„And a head in the freakish Atlantic
Where it pours bean green over blue
In the waters off beautiful Nauset.
I used to pray to recover you.
Ach, du."

Her father's very existence is tied metaphorically to water. More precisely the ocean, because it is the largest body of water that she uses to showcase the distance and depth (as well as influence) inside of this dynamic. In her writings, he is often this powerful figure while the memory that she carries of him relates to the ocean. In several of her writings, the water represents the domain where her father is still able to live and from where he continues to haunt the narrative. Daddy is the

main poem where the link is so explicit between her father and water. As Daddy progresses, Sylvia admits to killing a man, two to be precise, because life was drained out of her. This connects her two relationships with respective male figures. It shows how qualities in her father remind her of similar traits she came to recognize in her husband.

„If I've killed one man, I've killed two—
The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know.
Daddy, you can lie back now."

Plath metaphorically compares her father and husband to vampires, creatures that suck the life out of their victims. This vampiric image powerfully conveys the sense of domination inside of patriarchal relationships, representing how their control over her life left her feeling powerless.

However, the poem ultimately culminates in the speaker declaring her freedom and triumph over these male figures and by standing up against these relationship dynamics. All these relationships are described with water imagery because it serves as a complex medium through which she explored these dynamics and herself.

5.3 Life, Death & Rebirth

As soon as we look at the title of *Crossing the Water* (Plath, 1971, pp. 22-24), we already have expectations placed on us when it comes to the water imagery. We are presented with what Bachelard (1994) calls a "culture complex" in his essay on the imagination of matter. Even from the title alone we can assume that there is a particular journey and our minds rush towards the ancient tradition of crossing water as a funeral journey and even the mythology's very own river Styx. The water being one of transition means that it will have a dual element to it. Water as chaos water (that is water meant for transitioning between the solid and the ethereal/abstract, between life and death, between stability and instability) and along with all of this, dissolution is included. Water seems to hold the collective mind and the collective knowledge in this poem. Out of the categories mentioned before, *Crossing the Water* applies to plenty but the one it applies to the most is life and death.

The poem depicts a desolate ride across a lake. Even with the water imagery the colors we feel and get are black; the shapes we get are round and they present isolation. The era in which this poem was written was known by disillusionment and Plath presents it very well.

“Black lake, black boat, two black, cut-paper people.

Where do the black trees go that drink here?

Their shadows must cover Canada.”

For a brief second, the image, of two black cut-paper people, gets replaced by *everyone*. It is very paradoxical but marvelous how she can use the isolating elements to their full extent so that even when mentioning ‘us’ (everyone in the world, every human being) this sense of being alone is not lost, because all things eventually die. An unexpected obstacle rises a valedictory and in the middle of the administrations by the oar, the spirit of blackness engulfs all. Blackness, this sense of disillusionment and isolation, comes to rest in everything. It even rests in the fish that are there. This was Sylvia’s minimal exploration of her own identity when writing the poem. Again, it is known how her own identity is tied to fish as an animal. It almost seems like she was admitting the darkness that exists in her by saying that it exists in us all.

“Cold worlds shake from the oar.

The spirit of blackness is in us, it is in the fishes.

A snag is lifting a valedictory, pale hand;”

What Sylvia presents us with here is somewhat like Thales the philosopher. Thales simply believed that “everything is water” as water was the “first principle” (O’grady, 2017). Sylvia Plath uses the element of water in such a way that it is able to transition between roles and states and symbolisms. Specifically, in this poem’s case, it has managed to build a biodome space. The biodome space used in mythological, religious and exists in philosophical traditions. Specifically, in Gnosticism, the branch of Christianity. (For this part and other extensive information on Gnosticism Rudolph 2001 was used and is great for further reading). This biodome of her own making is the firmament. In biblical cosmology, the firmament is the vast solid dome created by God during the Genesis to divide the primal sea into upper and lower portions so that

the dry land could appear. Today it is simply known as the synonym of the word sky. This is because the firmament is likened to a false sky. Everything is encased entirely in water. There is some solid land, but the water was divided into two: the great deep and the water above the firmament. When both of the ‘ends’ reflect one another, we see both the sky and the sea as mirrors of each other. That is what Sylvia Plath wanted to describe as life and death constantly reflect one another. The flowers are not simply flowers alone. They are water flowers. In such a biodome, the sky and the sea can become inverted and the ‘astounded souls’ would not notice much of a difference.

“Stars open among the lilies.

Are you not blinded by such expressionless sirens?

This is the silence of astounded souls.”

In *Crossing the Water* Sylvia Plath gives both subtle and obvious layers of understanding. The water imagery is isolative, black and dark but somehow it comes to be filled with trees and stars and even flowers. The water imagery changes its objects throughout the poem, but the cycle remains the primary focus. Sometimes it has individuals, at other times collectives. Sometimes the water destroys and sometimes it gently carries things across. Water is both chaos and peace and the very thing that makes the journey through it all (life) possible.

Another poem that deals with these cycles (as well as religious elements) is *Tulips* (Plath, 1965b, pp. 12–13). This poem was written after she went an appendectomy at the hospital. It originally had a longer title, but she shortened it. The poem has infinite layers and peels them away to show a speaker that keeps switching between peace and panic. The speaker is angry at this sudden intrusion that the tulips brought into the space she is occupying. She goes on to be reminded of both life and death and her own existence in this world. Immediately from these facts we point out the confessional nature of the poem without questioning it. It is a poem about identity in life; the way the speaker goes back and forth shows us explorations of the self. Sylvia herself is speaking and lets the readers glimpse into her mental state. Death and life keep switching throughout the poem. And the poem is named after a thing of nature. But how does the water imagery float in this poem?

Sylvia Plath preferred the company and had a certain 'envy' towards those who had mastered practical skills in life. She said she preferred the company of doctors and midwives to the company of poets and writers (In the same BBC interview mentioned above). Something about those with practical skills made them particularly admirable in her eyes. When asked what career she would have liked to engage in if being a writer was out of the question, she chose doctor as her answer. In tulips, we can see this admiration very well. Doctors are those who are in charge and those who fix everything that is wrong. They are to be admired for the way they can do their work. That is why the doctors fill in the role of water while Sylvia Plath fills in the role of a pebble at the start; something imperfect and needing purification. And who better to complete this task than the water (doctors)? She understands that this must happen. She understands that the gentle way water treats pebbles is the same way doctors tend to her as a patient on the table, the bed and in the hospital. Pebbles do not move or have control, the water does. She puts herself in the role of the rock which needs perfecting by water's administrations. Here she showcases the power that nature and water have in shaping things up even when the water is not of an aggressive disposition or state. Water will continue to flow, and Sylvia will continue to be turned into a 'better' pebble the more time goes on. And she subjects herself to this gentle but powerful thing. She subjects herself to the power of water. She does not mind the sleep or how numb she gets; this is something that needs to happen and even she names it. She is sick of baggage she has in this life and finds the state to be one of rest. She remembers how water gives life, shapes it up and how it can be taken away. Her voice switches between the calm and the panicked as it goes on so that we can understand this inner struggle and see the way she explores herself from start to finish. From the tulips, to the operation and to her remembering her own heart. Her identity and mental state mirrors one of fight and flight throughout the poem. And, based on her own history, it clearly is a confession.

"My body is a pebble to them, they tend it as water

Tends to the pebbles it must run over, smoothing them gently.

They bring me numbness in their bright needles, they bring me sleep.

Now I have lost myself I am sick of baggage—"

We get her acceptance of it and after we get an explicit explanation on how it happened. It still happened with conflict. She accepted it but was still afraid of it. In this poem water also keeps conflicting with itself. Sometimes it takes things away and at others it births things. The water switches between destruction and purification. As Sylvia is scared, she starts to lose some parts of her identity. She loses the tea set for example (made even more interesting with the fact that this object holds and shapes up a liquid like a tub and a bottle from other poems); the linen and her books which make up parts of her outer dressing and career. All of these disappear. They *sink*, they get thrown to the bottom of the watery body and eventually even Sylvia herself sinks after them. Here, water shapes up her rebirth. Water *is* rebirth. After these objects she sinks too because the water engulfs her (gently, still) and she gets reborn again, away from these materialistic things. Sylvia's conscious and unconscious almost come to clash in this poem. However, once she is reborn - she is a nun. Completely pristine and clean. So, it is no surprise that tulips as vivid as the ones mentioned come to bother her. And her emotions just get intensified by this 'half-dead, half-alive thing' from nature that decorates her room. She just got engulfed by water and got rebirth from it so why should she care about the vase of flowers which are vivid in color and need their water changed to live?

"Scared and bare on the green plastic-pillowed trolley

I watched my teaset, my bureaus of linen, my books

Sink out of sight, and the water went over my head.

I am a nun now, I have never been so pure."

Then the tulips that she hates so much go on to have a bigger projection and to grow paradoxical. The tulips don't just stand still in one place. Sylvia is the pebble and the nun, but the tulips are the ones that seem to float as if the water prefers them over her. And this grows to bother her more and more. The water keeps them on her surface while it went over her head. Floating is not an aggressive or an endangering act, but to her it feels that way. Through personification they grow to be larger than the real-life counterpart that just

stands on a counter. The red tulips float and they have no issues with their position but while they do so, they are weighing her down. It wasn't the water that weighed her down. Sylvia has no issues with the body of the water besides seeing that the flowers are more accepted than her. This is because she cannot float. She must stay in this state of fight or flight – the conscious vs. the unconscious. Almost as soon as they get a tongue, they get reestablished as a thing again. They become *red lead sinkers* that drag her down to the bottom of the water. There is a dozen of them and Sylvia is not sure if she is a fish or a pebble still but whatever the case may be, they end up pulling her down by her neck. They are inescapable to her. It is important to remember that for this sinking (which is happening the second time at this point), she does not blame the water. She still subjects to it without any issues. As a fish or as a pebble – it all seems the same to her. But while the water has no guilt, the tulips are not sin free. They are still the villain and her self-identity keeps switching. From a nun to someone who gets punished with lead around her neck she goes from something needing fixing to something that still gets 'killed' at the end. It is like water has no guilt in delivering punishment and as a person she finds it all so odd but fascinating. Everything seems to go back to her own mental state and the self-exploration while dangling between the transience of life.

"They are subtle : they seem to float, though they weigh me down,

Upsetting me with their sudden tongues and their color,

A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck."

Then we get more moments in which the water is not to be blamed. With the weight of the sinking and the red lead sinkers, we would expect the water to be the entity taking on the role of a villain but instead Sylvia Plath continues to focus on the tulips again. She has been submerged in two different ways so far and yet the thing that takes away her ability to breathe is not the water or the drowning. It is the very flower that serves as the title.

"The vivid tulips eat my oxygen."

The tulips take away the oxygen. Nothing else does. But this poem has layers and eventually we reach the layer of when the tulips are showcased in a rather sadder light than before. The force of water still wins. The tulips are no longer floaters,

the water moves around them the same way it does around something that sunk down. The gentle (depending on if you ask the speaker or the tulips) force still managed to keep itself at the top. The river being used at the body of water instead of something larger like the sea has its own merit. The tulips should never be inside of a space vaster than the river.

"Now the air snags and eddies round them the way a river

Snags and eddies round a sunken rust-red engine."

It is no surprise that at the very end Sylvia Plath uses water imagery to finish off the poem. She gives herself more importance than the tulips by comparing her water to the sea instead of the river. Yet, she cannot escape the emotions that this self-exploration about life and death brought to her. Her water is not the actual sea or a lake or a river. The water she tastes is warm and full of salt. All this time the water was going over her head and around her things to take away items and now she is finally able to taste it. She was able to find a way to get to the end of a long journey even if it ended in a somewhat bitter way. Escaping water for right now is similar to the way of trying to escape the healing process she has to go through, and she is aware that that is impossible.

"The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,

And comes from a country far away as health."

These are the exact words with which the poem ends, positioning water as something of an end itself. Life and death and rebirth all present in one place alone.

5.4 The Self and The Social Commentary

Tale of a Tub (Plath, 1981, pp. 154–155) is about identity and self-exploration; but through this it also gave critique. This poem is full of tension. The tension stands between illusion and reality. There are harsh truths about existing and then there is comfort and safety in things that get fabricated inside of the speaker's mind. (Once again, the speaker is the poetess herself, thus making it confessional). This switch between reality and the imagined can be observed in the verses themselves. The first and the third are more realistic, concrete in

the descriptions. The second and the fourth verses are more disillusioned and abstract. The fifth one stands in the middle being half-description and half this grandiose and abstract idea. The water imagery used expresses these very things as commentary sets in. This poem does happen to be more analytical than her earlier work.

It starts off with describing the scene and then wondering about holy callings, rituals and shadows. While the speaker tries to comfort themselves, the poem continues to give off tension. This feeling is felt all throughout the poem. To help this, first the speaker gives us descriptions of spaces and things that help set the tone and establish that the speaker's identity is not free because the water is not either. But the power water holds is great. The speaker is inside this limited space but wonders about unlimited dreams and how powerful they are; wonders if they can come to blur the lines of the water.

"can our dreams
ever blur the intransigent lines which draw
the shape that shuts us in?"

The speaker becomes more and more aware about how real and concrete water is compared to themselves and what they dream of. They continue to enjoy this comfort but are aware-enough not to become so delusional they forget it is not real. Water does not take on a role of rebirth here or death, rather, it becomes a tool to explore emotional turmoil and emotional shifts. It does not act as a purifier; Sylvia Plath will not become a nun, as she did in *Tulips*. The water takes on a role of specific destruction in identity. The speaker comes to admit that they are nothing when opposed to the true matter. Honesty prevails in existence over the fantastic.

"the authentic sea denies them and will pluck
fantastic flesh down to the honest bone."

Then, in front of all this tension, the speaker is faced with a choice. Trying to resist or giving in? Without any hesitation, the speaker submerges themselves in this exploration of the self. How much is real? How much is unreal? Only after giving in to these questions does some fear arise but Sylvia recognizes that water naturally has the power to move bodies in such a way.

"We take the plunge; under water our limbs
waver, faintly green, shuddering away
from the genuine color of skin"

The poem is filled with deconstructions of narratives but at the very end the speaker still chooses this comfort in the abstract hoping. They wish for the tidal slosh of the seas to break everything apart. All the illusions, even if it means death so that things can become real. Without the death of one aspect (of herself), the other one would not come to exist. The power of the water becomes something that both destroys and gives life to identity. (Not rebirth, it does not give life *again* to something. It gives a completely new life.). As for the social commentary, Sylvia challenged societal norms in this poem. The poem mirrors the era's challenging of the traditional notions of identity and the pursuit of meaning. It captures the anxieties and disillusionments of modern life. And this poem presents us with the truth of a female speaker in a very specific way. Portraying the female body honestly in literature, including acknowledging the intricate thoughts women experience and details like the 'tiny brown hairs that appear on arms and legs,' inherently represented a feminist act.

"In this particular tub, two knees jut up
like icebergs, while minute brown hairs rise
on arms and legs in a fringe of kelp; green
soap
navigates the tidal slosh of seas
breaking on legendary beaches; in faith
we shall board our imagined ship and wildly
sail
among sacred islands of the mad till death
shatters the fabulous stars and makes us
real."

At the end, the speaker still believes in the power of the water to take on many roles and shapes. The speaker believes water will be the very thing to break apart the state of disillusionment that she is in.

Another poem that does both things is *Mirror* (Plath, 1965a, p. 7). It is one of the most

famous poems Sylvia Plath ever wrote. The poem is told from the perspective of a mirror which through personification goes on to give a precise description of itself. The mirror takes on a self-knowing tone and claims to not have any preconceived notions to judge by. It only has four corners and most of the time it thinks of the pink wall as a part of it from how long it has been in the exact place. The mirror has witnessed plenty of years come and go. The mirror goes so far to say that it has a heart and how this wall is one part of it.

Then, seemingly out of nowhere, the mirror is suddenly a lake. This was a deliberate choice. Sylvia Plath could not choose another reflective surface to serve the same purpose. It had to be a lake. It had to be water. When the mirror and the water get equated, we understand that the role water imagery plays here is one of true reflections. It does not serve to help or to break disillusionment, it serves to present the person with the full truth. While the person thinks of their own mortality and their own age, which just grows day by day, the lake presents that transition between two worlds again. The lake does not change its state, it remains a constant presence in the woman's life. The moon, known well to go through its phases, is one of the liars that the speaker turns to. When the mirror gets rewarded for its efforts (so to say), it is very important to note that it did not get a reward in the form of a smile. The reward the mirror gets is salty water. It is the woman's tears. This imagery of tears plays an important role to showcase the mental state presented. Thankfulness, but grief too.

"Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,
Searching my reaches for what she really is.
Then she turns to those liars, the candles or
the moon.
I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.
She rewards me with tears and an agitation
of hands.
I am important to her. She comes and goes.
Each morning it is her face that replaces the
darkness."

To truly appreciate the subtle nature in which Sylvia Plath approaches the confessional, we need to look at a few facts about the poem.

This poem has fragmentation. It was inspired and written with modernist era exploration which includes multiple identities. The woman becomes the mirror, and the mirror becomes the woman. The woman goes into the mirror and the mirror does not really know all parts of itself, but it does not reject this woman. Rather, it is glad to be of need. This poem reflected societal shifts and uncertainties at that time. It is believed that Sylvia found a roundabout way to express and confess to her own fears of mortality and aging through it. The second important fact to consider is that *Mirror* was written shortly after Sylvia had given birth to her first child. Her dissociation was caused by questioning, and in turn, accepting her mortality after such a drastic change. Instead of approaching the poem in a more 'traditionally confessional way' she used this dissociation to write about her own fears. And water has always been a comfort and destruction, chaos and peace so it was this perfect tool to express what she wanted to convey.

At the very end, this lake/this mirror drowns a young girl. Rather than that, the woman willingly and naturally drowns the young girl. Water here serves as something that confides and gives. It confides the drowned youth inside itself and what it gives back is something else. It is an old woman. Water works as the power that marks this transition and switch from one thing to the other as a natural thing.

"In me she has drowned a young girl, and in
me an old woman

Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible
fish."

What is really striking about the end is that, once again, we have the image of the fish. And this fish is not swallowing darkness like in the other poem; this fish is not being baited and killed in the water like it was in "Tulips", but it is a terrible fish, nonetheless. Again, throughout the animal kingdom, Sylvia Plath uses the image of the fish to present herself the most. The terrible fish that looks back is her. It is her, but it is aged. It is fearful of mortality. She used it to explore herself in the world as her beauty fades and she feels dissociated from the world that gives privilege to youth and beauty.

6. Conclusion

The analysis reveals that water in Sylvia Plath's work serves as a multifaceted symbol

encompassing themes of transition, mortality, and psychological depth. Key poems depict water as a dark, liminal space that embodies both fear and hope, reflecting Plath's internal struggles. This highlights water's role as a metaphor for transformation and emotional complexity, reinforcing its importance in understanding the core of Plath's literary and personal life. Counting each water body and the things/animals adjacent to it would be a true challenge. *That* proves exactly how much this seascape of water imagery serves as a core for understanding Sylvia Plath. It is inescapable and intricate. To understand Sylvia Plath's poetry and her as a person, we need to look towards her use of water. That is why it is no wonder so many of her poems and work give off a lucid feeling. Water can fit into so many spaces and so many emotions can fit into water because it plays a variety of roles. Sylvia Plath cannot abandon the seascape. The subsequent water imagery that comes from the core of her inspiration fulfills so many roles. Psychology, identity, relationship dynamics, death and life, natural world; all of that is interviewed in the fabrics that make her. Her approach to these descriptions did go through changes as her poetic career progressed. Nonetheless, water stayed as rebirth, purification, emotional turmoil, destruction and creation. The situational contexts of the tool changed, but the tool always stayed. Ultimately, Sylvia Plath's innovative use of water imagery not only enriches her literary works with vivid and symbolic depth but also invites readers to embark on a transformative journey of self-discovery and introspection. As we navigate the ebb and flow of water, we navigate the inner world of Sylvia Plath while also looking at our very own.

References

- Alqaryouti, M. H., Hadla, L. S., Huwari, I. F., Al-Khasawneh, F. M., Rababah, L. M., Sadeq, A., & Alshehadat, F. (2025). *Unveiling Symbolic Layers: Analyzing Style in the Poetry of TS Eliot and Sylvia Plath*. *Journal of Language Teaching & Research*, 16(3). <https://doi.org/10.17507/jltr.1603.05>
- Annas, P. J. (1988). *A disturbance in mirrors: The poetry of Sylvia Plath*. Greenwood Press.
- Axelrod, S. G. (2000). [Review of *Sylvia Plath and the theatre of mourning*, by C. Britzolakis]. *Criticism*, 42(4) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23124207>
- Bachelard, G. (2014). *Water and dreams: An essay on the imagination of matter*. Beacon Press.
- Badia, J. (2011). *Sylvia Plath and the mythology of women readers*. University of Massachusetts Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vkb0n>
- Bassnett, S. (2003). *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction to Poetry*. Manchester University Press.
- Britzolakis, C. (1999). *Sylvia Plath and the theatre of mourning*. (No Title).
- Burger, K. (2020). "The depths of fictional fathers and the sea for Sylvia Plath": A portal to the afterlife. *Plath Profiles: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Sylvia Plath Studies*, 12(1)
- Clark, H. (2020). *Red Comet: The short life and blazing art of Sylvia Plath*. Knopf.
- Frye, N. (1976). *Spiritus mundi: Essays on literature, myth, and society*. Indiana University Press.
- Gilbert, S. M., & Gubar, S. (2020). *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Yale University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvxkn74x>
- Gill, J. (2008). *The Cambridge introduction to Sylvia Plath*. Cambridge University Press.
- Gottler, M. (1975). *Otherness beyond the self: An analysis of water imagery in the woods of Sylvia Plath* [Master's thesis, University of Windsor]. Electronic Theses and Dissertations. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/72780928.pdf>
- Hughes, T. (1967). Pike. In *The hawk in the rain* (pp. 38–39). HarperCollins.
- Hughes, T. (1998). Love song. In *Birthday letters* (pp. 9–10). Faber and Faber.
- Hunter, D. M. (2014). *Family phantoms: Fish, watery realms and death in Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, and Ted Hughes*. Sussex Academic Press.
- Ketab, A. (2020). *The pessimistic images in Sylvia Plath's selected poems*. *Universidad del Zulia*, 25(1) <https://www.redalyc.org/journal/279/27963086042/27963086042.pdf>

Lant, K. M., & Plath, S. (1993). The big strip tease: Female bodies and male power in the poetry of Sylvia Plath. *Contemporary Literature*, 34(4) <https://doi.org/10.2307/1208804>

Mieszkowski, G. (1989). [Review of *South Central Review*]. *South Central Review*, 6(4) <https://doi.org/10.2307/3189666>

Ocsovai, D. (2019). *From womb to "wave-yard": The poetics of water in Sylvia Plath's oeuvre*. *Psychiatria Hungarica: A Magyar Pszichiátriai Társaság Tudományos Folyóirata*, 34(2) <https://europepmc.org/article/med/31417002>

O'Grady, P. F. (2017). *Thales of Miletus: The beginnings of western science and philosophy*. Routledge.

Perloff, M. (1992). [Review of *The haunting of Sylvia Plath; Rough magic: A biography of Sylvia Plath*, by J. Rose & P. Alexander]. *The New England Quarterly*, 65(4) <https://doi.org/10.2307/365826>

Plath, Sylvia. Daddy. In *Ariel* (pp. 12–13). Harper & Row

Plath, S. (1960). Dark wood, dark water. In *The colossus and other poems* (pp. 37–38). Alfred A. Knopf.

Plath, S. (1965a). Mirror. In *Ariel* (p. 7). Harper & Row.

Plath, S. (1965b). Tulips. In *Ariel* (pp. 12–13). Harper & Row.

Plath, S. (1971). Crossing the water. In *Crossing the water* (pp. 22–24). Harper & Row.

Plath, S. (1981a). Love letter. In T. Hughes (Ed.), *The collected poems* (p. 162). Harper & Row.

Plath, S. (1981b). Medusa. In T. Hughes (Ed.), *The collected poems* (pp. 149–150). Harper & Row.

Plath, S. (1962, October 30). *Sylvia Plath interviewed by Peter Orr* [Audio interview]. British Library.

Plath, S. (1981c). Tale of a tub. In T. Hughes (Ed.), *The collected poems* (pp. 154–155). Harper & Row.

Rénaux, S. (1998). The syntax of water, darkness and death in Sylvia Plath's "Crossing the water". *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses*, 11, 223–232.

Rosenblatt, J. (1979). Sylvia Plath: The drama of initiation. *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 25(1) <https://doi.org/10.2307/441398>

Rudolph, K. (2001). *Gnosis: The nature and history of Gnosticism*. A&C Black.

Showalter, E. (1977). *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv173f0v7>

Uroff, M. D. (1977). Sylvia Plath and confessional poetry: A reconsideration. *The Iowa Review*, 8(1) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20158710>

Yanti, N., & Pandey, N. (2019). The symbolism in Sylvia Plath's poems. *International Journal of Language, Humanities, and Education*, 2(1) file:///C:/Users/DT%20User/Downloads/1+Novi+Yanti.pdf

ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

THE IMPACT OF FEMALE LEADERSHIP ON ESG PRIORITIES IN SMES: EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FROM BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Marina Ridić¹, Nedim Čelebić² , Emir Ganić³

^{1,2,3} *University Sarajevo School of Science and Technology, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina*

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Marina Ridić, University Sarajevo School of Science and Technology, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. E-mail: marina.ridjic@stu.ssst.edu.ba.ba.

ABSTRACT

This study explores the impact of female leadership on Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) performance in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a transitional economy. While prior research shows that gender-diverse boards improve corporate social responsibility (CSR) and ESG outcomes, most studies focus on large firms in developed markets. This study fills that gap by analyzing data from 131 SMEs that applied to the 2024 SDG Business Pioneers Award.

Using descriptive statistics and correlation analysis, the research examines how women's representation in management affects ESG priorities. Findings indicate a positive association between higher female participation and improved outcomes in ethics, innovation, productivity, and inclusivity. Companies with at least one-third women in leadership show stronger commitment to balanced and sustainable governance. In contrast, environmental practices are widely adopted across firms but appear less dependent on leadership composition.

The study provides the first empirical evidence from Bosnia and Herzegovina on the gender-ESG link. It contributes to global debates on diversity and sustainability while offering practical insights for policymakers and managers. Promoting gender-inclusive leadership can enhance competitiveness, resilience, and alignment with international sustainability frameworks.

Keywords: female leadership, ESG performance, gender diversity, SMEs, Bosnia and Herzegovina



MAP EDUCATION
AND HUMANITIES

Volume 6

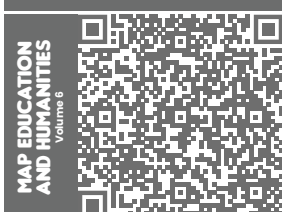
ISSN: 2744-2373 / © The Authors.
Published by MAP - Multidisciplinary
Academic Publishing.

Article Submitted: 03 August 2025
Article Accepted: 26 September 2025
Article Published: 27 September 2025



Publisher's Note: MAP stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

<https://doi.org/10.53880/2744-2373.2025.6.40>



HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Ridić M., Čelebić N., Ganić E. (2025). **The Impact of Female Leadership on ESG Priorities in SMES: Empirical Evidence from Bosnia and Herzegovina.** MAP Education and Humanities, 6, 40-50. doi: <https://doi.org/10.53880/2744-2373.2025.6.40>



© The Author(s). **Open Access Article**
Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.



1. Introduction

Socially responsible management and corporate governance, as integral elements of the corporate social responsibility (CSR) concept, have become key features of modern business. They emphasize the need for companies to operate in a transparent, socially responsible, and sustainable manner. These expectations have intensified with the growing awareness of global challenges, including climate change, socio-political instability, and social and economic inequality (Mathivanan et al., 2021; O'Dwyer & Unerman, 2020). In this context, the role of company leadership is essential, as management must act as a unifying force driving change toward greater equality and sustainable business models.

At the same time, international organizations and investors increasingly demand that companies demonstrate measurable contributions to sustainability. Environmental, Social, and Governance frameworks (ESG) have therefore gained prominence as standardized tools for assessing environmental, social, and governance performance, complementing earlier CSR approaches that were often voluntary and qualitative (Drempetic et al., 2019). This shift reflects a broader recognition that responsible corporate behavior is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic factor influencing competitiveness, access to capital, and long-term resilience. For Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in transitional economies, aligning with ESG standards can be particularly challenging, yet it also offers an opportunity to differentiate themselves and strengthen their market position in a globalized environment.

The evolving field of corporate governance has attracted greater attention due to its strong link with firms' societal impact (Kooli et al., 2018). Research often highlights the symbiotic relationship between organizations and their external environment (Juneja, 2015), leading to the integration of CSR into governance decisions (Moir, 2001). Several studies have specifically examined the role of women in corporate governance, demonstrating a positive correlation between female board membership and stakeholder orientation (Adams et al., 2015; Cook & Glass, 2018; Francoeur et al., 2019; Galbreath, 2018). Moreover, boards with a critical mass of women are found to enhance ethical outcomes and transparency in environmental, social, and governance (ESG) disclosures (Arayssi et al., 2016;

Manita et al., 2018; Pucheta-Martínez et al., 2018; Vähämaa, 2017).

Despite these findings, the majority of studies focus on large corporations in developed economies, leaving small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in emerging markets underexplored (Velte, 2016). SMEs are central to Bosnia and Herzegovina's economy, yet the governance practices of these firms, particularly the role of gender diversity in shaping ESG performance, remain largely unexamined. This study addresses this gap by investigating whether female leadership in SMEs is associated with shifts in corporate priorities across the three ESG dimensions: environmental, social, and governance.

Drawing on data from 131 SMEs that participated in the 2024 SDG Business Pioneers Award, this study applies descriptive statistics and correlation analysis to assess the relationship between women's leadership and ESG outcomes. By providing empirical evidence from a transitional economy, the research contributes to the global discourse on gender diversity and sustainability. Beyond its academic significance, the study offers practical implications for policymakers and business leaders, highlighting how female leadership can drive inclusive and sustainable corporate governance.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Gender Diversity and Sustainability

Research on gender diversity in leadership and sustainable business practices has expanded significantly over the past two decades. Studies consistently demonstrate that gender-diverse boards positively influence stakeholder orientation, decision-making, and ethical outcomes (Hillman, 2015; Larrieta-Rubín de Celis et al., 2015; Lin et al., 2018; Manita et al., 2018). Shaw (2022), for example, highlights that changes in female board representation are positively associated with corporate social responsibility (CSR) performance, which in turn is reflected in stronger environmental, social, and governance (ESG) scores. Similarly, Bajic and Yurtoglu (2018) identify CSR as a key predictor of ESG scores, while Francoeur et al. (2019) emphasize that female board representation significantly enhances corporate social performance, particularly in large corporations such as those included in the Fortune 500. Velte (2016) finds comparable results in German and

Austrian firms, identifying a positive correlation between gender diversity on corporate boards and ESG performance. In emerging markets, Issa and Hanaysha (2023) show that female representation reduces ESG controversies, particularly when boards include three or more women. Di Miceli and Donaggio (2018) add that achieving a “critical mass” of approximately 30% female representation significantly improves ESG outcomes.

Beyond firm performance, female directors are often associated with socially responsible actions that cultivate trust with stakeholders (Post & Byron, 2015). ESG scores capture these tendencies by quantifying a company’s alignment with environmental, social, and governance concerns (Manita et al., 2018). Empirical evidence suggests that boards with female directors achieve higher ESG scores, further underlining their positive impact on CSR and sustainability (Charles et al., 2018). The social dimension of ESG is particularly relevant: women directors frequently draw on unique life experiences that enable them to institutionalize CSR practices, safeguard stakeholders without decision-making power, and promote inclusive governance (Francoeur et al., 2019; Emmanuel et al., 2018). These perspectives also shape resource allocation and contribute to more balanced governance practices (Lin et al., 2018; Kumar & Zattoni, 2016). Moreover, female leadership has been shown to strengthen long-term commitments to sustainability through employee development, diversity, and inclusive organizational cultures (Ahmadi et al., 2018; Cook & Glass, 2018; Harjoto et al., 2019).

2.2 ESG Framework and Research Gaps

While much of this literature focuses on CSR, it is important to clarify its relationship to ESG. CSR encompasses a wide range of voluntary corporate activities aimed at addressing social and environmental issues, often with reputational or brand-related motives (Bajic & Yurtoglu, 2018). These activities are flexible and vary across firms and industries. By contrast, ESG performance is measured through standardized and quantitative indicators, such as the Thomson Reuters Eikon ESG score, which assess environmental, social, and governance outcomes (Thomson Reuters, 2017; Drempetic et al., 2019).

The ESG framework is built around three interdependent pillars that capture the multifaceted nature of corporate sustainability. The

environmental dimension evaluates performance in areas such as greenhouse gas emissions, energy efficiency, water consumption, waste management, pollution prevention, and renewable energy adoption. The social dimension encompasses labor relations, diversity and inclusion, human rights across supply chains, community engagement, product responsibility, and consumer protection. The governance dimension addresses board structure and independence, ethical standards, anti-corruption measures, transparency of disclosures, shareholder rights, and alignment of executive incentives with long-term sustainability objectives (Thomson Reuters, 2017; Friede et al., 2015). Together, these categories allow for a systematic and comparable assessment of how companies integrate sustainability into their strategies and operations, offering investors and other stakeholders standardized benchmarks for evaluating non-financial performance.

ESG metrics also closely interact with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). While the SDGs set out a broad global agenda for social, economic, and environmental development (United Nations, 2015), ESG criteria allow firms and investors to evaluate performance in financially material dimensions (Khan et al., 2016). Scholars emphasize that ESG outcomes often align with SDG targets, providing firms with a measurable way to assess their contributions to global development goals (Eccles & Krzus, 2010; Friede et al., 2015). By performing well on ESG indicators, companies not only advance sustainability but also strengthen their reputation and build greater investor trust.

Despite the growing body of evidence, several research gaps persist. Much of the empirical literature is concentrated on developed economies and publicly listed corporations, where disclosure requirements and investor scrutiny are stronger. This creates a knowledge bias, as SMEs in transitional economies often operate under weaker institutional conditions, less formalized governance structures, and limited resources for ESG reporting. Furthermore, most studies adopt cross-sectional approaches, leaving questions open about the longitudinal effects of gender diversity on ESG practices across industries. Region-specific analyses also remain scarce, particularly in Southeastern Europe, where post-socialist institutional legacies may shape governance norms and corporate behavior differently than in Western contexts.

Taken together, this literature highlights that female leadership plays a critical role in strengthening ESG priorities, especially when women reach a threshold of meaningful representation. However, the evidence remains fragmented and underdeveloped for SMEs in transitional settings. This gap motivates the present study, which investigates how female leadership shapes ESG priorities in Bosnian SMEs, thereby offering localized insights and contributing to the global debate on gender diversity and sustainable governance.

While global scholarship has firmly established the positive effects of gender diversity on governance and sustainability outcomes, empirical evidence from Bosnia and Herzegovina remains limited and largely descriptive. Existing domestic research tends to focus on broader aspects of corporate social responsibility (CSR) or the adoption of sustainability standards within SMEs, while the specific link between female leadership and ESG priorities has rarely been operationalized through systematic, quantitative measures.

In this context, the *SDG Business Pioneers Award*, organized annually by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, has emerged as a valuable mechanism for gathering relevant data and showcasing best practices. The award encourages companies to map policies and outcomes across two key dimensions—People and Resources & Environment—which gradually translate CSR initiatives into measurable ESG indicators aligned with international frameworks. In recent years, several Bosnian firms have been recognized for integrating gender diversity into leadership structures while simultaneously advancing innovation, workplace quality, and environmental responsibility.

Nevertheless, insights from these award processes remain largely confined to case studies and narrative reports, without a systematic comparison across different levels of female representation in management. The present study addresses this gap by drawing on the unique 2024 dataset and applying a “critical mass” framework to assess how gender diversity shapes ESG priorities in Bosnian SMEs, thereby linking global theoretical debates with a localized empirical context.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Aim and Data Collection

The aim of this study is to examine the impact of female leadership on ESG performance in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Primary data were collected during the application process for the 2024 SDG Business Pioneers Award, organized by the UNDP in partnership with the Foreign Trade Chamber of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The award promotes alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), focusing on the thematic areas of *People* (quality jobs and human capital development) and *Resources and Environment* (efficient resource use and reduced environmental impact).

The application process took place between January and March 2024. A total of 131 SMEs participated, representing diverse industries and regions in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Companies applied for one or both thematic areas depending on their strategic priorities. The SMEs that participated in this study represent a wide cross-section of Bosnia and Herzegovina's economy. They operate in diverse industries, ranging from traditional sectors such as manufacturing, agriculture, and trade, to rapidly expanding service-oriented and technology-driven fields. Company sizes also vary considerably, including small family-run enterprises with only a few dozen employees, as well as more structured medium-sized firms employing up to 250 people. Geographically, the sample ensures an equal distribution across the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) and Republika Srpska (RS), with representation from all major regions of the country. This broad spread across industries, company sizes, and territories strengthens the robustness of the dataset, ensuring that the findings capture the realities of SMEs across different local contexts and making the results more generalizable and reliable for understanding trends at the national level. Access to the dataset was provided by the UNDP in Bosnia and Herzegovina within the framework of the 2024 SDG Business Pioneers Award. The study is based on a secondary data analysis of information originally collected from 131 SMEs through award applications, evaluation forms, and supplementary questionnaires. While the UNDP ensured the integrity of the application process, the present research involved an independent analysis of the dataset. Descriptive statistics and correlation methods were applied to explore the relationship between female leadership and ESG priorities. This

approach enables a systematic examination of gender diversity in management structures and its association with ESG outcomes, thereby extending the scope of the original dataset beyond its primary evaluative purpose.

3.2 Research Instrument

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire specifically designed to assess environmental, social, and governance (ESG) practices of SMEs in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The instrument was developed in line with the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) standards and established ESG frameworks, ensuring methodological consistency with internationally recognized sustainability benchmarks.

The questionnaire encompassed several key dimensions:

- Company demographics, including sector, size, and geographic location.
- Sustainable development strategies, focusing on the existence of ESG policies, codes of conduct, stakeholder engagement mechanisms, and documented achievements in the field of sustainability.
- Leadership composition, with particular emphasis on gender representation, especially the percentage of women in managerial and decision-making positions.

In addition, the instrument was structured around two overarching categories of sustainability performance indicators:

1. People (Human Capital and Inclusion) – This category captured aspects such as employee satisfaction, average wages compared to sector benchmarks, gender balance, recruitment of youth and vulnerable groups, professional training and development opportunities, and women's representation in executive and decision-making bodies.
2. Resources and Environment – This category focused on company policies and practices aimed at environmental protection and resource efficiency. It included indicators on energy and water consumption, waste management and recycling, adoption of circular economy principles, reduction

of greenhouse gas emissions, and contributions to local community initiatives in the field of environmental sustainability.

The evaluation process was organized in two stages. In the first stage, company applications were independently reviewed by subject-matter experts against predefined criteria. Shortlisted companies were then invited to complete a supplementary questionnaire, providing additional detail on their practices and outcomes. In the final stage, results were verified through a quality assurance process conducted by the SDG2BiH program team in cooperation with the Council for Monitoring SDG Implementation in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

This multi-step evaluation design not only enhanced the validity of the collected data but also ensured triangulation between self-reported information, expert assessments, and institutional oversight, thereby strengthening the reliability of the research findings.

3.3 Analytical Approach

The analysis employed descriptive statistics to summarize company characteristics and ESG-related practices, as well as correlation analysis to test the relationship between female leadership and ESG performance. To explore the effect of gender diversity in leadership, companies were grouped into three categories based on female representation:

- Low representation (<34%),
- Medium representation (35–54%),
- High representation (≥55%).

This categorization follows the critical mass theory in gender diversity literature and allows for comparative analysis of ESG outcomes across the three groups.

3.4 Procedure

Data collection was conducted as part of the SDG Business Pioneers Award in Bosnia and Herzegovina 2024 process. SMEs were invited to participate through an open call, after which interested companies submitted applications via an online platform. The structured questionnaire served as the primary research instrument, and respondents were able to complete it electronically.

To ensure consistency and accuracy, companies could revise or update their responses before final submission, but only from the same device and browser used to begin the survey. This allowed for flexibility while preserving data integrity. The questionnaire combined closed-ended items, scaled responses, and open-ended sections, enabling both quantitative and qualitative data collection.

The evaluation unfolded in two stages. First, all submitted questionnaires were independently reviewed by a panel of experts who assessed the alignment of company practices with predefined ESG criteria. In the second stage, shortlisted companies received a supplementary questionnaire, designed to capture more detailed information on sustainability practices and leadership structures. The collected data were subsequently verified through a triangulation process carried out by the SDG2BiH program team in collaboration with the Council for Monitoring SDG Implementation in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

This multi-step data collection and verification process enhanced the robustness of the findings by combining self-reported data with expert assessment and institutional oversight, thereby increasing both the credibility and reliability of the results.

4. Results

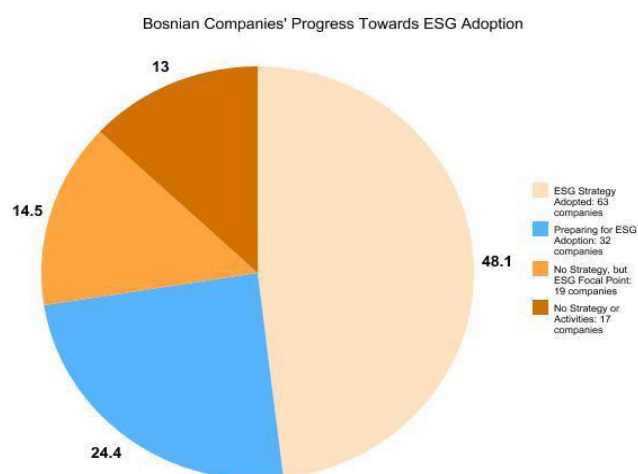
4.1 ESG Adoption in Bosnian SMEs

The survey results reveal a promising trend in ESG adoption among Bosnian SMEs. Of the 131 surveyed companies, 48.1% (63) reported having already implemented ESG strategies, while 24.4% (32) were actively preparing for adoption. In addition, 14.5% (19 companies) indicated the presence of an ESG focal point even without a fully formalized strategy, while 13.0% (17 companies) reported having no ESG-related activities.

This distribution suggests a growing commitment to sustainability within the private sector and an increasing awareness of the importance of ESG factors in achieving the SDGs. It also reflects broader global trends, where SMEs are increasingly recognized as essential contributors to sustainable development despite their limited resources. At the same time, the findings highlight the need for targeted outreach, capacity building,

and institutional support to assist companies that are still at an early stage or have not yet engaged with ESG practices. Such efforts could ensure that SMEs across different sectors are better equipped to integrate ESG principles into their operations.

Figure 1.
Bosnian companies' progress towards ESG adoption

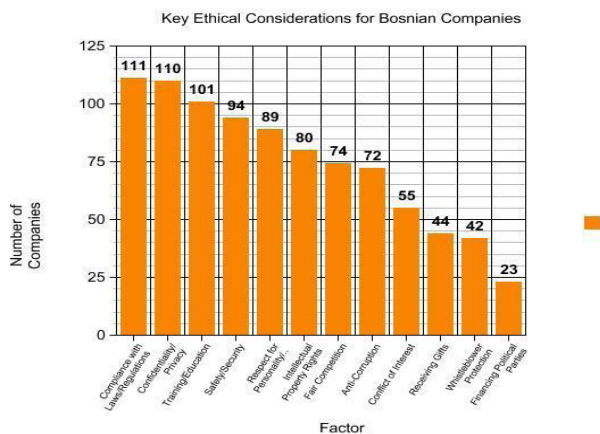


4.2 Ethical Standards and Governance Priorities

Of the 131 companies surveyed, 128 reported having established ethical standards and a code of conduct. One company indicated that it was in the process of developing its own standards, while two companies reported lacking a formal code of conduct. A strong emphasis on compliance with laws and regulations was evident, with 111 companies prioritizing this dimension, followed by confidentiality and privacy (110) and training and education (101). Safety and security at work were reported as important by 94 companies, and respect for diversity by 89. In contrast, certain governance-related aspects received less emphasis: fair competition (74) and anti-corruption (72), with conflict of interest (55), receiving gifts (44), and whistleblower protection (42) receiving even less attention. Financing of political parties was the least prioritized (23). These results, presented in Figure 2, demonstrate that Bosnian companies place high importance on ethical standards, although several areas remain underdeveloped.

Figure 2.

Key ethical considerations for Bosnian companies



4.3 Sustainable Development Priorities

When asked to identify their sustainable development priorities, companies most frequently emphasized employee satisfaction (118), followed by productivity (99), innovation (92), and pollution reduction (95). Rationalization of resource consumption (90) was also a major concern. Emerging areas of sustainability, such as green economy (72), energy transition (52), and circular economy (50), were less prominent but still relevant.

As shown in Figure 3, these results indicate that while traditional social and environmental priorities remain dominant, there is growing interest in more advanced sustainability models. The relatively lower emphasis on circular economy and energy transition suggests that many SMEs are still in the process of aligning with global sustainability agendas. Nevertheless, their recognition of these issues signals a readiness to gradually expand their practices, particularly if supported by adequate policy frameworks, financial incentives, and knowledge transfer.

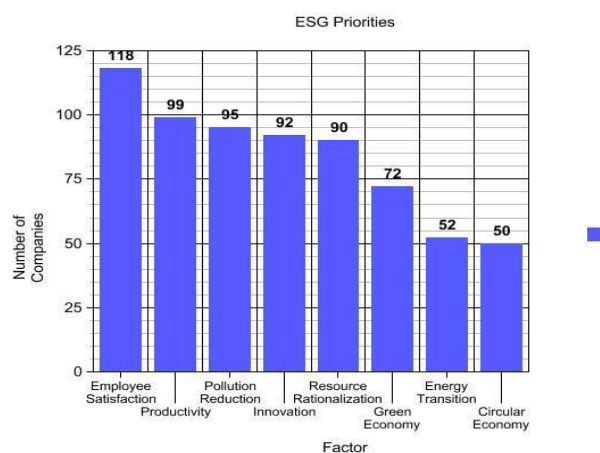
4.4 Gender Representation in Leadership

To establish a baseline understanding of gender diversity, companies reported the percentage of women in their senior management teams. Results reveal a diverse distribution: 29.0% of companies reported $\geq 55\%$ women in management, 37.4% reported $< 34\%$, and 33.6% fell in the 35–54% range. Following the critical mass framework in gender diversity literature (Velte, 2016; Di Miceli & Donaggio, 2018), the companies were categorized into three groups:

- Category 1: $< 34\%$ women (49 companies)
- Category 2: 35–54% women (44 companies)
- Category 3: $\geq 55\%$ women (38 companies)

Figure 3.

ESG priorities among Bosnian SMEs



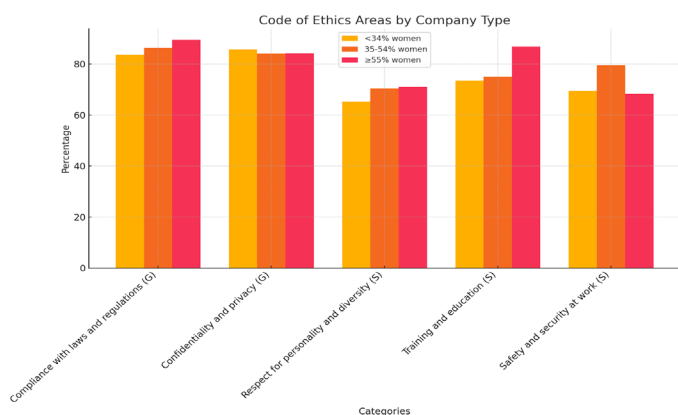
This categorization provides a framework for analyzing the relationship between gender diversity and ESG performance in Bosnian SMEs. It also indicates broader debates on whether incremental increases in women’s representation are sufficient, or whether surpassing a certain threshold—the “critical mass”—is necessary to generate meaningful change in corporate governance and sustainability practices.

4.5 Gender Diversity and Ethical Priorities

Survey results reveal that governance-related standards, particularly compliance with laws and regulations, were prioritized across all categories of companies, regardless of female representation in leadership. In Category 1, 83.7% of firms prioritized compliance and 85.7% confidentiality and privacy. Social aspects were also present, with training and education (73.5%), safety (69.4%), and respect for diversity (65.3%). Companies in Category 2 emphasized similar areas but placed relatively more weight on workplace safety (79.6%). In Category 3, compliance (89.5%) and training and education (86.8%) were most frequently highlighted, alongside respect for

diversity (71.1%). As shown in Figure 4, these results suggest that higher female representation may be linked to stronger emphasis on training, education, and inclusivity.

Figure 4.
Ethical priorities by gender representation

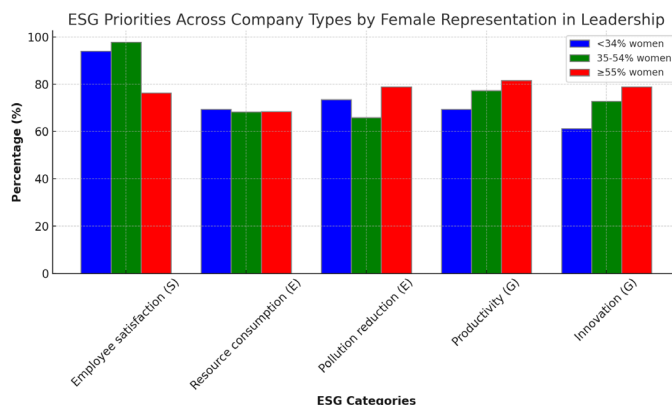


4.6 Gender Diversity and ESG Focus Areas

Examining ESG priorities through a gender lens reveals additional nuances. In Category 1, employee satisfaction was the top priority (93.9%), followed by pollution reduction (73.5%) and resource rationalization (69.4%). Companies in Category 2 maintained a strong focus on employee satisfaction (97.7%) and also prioritized productivity (77.3%) and innovation (72.7%). In contrast, companies in Category 3 placed greater emphasis on productivity (81.6%) and innovation (78.9%), while still valuing environmental issues such as pollution reduction (78.9%). Although employee satisfaction remained important (76.3%), it was not as dominant as in the other groups.

These patterns, summarized in Figure 5, suggest that a higher share of women in leadership correlates with greater attention to governance-related priorities such as productivity and innovation, while still maintaining a strong commitment to social and environmental aspects. Importantly, the results indicate that female leadership does not diminish concern for traditional ESG dimensions but rather reshapes the balance between them. In particular, the strong focus on innovation and productivity among companies with higher female representation may reflect broader perspectives on competitiveness and long-term sustainability, complementing social and environmental commitments. This highlights the potential of gender diversity to build more holistic and forward-looking ESG strategies.

Figure 5.
Top ESG priorities by gender representation



5. Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce the argument outlined in the introduction that gender diversity in leadership is a critical determinant of sustainable business performance. While previous literature has emphasized the contribution of female directors to enhanced stakeholder orientation, ethical outcomes, and CSR engagement (Adams et al., 2015; Cook & Glass, 2018; Francoeur et al., 2019), this study extends such insights to the underexplored context of SMEs in a transitional economy. Findings suggest that higher female representation in leadership correlates with both improved social and governance outcomes and elevated organizational performance in productivity and innovation.

By employing primary data from 131 companies participating in the UNDP's 2024 SDG Business Pioneers Award, the study was able to analyze the relationship between gender diversity and ESG outcomes in a unique empirical setting. This methodological approach, as described earlier, highlights the added value of using competition-based datasets that align with international sustainability frameworks. Such an approach enabled the examination of practical ESG indicators while capturing the realities of Bosnian SMEs, which are often overlooked in global governance research.

The results show that companies with higher female representation (≥55%) place greater emphasis on productivity and innovation, supporting the literature's argument that gender-diverse boards promote more dynamic governance structures (Velte, 2016; Di Miceli & Donaggio, 2018). In the social dimension, employee satisfaction is consistently prioritized across all firms, but the stronger association between female leadership

and initiatives related to training, diversity, and inclusivity indicates that women leaders enhance the institutionalization of CSR principles into corporate practice. Environmental factors, on the other hand, remain relatively stable across categories, suggesting that ecological responsibility is widely recognized among Bosnian SMEs but less dependent on leadership composition.

These findings have several theoretical implications. First, they extend the literature by demonstrating that the benefits of female leadership identified in developed economies are also observable in transitional contexts. Second, the results contribute to the ongoing debate on the “critical mass” of women in leadership, providing empirical evidence that once women surpass one-third of board representation, tangible improvements in governance and social performance emerge. Finally, the study underscores the interplay between CSR and ESG frameworks, suggesting that voluntary CSR engagement in SMEs may evolve into measurable ESG outcomes under gender-diverse leadership.

Practical implications are equally significant. Policymakers should acknowledge the strategic role of female leadership in enhancing the sustainability profile of SMEs, which represent a cornerstone of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s economy. Promoting gender equality in governance structures not only contributes to achieving the SDGs but also strengthens competitiveness, resilience, and inclusivity in the private sector. For managers, the results provide actionable evidence that diverse leadership teams are better positioned to balance ethical, social, and governance demands with strategic innovation.

Despite its contributions, this study has certain constraints. As mentioned in the methodology, the use of self-reported information carries the risk of bias, while the cross-sectional nature of the research limits the ability to draw causal conclusions. In addition, the absence of industry-specific breakdowns may mask potential differences in how gender diversity influences ESG outcomes across various sectors. To address these issues, future studies should consider longitudinal designs and comparative analyses in order to evaluate the durability of these effects over time and across different branches of the economy.

In sum, the discussion confirms that gender diversity in leadership is a critical factor associated

with ESG performance. By linking the empirical results to broader theoretical and policy debates, the study highlights both the universal relevance and the local specificity of women’s roles in advancing sustainable business practices.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that female leadership has a significant positive impact on ESG performance in small and medium-sized enterprises in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Based on evidence from 131 companies participating in the 2024 SDG Business Pioneers Award, the findings reveal that greater female representation in leadership positions is strongly associated with enhanced productivity, innovation, and ethical governance, as well as greater commitments to employee development, diversity, and inclusivity.

Theoretically, the research advances existing knowledge by shifting the focus from large corporations in developed economies to SMEs in a transitional context. This contribution is particularly valuable, as SMEs constitute the backbone of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s economy yet remain underrepresented in global discussions on gender diversity and corporate sustainability. By highlighting how gender-diverse leadership translates CSR commitments into measurable ESG outcomes, the study adds a localized perspective to the broader literature on governance and sustainability.

Practically, the results underscore that integrating ESG principles into business operations is a necessity rather than an option for long-term competitiveness. Promoting gender diversity in leadership structures not only strengthens corporate resilience but also aligns firms with global sustainability agendas, particularly the SDGs. Policymakers, regulators, and business leaders should therefore prioritize gender-inclusive strategies as a pathway toward sustainable growth and societal progress.

The study’s limitations must be acknowledged. The reliance on self-reported data may introduce response bias, and the cross-sectional design does not allow for causal inferences. Future research should employ longitudinal approaches to capture changes over time and conduct sector-specific analyses to uncover industry-level dynamics. Comparative studies across different emerging markets could

also provide additional insights into the universality or context-specificity of the observed relationships.

In conclusion, this research positions gender diversity as both a moral imperative and a strategic resource for advancing sustainability in transitional economies. Through inclusive leadership, SMEs in Bosnia and Herzegovina can strengthen their ESG performance and play a transformative role in building a more equitable, resilient, and sustainable future.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Foreign Trade Chamber of Bosnia and Herzegovina for granting access to the data collected through the 2024 SDG Business Pioneers Award. The views expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of UNDP or its partner institutions.

7. References

Adams, R. B., Gupta, N., & Leeth, J. D. (2015). Board diversity and corporate social responsibility. *Journal of Financial Economics*, 117(2), 304–321. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jfineco.2014.11.004>

Ahmadi, A., Cervantes, M., & Nguyen, L. (2018). Board gender diversity and corporate social responsibility engagement. *Journal of Business Research*, 84, 189–198. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2017.11.040>

Arayssi, M., Jizi, M. I., & Boubaker, S. (2016). Board diversity and corporate social responsibility reporting: Evidence from a neo-institutional framework. *Business & Society*, 57(6), 1183–1212. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0007650315628487>

Bajic, V., & Yurtoglu, B. B. (2018). The bidirectional relationship between corporate social performance and financial performance: Evidence from emerging markets. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 149(4), 825–841. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-016-3079-9>

Cook, A., & Glass, C. (2018). Diversity on boards and reporting on corporate social responsibility. *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management*, 25(2), 112–122. <https://doi.org/10.1002/csr.1445>

Drempetic, S., Klein, C., & Zwergel, B. (2019). The effect of ESG performance on the cost of corporate debt. *Journal of Banking & Finance*, 104, 40–58. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbankfin.2019.05.003>

Di Miceli, A., & Donaggio, A. (2018). *Women in Business Leadership Boost ESG Performance: Existing Body of Evidence Makes Compelling Case*. Private Sector Opinion No. 42, International Finance Corporation, The World Bank Group. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/31057>

Eccles, R. G., & Krzus, M. P. (2010). *One report: Integrated reporting for a sustainable strategy*. Wiley.

Emmanuel, C., Harris, I. C., & Koebel, C. (2018). The gender of the board chair and its effects on corporate social responsibility and board diversity: Evidence from the United States. *Corporate Governance: An International Review*, 26(3), 209–226. <https://doi.org/10.1111/corg.12228>

Francoeur, C., Labelle, R., & Sinclair-Desgagné, B. (2019). Gender diversity in the boardroom and corporate social responsibility. *Corporate Governance: An International Review*, 27(1), 16–34. <https://doi.org/10.1111/corg.12267>

Friede, G., Busch, T., & Bassen, A. (2015). ESG and financial performance: Aggregated evidence from more than 2000 empirical studies. *Journal of Sustainable Finance & Investment*, 5(4), 210–233. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20430795.2015.1118917>

Galbreath, J. (2018). Corporate governance: Women on boards: Issues of fit and critical mass. *Corporate Governance: An International Review*, 26(4), 293–305. <https://doi.org/10.1111/corg.12233>

Harjoto, M. A., Laksmana, I., & Lee, R. (2019). Board diversity and corporate social responsibility. *The Financial Review*, 54(2), 221–253. <https://doi.org/10.1111/fire.12208>

Hillman, A. J. (2015). The impact of board gender diversity and gender leadership on corporate social responsibility and social reporting. *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management*, 22(5), 281–293. <https://doi.org/10.1002/csr.1357>

- Issa, A., & Hanaysha, J. R. (2023). Breaking the glass ceiling for a sustainable future: The power of women on corporate boards in reducing ESG controversies. *International Journal of Accounting & Information Management*, 31(2), 187–216. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJAIM-09-2022-0222>
- Juneja, P. (2015). Corporate social responsibility and corporate governance: An overview. *International Journal of Law and Management*, 57(5), 382–392. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJLMA-05-2014-0030>
- Khan, M., Serafeim, G., & Yoon, A. (2016). Corporate sustainability: First evidence on materiality. *The Accounting Review*, 91(6), 1697–1724. <https://doi.org/10.2308/accr-51383>
- Kooli, M., Ben Hmida, D., Lotfi, E. H., & Achour, W. (2018). Corporate governance, board characteristics and corporate social responsibility disclosure: The case of French listed companies. *Corporate Governance: An International Review*, 26(3), 237–253. <https://doi.org/10.1111/corg.12230>
- Kumar, P., & Zattoni, A. (2016). Impact of gender diversity in corporate boards on firm financial performance: Evidence from emerging markets. *Corporate Governance*, 24(3), 320–339. <https://doi.org/10.1111/corg.12167>
- Larrieta-Rubín de Celis, M. D., Pucheta-Martínez, M. C., & Bel-Oms, I. (2015). The role of women directors in corporate social responsibility. *Corporate Governance*, 23(1), 42–59. <https://doi.org/10.1111/corg.12083>
- Lin, C., Chen, K., Chiu, Y., & Huang, Y. (2018). Female directors, corporate social responsibility, and financial performance in China. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 149(2), 377–395. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-016-3024-y>
- Manita, R., Lee, P. K., & Manita, E. (2018). Corporate governance, board characteristics, and environmental, social and governance disclosure: The case of Indonesian listed companies. *Pacific-Basin Finance Journal*, 52, 82–95. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pacfin.2018.01.001>
- Mathivanan, N., Jegadeeshwaran, R., & Priya, R. (2021). Impact of corporate governance practices on the performance of manufacturing companies in India. *Benchmarking: An International Journal*, 28(2), 576–596. <https://doi.org/10.1108/BIJ-03-2020-0123>
- Moir, L. (2001). What do we mean by corporate social responsibility? *Corporate Governance*, 1(2), 16–22. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EUM0000000005486>
- O'Dwyer, B., & Unerman, J. (2020). The evolution of corporate social and environmental accounting and reporting: From social responsibility to sustainability. *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, 33(1), 204–235. <https://doi.org/10.1108/AAAJ-10-2018-3715>
- Post, C., & Byron, K. (2015). Women on boards and firm financial performance: A meta-analysis. *Academy of Management Journal*, 58(5), 1546–1571. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2013.0319>
- Pucheta-Martínez, M. C., Bel-Oms, I., & Larrieta-Rubín de Celis, M. D. (2018). Corporate social responsibility and gender diversity in the boardroom: An empirical analysis in Spain. *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management*, 25(1), 86–99. <https://doi.org/10.1002/csr.1449>
- United Nations. (2015). *Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/RES/70/1)*. United Nations. https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E
- Velte, P. (2016). Women on the management board and ESG performance. *Journal of Global Responsibility*, 7(1), 118–135. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JGR-01-2016-0001>
- Vähämaa, S. (2017). Gender diversity on corporate boards and financial performance. *Journal of Corporate Finance*, 44, 296–311. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcorpfin.2017.04.008>

REVIEW PAPER

THE IMPACT OF DRAMA IN LEARNING AND TEACHING LANGUAGE/INTEGRATING DRAMA IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

Ajla Medanhodžić *International Burch University, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina*

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Ajla Medanhodžić, International Burch University, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. E-mail: ajla.medanhodzic@stu.ibu.edu.ba.

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to analyze the role of drama in context of learning a language, particularly in context of learning English through plays and dramatic movements such as Shakespeare's plays, Theatre of the Absurd and Modern and Post-modern American Drama, and the practical use of these plays in learning process according to different age and language level groups. The style of dialogue in Shakespeare's plays is analyzed and compared to the style in absurdist plays by authors such as Beckett and Ionesco. When talking about the works of Shakespeare, the process of adaptation and appropriation is mentioned as well as telling the famous tales and narratives through different media. Previous research will be taken in consideration, such as the pioneering work of drama educators who first introduced theatre as a learning tool in education or the Communicative Language Teaching approach focused on fluency and interaction in everyday situations. Specifics of drama in language learning in comparison to other literary genres such as poetry or prose will be briefly mentioned along with the history of Western drama. This paper discusses theatre and drama in the context of education with mention of similarities and differences to staged professional theatre plays. In few chapters, theatre is analyzed as a learning tool in various fields of study, but the main focus of the paper is language learning through drama with the purpose of improving students' linguistic and cultural knowledge. The discussion can be of concern to all those wishing to improve their language skills, and to drama educators and other theatre and education practitioners.

Keywords: language learning, drama, EFL/ESL, classroom drama, theatre of the absurd, modern and post-modern American drama, Shakespeare

MAP EDUCATION
AND HUMANITIES

Volume 6

ISSN: 2744-2373/ © The Authors.
Published by MAP - Multidisciplinary
Academic Publishing.

Article Submitted: 07 August 2025
Article Accepted: 01 November 2025
Article Published: 02 November 2025



Publisher's Note: MAP stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

<https://doi.org/10.53880/2744-2373.2025.6.51>



HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Medanhodžić A. (2025). **The Impact of Drama in Learning and Teaching Language/Integrating Drama in Language Education**. MAP Education and Humanities, 6, 51-60.
doi: <https://doi.org/10.53880/2744-2373.2025.6.51>



© The Author(s). **Open Access Article**
Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.



1. Introduction

Theatre has been an integral part of the cultures and traditions around the world for centuries. Some of the known benefits of theatre include the opportunity to experience catharsis, attend social events that connect the individual to the community, increase knowledge and awareness on certain topics, and many others. Theatre consists of different art forms joined together on stage, and language and literature is one of those art elements. The focus of this chapter is to research how different types of plays can be useful when learning English and what genres and dramatic movements are most suitable and effective for different and language level groups. It is almost certain that Western plays help improve linguistic, critical and other skills of native English speakers. However, considering this paper is written from a perspective of a non-native speaker, the focus of the text will be narrowed to English learned by non-native speakers, sometimes referred to as English as a foreign or second language, which includes writing, reading, listening and speaking.

There is a certain amount of confusion when speaking about theatre, plays and drama, or drama as a dialogue form that can be found in journalism (e.g. in interviews), screenplays for film or TV, and in novels or short stories. The distinction of plays compared to other literary genres, such as poetry or prose, is that they are mostly intended to be staged or read out loud in a group setting. In terms of learning a language, these specifics can be very useful. As an example, the author Betlem Soler Pardo (2020) writes about theatre as an educational tool for developing language skills. In the research paper "Theatre as a Communicative Strategy for Teaching English as a Foreign Language to Primary Education Undergraduates: A Pedagogical Experience", Pardo examines the effectiveness of theatre as a didactic tool in the classroom and discusses the benefits and challenges of using theatre in teaching English as a foreign language. Ever since the Communicative Approach or CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) was founded, theatre has been one of the educational tools in language teaching. The Communicative Approach is a language teaching method focused on fluency and interaction in real-life situations rather than grammar rules, and communication is both the means and the goal in the learning process. It emerged gradually in the late 1960s and early 1970s and was promoted by linguists such as D.A. Wilkins and Michael Halliday.

Pardo (2020) cites authors such as Ausubel (1963), Philips (2003), Wessels (1987), and Royka (2002), who claim that the best way to learn a foreign language is through the context of real everyday situations that the student can identify with and create a fictional world in which they can use the language. Expanding students' imagination is another benefit of using the theatre in the classroom. Some of the advantages of using theatre as a pedagogical tool are improved fluency and improvisation skills, increased self-confidence and motivation, improved pronunciation, learning new grammatical structures, and enhanced social skills and teamwork, since theatre is a group activity.

Pardo (2020) analyzes the work of Fleming (2006) and his distinction between drama and theatre, drama referring to improvised works and theatre to dramatic works that are performed on the stage; Pardo used the term "theatre" in the research to describe both definitions. According to Fleming's explanation, there is a lot of improvisation in drama and shorter plays, and theatre is the product of literary text and needs rehearsing rather than improvisation for the best results. One of Pardo's conclusions is that theatre has always been present in education and in the classroom in the form of different activities, games, and simulations.

Pardo's focus group in the practical part of his research were undergraduate students who were planning to work as English (EFL) teachers in elementary schools. At the end of the research, student participants performed the plays that were adaptations and parodies of popular tales such as *Hansel and Gretel*, *Cinderella*, *The Princess and the Pea*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, *The Three Little Pigs*, and *Alice in Wonderland*. Some of the students made significant changes to the stories and the plays could be considered loosely based on the tales rather than adaptations. The literary texts used in the research belong to the genre of children's literature because the participants' studies were focused on teaching language to children in elementary schools. However, the students wrote adaptation and parodies rather than used the original tales and it somewhat influenced the target audience that consisted of children but older generations, as well.

According to the definition of terms in Pardo's research, drama is mostly used in the context of younger age groups and beginner or intermediary language levels along with

improvisation (games and activities) and scripts that are not too complicated in terms of learning English. In terms of education, this would include pre-school, primary and secondary education, depending on their knowledge of English and school program. Plays by authors such as Shakespeare, Samuel Beckett, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, August Wilson, Eugene O'Neill, Edward Albee, and many other dramatic works that require more in-depth analysis and a lot of rehearsing are usually used as a learning material for advanced - level students and as part of high school program (or college/university level).

Another distinction between drama and play can be found in the research paper "Teaching Drama: Challenges and Benefits". Kalicanin and Petrovic (2021) discuss the pioneering work of drama educators Heathcote, Freire and Nussbaum and their perspectives on drama. Dorothy Heathcote contributed to one of the greatest revolutions in drama pedagogy and her methods of teaching were incorporated not only in teaching drama but also in other fields of study. Heathcote (2002) and Gavin Bolton (1979) were the first scholars to emphasize the importance of theatre in the first language classroom and to introduce theatre as a learning tool (social, emotional, cognitive). Soon after, the second language educators started developing strategies to integrate theatre into their classes because it was concluded that theatre could improve the four basic skills of language learning (speaking, writing, reading, listening). Heathcote was known for conducting dramatic workshops in which her students enacted different daily situations in controlled settings. The conventional methods of teaching drama consisted of ex cathedra lectures while Heathcote's and Bolton's method involved improvisation in various social and ethical situations and drawing inspiration from personal experience. The participants of the workshops were students of all ages, starting from elementary school to university level students. The students would dramatize a real-life situation that was not prepared for them in advance, through improvisation. Kalicanin and Petrovic (2021, p. 136) write that Heathcote's students were able to make clear distinction between the play and drama: acting in a play does not allow the personalization of the circumstances or the reactions, and in drama the dramatic conflict is based on the reactions of the students and each new class or workshop is an opportunity to resolve the situation in a new way.

According to this research and the distinction of play and drama, play is a pre-written dramatic text by authors such as Shakespeare that can be analyzed or enacted in a class setting. Drama, on the other hand, is dependent on students' reactions, their experiences and improvisation, and the dramatic story or conflict is made up of these factors. The first formal definition of drama in Western literature, or more specifically, of tragedy, can be considered Aristotle's definition written in *Poetics*, which identifies the components of tragedy as a type of drama.

The history of Western and English-speaking drama starts with tragedies and comedies in Ancient Greece (6th century BC) and a century later in ancient Rome. The plays were based on the rules of Aristotle's *Poetics* and written by authors such as Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides (tragedies), and Aristophanes, or Plautus in Rome (comedies). The 5th to 15th century was the time of medieval plays such as morality plays, miracles and mystery plays that dramatized Biblical events, moral lessons or lives of the saints. These medieval church plays had a flipside in the form of farces and carnival comedies performed during celebrations. This time can be considered the beginning of English-language theatre. Next was the Elizabethan drama most famous for a great number of Shakespeare's plays and tragic heroes and anti-heroes such as King Lear, Richard III, Hamlet, Macbeth, followed by 18th century drama, rise of melodrama in the 19th century, plays of naturalism and realism with psychological depth and playwrights such as Strindberg, Ibsen, Chekhov and Shaw, and finally, 20th and 21st century drama including Theatre of the Absurd, Modern American Drama, Feminist Theatre, Post-modern Drama.

The next few chapters will focus on plays and dramatic movements of the English-speaking world: Shakespeare's plays written in early modern English, and absurdist plays along with few examples of modern and post-modern American plays. The paper will analyze how these plays can be used in education, and particularly in learning English (EFL/ESL).

2. Learning English through Shakespeare's plays

William Shakespeare is widely regarded as one of the greatest playwrights in theatre history, and his plays have had a lasting impact on English literature and language (and on the literature and

languages in the rest of the world). He wrote 39 plays in his life, tragedies such as *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*; comedies that include *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *As You Like It*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, and plays that dramatize the lives of kings such as Henry IV, V, VI, Richard II, III, King John and others. Aside from writing the plays, Shakespeare is known for popularizing and inventing numerous English words. His plays introduce learners to diverse vocabulary, idioms and other expressions in the English language and that is why they are a great resource in language learning. His plays are typically written in a five-act structure that became a framework for dramatic writing: in Act I the setting and the main characters are established, Act II sets the story for dramatic conflict, in Act III and IV the conflict reaches its highest point followed by the effects of the event, and finally in Act V there is a resolution to the story. It can be claimed that the dialogue in Shakespeare's plays, with its complexity and diversity of the language is the most resourceful aspect for study in terms of language learning rather than focusing on character development, plot, structure and other aspects of play analysis. However, the more the students understand the parts of play and play as a whole the more they will be able to grasp the language, its function and its dimensions. There is a distinction in how the dialogue is written for different characters, e.g. heroes in Shakespeare's plays often speak in verse, and prose and ordinary speech is often used in scenes of comic relief. The type of verse used in the play is iambic pentameter without rhyme, and rhymed verse is sometimes placed at the end of a scene.

In paper *Shakespeare for ESL*, Todd Heyden (2003) writes that Shakespeare has left a stronger linguistic imprint on the English in terms of themes, characters and specifics of speeches and phrases than any other writer, and that ESL students should be given a strategy for accessing the cultures of the English-speaking world.

For Heyden, there should be a sense of play and fun for students in reading literature, particularly the plays of Shakespeare. Another important aspect is confidence because non-native speakers can find it challenging to read Shakespeare's plays that are not written in modern English. Heyden describes the methodology in his lectures, the first thing his students do in small groups is rewrite the famous soliloquys such as

"To be or not to be". As they are writing this task, students stumble upon many words they already know, and realize it is not a solitary activity but something they can write together with their group partner. Other activities in Heyden classes include inventing dialogues, writing letters to characters and creating simplified scripts based on a scene in a Shakespeare play. Another English playwright, Tom Stoppard has done this and expanded the text into a full-length absurdist play focusing on the Shakespearean characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Heyden explains that rewriting helps students to read with attention and notice how the original speech is constructed, details such as the number of syllables, the rhythm of the speech, the sound of words. Heyden observes that rewriting the soliloquys could seem like a sacrilege at first but it is the first step in understanding the meaning of the speech and appreciating its beauty (Heyden, 2003).

Considering the essay is published in *The Journal of the Imagination in Language Learning and Teaching*, with focus on imaginative writing and writing tasks in the classroom setting, it is clear that the purpose of rewriting the soliloquys is not to change the original text but to increase the students' knowledge and understanding of Shakespeare. However, if the rewriting was done in a professional theatre setting, with the intention of staging the play with the changed version of Shakespeare's text, there would probably be few critics or theorists who would argue against the changes of Shakespeare's dramatic works, such as few former directors at the Globe theatre. This is what Julie Sanders says about adaptation and appropriation of tales, folklore and other source materials:

These forms and genres have cross-cultural, often cross-historical, readerships; they are stories and tales which appear across the boundaries of cultural difference and which are handed on, albeit in transmuted and translated forms, through the generations (Sanders, 2006, p. 45).

Sometimes Shakespeare's plays are adapted for different media, such as film or radio, or set in another context or timeline, in such a case the term adaptation would be used to describe the retelling of the original story with some changes. Shakespeare himself used sources such as classical texts, medieval legends and historical chronicles as inspiration for his plays. In case of plays like *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead*, that reference Shakespeare's *Hamlet* but diverge greatly

from the original story (in terms of the plot, the main characters, themes, perspective), they could be described as loosely based on Shakespeare (in a way homage), or as plays referencing or commenting on the original play. Pardo's research was conducted in a similar way with adaptations and loose adaptations of children's tales. Sanders (2006) writes that dramatic adaptations of Shakespeare's plays have been done since Restoration in England in 1660s and Shakespeare's cultural value lies in his availability to coming ages to adapt his work as they wish, because, as Jean Marsden (as cited in Sanders, 2006) says every new generation tries to redefine Shakespeare from a contemporary point of view.

Shakespeare is more often taught (as part of drama or language classes) in higher grades in high school and at university level, but can be an inspiration for all generations, not only in the form of plays but through numerous literary, film and TV adaptations and references in pop culture. Shakespeare's unforgettable plays are proven resources for learning English through its masterful word constructs, phrases, idioms and expressions that increase students' linguistic and cultural knowledge.

3. Theatre of the Absurd in the context of language learning

Unlike Shakespeare's style, which can be described as poetic, expressive and filled with metaphors and imagery, the linguistic style of Theatre of the Absurd is repetitive and simpler in expression, it reflects the breakdown of communication and is fragmented and stripped to its core layers of meaning. When speaking about Theatre of the Absurd, the context of the World War II and its aftermath is often discussed, and so are the personal experiences of the authors who changed countries and wrote in more than one language.

Aside from Theatre of the Absurd, representatives of Modern and Post-modern American Drama are included in this chapter, who were influenced by Theatre of the Absurd such as Edward Albee, or Sam Shepard who had similar thematic focus in some of his plays. Similar to the case of Shakespeare's dramatic works, the absurdist plays are more suitable for advanced-level students and older age groups in terms of thematic complexity and context of the plays. However, parts of the dialogue could potentially be adapted for younger age groups but this paper will focus on the original unedited plays.

True West is a play that was published in 1981 (and produced the year before) by an American playwright, screenwriter, actor, and director, and it is one of the 58 plays Shepard wrote in his lifetime. The story centers on two brothers, Austin and Lee, who, after many years of estrangement, meet at their mother's house located 20 miles outside of Los Angeles. Some of the topics the play explores are family relations, the American dream, and the search for meaning in life.

According to some theorists, Albee's plays are an American version of the Theatre of the Absurd, which describes plays about existential issues, human existence, the lack of meaning, and the lack of communication. Martin Esslin (2004) writes that Theatre of the Absurd did not have as much influence on American writers at the time because, in the US, there has not been the loss of meaning and the concept of American dream was still strong. Albee was, however, considered one of the absurdist authors due to the irony and lack of optimism in his work. Some of his renowned plays include works such as *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, *The Zoo Story*, *Homelife*, *The Sandbox*, *The American Dream* and others.

Absurdist plays were written between the 1940s and 1960s, in the period after WW2 that was characterized by disillusionment with previous values and traditions. In his essay "Theatre of the Absurd", Esslin writes about the absurd in the plays of Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, and Arthur Adamov, and the absurd in Beckett's plays is described as melancholic and characterized by a feeling of futility and chronic hopelessness. The world is portrayed as an incomprehensible place observed from an external point of view, and that is why the events unfolding on stage appear to lack meaning (Esslin, 1961).

Our own time, at least in the Western world, wholly lacks such a generally accepted and completely integrated world picture. The decline of religious faith, the destruction of the belief in automatic social and biological progress, the discovery of vast areas of irrational and unconscious forces within the human psyche, the loss of a sense of control over rational human development in an age of totalitarianism and weapons of mass destruction, have all contributed to the erosion of the basis for a dramatic convention in which the action proceeds within a fixed and self-evident framework

of generally accepted values. Faced with the vacuum left by the destruction of a universally accepted and unified set of beliefs, most serious playwrights have felt the need to fit their work into the frame of values and objectives expressed in one of the contemporary ideologies (Esslin, 1961, p.6).

The play *True West* cannot directly be described as absurdist, and it was written a few decades after most of the plays of the theatre of the absurd, but it does deal with the same topics, such as isolation, search for identity, and lack of communication and understanding.

It is particularly the aspect of the communication that makes the absurdist plays appealing for analysis in the context of teaching English as a foreign language. The breakdown of communication, however, leads to a lack of meaning not only in an existentialist sense but in terms of words and phrases within the play. Dialogue in Theatre of the Absurd sometimes differs from or is in contradiction with the action happening on the stage, and it is important not to further confuse the students as they are trying to improve their linguistic skills, and to find the appropriate parts of the dialogue for different age groups and levels of education. Activities such as the analysis of the play and the discussion about the context and the characteristics of the Theatre of the Absurd can be conducted, and just like in the case of Pardo and Heyden, the students can try to write their own absurdist plays or adapt the stories they find to be absurdist in some way. The characters in the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd are essentially trying to find or create meaning in what they perceive to be a world devoid of meaning, and in that way, they can be relatable to students wishing to improve their English skills. Unlike Beckett's or Ionesco's plays, which are some of the main examples of absurdist plays and are very philosophical, vague, and repetitive in terms of the dialogue, play structure, and location, Albee's and Shepard's plays are not as vague, and follow some of the traditional rules of playwriting.

Dialogue in absurdist plays usually consists of clichés and repetitive stereotypical phrases, and Esslin (1961) questions how many of such phrases are used in daily life. Theatre of the Absurd is most revolutionary in terms of its approach to language; it tries to renew the dramatic language and to deconstruct the conventional stage dialogue. In

1948, before writing his first play, Romanian-French playwright (and at the time proofreader) Ionesco was trying to learn conversational English, and soon he bought a French-English phrase book, *L'Anglais sans Peine* (English without Pain), and started studying at Berlitz school. His method was to write down and copy sentences from the book and try to memorize them. After reading the sentences a few times, Ionesco realized that it is not so much his knowledge of English that is improving but his awareness of facts such as that there are seven days in a week, or that the ceiling is up and the floor is down, which he knew about before but never seriously considered. He was affected by the tragic quality of these phrases, and the ordinariness that creates the absurdity. The sentences in the book were not only simple statements in French translation but universal truths and observations. As Ionesco continued learning from the phrase book, in later lessons he encountered personal observations that were written in the form of dialogue, and all of these findings led him to write his first play and improve his knowledge of the English language (Ionesco, 1960).

Ionesco was born not far from Bucharest in Romania, but moved to France with his family due to his father's work. At the age of 13, he and his sister had to return to Romania, and Ionesco was not happy about the move and felt a sense of isolation from the Romanian society and language. It is precisely the alienation from his first language that, later, when Ionesco moved again to France and started his playwriting career, helped him evoke in his texts a feeling of confusion and frustration at the inability of language to find and describe the meaning of reality (Lahr, 1994).

A strange phenomenon took place. I don't know how—the text began imperceptibly to change before my eyes. The very simple, luminously clear statements I had copied so diligently into my notebook, left to themselves, fermented after a while, lost their original identity, expanded, and overflowed. The clichés and truisms of the conversation primer, which had once made sense (...), gave way to pseudo-clichés and pseudo-truisms (...). For me, what had happened was a kind of collapse of reality. The words had turned into sounding shells devoid of meaning, the characters too, of course, had been emptied of psychology, and the world appeared to me in an unearthly, perhaps its true light, beyond understanding and

governed by arbitrary laws (Ionesco, 1964, p. 178-179).

In the research paper "The Impact of Literature in Teaching a Foreign Language: A Case Study on the Use of Drama and its Practical Implications", Anxhela Starja analyzes the various proven means of language acquisition with the purpose of developing skills and competencies. The first part of the research focuses on the role of literary texts in the teaching process, and in the second part, Starja writes about the practical approach within the classroom setting. The research aims to emphasize the effect of drama, particularly Shepard's play *True West*, on the students' learning process and their levels of creativity, motivation, individual work, and work in a group setting. According to Starja, literary texts can be put to use in developing linguistic and literary skills. One of the preconditions for using literature as a source material in learning a foreign language is to have the students familiarized with the necessary information that will enable them to understand its key principles and extract meaning from various uses of language. In order to interpret and understand dramatic texts and other literary works, the students need to use their communicative skills and have literary competence. Based on the works and argumentation of numerous eminent scholars, Starja mentions the following reasons for integrating literature in the foreign language classroom: literature represents the best aspects of language and that is why it is adequate for language learning, it helps students develop the linguistic awareness, discussion of literary themes, character relations and so on develops communicative competences, it provides students with the knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, cultural values and fosters creativity with language activities such as role playing, rewriting or changing the point of view within the story (Starja, 2015).

Albee's plays, with similar themes, length and duo-character relations, can be analyzed and taught in the classroom setting according to Starja's case study. Plays like *Marriage Play*, *The Zoo Story*, *Homelife*, *The American Dream*, *The Box*, consist of one act and, based on the book edition and the number of pages, can be read or listened to in one or a few classes, workshops, or other group work setting. *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia* has two acts (in a published version) and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* consists of three acts. Excerpts can be chosen for reading and analyzing, or the play as a whole, depending on the thematic focus. Some of the suggested themes are the clash of

values (points of view, lifestyles, philosophies) that the main characters represent, the symbolism of the setting and its commentary of contemporary society and the American Dream, absurdity and existentialism in Albee's work, the unconventional dramatic structure and the other contrasting topics such as alienation, isolation and search for the connection and meaning.

In Starja's case study, practical activities were carried out in order to analyze the role of the literary genre of drama, and the participants were fourteen upper-intermediate level students of English at the Faculty of Foreign Languages. Divided into small groups, students were supposed to read, listen to, and rehearse extracts from Shepard's play and present to the class the main ideas of the play and their impact on American society. The objectives of the case study were to get the students acquainted with the works of Sam Shepard and rehearse the play, to improve listening skills by watching the play on YouTube, speaking skills through presentation of main ideas to the class, and reading skills by reading the dialogue excerpts. Some of the other objectives were to get acquainted with new vocabulary terms, enhance students' creative and critical thinking, and develop connections between literature (drama) and other subjects such as sociology or geography through the research of contemporary American society, consumerism, and setting (Starja, 2015).

The participants in both Starja's and Pardo's case studies were university students of English, but Pardo's approach was more focused on language and pedagogy. Starja's methodology was interdisciplinary as well in terms of wanting to link different fields of study but was focusing more on the socio-political and psychological aspect of the play.

The stages of the case study were divided into 5 to 6 classes. In the first two classes, the students are introduced to Sam Shepard, who is a winner of numerous screenwriting and playwriting awards, such as the Palme d'Or and Pulitzer Prize (Drama). The research of his plays is divided into three parts, into the early plays portraying the life in America in the '60s, the second part focused on the family plays set in the next few decades until the '90s, and the third part centering on the plays with themes such as the portrayal of the contemporary individual, the national identity and the male identity (Starja, 2015).

Similar to the works of Shepard, Albee's plays can be explored in the classroom/workshop setting in three phases. His Early Plays, written between the late '50s and early '60s, are strongly influenced by the Theatre of the Absurd and characterized by confrontations and societal critique. The language is often stylized and obscure, and the setting is minimalist and symbolic. Albee's Middle Plays phase lasted from the beginning of the '70s to the end of the '80s, and, during this time, he moved his focus from Broadway to regional US theaters and various European cities. In the early part of the '90s, Albee wrote the Later Plays, which represent a more mature, introspective and stylistically diverse stage of his work (Roudane, 2017).

In the next stage, the focus of the class is switched from the playwright to the play, and students are introduced to *True West*. The students are told that the play is a character study examining the relationship between two brothers, Austin and Lee. The play's basic information written on the playwright's official website is discussed, such as the setting and the main plot of the story. The play synopsis is briefly mentioned, along with the main points. The discussion of a play is approached with a "character study" point of view, and focuses on the analysis and discussion of two main characters and how they influence the plot. Finally, the participants were asked to read the play at home and watch the footage of one of the stage productions on YouTube (Starja, 2015).

This part of Starja's research focuses on the character study in the same way Kalicanin and Petrovic used English Renaissance anti-heroes and characters in Shakespeare's plays as practical examples of Heathcote's methods of teaching. Characters in Theatre of the Absurd can be challenging to analyze due to them not being written in a traditional but rather fragmented way, and through embodiment of deep philosophical and symbolic ideas. Characters in *True West* and in Albee's plays (e.g., Martha and George in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*) are written with more psychological depth and are more adept for character study.

According to Starja's description, in classes 3 and 4, students were divided into groups of four to five students, with each group doing the analysis of one of the acts. One of the tasks was to identify and discuss the themes emerging in the play, such as the comparison between the Old and the New West, the American Dream and its failure, and different

understandings (definitions) of art that each of the brothers represents, along with different parts of American society. The student later explored the idiolect of the main characters and through it, their social and other background; symbols and the concept of Austin and Lee changing the roles within the play, and coming up with a list of characteristics for the protagonists and writing it on the board in the classroom. The topic of dialogue and monologue was discussed, and every group focused on one of the major events in the play, such as the conflict between the brothers or their talking about Austin's screenplay. Afterwards, a small contest was organized between the groups to motivate them to continue to work hard. Each group was given a list of dialogue lines, and their task was to guess which character said the statement. One of the aims was to connect the dialogue lines and the characters' discourse to their background. The dialogue statements consisted of peculiarities in speech, such as the use of slang words, cursing, or more sophisticated terms (Starja, 2015).

In terms of linguistic exploration of Albee's work, Roudane (2017) writes that Albee animates his theatre through language, which is the dominant feature of his plays and his contribution to the history of American drama. One of Albee's strong technical points is the ability to capture the essence of personal beliefs, values, and views of his characters through language. His approach to language is precise and effective, often referencing leitmotifs such as food and drink, animals, and language itself. The stage directions in Albee's plays are occasionally read as mini-prose poems emphasizing the emotional intensity in scenes, and his use of italics in the dialogue lines creates a subtler interpretation of the dialogue and the subtext.

Towards the end of Starja's two classes, the students were asked to come up with a different ending to the play. The ending in *True West* is ambiguous; there is no resolution in a traditional sense, with the events ending tragically or on a more positive, optimistic note. Austin and Lee get into a physical fight, almost choking each other to death. However, Lee suddenly wakes up from unconsciousness and stops Austin from leaving. The brothers are left standing and facing each other, ready to continue the conflict. (Starja, 2015). This type of ending resembles the endings in the Theatre of the Absurd plays, suggesting emotional or physical intensity due to failure of words and communication, endless repetition and lack of

resolution. In some cases, the play ends the same way it started, and it can be claimed that there is no real character or relationship change in *True West*. In the last two lectures, class 5 and 6, every group had the final rehearsal and interpreted the new ending of the play, students had the presentation on the topic of their choice and with a focus on sociological aspect, and finally, the student participants were given the questionnaires to describe their impressions and evaluate their experience in the project.

In case of Albee's plays, again, Starja's approach can be implemented, and the learners can be divided into teams with the task of writing their own ending for the plays, rehearsing it, and presenting it to the class or workshop. In *Homelife*, the play ends with Peter leaving the apartment after an intense conversation with his wife, and the same character of Peter is later shown in a different kind of conflict. In *Marriage Play*, that is about a married couple dissecting their past few decades together, Jack and Gillian do not come to resolution but remain in the same point of conversation they were in the beginning (almost referencing the ending of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*), and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* ends in disillusionment.

The ending of the play can be rewritten based on the themes the participants would like to highlight and their view of the conflict between the main characters. As Matthew Roudane writes in *Overview: The Theatre of Edward Albee* (2017), Albee's theatre is a theatre of rebellion, and a variation of Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre, that is the interactive theatre technique exploring societal issues, can be implemented in the sense that there is a group discussion about the play's main themes and the teacher serving as the spect-actor and guiding the performance. In Forum Theatre, sometimes known as Theatre of the Oppressed, the audience usually has an active role in discussions of social issues and suggestions for conflict resolution within the scenes and the play. In the case of a workshop or classroom setting, the participants would be both the actors and the audience.

According to the questionnaire and students' feedback in Starja's research, the drama technique used in the case study was successfully implemented. Including the drama in the English teaching curriculum positively affected the students' critical thinking, imagination, confidence, motivation, individual work, and teamwork, and the students enjoyed being an active part of the

groups and helping with the organization and management of the process. They were a part of not only cognitive but also social processes, and proved the importance of the social dimension and community in the learning process. Additionally, the students liked writing their own endings for the play and discussing different issues and aspects of American society in the presentation part. The participants were able to express their opinions, and there were numerous opportunities for interaction and language usage through the dialogue. Both verbal and non-verbal language skills were integrated through the use of drama. There were a few setbacks mentioned during the process, such as the difficulty of listening/reading the play within the given time frame of one class and occasional difficulties in understanding the spoken version of the play on YouTube (Starja, 2015).

Theatre of the Absurd can in many ways be inspiration for learning English, starting from its playwrights who were actively learning new languages (particularly Ionesco whose attempt to learn English resulted in writing a full-length play that was a turning point in modern drama), to its world-building and characters who are unsuccessfully trying to grasp meaning and establish communication. Not only are the absurdist plays effective in the process of learning a language, but so are the plays that were influenced by them, as it is shown through Starja's case study and Esslin's observations.

4. Conclusion

This paper discusses the role of drama in the context of learning English, with a focus on English as a second or foreign language (EFL/ESL). Few case studies were analyzed along with the methodology of drama and language educators who were aiming to improve the students' linguistic and literary skills (and other skills such as imagination, critical thinking, confidence). The distinction of terms, such as drama and play, was clarified according to more recent definitions. The main part of the paper focuses on the Renaissance and the 20th century, and the dramatic works of Shakespeare and absurdist playwrights in terms of teaching English to different student level groups. These particular plays were analyzed for their linguistic diversity that can help improve the students' English, and their literary and cultural knowledge.

5. References

Aristotle. (1984). *The complete works of Aristotle: The revised Oxford translation* (J. Barnes, Ed., Vol. 2). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Bolton, G. (1979). *Towards a theory of drama in education*. London: Longman.

Esslin, M. (1961). *The theatre of the absurd*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company.

Esslin, M. (2004). *The theatre of the absurd* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Vintage Books.

Fleming, M. (2006). *Drama and language teaching: The relevance of Wittgenstein's concept of language games*. *Humanising Language Teaching*, 8(4). <http://old.hlomag.co.uk/jul06/mart01.htm>

Heathcote, D. (2002). *Contexts for active learning: Four models to forge links between schooling and society* [Conference presentation]. NATD Conference, Birmingham, UK.

Heyden, T. (2003). *Hamlet through imaginative writing*. *The Journal of the Imagination in Language Learning and Teaching*, 8. https://archive.org/details/ERIC_ED476597/mode/2up

Ionesco, E. (1964). *The tragedy of language, notes and counter notes: Writings on the theatre* (D. Watson, Trans.). New York, NY: Grove Press.

Ionesco, E. (1960). *The tragedy of language: How an English primer became my first play*. *The Tulane Drama Review*, 4(3), 10–13. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1124841>

Kalicanin, M., Petrovic, K. (2021). *Teaching drama: Challenges and benefits*. Philosophical Faculty, University of Niš.

Pardo, S. B. (2020). *Theatre as a communicative strategy for teaching English as a foreign language to primary education undergraduates: A pedagogical experience*. *Ikastorratza. e-Journal on Didactics*, (25). https://doi.org/10.37261/25_alea/5

Roudané, M. C. (2017). *Edward Albee: A critical introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sanders, J. (2006). *Adaptation and appropriation* (The New Critical Idiom). London; New York: Routledge.

Starja, A. (2015). *The impact of literature in teaching a foreign language – A case study on the use of drama and its practical implications*. *European Scientific Journal*, 11(14), 432–441. <https://eujournal.org/index.php/esj/article/view/5701/5454>

REVIEW PAPER

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE POLICIES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION: MANIFESTO FOR CRITICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND A ROADMAP

Christian M. Stracke¹ , Nurun Nahar², Veronica Punzo³, Stefania Massaro⁴, Dimitra Pappa⁵, Annamaria Di Grassi⁶, Senad Bećirović⁷ , Paul Hollins⁸, Xenia Ziouvelou⁹, Marjana Prifti Skenduli¹⁰, Daniel Burgos¹¹

¹University of Bonn, Bonn, Germany, ²University of Greater Manchester, Bolton, UK, ³Università di Pisa, Pisa, Italy, ⁴Università degli studi di Bari Aldo Moro, Bari, Italy, ⁵National Centre For Scientific Research Demokritos, Agia Paraskevi, Greece, ⁶Università degli studi di Foggia, Foggia, Italy, ⁷University College of Teacher Education Lower Austria, Baden, Austria, ⁸University of Greater Manchester, Bolton, UK, ⁹National Centre For Scientific Research Demokritos, Agia Paraskevi, Greece, ¹⁰University of New York, Tirana, Albania, ¹¹Universidad Internacional de La Rioja (UNIR), La Rioja, Spain

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Christian M. Stracke, University of Bonn, Bonn, Germany. E-mail: stracke@uni-bonn.de.

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the relationship between artificial intelligence (AI) technology and educational policy in higher education, highlighting key research and implementation. The paper focuses on critical considerations for AI policy development with a view to producing a roadmap focused on contextual higher education AI policies. The rapid development of AI presents both significant opportunities and challenges for higher education institutions in Europe and globally. As AI technologies become ubiquitous, integrated into teaching, learning, and administrative functions, it is essential to identify critical considerations at the core of the AI integration process, namely: (1) regulatory framework, (2) stakeholder-specific guidelines, (3) AIED research, and (4) AI literacy. As a starting point, the paper presents a review of existing AI policy frameworks within higher education, drawing on recent empirical research, identifying four design and implementation priorities for higher education stakeholders aiming to create responsible AI governance frameworks. As a result, we propose a roadmap designed to be used as strategic planning instrument for higher education stakeholders developing AI policies and guidance. In proposing a strategic roadmap for AI policy development, the work offers valuable insight into how higher education can effectively leverage the potential of AI whilst ensuring ethical considerations, equity, and maintaining academic integrity. Additionally, the paper contributes to the ongoing discourse regarding AI's role in higher education in proposing research pathways that will benefit all stakeholders involved in the academic ecosystem.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence in Education (AIED), AI policy development, higher education, framework for strategic planning, design and implementation roadmap



MAP EDUCATION
AND HUMANITIES

Volume 6

ISSN: 2744-2373 / © The Authors.
Published by MAP - Multidisciplinary
Academic Publishing.

Article Submitted: 06 October 2025
Article Accepted: 01 November 2025
Article Published: 02 November 2025



Publisher's Note: MAP stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

<https://doi.org/10.53880/2744-2373.2025.6.61>



HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Stracke et al. (2025). **Artificial Intelligence Policies for Higher Education: Manifesto for Critical Considerations and a Roadmap**. MAP Education and Humanities, 6, 61-73.
doi: <https://doi.org/10.53880/2744-2373.2025.6.61>



© The Author(s). **Open Access Article**
Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.



1. Introduction

As rapid integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies becomes ubiquitous in Higher Education teaching and learning, research and administrative processes, it raises important ethical and policy questions to ensure equitable, safe and effective implementation. Society's need to guide the development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies is becoming more widely acknowledged. Guidance is crucial for maximizing AI benefits and managing risks, ensuring that AI systems are designed to serve the common good, align with human values and ethical principles, and preventing misuse (Stracke, 2025).

Recent studies have shown a marked increase in the use of AI in higher education, with applications ranging from intelligent tutoring systems to predictive analytics for student success (Bećirović & Mattoš, 2024; Crompton & Burke, 2023). The adoption of AI tools in Higher Education has been driven by their affordances, to personalise learning experiences, provide real-time feedback and automate routine tasks, thereby allowing educators to focus on more complex instructional activities (Slimi, 2023). However, as these technologies continue to evolve, ethical considerations become of paramount significance as robust measures are required to protect individual human rights such as data privacy and compliance with regulations whilst ensuring transparency and fairness in use. Developing flexible regulatory frameworks that can adapt to rapid technological advancements is a complex task if measures to be undertaken prioritise equitable distribution of benefits of AI across all societal segments.

This paper will provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of AI policies in Higher Education, drawing on recent empirical studies. It will present a roadmap for developing AI policies for Higher Education by examining the intersection of AI technology and educational policy and contribute to the ongoing discourse on how to harness AI's potential best so that all stakeholders in the higher education ecosystem benefit.

2. Background

AI is a transformative force in education with the potential to revolutionise learning experiences and create new opportunities for personalised education (Holmes & Tuomi, 2022; Zheng, Niu, Zhong & Gyasi, 2023). The integration of

AI in education is part of a global context of rapid technological innovation, where AI-based tools such as intelligent tutoring systems, predictive analytics and personalised learning platforms are redefining the way students and teachers interact with knowledge. Artificial intelligence has become a priority issue for governments and international organisations (Educause, 2022; UNESCO, 2021a, 2021b, 2023; OECD, 2024), as it now impacts on all areas of human activity.

Existing literature indicates significant progress in the development of AI applications for education (Zheng, Niu, Zhong & Gyasi, 2023). Recent studies have shown that AI-based tools can improve the personalisation of learning by adapting content to the specific needs of students through machine learning systems. In addition, the use of predictive algorithms provides institutions with the ability to identify students at risk of dropping out early and thereby improve course completion rates (Tlili et al. 2024; Bozkurt, et al. 2023). However, there is no shortage of criticism (Crawford, Allen, Pani & Cowling, 2024). Research suggests that the indiscriminate adoption of these technology risks creating new forms of inequality, particularly in contexts where technological resources and digital skills are limited (Baker & Haw 2022). Other concerns relate to issues of informed consent, invasion of privacy, biased data collection, fairness and accountability (Nguyen et al. 2023). Although AI systems are designed to be unbiased, they may perpetuate or even exacerbate existing biases if the original data on which they are trained and their proxies are not accurate and free from bias and incorrect assumptions (Miao, Holmes, Huang & Zhang, 2021). There are also concerns about the impact of AI on the exercise of democracy and active citizenship (ECAP, 2023; Burr, Taddeo & Floridi, 2020; Dignum, 2021). Many educational institutions are adopting AI tools without a clear regulatory framework, risking ethical issues related to privacy, data security and transparency of algorithms (Stracke, 2024; Stracke et al., 2024). The current widespread adoption of unregulated AI applications in schools poses a serious threat to democratic civil society and individual freedom and liberty (Williamson, Molnar & Boninger, 2024). To understand the challenges, we face in education and to increase trust in AI systems, the concept of Explainable AI has recently emerged. This term refers to movements, initiatives and efforts to ensure that algorithmic decisions and the data that drive these decisions can be explained in a clear and understandable way to end users and other stakeholders (Adadi, & Berrada, 2018). All

these findings highlight the need for guidelines for the responsible use of AI in education.

A detailed study was conducted by Stracke et al. (in press) to analyze and compare AI policies for higher education. 15 AI policies were selected from governments and universities of eight European countries. Their evaluation compared four potential target groups (students, teachers, education managers, and policymakers) emphasizing their commonalities and gaps within the selected AI policies. The final conclusion is that unique ethical and social challenges are caused by AI, including data security, algorithm transparency, social impact and educational quality, and ethical responsibility (Stracke et al., in press).

There is still no clear consensus on the ethical dimensions of AI as a technological practice, meaning its development is primarily shaped by the principles of those who create and implement it. As a result, the ethical considerations reflected in policies and declarations are often personal and subjective perspectives put forward by those involved. This complexity is further heightened by the interplay between regulatory adaptations and the rapid pace of AI advancement. To ensure that AI in higher education is deployed ethically, transparently, and with respect for human rights, regulatory frameworks are essential at all levels—nationally, internationally, and institutionally. While a broad framework can provide a theoretical foundation, practical guidelines are necessary to offer targeted, context-specific responses categorized by topic, sector, and audience.

Currently, the development of regulations and ethical frameworks for AI use in universities remains in its early stages. Although European governments are making strides in establishing regulatory standards for AI in the public sector, comprehensive national policies specifically addressing the ethical and responsible use of AI in education are still lacking. At present, regulatory efforts in higher education are largely fragmented, with most initiatives emerging from grassroots, bottom-up approaches. Universities and academic institutions are only beginning to implement structured frameworks for AI ethics and governance. Regulations tend to lag behind technological advancements, making it both inevitable and potentially beneficial for institutions to take the lead in shaping AI policies and practices—ensuring that regulations are informed by the real-world implications of the technology.

While existing AI and higher education policies provide a foundational framework for integrating AI technologies into educational institutions, several critical gaps remain that could undermine their effectiveness and equity. Ethical considerations such as bias and fairness, are often addressed in guidelines but lack comprehensive policies that ensure accountability and transparency in AI operations (Lowe 2023; European Commission, 2020). This oversight could lead to perpetuation of existing inequalities and the introduction of new forms of discrimination that could compromise the ethical deployment of AI in Higher Education. The current policies on data privacy and security measures often fallback on compliance with regulations but lack clear robust frameworks that would safeguard data against breaches and misuse which could erode public trust in AI technologies and institutions using them. Moreover, as AI technologies proliferate, it could exacerbate educational inequities by further widening the digital divide, potentially leaving marginalised and under-represented groups at a disadvantage (Imbrie, 2024; UNESCO, 2021) if existing policies do not focus on a roadmap of comprehensive guidelines for promoting critical AI literacy in higher education stakeholders.

Recent research provides groundwork for developing comprehensive and relevant guidelines to ensure the ethical use of AI in higher education, enabling all stakeholders to navigate its complexities responsibly. From this perspective, we have identified several key elements necessary for creating effective guidelines on AI ethics and responsible use in higher education. These guidelines should be tailored to different target groups, clarify roles in AI interactions, encompass various application areas, and establish a well-defined scope of guidance.

Our findings emphasize the need for further, particularly evidence-based, research to assess both the potential and practical impact of AI in higher education. It is crucial to integrate AI use in education with education about AI—commonly referred to as AI literacy—to ensure that all stakeholders, including students, educators, education administrators, and policymakers, understand both the opportunities and risks associated with AI in higher education. Ultimately, AI itself is neither ethical nor moral; rather, it is people who bear this responsibility. Therefore, AI policies in education should be designed to support institutions and individuals in upholding ethical responsibilities.

Furthermore, our research reiterates the necessity of continued evidence-based inquiry into the impact of AI in higher education while reinforcing the importance of combining AI implementation with AI literacy initiatives.

Policies are being developed to inform the ethical, safe and effective integration of AI into educational practices. International agencies including the European Commission, UNESCO, and the Council of Europe are actively engaged in creating and enforcing suitable guidelines and frameworks that encourage the moral and responsible application of AI.

UNESCO has taken a number of steps to incorporate AI skills into education, focussing on AI independently of other digital technologies in education, despite the fact that regulations governing AI integration are still in their early stages (Stracke et al., 2024). UNESCO approaches AI in education from a human-centered perspective, emphasising the development of human capabilities while also promoting social justice, sustainability, and human dignity. UNESCO's "Ethical Framework for AI" (Miao et al., 2021) establishes some fundamental guiding principles, such as transparency, equity, accountability, and inclusiveness, to ensure that these technologies are used ethically and in accordance with human rights. To help nations support teachers and students in understanding the potential and risks of AI so they can use it responsibly, ethically, and safely in education and beyond, UNESCO unveiled two new frameworks during Digital Learning Week 2024. The focus on AI literacy is based on the claim that AI presents novel ethical and social challenges due to the affordance which mimic human behaviour (Franke, 2022). Addressing these issues requires specialised skills that go beyond traditional digital literacy. These challenges necessitate specialised skills that extend beyond the scope of traditional digital literacy. The AI competency framework for students (Miao et al., 2024) is intended to help curriculum developers, educators, and legislators give students the abilities, values, and information they need to engage with AI in productive ways. Similarly, the AI Competency Framework for Teachers (Miao, & Cukurova, 2024) offers a framework for national competency development and training initiatives, with an emphasis on teachers' ongoing professional development. The framework identifies five core competency areas, with the goal of preparing teachers to use AI responsibly and effectively while minimising potential risks to students and society.

The Council of Europe is following a similar approach but combining two complementary activities and developments to achieve international conventions (Council of Europe, 2024a). Based on the mandate by all its 46 Member States, the Council of Europe works on a binding international law on the regulation of AI use in education as well as on a global recommendation for AI literacy to be included in national and local curricula (Council of Europe, 2023a, 2023b). The rationale is that AI competence frameworks can be a valuable and authoritative starting point for regulating AI education and adoption. They offer clear, ethical, and forward-thinking advice to help schools prepare students and teachers to use AI responsibly, so that AI can support human decision-making rather than replace it (Stracke, 2024).

Finally, the AI Act of the European Union, the first artificial intelligence regulation that went into force on August 2, 2024 and focuses AI providers (European Union, 2024). The policies and guidelines of international organisations converge on the concept that education and awareness are key tools for ensuring AI use that is respectful of both human rights and ethical regulations.

The AI Act highlights the importance of the ethical component in the creation and application of such technologies and invokes the principles of accountability and transparency to reduce the possibility of detrimental effects on fundamental rights, particularly the right to education.

There is widespread consensus on the importance of education and awareness as key tools for ensuring the use of AI that respects human rights and ethical norms. The increasing integration of AI into society necessitates the development of specific AI literacy in order to better understand its opportunities and risks. This is crucial for safeguarding human rights, preventing discrimination, and ensuring that the benefits of AI are distributed fairly. In order to prevent harmful uses and foster widespread understanding, the AI Act highlights the importance of literacy regarding the use of AI technologies, including their ethical implications (Recitals 20, 56; European Union, 2024).

To foster a protective culture for vulnerable groups of people who might be harmed by the misuse of AI requires educating students, teachers, school administrators, and policy makers (Recitals 93; European Union, 2024). The AI Act's specific provisions help to prevent potential rights violations

by protecting these groups from the dangers posed by high-risk AI systems (Article 27; European Union, 2024).

As a result, the first international AI regulation was finalized and approved by the Council of Europe and its 46 Member States: The Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law (Treaty 225) at went into force on September 5, 2024 (Council of Europe, 2024b). It focuses individual rights and the core values of human rights, democracy and rule of law.

Building public trust in use of AI technologies demands more transparent and explainable AI systems that must be prompted by existing policies (Lowe, 2023). However, the static nature of current AI policies and regulations could potentially stifle the demand for a regulatory framework that is flexible and adaptive to respond to emerging challenges as AI technologies advance with time. Addressing these gaps through ongoing research, collaboration and the development of comprehensive and adaptable policies is essential for harnessing innovation with AI in higher education that benefits all relevant stakeholders.

The literature reflects a growing recognition of the need for considered AI policies in higher education, emphasizing the importance of addressing ethical challenges, ensuring equity, and fostering responsible use of AI tools to enhance teaching and learning outcomes. Spivakovsky et al. (2023) underscore the necessity of defining the scope of AI applications through institutional policies, enabling the academic community to determine appropriate uses of AI in the educational process and to prevent its use in areas where ethical norms are violated. Chan's (2023) study proposes an AI Ecological Education Policy Framework for university teaching and learning, incorporating pedagogical, governance, and operational dimensions, and advocating for active student involvement in policy creation. Atkinson-Toal and Guo (2024) reveal widespread methods of integrating AI within policies of UK Russell Group universities, alongside the government's position on generative AI in the education sector, while the study of Evangelista (2025) highlights the need for clear institutional guidelines, and Dabis and Csáki (2024) explore the first responses of universities globally to the challenges of generative AI. Azevedo et al. (2024) argue that while much attention has been given to tools like ChatGPT and their impact

on student writing and academic integrity, there has been less focus on how emerging AI policies affect faculty work, sometimes in inequitable ways. Moore et al. (2024) stress the importance of audience-focused, clearly written policies grounded in strategies to promote ethical AI use in academia and the workforce, offering practical tips and sample policies for guidance.

Despite the progress made in the development of AI policies in higher education, there still remains significant gaps in the literature. Further research is needed to explore how AI can be integrated into university curricula and research practices in a way that promotes inclusivity, ethical considerations, and sustainable outcomes.

3. Methodology of Narrative Review

Our study examined "Artificial Intelligence Policies for Higher Education" using a *critical narrative review* methodology with the objective to develop a "Manifesto for Critical Considerations and a Roadmap". In contrast to a systematic review, which often concentrates on a specific subject within a particular context and utilises a predetermined process to synthesise results from related studies, a narrative review can incorporate a wide range of literature and offer a comprehensive view along with interpretations and discussion (Sukhera, 2022). Further, a narrative review approach allows for the comprehensive and meticulous determination of the primary research on the subject, enabling the drawing of inferences based on the researchers' professional experiences and pre-existing theories (Demiris et al., 2019).

Topics that need an effective synthesis of research evidence, which may be broad or complex, and that call for in-depth, sophisticated analysis and interpretation are frequently well-suited for narrative reviews (Greenhalgh et al., 2018). Likewise, this approach enables researchers to describe what is already known about the topic and perform subjective evaluation and critique of reviewed studies (Sukhera, 2022). In our study, an extensive searching technique was implemented across numerous internet-based databases including Web of Science as the most restrictive indexing service of peer-reviewed journal publications. The sources of information for the analysis were chosen based on its timeline (2020-2025), its connection with the research subject, and dissemination in quality publications.

By employing narrative reviews in the process of reviewing the literature within the topic, scholars are able to first describe what is already known and the current issues with the topic, then advance the body of knowledge by generating new insights from different perspectives as well as a new theory (Rumrill & Fitzgerald, 2001). Therefore, this method enabled to investigate the current status of AI policies for higher education, as represented in recent publications, in a comprehensive thematic manner. By choosing and collecting relevant information from previous publications and addressing inconsistencies using a consensus decision-making procedure, the researchers carried out data extraction. Likewise, researchers were able to thoroughly identify and arrange common themes pertaining to artificial intelligence policies for higher education by analysing and synthesizing the records from selected publications using a thematic analysis approach (Naeem et al., 2023). Thus, these studies can be helpful in examining under-researched subjects as well as in providing fresh perspectives on established, thoroughly studied domains (Sukhera, 2022) in our case artificial intelligence policies for higher education and proposing the new insights on these policies and advancing this field.

The foundation for this narrative review was our research objectives as well as the socio-technical system theory, which aims to illustrate and address the theoretical and practical challenges of integrating technology into educational systems (Ropohl, 1999). This conceptual framework has been also successfully used in numerous prior studies (Onesi-Ozigagun et al., 2024; Vinay & Surendra, 2024) which explained the reciprocal interactions between individuals and the integration of AI technology and its implications for organisational transformation (Dervić et al., 2025).

The *critical narrative review* approach, employed in this study and which proposes a narrative synthesis of literature through an interpretative lens, implies the interpretation which “combines the reviewer’s theoretical premise with existing theories and models to allow for synthesis and interpretation of diverse studies” (Sukhera, 2022, p. 416). In order to gather data and gain thorough and deep insights into different facets of policies for artificial intelligence for higher education, we examined studies that used a variety of methodological techniques.

4. Results and Discussion: Manifesto and Roadmap

AI policy development in higher education should be informed by various critical considerations, including overarching regulations and guidelines, operational guidance (implementation), and individual AI literacy. Firstly, there needs to be an understanding of the overall regulations and guidelines that govern the ethical use of AI. Additionally, operational guidance is essential for implementing effective strategies. Furthermore, promoting AI literacy among students and staff is imperative. This ensures that everyone is equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to responsibly and effectively navigate the complexities of artificial intelligence.

Aiming to facilitate the strategic policy planning processes for the use of AIED systems across countries, we propose a policy priority framework. This framework is intended to be used as strategic planning instrument for higher education stakeholders developing AI policies and guidance taking into account the cultural diversities and context of each country (i.e., digital education readiness, AI readiness, etc.). This is followed by a strategic roadmap for AI policy development, aiming to offer valuable insights into how higher education can effectively leverage the AI potential while ensuring ethical considerations, promoting equity and maintaining academic integrity.

Aiming to enhance strategic policy planning for the ethical and responsible use of AI in higher education institutions across countries, we investigated the relationship between AI technology and educational policy in higher education, concentrating on critical considerations for AI policy contextualisation.

Our resulting manifesto proposes a roadmap that could serve as an instrument for practical implementation in multiple given specific situations and contexts.

Manifesto: Critical considerations for AI policy development

The emerging critical considerations for stakeholders developing and designing an own AI policy in their own institution include:

Critical consideration 1: Regulatory framework

An **overarching framework** can provide a theoretical approach to the topic that will guide the ethical and responsible use of AI in higher education. At the same time, such framework should encompass practical guidelines that can offer contextualized answers to questions clustered by topic, sector, target group, etc. Ensuring this way consistency and coherence across different levels of education.

In addition, it is important to promote **collaborative and co-creation approach**, involving all stakeholder segments, including students, teachers, parents, administrators, and policy makers; that instead of limiting policy development initiatives to specific educational levels or target groups. Such an inclusive approach will ensure that the proposed frameworks are comprehensive and reflect the direct needs and interests of all the involved stakeholders of the higher education community.

To ensure the effectiveness of such regulatory frameworks, it is important to adopt a **risk-based approach**, aligned with the EU Artificial Intelligence Regulation (usually known as AI Act (EU AI Act 2024/1689) and the Framework Convention by the Council of Europe (CoE, 2024). The AI Act addresses AI providers and classifies AI systems based on their potential risks, which shapes the regulations accordingly. The Framework Convention focuses individual and global rights and in particular the values of human rights, democracy and rules of law for the deployment of AI systems and services. Both frameworks however do not explicitly address education.

In addition, the **contextualisation of the practical guidelines for the implementation of the regulatory frameworks** will provide a set of clear directions linked with the use of AI systems in specific educational contexts adapting to the cultural and pedagogical needs. Acknowledging that children and education, constitute unique cases, there is a need for a legal framework aimed at regulating AI systems within educational environments, as highlighted in the Council of Europe Preparatory Study for the Development of a Legal Instrument on Regulating the Use of AI systems in Education (CoE, 2024). This proposal for a comprehensive legislation aims to address the distinct challenges of the use of AI in education while ensuring the protection and

promotion of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law.

Critical consideration 2: Stakeholder-specific guidelines

Customized guidelines are needed to meet the specific needs of each group involved: it is important to ensure that all stakeholders (educators, institutions, children, parents) play an active role in ethical AI application in Education. Therefore, guidelines and policies should be tailored to their needs and roles of the different stakeholders taking into account their distinct needs for understanding and utilising AI system in education as well as evaluating their effectiveness. In addition, they should ensure that all stakeholders can deal responsibly with the complexities of AI.

These guidelines should address different target groups, define roles in AI interaction, cover diverse application areas, and provide a clear scope for their guidance. An agile approach for the development of guidelines should be adopted in order to ensure alliance with the evolving aspects of the use of AI in education. Furthermore, the country cultural and digital education readiness level should be taken into account.

Critical consideration 3: AI&ED Research

Institutional AI policy development should be guided by and aligned with AI and Education (AI&ED) research.

AI&ED research is required to analyse and evaluate the impact of AI use in education (AIED) and the need for AI literacy. Such research should be based on evidences to determine the potential and practical impact of AI in higher education.

In particular, there is the need for evidence-based research to analyse precise conditions and long-term effects. The monitoring and evaluating of the use of AI systems in Education is crucial to identify potential impact and gaps of related AI policies.

Critical consideration 4: AI literacy

There is an **urgent need to combine AI use in (higher) education with education about AI**, often called AI literacy, to ensure that all stakeholders and target groups (students, teachers, education managers and policy makers) are aware of the potential opportunities and risks of AI use in (higher)

education. In the final analysis, AI is not ethical nor moral; people are.

AI literacy must encompass the ethical use of artificial intelligence as it grows in education. Students and teachers need skills to evaluate and use AI responsibly, balancing technical abilities with ethical considerations (Zimmerman, 2018). Literacy programs should involve the whole school community, including parents, focusing on evaluating AI-generated content and recognizing bias to uphold academic integrity.

The AI Act (EU AI Act 2024/1689) recently formalised the concept of AI literacy as the obligation for AI system vendors and those who deploy systems to devise appropriate measures to ensure a sufficient level of understanding of AI's functioning, potentialities, limitations, and risks. Even though AI is a long-standing field, most of the research on how to develop non-expert literacy has been published in recent years, and discussions on how to improve it are ongoing, in part because it must be funded on other types of competences, such as digital literacy (European Union, 2024).

Issues raised in the AI literacy debate revolve around the importance of ethical AI use, which summarises the ethical concerns and challenges associated with the regulation and governance of AI technologies for a sustainable development that balances the undeniable benefits with the need to protect universally recognised values through a risk-anchored approach (Jobin et al., 2019).

Integrating ethics into AI literacy programs is essential for responsible AI use that benefits society (Ng et al., 2021). Educating developers, users, and policymakers fosters a technological culture that balances innovation with respect for fundamental rights (Microsoft, 2021). Understanding AI's social and moral implications is vital to prevent discrimination and ensure equitable distribution of technology's benefits in education (Burgsteiner et al., 2016; Ghallab, 2019).

AI literacy should include training to identify biases in data and models, ensuring equity and transparency in educational settings, where automated decisions can significantly impact students and teachers (Gong et al., 2020). Promoting principles like transparency and human oversight is crucial for understanding and tracing automated outputs, especially in high-risk systems (Fourtané, 2020).

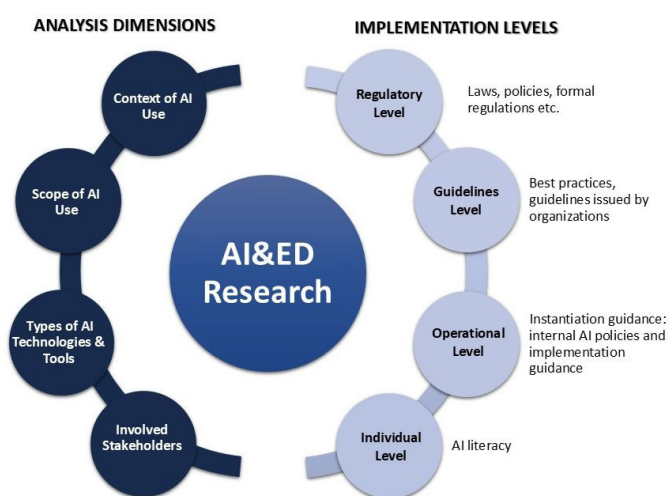
AI literacy enhances responsible technology use by raising awareness of privacy, data security, and algorithmic discrimination (Smith et al., 2012; Dietterich & Horvitz, 2015). Educating stakeholders about the significance of core values such as privacy, dignity, and equality builds trust in technology (Druga et al., 2019). This combined understanding empowers students and educators regarding data use and the biases that may affect their learning experiences.

AI literacy helps to demystify these technologies, making them more accessible to everyone and encouraging a more realistic understanding of their capabilities and limitations, all while avoiding new forms of social exclusion.

Roadmap for AI policy development within HED institutions

The roadmap is our proposal for the implementation process and pathway for the alignment of the four priorities. It consists of analysis dimensions for the design of an individual AI policy for a higher education institution and implementation levels that have to be addressed. AI&ED research should be in the centre and could provide support for all aspects and processes of such an individual AI policy development. The following figure 1 presents the overview of this proposed roadmap.

Figure 1: Contextualised AI policy development in higher education institutions



The task of AI policy development within HED institutions is about customisation and adaptation, rather than about uniformity. Institutional policies vary based on the specific application scope and setting, as they must be tailored to meet particular implementation needs and adapt to unique environmental constraints. Therefore, identifying the critical aspects of an AI policy poses a challenge that requires a systematic approach.

In the present work, we map a path for the development of contextualized AI policies and guidelines within higher education institutions. The proposed model supports a comprehensive understanding of the complexities affecting institutional AI policy design by contextualizing each critical consideration and emphasizing its interrelation with other important analysis dimensions. Four key interrelated dimensions of analysis are identified: "Scope of AI Use", "Context of AI Use", "Types of AI Technologies and Tools", and "Involved Stakeholders", representing the "what", "where", "how", and "who" of AI implementation within the HED institution (Table 1).

Table 1.
Analysis Dimensions

Analysis Dimension	Content	Examples
Scope of AI Use	Use Cases for AI Implementation in the Higher Education Institution	Teaching and learning, Research, Administration, Planning
Context of AI Use	Characteristics of the HED institution	Characteristics of the implementation environment Existing barriers and enablers
Types of AI Technologies & Tools	Technology-agnostic classification of the various capabilities and limitations of AI technologies and tools	Technology attributes, limitations, and constraints
Involved Stakeholders	User groups for whom this policy is intended and their roles regarding AI systems and tools. Users of AI tools or Developers/designers/buyers of AI systems	Teachers, students, managers and administrators, policy makers etc. acting as Users of AI tools or Developers/designers/buyers of AI systems

Analysing a specific aspect of AI regulation through the proposed Analysis Dimensions can provide a solid foundation for making critical decisions during the development of AI policy. This approach allows policy developers to assess the overall AI deployment setting and to interpret aspects related to each Analysis Dimension appropriately. The significance of each Analysis Dimension must be explored, including the dependencies and correlations among attributes within this and other dimensions. Once the contents of each Analysis Dimension have been identified, it is important to examine the interconnections among them. This means understanding how a specific analysis attribute affects and/or is influenced by other analysis attributes. After this exploration, policy developers can translate these insights into clear rules and conditions to include in the policy.

Additionally, AI policy development within HED institutions should be informed by **collective knowledge** across relevant AI policy **Implementation Levels** regarding overarching regulations and guidelines, operational guidance, and stakeholder accommodation. There needs to be an understanding of overarching regulations and guidelines on the ethical use of AI in HED, of relevant operational guidance regarding policy implementation, and of the influence of the human factor in terms of AI literacy.

The long-term effectiveness of an institutional AI policy largely depends on how closely its proposed provisions align with and adhere to **AI&ED research**. This means that the developed policy should be evidence-based and informed by ongoing research. It should integrate best practices and insights from empirical studies, and address current challenges. Integrating flexibility into the development of AI policies is essential for ensuring that these regulations can effectively respond to evolving challenges, changes in regulatory provisions, and rapid technological advancements. This adaptability is vital for maintaining the responsible and ethical application of AI technologies within the HED institution.

5. Conclusions

AI has the potential to significantly improve the educational experience by making educational pathways more inclusive, adaptive and accessible. However, these opportunities are accompanied by ethical and social challenges that challenge the traditional role of the educational institution and

raise new questions about the role of the educator in teaching.

The potential of AI to significantly reshape societies, economies, and educational systems differs from other digital technologies because of its potential to profoundly reshape societies, economies, and educational systems. In contrast to traditional ICTs, artificial intelligence (AI) presents particular ethical and societal problems, including concerns about accountability, transparency, privacy, and equity.

To address these challenges, the development of AI in education needs to be guided by robust and inclusive governance. This means establishing guidelines and policies that ensure the responsible and sustainable use of AI. Governance must involve a plurality of actors, including educators, students, administrators, ethicists and civil society representatives, to ensure that each decision takes into account different perspectives and potential impacts. It is also crucial to promote transparency in decision-making processes, ensuring that algorithms are understandable and that the criteria for using AI are clear and shared.

Finally, governance must include mechanisms for ongoing monitoring and evaluation to identify and address any critical issues in a timely manner to ensure that AI contributes effectively to improving the quality of education without compromising the core values of the education system. Just the contrary: the education system and its stakeholders (and in particular the single educators) have to take and keep the responsibility to decide on the AI use in education depending on the intended learning objectives and given educational situation and context.

References

Adadi, A., & Berrada, M. (2018). Peeking inside the black-box: a survey on explainable artificial intelligence (XAI). *IEEE access*, 6, 52138–52160.

Atkinson-Toal, A., & Guo, C. (2024). *Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) Education Policies of UK Universities. Enhancing Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*.

Azevedo, L., Mallinson, D. J., Wang, J., Robles, P., & Best, E. (2024). AI Policies, Equity, and Morality and the Implications for Faculty in Higher Education. *Public Integrity*, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10999922.2024.2414957>

Baker, R. S., & Hawn, A. (2022). Algorithmic bias in education. *International Journal of Artificial Intelligence in Education*, 1–41

Baldassarre, M. (2016). Think big: learning contexts, algorithms and data science. *Research on Education and Media*, 8(2), 69–83.

Bećirović, S., & Mattoš, B. (2024). Artificial Intelligence in the Transformation of Higher Education: Threats, Promises and Implementation Strategies. In L. Miltiadis D., A. C. Serban, E. Alkhalidi, M. Sawsan, & T. Aldosemani (Eds.), *Digital Transformation in Higher Education, Part A: Best Practices and Challenges* (pp. 23–43). <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-83549-480-620241002>

Bozkurt, A., Xiao, J., Lambert, S., Pazurek, A., Crompton, H., Koseoglu, S., ... , & Jandri, P. (2023). Speculative futures on ChatGPT and generative artificial intelligence (AI): A collective reflection from the educational landscape. *Asian Journal of Distance Education*, 18(1), 53–130, 2023, <https://www.asianjde.com/ojs/index.php/AsianJDE/article/view/709/394>

Burgsteiner, H., Kandlhofer, M., & Steinbauer, G. (2016). Irobot: Teaching the basics of artificial intelligence in high schools. In *Proceedings of the AAAI Conference on Artificial Intelligence*, 30(1), 2016.

Burr, C., Taddeo, M., & Floridi, L. (2020). The ethics of digital well-being: A thematic review. *Science and Engineering Ethics*, 26(4), 2313–2343.

Chan, C. K. Y. (2023). A comprehensive AI policy education framework for university teaching and learning. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, 20(38). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-023-00408-3>

Council of Europe (2024a). *Preparatory Study for the Development of a Legal Instrument on Regulating the Use of AI systems in Education*. DGII/EDU/AIED(2024)01.

Council of Europe (2024b). *Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law (Treaty 225)*. <https://rm.coe.int/1680afae3c>

Council of Europe (2023a). *Regulating Artificial Intelligence in education*. <https://rm.coe.int/regulating-artificial-intelligence-in-education-26th-session-council-o/1680ac9b7c>

Council of Europe (2023b). *The Transformative Power of Education: Universal Values and Civic Renewal*. Resolutions of the 26th Session of the Council of Europe Standing Conference of Ministers of Education (28-29 September 2023). MED-26(2023)06 final. <https://rm.coe.int/resolutions-26th-session-council-of-europe-standing-conference-of-mini/1680abee7f>

Crawford, J., Allen, K. A., Pani, B., & Cowling, M. (2024). When artificial intelligence substitutes humans in higher education: the cost of loneliness, student success, and retention. *Studies in Higher Education*, 49(5), 883-897.

Dabis, A., & Csáki, C. (2024). AI and ethics: Investigating the first policy responses of higher education institutions to the challenge of generative AI. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 11(1006). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-03526-z>

Demiris, G., Oliver, D. P., & Washington, K. T. (2019). Defining and Analyzing the Problem. In *Behavioral Intervention Research in Hospice and Palliative Care* (pp. 27-39). <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-814449-7.00003-X>

Dervić, M., Bećirović, S., & Polz, E. (2025). Revolutionizing Pedagogy: The Transformative Influence of Artificial Intelligence on Educators' Practices. In M. A. Adarkwah, S. Amponsah, R. Huang, & M. Thomas (Eds.), *Artificial Intelligence and Human Agency in Education: Volume One: The Nexus Between AI and Human Agency in Educational Contexts* (Vol. 1, pp. 193-212). Springer Nature. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-96-7937-9_9

Dietterich, T.G., Horvitz, E.; Rise of concerns about AI: Reflections and directions. *Communications ACM* 58, 10: 38-40, 2015.

Dignum, V. (2021). The role and challenges of education for responsible AI. *London Review of Education*, 19(1). <https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.19.1.01>

Druga, S., Vu, S. T., Likhith, E., & Qiu, T. (2019). Inclusive AI literacy for kids around the world. In *Proceedings of FabLearn*, 104-111.

ECAP. (2023). *European Centre for Algorithmic Transparency*. https://algorithmictransparency.ec.europa.eu/index_en

EDUCAUSE. (2022). Kathe Pelletier, Mark McCormack, Jamie Reeves, Jenay Robert, & Nichole Arbino, with Maha Al-Freih, Camille Dickson-Deane, Carlos Guevara, Lisa Koster, Melchor Sánchez-Mendiola, Lee Skallerup Bessette, & Jake Stine, *Horizon Report, Teaching and Learning Edition*.

Eslami, M., Vaccaro, K., Kyung Lee, M., Elazari, A., Gilbert, E., & Karahalios, K. (2019). User Attitudes towards Algorithmic Opacity and Transparency in Online Reviewing Platforms. In *Proceedings of the 2019 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 1-14.

European Union (2024). *AI Act (Artificial Intelligence Act)*. Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 laying down harmonised rules on artificial intelligence. <http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2024/1689/oj>

Evangelista, E. D. L. (2025). Ensuring academic integrity in the age of ChatGPT: Rethinking exam design, assessment strategies, and ethical AI policies in higher education. *Contemporary Educational Technology*, 17(1), ep559. <https://doi.org/10.30935/cedtech/15775>

Fourtané, S. (2020). Ethics of AI: Benefits and Risks of Artificial Intelligence Systems. *Interesting Engineering*. Retrieved from <https://interestingengineering.com/ethics-of-ai-benefits-and-risks-of-artificial-intelligence-systems>

Franke, G. (2022). *Künstliche Intelligenz, Transhumanismus und menschliche Persönlichkeit*. Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt 2022, 339.

Ghallab, M. (2019). Responsible AI: requirements and challenges. *AI Perspectives*, 1(1), 1-7.

Gong, X., Tang, Y., Liu, X., Jing, S., Cui, W., Liang, J., & Wang, F. Y. (2020). K-9 Artificial Intelligence Education in Qingdao: Issues, Challenges and Suggestions. In *2020 IEEE International Conference on Networking, Sensing and Control (ICNSC)* (pp. 1-6). IEEE.

Greenhalgh, T., Thorne, S., & Malterud, K. (2018). Time to challenge the spurious hierarchy of systematic over narrative reviews? *European Journal of Clinical Investigation*, 48(6), e12931. <https://doi.org/10.1111/eci.12931>

Holmes, W., & Tuomi, I. (2022). State of the art and practice in AI in education. *European Journal of Education*, 57(4), 542-570.

Jobin, A., Ienca, M., & Vayena, E. (2019). The Global Landscape of AI Ethics Guidelines". *Nature Machine Intelligence*, 1(9), 389-399.

Khosravi, H., Shum, S. B., Chen, G., Conati, C., Tsai, Y. S., Kay, J., ... & Gašević, D. (2022). Explainable artificial intelligence in education. *Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence*, 3, 100074.

Miao, F., & Holmes, W. (2023). *Guidance for generative AI in education and research*. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000386693>

Miao, F., Holmes, W., Huang, R., & Zhang, H. (2021). *AI and education: A guidance for policymakers*. Unesco Publishing

Miao, F., & Cukurova, M. (2024). *AI competency framework for teachers*. UNESCO. <https://doi.org/10.54675/ZJTE2084>

Miao, F., Shiohira, K., & Lao, N. (2024). *AI competency framework for students*. UNESCO. <https://doi.org/10.54675/JKJB9835>

Microsoft (2021). *FATE: Fairness, Accountability, Transparency, and Ethics in AI*. Retrieved from <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/research/theme/fate/>

Moore, S., & Lookadoo, K. (2024). Communicating clear guidance: Advice for generative AI policy development in higher education. *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*, 87(4), 610–629. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23294906241254786>

Naeem, M., Ozuem, W., Howell, K., & Ranfagni, S. (2023). A Step-by-Step Process of Thematic Analysis to Develop a Conceptual Model in Qualitative Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 22, 16094069231205789. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231205789>

Ng, D. T. K., Leung, J. K. L., Chu, K. W. S., & Qiao, M. S. (2021). AI Literacy: Definition, Teaching, Evaluation and Ethical Issues. *Proceedings of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, 58(1), Article 1. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pr2.487>

Nguyen, A., Ngo, H. N., Hong, Y., Dang, B., & Nguyen, B. P. T. (2023). Ethical principles for artificial intelligence in education. *Education and Information Technologies*, 28(4), 4221–4241.

OECD. (2024). *Governing with Artificial Intelligence: Are governments ready?* OECD Artificial Intelligence Papers, No. 20. <https://doi.org/10.1787/26324bc2-en>

Onesi-Ozigagun, O., Ololade, Y. J., Eyo-Udo, N. L., & Ogundipe, D. O. (2024). Revolutionizing Education through AI: A Comprehensive Review of Enhancing Learning Experiences. *International Journal of Applied Research in Social Sciences*, 6(4), 4. <https://doi.org/10.51594/ijarss.v6i4.1011>

Rumrill, P. D., & Fitzgerald, S. M. (2001). Using narrative literature reviews to build a scientific knowledge base. *Work (Reading, Mass.)*, 16(2), 165–170.

Smith, M., Szongott, C., Henne, B., Von Voigt, G. (2012). Big data privacy issues in public social media. In *2012 6th IEEE International Conference on Digital Ecosystems and Technologies (DEST)*, 1–6.

Spivakovsky, O. V., Omelchuk, S. A., Kobets, V. V., Valko, N. V., & Malchukova, D. S. (2023). Institutional policies on artificial intelligence in university learning, teaching and research. *Information Technologies and Learning Tools*, 97(5), 181–202. <https://doi.org/10.33407/itlt.v97i5.5395>

Stracke, C. M. (2025). Artificial Intelligence and Education (AI&ED). In A. Manzeschke & T. Wittenberg (eds.), *Ethical Perspectives on Artificial Intelligence in Biomedical Engineering*. (accepted, in press).

Stracke, C. M. (2024). Artificial Intelligence and Education: Ethical Questions and Guidelines for Their Relations Based on Human Rights, Democracy, and the Rule of Law. In *Radical Solutions for Artificial Intelligence and Digital Transformation in Education: Utilising Disruptive Technology for a Better Society* (pp. 97–107). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-8638-1_7

Stracke, C. M., Griffiths, D., Pappa, D., Bećirović, S., Polz, E., Perla, L., ..., & Hollins, P. (2025). Analysis of Artificial Intelligence Policies for Higher Education in Europe. *International Journal of Interactive Multimedia and Artificial Intelligence*, 9(2), 124–137. <https://doi.org/10.9781/ijimai.2025.02.011>

Stracke, C. M. (2019). Quality Frameworks and Learning Design for Open Education. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 20(2), 180–203. <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v20i2.4213>

Stracke, C. M., Burgos, D., Santos-Hermosa, G., Bozkurt, A., Sharma, R. C., Swiatek, C., ..., & Truong, V. (2022a). Responding to the initial challenge of COVID-19 pandemic: Analysis of international responses and impact in school and higher education. *Sustainability*, 14(3), 1876. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14031876>

Stracke, C. M., Chounta, I. A., Dimitrova, V., Havinga, B., & Homes, W. (2024). Ethical AI and education: The need for international regulation to foster human rights, democracy and the rule of law. *Artificial Intelligence in Education (AIED 2024). Communications in Computer and Information Science*, 2151 (pp. 439–445). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-64312-5_55

Stracke, C. M., Chounta, I.-A., Holmes, W., Tlili, A., & Bozkurt, A. (2023). A standardised PRISMA-based protocol for systematic reviews of the scientific literature on Artificial Intelligence and education (AI&ED). *Journal of Applied Learning and Teaching*, 6(2), 64–70. <https://doi.org/10.37074/jalt.2023.6.2.38>

Stracke, C. M., Sharma, R. C., Bozkurt, A., Burgos, D., Swiatek, C., Inamorato dos Santos, A., ..., & Truong, V. (2022b). Impact of COVID-19 on formal education: An international review on practices and potentials of Open Education at a distance. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 23(4), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v23i4.6120>

Sukhera, J. (2022). Narrative Reviews: Flexible, Rigorous, and Practical. *Journal of Graduate Medical Education*, 14(4), 414–417. <https://doi.org/10.4300/JGME-D-22-00480.1>

Tlili, A., Adarkwah, M. A., Lo, C. K., Bozkurt, A., Burgos, D., Bonk, C. J., ..., & Huang, R. (2024). Taming the Monster: How can Open Education Promote the Effective and Safe use of Generative AI in Education? *Journal of Learning for Development*, 11(3), 398–413. <https://doi.org/10.56059/jl4d.v11i3.1657>

UNESCO. (2021). *Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence*. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381137>

Van Leeuwen, C. A., Veletsianos, G., Belikov, O., & Johnson, N. (2020). *Institutional perspectives on faculty development for digital education in Canada*. *Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology*, 46(2).

Vinay, S., & Surendra, R. (2024). Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Teacher Education. *Shodh Sari-An International Multidisciplinary Journal*, 03(01), 243–266. <https://doi.org/10.59231/SARI7669>

Williamson, B., Molnar, A., & Boninger, F. (2024). Time for a Pause: Without Effective Public Oversight, AI in Schools Will Do More Harm Than Good. https://nepc.colorado.edu/sites/default/files/publications/PB%20Williamson_0.pdf

Xie, X., & Wang, T. (2024). Artificial Intelligence: A help or threat to contemporary education. Should students be forced to think and do their tasks independently?. *Education and Information Technologies*, 29(3), 3097–3111.

Zheng, L., Niu, J., Zhong, L., & Gyasi, J. F. (2023). The effectiveness of artificial intelligence on learning achievement and learning perception: A meta-analysis. *Interactive Learning Environments*, 31(9), 5650–5664.

Zimmerman, M. (2018). Teaching AI: Exploring New Frontiers for Learning. *International Society for Technology in Education*.

REVIEW PAPER

LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY AND LANGUAGE VARIETIES IN THE EUROPEAN UNION: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTEGRATION AND POLICY

Ludmila Waschak

Hochschule Burgenland, Eisenstadt, Austria

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Ludmila Waschak, Hochschule Burgenland, Eisenstadt, Austria. E-mail: ludmila.waschak@hochschule-burgenland.at.

ABSTRACT

The European Union (EU) embodies one of the world's most linguistically diverse regions, encompassing 24 official languages, more than 60 regional and minority languages, and a wide array of immigrant and sign languages. This diversity reflects not only Europe's cultural and historical pluralism but also its ongoing political and educational challenges. This paper examines the complex landscape of linguistic diversity and language varieties in the EU, analyzing how language policy frameworks, educational initiatives, and institutional practices interact with broader questions of identity, integration, and governance. Drawing on official EU documents, sociolinguistic research, and legal frameworks such as the Charter of Fundamental Rights and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, the study explores the evolution of the EU's multilingualism policy and its implications for linguistic equality and cohesion. The analysis highlights the persistent tension between the EU's official commitment to multilingualism and the pragmatic dominance of a few major languages—most notably English, French, and German—within institutions, academia, and international communication. It also considers the sociolinguistic implications of this hierarchy for regional, minority, and immigrant languages. Special attention is given to language education policies and the implementation of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as a tool for standardizing learning outcomes across member states. Ultimately, the paper argues for a more inclusive, dynamic, and equitable language policy—one that values all language varieties as integral to the EU's democratic and cultural fabric and recognizes multilingualism not merely as a policy objective, but as a vital resource for social cohesion, intercultural understanding, and European identity.

Keywords: linguistic diversity, language varieties, language policy, language education, multilingualism



MAP EDUCATION
AND HUMANITIES

Volume 6

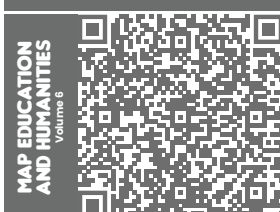
ISSN: 2744-2373 / © The Authors.
Published by MAP - Multidisciplinary
Academic Publishing.

Article Submitted: 14 August 2025
Article Accepted: 02 November 2025
Article Published: 03 November 2025



Publisher's Note: MAP stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

<https://doi.org/10.53880/2744-2373.2025.6.74>



HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Waschak L. (2025). **Linguistic Diversity and Language Varieties in the European Union: Challenges and Opportunities for Integration and Policy**. MAP Education and Humanities, 6, 74-80. doi: <https://doi.org/10.53880/2744-2373.2025.6.74>



© The Author(s). **Open Access Article**
Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.



1. Introduction

Language in the European Union (EU) serves a dual role as both a tool for communication and a marker of identity, reflecting the continent's historical, cultural, and social diversity (Extra & Gorter, 2008). The EU's foundational motto, "*United in diversity*," encapsulates its attempt to build unity across linguistic and cultural plurality. The European project, since its inception, has embraced multilingualism not as an obstacle but as an asset—a manifestation of democratic inclusion and cultural richness.

The recognition of linguistic diversity has also been enshrined in the legal framework of the Union. The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2000), made legally binding through the Treaty of Lisbon, commits the EU to respect linguistic diversity (Article 22) and to prohibit discrimination based on language (Article 21). Thus, the protection and promotion of linguistic diversity are not merely policy preferences but fundamental European values (Bećirović, 2023).

Nevertheless, maintaining this commitment within the realities of governance, education, and communication has proven complex (Kovačević et al., 2018). The coexistence of 24 official languages, over 60 regional and minority languages, and numerous immigrant languages has created a dynamic yet challenging multilingual environment. This paper examines how EU institutions have sought to manage this complexity through evolving language policies and initiatives while addressing the tensions between linguistic equality, economic utility, and social inclusion.

2. Historical development of the European Union Language Policy

The evolution of the European Union Language Policy (EULMP) has been gradual and multifaceted. Michał Krzyżanowski and Ruth Wodak (2011) identify several milestones that mark its development. The first major step came with the 1997 European Council Resolution on Early Teaching and Learning of EU Languages, which laid the groundwork for the EU's language policy by emphasizing the importance of early language education. This was followed by the 2000 Lisbon Strategy, which positioned linguistic competence as essential to the emerging knowledge-based economy.

The 2001 European Year of Languages further strengthened public awareness and cross-national cooperation in language learning. This initiative helped mainstream multilingualism within broader cultural and educational policies. Between 2004 and 2006, the Action Plan on Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity was introduced, reinforcing the EU's dual objective of enhancing citizens' multilingual skills and safeguarding Europe's linguistic heritage. The New Framework Strategy on Multilingualism (2005) and the establishment of the High Level Group on Multilingualism (2006) deepened the institutional commitment to language diversity. Between 2007 and 2010, multilingualism even became a distinct portfolio within the European Commission, culminating in the *Action Plan: Multilingualism—An Asset for Europe and a Shared Commitment* (2008). This period saw the recognition of linguistic diversity as a defining feature of the EU's cultural identity and a resource for social cohesion and competitiveness.

Building upon these initiatives, the European Union Civil Society Platform on Multilingualism (2011) marked a significant turning point. Emerging from a 2009 European Commission call for structured dialogue with civil society, the Platform convened 29 representatives across four thematic areas—education, social inclusion, translation, and language planning. Under Commissioner Leonard Orban, it outlined five strategic priorities, including the promotion of multilingualism for cohesion and intercultural dialogue, support for migrant language education, protection of linguistic diversity, and lifelong language learning (European Union 2011). As Romaine (2011) argues, the Platform sought to align linguistic diversity with the EU's broader goal of fostering a shared European identity, addressing earlier critiques that EU language policy remained fragmented and "rudderless" (Nic Shuibhne, 2004). It thus represented a decisive effort to institutionalize multilingualism as a core element of European integration.

Since 2010, responsibility for multilingualism has been integrated into the portfolio of the Commissioner for Education, Culture, and Youth, signaling an effort to link language policy more closely with educational and cultural objectives.

3. The Sociolinguistic landscape of the EU

The European Union's linguistic ecosystem is unparalleled in its complexity. While there are 24 official languages, more than 60 indigenous, regional, and minority languages (RMLs) are spoken by roughly 40 million citizens (European Commission, 2017). Languages such as Basque, Catalan, Frisian, Galician, Saami, Welsh, and Yiddish represent centuries of cultural continuity. Additionally, immigrant communities have introduced languages from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, reshaping Europe's urban linguistic landscapes.

Despite formal equality among official languages, a functional hierarchy persists (Ammon, 2006). English, French, and German dominate the European Commission's day-to-day operations, with Italian and Spanish serving as secondary working languages (Ammon, 2009). This hierarchy reflects broader socio-economic and political realities, as these languages are associated with Europe's most powerful economies. Documents circulated among EU institutions are often drafted in English, and digital platforms, including the Commission's website, display a similar imbalance in linguistic availability (Phillipson, 2010).

Nevertheless, the right to use one's native language in both written and spoken communication remains a cornerstone of EU policy. The Regulation on the Use of Languages in the Institutions (1958) grants each member state one official language, but as the Union expanded from 4 to 27 members, the logistical complexity of translation and interpretation has multiplied. Efforts to grant co-official status to regional languages such as Catalan, Basque, and Welsh further highlight the EU's evolving approach to inclusivity, though challenges of implementation persist.

Minority languages within the EU can be classified in various ways. Felföldi (2011) distinguishes between officially recognized languages that are not EU official languages (e.g., Letzeburgesch), languages spoken in a single member state (e.g., Sorbian in Germany), transnational minority languages (e.g., Catalan), languages associated with a kin-state (e.g., Hungarian), and deterritorialized languages (e.g., Romani, Yiddish). These classifications reveal not only linguistic diversity but also the complex political, social, and historical factors shaping language use and recognition.

4. Language education and the promotion of multilingualism

Education has been a key domain for implementing multilingualism policies. The EU's long-term objective, reaffirmed at the 2017 Gothenburg Summit, is for every European citizen to learn at least two foreign languages in addition to their mother tongue by the end of secondary education. However, implementation has been uneven across member states.

According to Eurostat (2015), 97.3% of lower secondary students in Europe study English, while 33.8% learn French and 23.1% German. Spanish, Russian, and Italian trail significantly behind, with participation rates of 13.6%, 2.7%, and 1.1%, respectively. The European Survey on Language Competences (Costa & Albergaria-Almeida, 2015) revealed marked disparities between students' proficiency in their first and second foreign languages, leading the European Commission to recommend stronger measures to improve language teaching quality, particularly for second foreign languages.

The dominance of English has also extended into higher education (Polz & Bećirović, 2022). While national languages often remain the official medium of instruction, particularly in Nordic countries, much of the academic reading and research is conducted in English. This trend has effectively rendered the natural sciences monolingual, raising concerns that English's dominance may limit epistemological diversity by marginalizing alternative linguistic and theoretical frameworks (Macedo et al., 2003; Phillipson, 2003).

To promote multilingualism, the EU has implemented several action programmes. The Erasmus+ Programme (2014–2020) supports mobility for students and professionals while offering Online Linguistic Support (OLS) to enhance host-country language acquisition. The Creative Europe Programme (2013–2020) contributes by funding literary translation, subtitling, and dubbing of European films, facilitating intercultural exchange. Additionally, the European Day of Languages, celebrated annually on 26 September, and the European Language Label, which rewards innovation in language teaching, continue to foster awareness and appreciation of Europe's linguistic diversity.

5. Policy frameworks and institutional challenges

The EU's multilingual policy framework is anchored in several foundational documents and strategies. The Action Plan 2004–2006, the Framework Strategy for Multilingualism (2005), and the Action Plan on Multilingualism (2008) collectively emphasize three key priorities: promoting language learning among EU citizens, supporting the multilingual economy, and ensuring citizens' access to legislation and information in their native languages (European Commission, 2003; 2005; 2008).

Despite these ambitions, a persistent tension exists between symbolic and functional multilingualism. While Article 6 of the Regulation on the Use of Languages allows EU institutions to determine their working languages, thereby legitimizing a functional distinction among the Union's official languages (Arzoz 2008: 178; de Witte 2008: 179), few have exercised this right formally. The General Court's ruling in Joined Cases T-124/13 and T-191/13 found that requiring proficiency in English, French, or German for EU recruitment was discriminatory, since no official regulation designates these as *de jure* working languages. This underscores the contradiction between the EU's official multilingualism and its *de facto* linguistic hierarchy.

Furthermore, linguistic diversity is complicated by migration and demographic changes (Bećirović et al., 2019). Policy discussions increasingly highlight the need to integrate immigrant children by balancing proficiency in the language of instruction with the maintenance of their home languages. At the 2018 Brussels Consultation on Languages in Education, three main priorities were identified: enabling immigrant students to acquire functional proficiency in the school language, maintaining literacy in their mother tongue, and learning additional European languages. These principles informed the European Commission's 2018 Proposal for a Council Recommendation on a Comprehensive Approach to the Teaching and Learning of Languages, which advocates the adoption of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as a benchmark for curriculum and assessment alignment across member states.

The evolving multilingual reality of Europe calls for a more inclusive approach to language

policy—one that moves beyond the binary opposition of "official" versus "non-official" languages. To achieve this, the EU must strengthen institutional recognition and support for regional, minority, and immigrant languages, while promoting bi- and multilingual education models that integrate linguistic diversity into everyday learning contexts.

Such a policy would also require enhanced funding for research, documentation, and revitalization of endangered languages, as well as the expansion of media representation and digital content in minoritized languages. Promoting multilingualism in the digital sphere—where English dominance is even more pronounced—could contribute to more equitable access to knowledge and participation in the European public sphere (Dautbašić & Bećirović, 2022).

Ultimately, linguistic diversity should be viewed not as an administrative burden but as a democratic resource. A multilingual Europe can foster creativity, intercultural competence, and solidarity—values central to the European project.

7. Conclusion

Multilingualism remains both a defining feature and a persistent challenge for the European Union. The policy framework developed over the past decades reflects the EU's foundational commitment to linguistic diversity, democratic inclusion, and cultural respect. From the adoption of the Charter of Fundamental Rights (2000), which enshrined the respect for linguistic diversity (Article 22) and non-discrimination on linguistic grounds (Article 21), to the subsequent initiatives under the European Commission's multilingualism portfolios, the Union has consistently articulated its ambition to balance unity and diversity. Yet, the implementation of this vision has been shaped by tensions between ideals of equality and the pragmatic dominance of a few major languages, particularly English.

The European Union's efforts to safeguard linguistic diversity extend beyond its 24 official languages to include over 60 regional and minority languages, spoken by approximately 40 million citizens. Policies and frameworks, such as the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (Council of Europe, 1992) and various EU action plans, underscore the recognition of these linguistic communities as integral to Europe's cultural mosaic. Nonetheless, the socio-political and economic hierarchies that underpin language

use in institutional and educational contexts reveal persistent asymmetries. English, French, and German continue to dominate as procedural languages within EU institutions, reflecting historical power relations and economic influence. Italian and Spanish, though granted “support” status, operate within this same hierarchy. This linguistic stratification, while practical for administration, risks reinforcing inequalities among EU citizens and member states.

Language education policies have been a central instrument in promoting multilingualism, with significant initiatives such as the Erasmus+ Programme and the Action Plan on “Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity” (2004–2006). These programmes have facilitated mobility, intercultural exchange, and linguistic competence across member states (Mašić & Bećirović, 2021). However, empirical studies, including the European Survey on Language Competences (Costa & Albergaria-Almeida, 2015), highlight uneven outcomes, particularly regarding proficiency in second and third foreign languages. While nearly all secondary school students learn English, far fewer achieve comparable competence in other European languages. This imbalance reflects the broader societal tendency to privilege English as the lingua franca of education, science, and business (Cogo & Dewey, 2012) —often to the detriment of linguistic pluralism.

The predominance of English in academia and scientific communication poses a particularly pressing concern. As Dendrinos and others have noted, the “monoglossic” nature of scientific discourse in English may constrain the diversity of intellectual frameworks and epistemological approaches that different languages can bring. The issue is not merely linguistic but epistemic: when knowledge production is mediated through a single dominant language, the plurality of perspectives essential to innovation and democratic exchange may be diminished. Addressing this challenge requires conscious efforts to foster multilingual scholarship, translation, and language-sensitive research dissemination.

Recent consultations, such as the 2018 Brussels meeting and the European Commission’s Proposal for a Council Recommendation on a Comprehensive Approach to Language Teaching and Learning (2018a; 2018b), signal renewed attention to these challenges. The emphasis on adopting the CEFR as a shared standard, improving

teacher education, and supporting immigrant students’ bilingual or multilingual development demonstrates an awareness of the complexities of Europe’s linguistic landscape. Yet, as English continues to dominate everyday and institutional communication, the EU faces the delicate task of ensuring that multilingualism remains a living reality rather than a symbolic commitment.

Looking forward, several areas warrant deeper consideration. First, greater coordination between language policy and migration policy is necessary to integrate and valorise the languages of immigrant communities as part of Europe’s linguistic capital. Second, the EU should strengthen mechanisms for supporting minority and regional languages not only through cultural preservation but also through digital, educational, and economic inclusion. Finally, more empirical research is needed on how multilingual practices affect cognitive development, social cohesion, and democratic participation in the EU context.

In essence, the future of multilingualism in the European Union will depend on whether policy can evolve from a primarily administrative concern into a dynamic cultural and educational project. The challenge is to ensure that linguistic diversity is not merely managed, but actively sustained as a core component of European identity and citizenship. As the EU continues to navigate globalization, migration, and technological change, multilingualism—if supported robustly—can serve not only as a symbol of diversity but also as a strategic resource for social innovation, intercultural understanding, and democratic resilience.

References

- Ammon, U. (2006). Language conflicts in the European Union: On finding a politically acceptable and practicable solution for EU institutions that satisfies diverging interests. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 16(3), 319–338.
- Ammon, U. (2009). Über die Dilemmata jeglicher EU-Sprachenpolitik. In H. Stickel (Ed.), (pp. 19–34).
- Arzoz, X. (2008). The protection of linguistic diversity through Article 22 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights. In X. Arzoz (Ed.), *Respecting linguistic diversity in the European Union* (pp. 145–174). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

- Bećirović, S. (2023). The Relationship Between Cooperative Learning, Cultural Intelligence, EFL Motivation and Students' Performance: A Structural Equation Modeling Approach. *SAGE Open*, 13(4), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440231208975>
- Bećirović, S., Brdarević Čeljo, A., & Zavrl, I. (2019). Research into intercultural effectiveness in a multicultural educational milieu in Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Economic Research-Ekonomska Istraživanja*, 32(1), 1336–1351. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1331677X.2019.1629329>
- Cogo, A., & Dewey, M. (2012). *Analysing English as a lingua franca: A corpus-driven investigation*. Continuum.
- Costa, P., & Albergaria-Almeida, P. (2015). The European survey on language competences: Measuring foreign language student proficiency. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 191, 2369–2373. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.04.367>
- Council of Europe. (1992). *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Dautbašić, A., & Bećirović, S. (2022). Teacher and Student Experiences in Online Classes During COVID-19 Pandemic in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia. *MAP Social Sciences*, 2(1), Article 1. <https://doi.org/10.53880/2744-2454.2022.2.1.9>
- de Witte, B. (2008). The protection of linguistic diversity through provisions of the EU Charter other than Article 22. In X. Arzoz (Ed.), *Respecting linguistic diversity in the European Union* (pp. 175–190). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- European Commission. (2003). *Promoting language learning and linguistic diversity: An action plan 2004–2006* (COM(2003) 449). Brussels.
- European Commission. (2005). *A new framework strategy for multilingualism* (COM(2005) 596). Brussels.
- European Commission. (2008). *Multilingualism: An asset for Europe and a shared commitment* (COM(2008) 566). Brussels.
- European Commission. (2017). *Key data on teaching languages at school in Europe – 2017 edition*. Retrieved from https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/nationalpolicies/eurydice/content/key-data-teaching-languages-school-europe---2017-edition_en
- European Commission. (2022). *Multilingualism: Language policy*. Retrieved from <https://europa.eu>
- European Union. (2011). *Civil society platform on multilingualism: Policy recommendations for the promotion of multilingualism in the European Union*. 6/6/2011. Brussels.
- Extra, G., & Gorter, D. (2008). *Multilingual Europe: Facts and policies*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Felföldi, R. (2011). *A kisebbségi nyelvek helyzetének változása az Európai Unióban [Changes in the status of minority languages in the European Union]*. Retrieved from <https://btk.ppke.hu/uploads/articles/6414/file/felfoldirita.pdf> (Accessed May 4, 2013).
- Kovačević, F., Brdarević Čeljo, A., & Bećirović, S. (2018). Opportunities and Challenges Facing Bosnian High-School EFL Learners. *European Researcher*, 9(4), 298–306. <https://doi.org/10.13187/er.2018.4.298>
- Macedo, D., Dendrinos, B., & Gounari P. (2003). *The Hegemony of English*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.
- Mašić, A., & Bećirović, S. (2021). ATTITUDES TOWARDS LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE. *Journal of Linguistic and Intercultural Education – JoLIE*, 14(2), 85–105. <https://doi.org/10.29302/jolie.2021.2.5>
- Nic Shuibhne, N. (2004). *Does the draft EU constitution contain a language policy? II Mercator international symposium: Europe 2004: A new framework for all languages?* <http://www.ciemn.org/mercator/pdf/simp-shuibhne.pdf>
- Phillipson, R. (2003). *English-only Europe? Challenging language policy*. London: Routledge.

Phillipson, R. (2010). The EU and languages: Diversity in what unity? In A. L. Kjær & S. Adamo (Eds.), *Linguistic diversity and European democracy* (pp. 57–74). Farnham: Ashgate.

Polz, E., & Bećirović, S. (2022). *Competency-Based Teaching and Learning*. MAP Multidisciplinary Academic Publishing. <https://mapub.org/books/competency-based-teaching-and-learning/>

Romaine, S. (2011). Policy and planning for protecting linguistic diversity. In T. Migliore & P. Fabbri (Eds.), *The architectures of Babel. Creation, extinctions and intercessions in the languages of the global world* (pp. 57–71). Firenze: Leo S. Olschki.

ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

THE USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY INTO VIENNESE MIDDLE SCHOOLS

Benjamin W. Jones 

Pädagogische Hochschule Niederösterreich, Vienna, Austria

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Benjamin W. Jones, Pädagogische Hochschule Niederösterreich, Vienna, Austria. E-mail: benjamin.jones.2021@teachforaustria.at.

ABSTRACT

Current research has highlighted both the potential and challenges of integrating artificial intelligence (AI) in English language teaching and learning (ELT/L). Studies have focused on AI technologies in education, encompassing personalised, independent learning for students and effective instructional and administrative support for teachers. However, classroom settings, particularly at lower secondary level, are currently under-researched as tertiary education has been the principal focus. Consequently, this study investigates how and why AI is being used and integrated in ELT/L in urban middle schools in Vienna. It explores teachers' perceptions, experiences, and motivations surrounding AI tools and their integration. Using a qualitative, phenomenological design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with nine English language teachers and two headteachers from five participating middle schools. A thematic analysis revealed the themes of evolving teaching practices with AI tools, student use and impact, AI for personalised and autonomous learning, and teacher readiness and willingness to use AI. The findings of this study suggest that while AI is beginning to transform certain aspects of ELT/L in Viennese middle schools, there are barriers to successful adoption. These include teacher willingness, readiness, and training also students' digital skills and the potential misuse of AI. These insights contribute to a rapidly growing body of research on AI in language education and offer practical implications for teacher education and future research in AI-supported ELT/L.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, English language teaching and learning, Viennese Middle School, Lower Secondary School



MAP EDUCATION
AND HUMANITIES

Volume 6

ISSN: 2744-2373 / © The Authors.
Published by MAP - Multidisciplinary
Academic Publishing.

Article Submitted: 10 November 2025
Article Accepted: 04 December 2025
Article Published: 05 December 2025



Publisher's Note: MAP stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

<https://doi.org/10.53880/2744-2373.2025.6.81>



HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

W. Jones B. (2025). **The Use of Artificial Intelligence in English Language Teaching and Learning: A Phenomenological Study into Viennese Middle Schools.**

MAP Education and Humanities, 6, 81-108. doi: <https://doi.org/10.53880/2744-2373.2025.6.81>



© The Author(s). **Open Access Article**
Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.



1. Introduction

Opinions on the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in Austria within an educational context are divided. Recently, surveys have revealed that Austrians' views on this new wave of technology range from advocating for a complete ban and efforts to limit potential harm, to the possibility of revolutionising the teaching profession through personalised and individualised learning. Perspectives on the use of AI in education demonstrate a high degree of variation (Helm & Große, 2024, pp. 371-378). A closer examination indicates that many teachers are already using AI and perceive it to be useful. According to a survey by the Austrian Federal Publishing House (ÖBV), 44.3% of educators in Austria reported having already used AI in their daily school life, and 55.9% found that AI was beneficial to student learning (ÖBV, 2024, p. 9). Such viewpoints are more than likely only to increase. One interesting aspect of the questions posed is that the focus was not simply on whether AI should be used in schools, but rather on when and how it should be used. These AI-powered tools are here to stay. Asking the binary question of "yes" or "no" is therefore belated; instead, the focus should be placed on considering the ways in which it should be used, the extent to which it should be used, and the guidance and limitations that should be placed on AI's usage.

Regarding current support, the Ministry for Education has outlined its stance on AI as a "chance for Austria's schools" (BMBWF, n.d.). AI is described as a technology capable of personalising learning, fostering innovation, and preparing students for a future increasingly focused on digital technology. While AI is often praised for its potential, digital technologies should not be overestimated, nor relied upon to deliver beyond their limits. As Selwyn (2021) notes, "any technology must also be considered in terms of the limits and constraints it imposes" (p. 9). Given its promises and challenges, AI should also be explored in relation to its interaction with the complex realities of education. The integration of AI tools does not happen in isolation but is embedded within broader educational systems shaped by pedagogy, policy, and social context.

This study primarily focuses on a Viennese middle school, examining AI's role in promoting educational equality within Austria's educational system. As an urban institution, its structures are significant, especially when considering differences between urban and rural schools (Zehetner et al.,

2022; Eder & Neuweg, 2024). Education involves real individuals and experiences. Consequently, education and learning are inherently "phenomena that involve real people who live in real, complex social contexts from which they cannot be meaningfully abstracted" (Phillips, 2014, p. 10). Each educational experience is personal and distinct. Phillips' focus on context aligns with Selwyn's perspective on understanding the link between education and technology. Selwyn highlights that "learning is deeply intertwined with various dimensions of social life, such as family background, socioeconomic circumstances, gender, race, (dis)ability, and social class" (Selwyn, 2021, p. 6). This understanding is crucial when considering Viennese middle schools, which can generally be characterised as schools with students who have a migration background, are not LI speakers of German, often come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and frequently have parents with limited or no formal education (Erling, 2023; Soukup-Alrichter, 2024). Early academic tracking remains a core characteristic of the Austrian education system. Students are separated into differentiated institutions, grammar schools (AHS) and compulsory secondary schools (middle school), after successful completion of the fourth year of primary education. This early selection process, according to the OECD, affects equal opportunities in reading abilities (2020). Viennese middle schools, especially, have subsequently been perceived as "residual schools" (Flecker et al., 2020, pp. 306-307). Recognising these intersections is vital to understanding how AI and other technological advances are integrated into such educational settings. Therefore, examining the role of AI in Viennese middle schools demands a nuanced understanding of the socio-educational context.

This study investigates teachers' perceptions of integrating AI into English language teaching (ELT/L) in Viennese middle schools. The main research question asks: How and why have AI-powered tools been incorporated into ELT/L in these schools, and what are teachers' views on them? This broad question was expanded into several sub-questions:

- How have English teachers in Viennese middle schools integrated AI tools into their teaching?
- Which AI tools are used by these teachers?

- Why have they chosen to incorporate AI tools, and what benefits do they see?
- How do teachers perceive their own readiness to use AI in ELT/L?
- What are their views on students' use of AI in language learning?

The study involved semi-structured interviews with 11 participants, with both teachers and headteachers in Viennese Middle schools, across five different schools. Since the research is exploratory, a qualitative and phenomenological approach was employed. This approach provided deeper insights into how school leaders and English teachers experience and interpret the integration of AI in their classrooms. Overall, the research aims to contribute to the ongoing discussion about AI's role in ELT/L in Viennese middle schools, in order to offer insights into how such tools can be best implemented to support teaching and learning.

2. Literature Review

2.1 AI in Education

In 2022, the release of ChatGPT led to a rapid increase in AI use, highlighting an urgent need to explore its benefits and challenges within the education system. Since then, the Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Research (BMBWF) has made efforts to provide assistance and guidelines for students and educators. Similar to the definition provided by the OECD, the BMBWF follows the European Parliament's definition of AI as "the ability of a machine to display human-like capabilities such as reasoning, learning, planning and creativity" (European Parliament, 2020, para. 1; see BMBWF, 2023, p. 6). This understanding aligns with Baker et al.'s (2019) definition of "computers which perform cognitive tasks, usually associated with human minds, particularly learning and problem-solving" (p. 10). Consequently, AI systems can self-learn, mimic human cognitive processes, and significantly impact their environment. In line with these definitions, the understanding of AI in this study will remain broad.

As artificial intelligence is a broad term encompassing various intelligent systems, it encompasses equally numerous subsets and aspects. One such subset is generative AI, which includes, most notably, ChatGPT. Having proliferated in recent years, these programs are now well known to many (Hockly, 2023). According

to Lim et al. (2023), generative AI can be defined as a technology that leverages deep learning models to generate human-like content in response to complex and varied prompts. Deep learning models are comprised of an algorithmic system that, when provided with sufficient data, uses artificial neural networks to be able to "make predictions or solve problems, such as identifying objects in pictures or winning at particular games, for example" (Baker et al., 2019, p. 10). Using these models, generative AIs can synthesise, create, compose, analyse and translate a significant number of texts. Thus, their integration into education and language learning is marked with a great deal of transformative potential. Therefore, it is now necessary to view AI's application in an educational setting.

The use of AI in education (AIEd) represents one of the many ways in which AI has pervaded society. In categorising the use of AI systems in education, Baker et al. (2019) define three types of AIEd: learner-facing, teacher-facing, and system-facing (see also Crompton et al., 2024; Pokrivcakova, 2019). As this study seeks to investigate the usage of AI in ELT/L, this categorisation is helpful in the differentiation of these tools. On the one hand, learner-facing systems are able to diagnose areas of improvement and to support and differentiate and personalise instruction and tasks accordingly. Furthermore, they can give students feedback on their work (Baker et al., 2019). On the other hand, teacher-facing tools include "automating tasks (such as assessment, plagiarism detection, administration or feedback); providing insights about the progress of a student or class; helping teachers to innovate and experiment" (Baker et al., 2019, p. 12). This categorisation highlights key differences in terms of the ways in which AI programs and systems can be used in an educational context.

2.2 English Language Teachers and AI

2.2.1 AI tools and Lesson Planning in ELT/L

Lesson planning is time-consuming and mentally demanding (Bauml, 2014). As a result, GenAI and LLMs are emerging as valuable tools to support this task. AI can act as a helpful teaching assistant (Mishu et al., 2025; Mohamed, 2024). In education, this is a central issue. As AI becomes part of teachers' workloads, teacher training must include this essential skill. It also highlights the ongoing need for critical digital literacies to ensure responsible, effective AI use.

Various AI tools like ChatGPT, Educational Copilot, and Educaide.ai aid teachers in lesson planning by generating complete lesson plans from basic prompts, offering instructions and guidelines (Tang et al., 2024). English teachers can customise lessons based on learning objectives, topics, materials, and CEFR levels (Kusuma et al., 2024; Mishu et al., 2025). Structuring lessons around goals and levels promotes a competence-based approach, a key of the new middle school curriculum. Planning with AI, however, is not limited to ChatGPT; programs like Diffit, Twee, and Gamma support lesson preparation. Ease, however, does not necessarily mean that teachers implement the generated lesson plan directly. Research suggests that some teachers use AI tools to assist in drafting lesson plans. This is especially the case when they need a quick structure or outline (Shamsuddinova et al., 2024a), implying that there is a spectrum and a degree to which AI tools are used for lesson planning. Materials compiled by AI tools can supplement this structured approach to a lesson; these can include summaries and levelled texts, creation of presentation notes and the modification or updating of previously used lesson content to match new groups and new needs (Bonner et al., 2023). Specific AI tools can offer support, not only in lesson planning but also in designing activities and tracking students' progress, leading to more efficient work practices.

Teaching is not only comprised of planning, but it also involves complex, dynamic processes like classroom relationships, interactions, assessment, and skill development. However, planning is time-consuming. AI significantly reduces this by helping teachers focus on other tasks (Pokrivcakova, 2023; Mishu et al., 2025). AI benefits both new and experienced teachers by offering new ideas, inspiration, and private experimentation outside the classroom, boosting confidence (Moorhouse, 2024). While AI aids planning and saves time, it is not a substitute for pedagogical training and insight to ensure quality lessons.

2.2.2 AI tools and ELT/L Material Creation

Recently, there has been a growing interest in the use of AI tools to support teachers in the creation and development of teaching and learning materials. Similarly, this trend has been reflected in the literature on AI in language learning. Generally, educators face recurrent challenges in their work; these include time constraints, a lack of appropriate materials, and the need to personalise activities.

Recent studies have been conducted on the use of AI tools, such as ChatGPT, to investigate how they can alleviate teachers' workloads and effectively adapt to the demands of the profession (Bonner et al., 2023; Kusuma et al., 2024; Moorhouse, 2024).

The use of AI tools to generate teaching resources emerges as having high potential. Such optimism was found not only in active teachers with experience but also in pre-service educators and first-year teachers of English (Pokrivcakova, 2023). Similar findings were confirmed by Moorhouse's (2024) study on first-year teachers, who actively use GenAI tools to create novel language materials. However, one contributing factor to the beneficial use of AI for this purpose, noted by a wide range of educators, was the lack of adequate content in existing materials or online. A similar theme emerged in the research to suggest that teachers actively prefer tools such as ChatGPT for finding and producing comprehensive resources over traditional search engines (Kusuma et al., 2024). This move from internet searches to AI is interesting as it suggests that teachers are using AI to save time in the creation of teaching materials, shifting their focus from looking for relevant content to creating relevant materials (Bonner et al., 2023; Mohamed, 2024). Thus, AI allows teachers to experiment more with material generation (Moorhouse, 2024).

Language learning is dependent on a wide range of skills; it therefore demands a variety of techniques, methods, and activities. AI tools can create this diverse offer of teaching materials through a simple prompt. AI outputs can include grammar and vocabulary exercises, reading comprehension texts and writing that is tailored to learners' different levels (Bonner et al., 2023; Moorhouse, 2024). Shamsuddinova et al. (2024) noted that AI was particularly helpful in creating repetitive and low-level tasks. Such activities are an essential component of language learning, and regular practice with appropriate and topic-specific tasks can aid in the language acquisition process. Not only can AI tools produce these necessary materials but they can also adapt existing materials to match differing proficiency levels and generate individualised tasks (Kuhail et al., 2023). This function pertains predominantly to AI's capacity for providing personalised learning and differentiation and will be discussed later in this literature review. Thus, the literature contains many examples of the practical uses of AI for creating teaching resources, illustrating the many ways in which teachers can use AI for their lessons.

Despite the ease with which materials can be generated using AI, these tools also bring a specific set of ethical and practical limitations. Therefore, it is crucial to explore the challenges of using AI to create teaching materials, as Selwyn notes, “technology must also be evaluated within the framework of its conditions and shortcomings” (2021, p. 9). For example, Kusuma et al. (2024) (2024) argue that AI tools can sometimes provide vague, generic or irrelevant content, especially when the prompts are not specific. However, Kusuma et al.’s (2024) (2024) study focused on pre-service teachers and their usage of ChatGPT. As this study focuses on active teachers with greater experience, their different insights, gained through many years in the classroom, will likely affect how they search for or create materials. Similarly, its sole focus on ChatGPT as AI, despite its being one of the most popular tools, constrains the scope of this study. Therefore, teachers must remain critical of the output they receive from AI tools. Educators must check the accuracy and appropriateness of the resources they have created before using them in class (Mohamed, 2024; Pokrivcakova, 2023), especially when considering culturally sensitive or nuanced teaching points. Ultimately, AI-produced resources cannot be fully personalised to the same extent as those by a human teacher.

Furthermore, there is also the ethical concern that ChatGPT and other LLMs draw on pre-existing content from data sets and do not consider copyright (Hong, 2023). This raises the question of ‘whose work it is anyway?’ Moreover, considerable thought must be given to a situation in which students receive work created by AI, which AI then assesses. When using AI, therefore, it is important to remain critical about the output that students receive and to remember that human oversight in the teaching profession is fundamental. As previous studies have noted, new digital technologies powered by AI are promising, with the potential to alleviate teachers’ workload; however, a clear understanding of when and how to use them appropriately is necessary, not only in the creation of teaching materials but also in the design of lesson plans.

2.2.3 AI for Differentiation

Differentiation and personalising learning represent a challenge in any type of school and classroom, as children learn at different paces (Piaget, 1970; Vygotsky, 1978). Classrooms are inherently heterogeneous, with diverse needs, especially in Viennese middle schools with various

first languages and skill levels. Despite the intention to support all students, studies indicate AI can help address this heterogeneity (Zhou et al., 2025; Tang et al., 2024). Assessments and feedback enable students to identify areas for growth, with Zhou et al. (2025) using AI to tailor instruction to individual needs, fostering targeted development. In ELT/L, GenAI offers personalised support, allowing educators to delegate differentiated instruction, making learning more efficient.

Differentiation is a key concept in the Austrian education system. As previously noted, external differentiation occurs through the process of academic selection. Another form of internal differentiation takes place when middle school students are assigned two levels in the compulsory subjects of German, first modern language, and mathematics. In this context, the system distinguishes between academic levels and the maximum grades students can achieve. However, differentiation can take many forms, becoming particularly significant when considered in the context of teaching and learning. This study focuses specifically on differentiated instruction within the classroom. Tomlinson (1995) asserts that “in a differentiated classroom, the teacher plans and implements varied approaches to content, process, and product in anticipation of and response to student differences in readiness, interest, and learner needs” (1995, p. 10). The core concept of differentiation shifts teaching away from a one-size-fits-all approach and towards an adaptive process, allowing each student the opportunity to learn in the most effective manner for them. In this subchapter of this literature review, various aspects of differentiation will be explored.

AI tools support teachers through an automated process. With adaptation being one of the key aspects of AI in general, it is possible to envisage how these tools can be integrated into teaching to help with the adaptation of resources for students, i.e. differentiation and personalised instruction. Tools like Diffit and Eduaide.ai generate lesson plans at varying complexity. Especially, Diffit is designed for US curricula but adaptable for other countries. These tools help teachers tailor tasks for diverse learners, as shown in studies by Bonner et al. (2023) and Kohnke (2024). In middle schools with dual grading systems of grading within the same class, this quick adaptation represents significant assistance to teachers (Kohnke et al., 2023a), ensuring that weaker learners can receive the same content and stronger learners can be

suitably challenged. In both cases, there is a positive effect on language learning. Mohamed (2024) and Kusuma et al. (2024) confirm AI's ability to create tailored lesson plans and adapt tasks based on student groups, exemplified by Microsoft's Reading Progress, which tracks and generates individualised reading materials.

2.3.4 AI and Improved Instructional Effectiveness

There are numerous ways in which AI tools and software can enhance teachers' efficacy and effectiveness, whilst also reducing their workloads. In turn, this can improve their teaching abilities and positively impact their instruction and outcomes in teaching the English language. However, it is still important to note that teachers' perceptions of the usefulness, efficiency and innovative potential of AI are central to its adoption (Jiang, 2022; Shamsuddinova et al., 2024a). Teachers' feedback and assessment of AI's usefulness is a common theme. Tools like Automated Evaluation Systems (AES) help reduce grading time, freeing up teachers for other tasks. They can efficiently mark grammar and vocabulary and review writing for mistakes, allowing teachers to focus on providing meaningful feedback (Mohamed, 2024; Nazaretsky et al., 2022). AI tools also offer personalised responses, enhancing feedback responsiveness and supporting differentiated learning. However, it is important to consider when AI should be used. Since tools such as ChatGPT are always accessible, students can get outside help with language skills through human-like interaction, supplementing teacher feedback. This can benefit both teachers and students. While AI can handle routine tasks, the literature also highlights its potential to improve instructional quality and help with creativity.

The ability to teach English is dependent on both content knowledge and pedagogical skills. Teachers, therefore, need to develop a repertoire of methods for teaching and explaining a language to learners. However, as one size does not fit all, in an educational sense, new techniques and activities are often needed to suit different classes, even those working at the same level. Shamsuddinova et al. (2024b) found that AI supports not only efficiency but also innovation in teaching methods. In their study, teachers reported that AI can act as a partner and an assistant that aids them in their pedagogical capacity and creativity.

Furthermore, AI can also offer dynamic ways in which to engage students through varied tasks at the appropriate level (Bonner et al., 2023; Mohamed, 2024). Essentially, AI's transformative potential lies not in replacing teachers but in augmenting their cognitive and creative capacities. As such, they argue, AI can be seen as a friend and a helper (Shamsuddinova et al., 2024a). However, other researchers say that there is a distinction between automating tasks teachers already perform and enhancing pedagogical skills (Moorhouse, 2024). In any case, this is all dependent on teachers' willingness to adopt the technology, which will be subsequently discussed.

2.2.5 Teachers' Willingness to Adopt AI

Factors that influence willingness, such as trust, perceived ease of use, professional identity and beliefs about teaching, can be understood through Davis's (1989) Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). This was used by Bonner et al. (2023) Mohamed (2024) in their studies to understand teacher willingness to adopt AI. According to the model, "users' acceptance of a system and their behavioural intention to continue using it largely depends on two principal determinants, namely, perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use" (Fathali, 2024, p. 33). Therefore, this model anticipates perceptions of usefulness and ease as being factors influencing acceptance and intention. In a mixed-method study that aimed to explore student teachers' perceptions of AI in EFL, Belda-Medina and Kokošková (2023) found that teachers' perceptions of AI changed after conducting AI-guided writing tasks. These guided writing tasks formed part of the study, with surveys being conducted both prior to and after their completion. Essentially, teachers' perceptions shifted after learning to use ChatGPT, increasing trust in the system. Similarly, pre-service teachers interacted more with AI, becoming more likely to trust and adopt it. Nazaretsky et al. (2022) found that teachers' trust in AI significantly impacts their willingness to integrate AI into their classrooms. However, misconceptions and a lack of understanding often hinder trust, affecting how teachers adopt technology. Overall, effective integration depends on teacher preparedness to embrace AI.

The preparedness of teachers also emerged as a theme in the literature, based on their willingness to adopt AI in ELT/L. Whilst AI may have been part of the curriculum for recently graduated

students or current trainees, its rapid growth in the past few years suggests that this is probably not the reality for most teachers. Teachers' need for digital literacy skills and professional development programs was found to be a significant factor in teachers' preparedness for AI and their willingness to adopt it in ELT/L (Hockly, 2023; Kohnke et al., 2023b; Nazaretsky et al., 2022). However, digital literacy skills must now include AI literacy skills in teacher training and development programmes. In this regard, AI literacy can be defined as "a set of competencies that enables individuals to critically evaluate AI technologies; communicate and collaborate effectively with AI; and use AI as a tool online, at home, and in the workplace" (Long & Magerko, 2020, p. 2). Participants in the study reported increased confidence in using AI tools and recognised the usefulness of AI technologies through scaffolded tasks and hands-on training. In a similar context, Lee et al. (2025) studied pre-service teachers participating in GenAI-based lesson design projects. These projects encouraged the collaborative use of tools such as ChatGPT, Copilot, and DALL-E3 and led to an improvement of AI literacy and pedagogical skills. Furthermore, in order to effectively train teachers to become literate through professional development programmes, the ethical use of AI should be integral in training curricula (Hockly, 2023). Kohnke et al. (2023) reported that these programs should specifically focus on teachers' skills, "such as hands-on workshops, self-paced learning experiences and personalised or individualised coaching" (p. 5). If effective, these courses can increase teacher preparedness, trust and willingness to use AI in the classroom.

However, there is a caveat to the willingness and preparation of teachers in relation to AI. Teachers should be trained to use AI tools not only efficiently but also effectively. In this respect, AI should support teacher autonomy and creativity, rather than simply automating teaching into standardised routines. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that teachers' willingness to integrate AI tools is not automatic; rather, it is shaped by their beliefs, confidence and experiences (Lan, 2024). By increasing the perceived usefulness of the tools, reducing technical barriers and building trust through professional support, educational institutions can increase the likelihood of the successful adoption of these tools. One area over which teachers have less control relates to the ways in which students use AI for language learning, which will be discussed below.

2.3 AI tools for English Language Learning

2.3.1 Student-Centred AI for Language Learning

Students in ELT/L are increasingly using AI chatbots and other programs to learn and improve their language skills in general. Such programs offer accessible and on-demand language interaction (Belda-Medina & Kokošková, 2024). These tools can provide sequences and activities that develop the core skills of language proficiency: speaking, writing, reading, listening, and grammar. One study has shown that the use of Chatbot-Assisted Dynamic Assessment (CA-DA), a form of automated, adaptive feedback tailored to the learner, significantly improved vocabulary acquisition and retention (Jeon, 2023). Other studies have found that students find ChatGPT can act as a personal tutor, which can provide feedback and aid in vocabulary and grammar learning (Shaikh et al., 2023). However, the language level certainly plays a role in the learner's ability to work effectively with an AI. If a student cannot understand the prompt, then it is of no use to the learner. In this respect, Young and Shishido (2023) found that ChatGPT-generated dialogues are readable for A2-B1 CEFR levels. The CEFR language level for middle schools in Austria over the four years is A1-A2+. Therefore, the relevance of these tools for this study and research area for ELT/L cannot be understated. This new leap in technology allows students to learn independently of a classroom environment, especially given the adaptability and readability of the content produced by AI programs. Considering that learners can now access valuable, interactive content anywhere and at any time, this has significant implications for the way in which English has traditionally been taught. In other words, the traditional classroom environment, incorporating the clear roles of teacher and student, can be broken down so that students can learn independently. Essentially, language learners can utilise these tools, allowing them to develop skills, especially in the case of speaking abilities and how and where students can practice.

Speaking and writing practice can be challenging to manage both inside and outside the classroom; however, AI tools provide new opportunities for learners to engage with authentic content and develop these productive skills. A key advantage of such tools over traditional methods lies in their ability to deliver immediate feedback, supporting faster and more autonomous learning.

Several studies have highlighted the effectiveness of AI applications such as Alexa, EAP Talk, Babbel, Duolingo, and other dialogue systems in facilitating autonomous speaking practice and providing instant corrections (Dizon & Tang, 2020; Ericsson et al., 2023; Zou & Wang, 2024). Zou et al. (2024) found that EAP Talk improved learners' fluency and grammar while increasing motivation and convenience, and Dizon and Tang (2020) reported that students used Alexa for speaking and listening practice beyond the classroom. Similarly, Ericsson et al. (2023) observed that middle school students using an AI dialogue system experienced greater motivation, improved pronunciation, and a safe space for autonomous speaking. Despite some variability, their study offered valuable insights into AI's potential for younger learners, who described these tools as fun, easy, and useful for developing speaking skills.

Comparable benefits have been observed for writing development. AI writing tools such as Grammarly and Microsoft Word's Spellchecker both examples of automated writing evaluation (AWE) systems offer real-time feedback on grammar, accuracy, fluency, and style (Kern, 2024; Klimova et al., 2023). This feedback promotes learner autonomy and reduces teacher workload (Goodwin-Jones, 2022). Supporting this, Dizon and Gayed (2021) found that middle-school learners using Grammarly showed improved grammatical accuracy and lexical richness, while Ebadi et al. (2023) demonstrated that combining Grammarly with teacher feedback significantly enhanced grammatical accuracy and writing fluency.

2.3.2 Personalised and Independent Learning

Personalised learning is similar to differentiation, albeit with a focus on the student and the benefits that they can draw from this. According to Bulger (2016), "personalised learning describes adaptation to a student's unique combination of goals, interests, and competencies and the ongoing process of shifting instruction as these conditions change" (p. 4). Considering this definition of personalised learning, it is evident that differentiated instruction and personalised learning are similar. More individualised and personalised learning can similarly be seen to mitigate the problems associated with heterogeneity and mixed abilities in classrooms. The research on personalised and independent learning revealed many potential AI tools and AI uses that can help with this.

The first usage of AI for student and independent learning can be seen in AI's role in targeting and enabling learner autonomy (Fryer et al., 2020; Goodwin-Jones, 2022; Nazaretsky et al., 2022). Learner autonomy is crucial because it demonstrates how students can organise, initiate, and manage their learning both in and outside the classroom environment, while following a guided learner path. However, this does not imply that the student must handle their learning independently; teacher involvement remains essential and must be balanced appropriately (Kuhail et al., 2023; Lim et al., 2023; Mohamed, 2024). The adoption of AI tools and targeted uses can help in developing the necessary skills for independent learning; these will be subsequently discussed.

Chatbots and LLMs, such as ChatGPT, can assist in this respect by providing students with round-the-clock access to feedback. This feedback is automated; thus, the learner has constant access to it (Kuhail et al., 2023; Mohamed, 2024; Shaikh et al., 2023). In terms of language learning, students can practice grammar and vocabulary topics, either to explain or to develop these areas of English language learning. A common example of this is Duolingo's AI-powered Duolingo Max, which offers "explain my answer" on-demand, context-specific grammar and vocabulary explanations of learner responses, extending teacher-like support on demand, and helping to develop learner-autonomous practice outside class time.

AI tools can further help students through personalised and independent learning in terms of accuracy. In this regard, mistakes and corrections can be addressed directly and with accuracy through the chatbot. Shaikh et al.'s (2023) study suggests that this simulates real-life dialogue through the use of ChatGPT, and the motivation of the student increases accordingly. These are areas of language learning in which students can assume responsibility for learning and language acquisition without the need for a teacher. Moreover, it is not only chatbots that can help in this respect; Intelligent Tutoring Systems (ITS) were equally noted as having a similar effect. In this study, this will not be discussed in any great detail as this did not emerge in the participants' responses. However, examples of an ITS include Squirrel AI Learning (Jones, 2018). Nonetheless, learner autonomy was found to increase through the use of these programs.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Problem

The main aim is to investigate the current status and use of AI tools in English classrooms in Viennese middle schools. The second aim is to explore teachers' perceptions, beliefs, challenges, and perceived benefits regarding AI in English language teaching (ELT).

As a phenomenological study, the project examines how AI is used for teaching and learning English in this specific context. The choice of setting is based on the researcher's three years of experience teaching English in a Viennese middle school, as well as the relevance of AI to everyday educational practice. Middle schools remain underrepresented in AI-related research, which further justifies the focus of this study.

3.2 Research Questions

This research aims to provide insight into the current usage and integration of AI in ELT and teachers' beliefs about it: How and why have AI-powered tools been integrated in ELT/L in Viennese middle schools, and what are teachers' perceptions of them?

This offered a broad scope and was subsequently expanded into the following sub-research questions:

- How have English teachers in Viennese middle schools integrated AI tools into their teaching practices?
- What AI tools are being used by English teachers in Viennese middle schools?
- Why have English teachers chosen to integrate AI tools into their teaching, and what advantages or benefits do they perceive?
- What are English teachers' perceptions of their own readiness and preparedness to use AI tools in ELT/L?
- How do English teachers perceive students' use of AI in the context of English language learning?

3.3 Research Design

This qualitative, phenomenological study explores teachers' and school leaders' experiences and perceptions of AI integration. Phenomenology examines how individuals experience phenomena, not establishing causality or generalisations (McMillan, 2021, p. 344; Grant, 2020, p. 10). The focus is on AI tools in ELT/L and teachers' perceptions of them. Since teachers are key decision-makers in curriculum delivery, their experiences are central. Semi-structured interviews gathered descriptive data, similar to other qualitative research (e.g., Shamsuddinova et al., 2024; Mohamed, 2023; Moorhouse, 2024; Kohnke, 2024a).

3.4 Sampling

Participants included Viennese middle school English teachers and headteachers. Interviews with both groups enabled a process of triangulation. Eleven participants were interviewed, typical for phenomenological samples (McMillan, 2021, p. 337). They were fully informed and gave consent (McMillan, 2021, p. 41).

One reason for selecting middle schools in Vienna was their underrepresentation in scholarly research (Erling et al., 2023). Furthermore, as an English teacher at a middle school in Vienna's 16th district, the researcher was able to recruit colleagues from their school and utilise their connections to this and other schools to gather participants. These sampling methods can be described as convenience and purposeful sampling, in the sense that the participants were "accessible" and had "characteristics that are targeted by the study" (McMillan, 2021, p. 143). The researcher, a teacher in a Viennese middle school, acted as a "complete insider" (McMillan, 2021, p. 366), providing contextual understanding.

Participants came from five schools in Vienna's 3rd, 16th, and 18th districts. Most were male, and many had under five years of experience, suggesting possible self-selection by younger teachers more open to AI. Nearly all taught multiple subjects, typical of Vienna's middle schools, which may affect how teachers adopt AI tools, given workload and time constraints.

Table 1.
Participant Data

Participant	Gender	Age	Years of Teaching Experience	Subjects
Participant 1	female	32	4	English, German, Geography, Art
Participant 2	male	63	38	English, Biology, P.E., Music
Participant 3	male	61	36	Headteacher, English, P.E.
Participant 4	male	45	18	English
Participant 5	female	34	5	English, Maths, Art, I.T., Biology, P.E., Career Education
Participant 6	male	27	1	English, German, Biology, Art, I.T.
Participant 7	female	38	4	History, Career Education, P.E., Art
Participant 8	male	29	3	English, Physics, P.E., Chemistry,
Participant 9	female	32	3	English, Career Education, P.E., SEN
Participant 10	male	54	30	Headteacher, Mathematics, Physics, I.T.
Participant 11	male	30	4	English, History, Geography, P.E.

3.5 Instruments for Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, a common method in phenomenological studies (McMillan, 2021, p. 345). Interviews provided in-depth insight into teachers' and school leaders' experiences and perceptions of AI, which cannot be easily captured through quantitative methods (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 28; Dörnyei, 2007, p. 135).

3.6 Procedure

Semi-structured interviews followed Braun's (2013, p. 78) model, allowing flexibility while enabling participants to raise issues important to them. Conducted in English or German for comfort, all

interviews were anonymously recorded via Apple Voice Memos and securely stored. Transcribed with noScribe, then checked and translated by the researcher with the help of DeepL, translations were proofread for meaning, minimising translation bias through careful review. Thematic analysis involved familiarisation, coding, and theme development.

3.7 Data Analysis

An inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to identify patterns and meanings from the data, suitable for an exploratory educational study. It reports patterns within data, highlighting key meanings related to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Themes were based on explicit participant statements rather than interpretations (p. 84). This semantic approach offered a flexible, systematic way to interpret teachers' perspectives without pre-existing theories. To increase validity, teacher and headteacher data were triangulated, enabling perspective comparison and enhancing credibility.

4. Results

This section outlines the study's key findings. The passages were grouped into five themes:

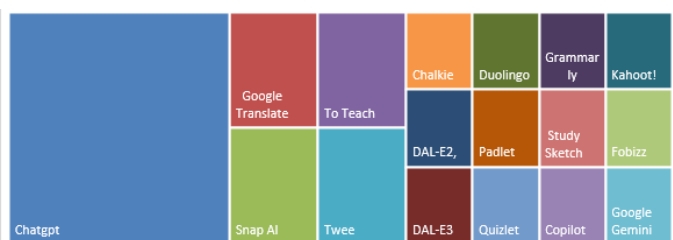
- AI for ELT/L teaching practices
- Teacher readiness and views on AI tools
- Students' use and impact of AI tools on language learning
- Challenges and concerns of AI tools in ELT/L.
- Head teachers' perspectives on AI among teachers and students

Firstly, participants were asked to name any AI-powered tools that they had used or were familiar with in an ELT/L context. Their responses reveal a broad range of tools with varying levels of frequency and application. The frequency with which these programmes were mentioned is illustrated in Figure 1.

As shown in the treemap above, ChatGPT was the most frequently mentioned tool. OpenAI's programme was mentioned in all but one of the eleven interviews. Other commonly cited tools were Google Translate, SnapAI, ToTeach and Twee. SnapAI is the built-in GenAI for Snapchat, which is popular amongst young people. ToTeach and Twee,

however, are explicitly designed for educational purposes. ToTeach is a student-facing AI that creates activities and personalised learning paths for learners. Twee is predominantly for teachers to develop teaching materials from existing texts, audio, and videos. The remaining tools in the diagram were mentioned only once. Among the AI tools in this list, Kahoot, Fobizz, Duolingo, and Study Sketch are all educational tools. Fobizz is the AI program selected by the BMBWF to be implemented as part of its AI pilot scheme. The rest are largely GenAI tools, which have varying functions.

Figure 1.
Reported AI Tools



4.1 Theme 1: AI Tools for English Language Teaching Practices

Lesson Planning

Lesson planning was a central focus of this study. Most participants indicated that integrating AI into language teaching saved time and boosted their efficiency. Participant 8 specifically said, “just Twee alone can take so much work off your hands... with pre-, post-listening... planning is basically what takes up a lot of time.” This view was widely shared among most participants. However, some offered more nuanced perspectives on using AI in lesson planning. Participant 6 mentioned, “because I’ve only been teaching for a year, I would say that I started planning with AI relatively early on,” Suggesting a generational shift toward AI use in ELT/L; newer teachers may adopt AI tools more naturally. Additionally, AI can assist with long-term planning and lesson development. Describing their use of ChatGPT, Participant 9 explained, “if I enter that I have 20 hours until the next test... the AI can break it down into 20 teaching hours... I can simply ask the AI a question, and it will answer me.” Participants 1, 5, and 11, with four to five years of experience, also reported using AI for planning. One noted, “I sometimes use it for planning. It does not mean that I’m not planning myself anymore, but it just saves me a lot of time and makes my planning more efficient” (Participant 1). Time-saving was

again emphasised. Nonetheless, AI complements rather than replaces traditional planning methods in ELT/L. In this context, lesson planning is a key application of AI, covering both long-term and short-term efforts. Furthermore, newer teachers may adopt AI more easily, with experienced educators using it selectively to save time and enhance efficiency.

Creating Teaching Materials

Most participants in the study reported using AI to create teaching materials, even though this was not directly asked in the interview. This is the most frequently commented use of AI for ELT/L in middle schools. Seven of the participants noted that they use AI tools, particularly generative AI, to create a wide range of language activities for students. These included reading texts, listening tasks, vocabulary exercises, cloze texts, and complete worksheets. Several respondents further noted AI’s value for automating repetitive tasks for students, such as grammar topics. This allowed teachers to concentrate on more creative tasks. However, most participants did not specify how they used AI to create teaching materials. The exception to this was participants 7 and 8. Participant 7 described the process of using Twee to create reading and listening texts. They also made comprehension and vocabulary activities from a selected video or topic. This process highlighted Twee’s ability to adapt linguistic output to specific proficiency levels and to produce a range of materials according to the teacher’s preferences. The participant shared excitement about AI’s teaching potential in ELT/L. Another participant highlighted the way in which Twee could automate worksheet creation for vocabulary and grammar. These examples demonstrate the tool’s adaptability and efficiency in producing teaching content. However, most participants indicated that they did not use the AI-generated materials verbatim, but instead adapted them to better suit their lesson objectives.

Furthermore, the majority of respondents noted that they subsequently adjusted their activities to meet the lesson requirements. Respondents described using AI not only for creating teaching materials but also for changing existing content to match their learners’ needs. Furthermore, Participants 5, 9, and 11 used AI to adapt learning materials in published textbooks, which they felt lacked suitable content for middle schoolers. One respondent expressed their dissatisfaction with the books provided by the school: “I’m often not

very satisfied with the textbooks, or rather, I have the feeling that the textbooks I have available are not adapted for my children and my school" (Participant 11). This led the participant to use AI to create more suitable materials. This example also reflects the theme of differentiation, as adjusting existing materials with AI enables teachers to better address the diverse needs of learners. Participants' responses regarding AI's assistance in creating teaching materials were similarly found to be effective in creating lesson plans.

Differentiation

This research project focused on differentiation, personalised learning, and independent learning. It specifically looked at their nature in ELT/L and Viennese middle schools. All participants noted that AI programs, such as ChatGPT or Twee, can help provide differentiated instruction for students. Some participants described using AI primarily as a time-saving assistant for task adaptation, while others used it more creatively to design entirely new materials tailored to student needs. Alongside this, the nature of the Austrian school system was equally reflected in the views of the majority of participants.

An aspect mentioned by several participants was AI's ability to support differentiation in heterogeneous classrooms. Participant 7 illustrated this, explaining that AI tools make it easy and efficient to create multiple versions of the same task to address varying learning levels within a class. They noted that, unlike traditional approaches that required considerable time to modify materials manually, AI allows teachers to adjust task complexity quickly, producing differentiated versions suited to students' abilities. This capacity was seen as particularly beneficial in Viennese middle schools, where a wide range of abilities and learning levels within classes necessitate targeted teaching materials. This view was echoed by Participants 8 and 1, who described the process of streaming students into Standard and AHS Standard groups within the same class. This streaming in a selective system increases the need for different teaching methods. Participant 11 highlighted this, saying the education system "is not a one-size-fits-all." Overall, participants identified differentiation as a fundamental requirement in middle school teaching, with AI offering a practical means of achieving it despite the structural complexities of the system.

Furthermore, reviewing existing textbooks and conducting internet searches were each described as time-consuming processes (Participant 7); such tasks can be replaced by an AI tool that can take one task and produce variations tailored to students' needs. Similarly, Participant 5 stated that course materials used in middle schools are not conceived for heterogeneous classes. In this respect, AI can aid in differentiation, meaning that teachers "can say much more quickly, just make my vocabulary lists, help me with that" (Participant 5). In this specific ELT/L context, the development of vocabulary learning and understanding in coursebooks can be complemented through the use of AI. In addition to vocabulary support, Participants 6 and 9 described how AI can facilitate the simultaneous adaptation of tasks for varying levels. Participant 9 noted the ease of generating differentiated tasks, explaining, "AI means I can create three different worksheets on the same topic with a single click." This ease was similarly noted in the interview with Participant 6, who commented that AI tools enable teachers to "fall back on this possibility of easier differentiation," particularly when addressing different learning levels simultaneously. The last quote indicates a likely way in which teachers will utilise AI in the future, suggesting that it will become a default tool for teachers when differentiating materials.

AI for Teacher Support

The final aspect of the theme of Teacher Integration of AI in ELT/L in middle schools relates to miscellaneous uses. One key area in this respect was idea generation, whereby AI tools are used by teachers to innovate their lessons and create new content. For example, Participants 1, 5 and 6 noted that they use AI to support planning and gather inspiration for teaching. Participant 9 mentioned a key use of AI. They noted that it could assist teachers who are teaching subjects outside their expertise or who entered the profession through lateral entry programmes. Indeed, this participant noted they themselves were not "a trained English teacher," despite teaching the subject. In this respect, they reported that AI helped prepare them for ELT/L. Another aspect identified was that AI allows teachers to focus more on students and the classroom environment: "it lets the teacher concentrate more on problem issues in the class, which we don't do always or we don't get to" (Participant 4). These varying yet interconnected comments express how AI can help educators in middle schools in their roles as language teachers. Having discussed the results

from the participants' responses on how they use AI in their teaching practices, the next theme to be examined is teachers' perceptions of student use of AI in ELT/L.

4.2 Theme 2: Teacher Readiness and Perceptions

Using AI in an ELT/L context means that educators must be willing, ready, and equipped to effectively incorporate this technology into their language teaching. This study focused on teachers' perceptions, which stood out in participants' responses and discussions. Responses indicate that the participants held a wide range of views. Whilst most of the teachers interviewed were generally willing to integrate some form of AI into their work, there were discrepancies in terms of how prepared they were to use it effectively and efficiently. Furthermore, there were differences in terms of the adequacy of training they had received, both in terms of initial teacher training and in continued professional development.

Most participants showed willingness, but Participant 6 focused on practicality and immediate success when discussing their openness to use AI in teaching. "If I try a new tool and it does not work after the second try, I have neither motivation with AI nor any desire to continue and invest more time." Thus, ease of use and design are key factors in incorporating AI tools into teachers' practices. Furthermore, Participant 6 suggested that a good understanding of an AI tool takes time, which can hinder the experience. Initial success was also posited by this participant as being necessary for the adoption of AI, noting that "if something comes out on the first try, then that's nice and beautiful. So, I think it also depends on the tool" (Participant 6). As described here, the participant suggested that the usability of a specific tool is essential in their adoption. Another participant reflected, "I haven't invested so much time yet to discover new tools or all the tools that are available" (Participant 7), suggesting both time constraints and the overwhelming nature of the numerous available technologies. A sense of ongoing transition was also present: "I have to honestly admit that it's also a leap that I still have to take for myself" (Participant 8), acknowledging the gap between current practice and future goals. For some, the rapid development of AI tools added to the challenge: "I don't think I can ever be too well prepared because the systems adapt and change so often" (Participant 4). Adapting to new technologies is essential to support students and enhance their future education and careers.

In addition to this, Participant 4's response also addressed the challenges of equity for students in Viennese middle schools: "The kids that we teach are often already at a disadvantage, and if we can bring it into the school some way, it's easier for them because this is going to be their future." The challenges of the future, particularly with regard to AI and targeted education for middle schoolers, are the themes of this response. However, to address certain issues, teachers must be prepared to utilise AI tools in their English lessons, planning, and other areas. Indeed, this was a reported aspect of this study, emerging in the varied self-evaluations of teachers' preparedness through their studies, self-study, or professional development programmes.

In terms of being prepared through the teachers' education and studies, only one participant had received AEd as part of their initial teacher training. Participant 6 noted that they were finishing their MEd and that AI "was partly a topic in my training, but it was about how we are allowed to use AI, so we as students. I think AI was mentioned once as a tool, but not really somehow in detail." Describing only the ways in which university students can use AI, rather than teachers, indicates that AI-based tools have not yet been adopted into teacher training curricula. The potential uses as a student are very different compared to those as a teacher. No other participant mentioned that they had any formal education with AI as part of their teacher training. However, Participant 9 mentioned that they had undergone an internal professional development programme on AI, although this course was not discussed in any detail. Furthermore, Participant 11 expressed the desire to undertake a course similar to their headteacher's training, but, at the time of the interview, this had not yet taken place. Finally, Participant 7 mentioned that they would like to attend a training course for using AI but had not yet got around to it. Similarly, this interaction between AI proliferation and preparedness was mentioned by one teacher who noted, "because there are already so many different AI programs and tools, but they work well or poorly or work well or poorly in different languages. Um, that's why it's rather difficult to implement" (Participant 6). On one hand, almost all of the participants lacked formal training with AI and its possible uses in education and in ELT/L. On the other hand, many participants noted that they had trialled AI in their own time and were mainly autodidactic. Indeed, teachers expressed the ability to use AI and understand how to implement it in teaching as mostly a process of self-study, trial and error, and experimentation.

Despite various challenges, most participants reported feeling ready in attitude but not fully prepared in practice. Participant 6 noted being generally open to using AI but lacking the necessary skills. Participant 5 felt confident with the technical side but uncertain about how to manage its use with students and had not fully considered its ethical implications. Participant 9 felt well prepared due to frequent computer use, while Participant 11 described limited knowledge and hoped to learn more in the future. Overall, this theme shows that while most teachers are open to the idea of using AI in their work, there remains a significant discrepancy between being willing and actually feeling prepared. Many participants said they were curious and even excited about the possibilities AI offers, but they also pointed out that they have not received enough training, either during their studies or in their current jobs, to really understand how to use it well. In most cases, the teachers were figuring things out on their own, experimenting when they had time, and learning by doing. A few felt confident with the technical side of things, but even so, they raised questions about how to use AI responsibly in the classroom or how to guide students in using it effectively. Others mentioned that the sheer number of tools and their rapid evolution made it hard to keep up.

4.3 Theme 3: Student Use and Impact of AI Tools on Language Learning

According to the data, the theme of middle school students' use of AI in ELT/L emerged as one of the most critical aspects of this study. The participants discussed their thoughts on how students currently use AI and how they could use it in the future. Furthermore, their perceptions regarding its usefulness, support, and critical application were central elements in many discussions. In general, the participants showed support for the use of AI in ELT/L by students. However, they noted that its use must remain critical and responsible. Many participants acknowledged that AI is now a part of students' everyday lives. Most students have mobile phones, iPads or digital equipment, which means that they are regularly confronted with some form of AI (Participant 7; Participant 11). On this topic, the support of AI in an educational context was drawn upon to ensure that students had utilised the advantages of AI (Participant 1, 4, 7, 11), not only outside but also inside the classroom. This was often discussed in relation to acquiring new skills through the use of AI. However, as stated above, the teachers also perceived the necessity of remaining critical

of AI tools. In this regard, Participant 1 expressed the view that when working with ChatGPT for an assignment or for language learning, students have to "read it," and not just "copy" it. Additionally, "it's actually important to reflect on it in the learning process and actually analyse the results" (Participant 7). Furthermore, teachers have to be ready to scrutinise students' work after it is produced to ensure academic integrity and interaction with AI with the material, rather than simply accepting a blind copy of AI-generated output from students (Participant 5). Similarly, teachers need to actually instruct students on how to use AI in their work, so that students "know how to work with it [AI]" and engage "critically" with it (Participant 1). This aspect of AI support alongside critical use was a common perception voiced throughout many interviews. Many participants also gave concrete examples of how students can use AI in ELT/L.

In terms of developing language skills amongst students, the participants reported numerous ways in which AI can help with this, ranging from correcting spelling and grammar to pronunciation. Being able to write a grammatically and lexically accurate text in a specific style or form is a requirement of students learning English in Viennese middle schools. On this subject, Participant 5 noted that students can use AI to look up a "grammatical rule" to ensure that their text is accurate. Furthermore, Participant 1 discussed the benefit of students using Grammarly to check their spelling, punctuation and grammar. This was described as being advantageous for both students and teachers. Other participants further discussed writing, including, most notably, how AI can specifically help with the construction of written work, showing students "what the structure of the texts looks like" (Participant 8). Such assistance allows students to practice successful writing on their own terms. Effectively, this constitutes the use of AI to aid students in independent learning in ELT/L, which was another key aspect of this study and will subsequently be discussed.

Independent learning

When considering the teachers' perspectives on independent learning specifically, numerous aspects emerged. These ranged from the ability to provide scaffolded support for individual learners to helping students in large, diverse classrooms. For example, AI can break down complex tasks into more straightforward steps for learners, offering personalised learning experiences so that

students can work independently (Participant 9). Furthermore, the participant described AI use as enabling students to take ownership of their own work without needing support from the teacher. Another relevant example of AI usage was provided by Participant 4, who noted that AI can assist with extension work for students who work at different paces, individualising learning paths, and adapting to the learner and their way of thinking in the process. Specifically, they described AI as being able to “accommodate everyone and give the teacher more time to think about the kids who need more help, allow kids to work more independently if they want to” (Participant 4). This presents advantages to both the student and the teacher. It is not only in the classroom environment that students can benefit from AI in relation to learning English; AI tools such as chatbots provide students with the opportunity to practise speaking and interacting in the English language at home as well. This supports autonomy and self-regulation (Participant 9). Chatbots were described by Participant 9 as being “very good for learning a language.” The connection between independent learning and the use of technology in ELT/L and education was further noted by teachers as having a significant impact on student motivation through engagement with AI. This theme recurred in many interviews and represented a key advantage of students using AI as this was seen to impact on student motivation and engagement positively.

The classroom environment is not ideal for every learner. However, multiple participants in this study mentioned that the use of AI in English lessons can motivate students and engage them more fully in the learning experience. It was mentioned that most middle schools now have iPads or some form of digital hardware that they can use in their lessons, taking advantage of the Austrian government’s initiative (Geräteinitiative Digitales Lernen) to provide digital devices to all students. One participant noted that “the use of digital media in the classroom is more interesting for many students than just face-to-face teaching” (Participant 8). Another participant described capturing students’ interest by using AI for making lessons “more fun for the kids because it’s engaging” (Participant 1). Similarly, another participant had noticed increased student interaction with AI and opined that “interaction with AI is good for learning” (Participant 9). Participant 5 further expanded upon this increase in interaction, engagement and motivation with AI, by specifically saying that, “I also think that it can be very motivating for students who are not keeping up or are underchallenged,

that they can get tailor-made English resources. It’s much more interactive and motivating.” When students have access to materials that are adapted to their language level through AI, it increases their engagement in the lessons. However, it should be noted that greater interaction and motivation with AI can be achieved through the use of digital media and AI in English lessons only as long as students have the requisite digital skills to be able to use this software effectively. This issue constitutes the first of the challenges to student use of AI in ELT/L, as perceived by teachers.

Student’s digital skills

Despite various challenges, most participants reported feeling ready in attitude but not fully prepared in practice. Participant 6 noted being generally open to using AI but lacking the necessary skills. Participant 5 felt confident with the technical side but uncertain about how to manage its use with students and had not fully considered its ethical implications. Participant 9 felt well prepared due to frequent computer use, while Participant 11 described limited knowledge and hoped to learn more in the future. Interviewees frequently commented on students’ digital skills, with factors such as students’ age, language proficiency, and class level influencing teachers’ perspectives on AI usability in ELT/L. Participants emphasised that students’ basic digital literacy needed to be addressed before AI could be effectively used. Participant 9 stated that “it’s the digital skills that children still need to develop in order to be able to use AI in such a way that it really helps as a learning partner,” and Participant 7 highlighted that younger students in early grades required more support with basic digital platforms. Participant 6 noted that age isn’t strictly tied to digital literacy. However, it’s often better to introduce AI to older students who have foundational skills. Younger students usually need to focus on basic digital skills first before working with AI.

Participants noted their awareness of AI’s potential uses in ELT/L for middle schoolers. However, they also expressed many concerns about students misusing AI. For example, teachers frequently mentioned cheating and dishonesty. Considering the use of AI for cheating during tests and other assignments, the “cheat sheet” was seen as a precursor to the development of AI (Participant 7). This was further expanded upon by another participant, who stated, “you should not give a writing task as homework where you cannot

see if they do it themselves" (Participant 1). In their view, students cannot be relied on to produce their own work for homework and other written assignments independently without using AI. Such tasks are a fundamental part of language learning, relating to accuracy, fluency, and critical thinking. This concern was often related to the assertion of over-reliance and dependency on AI for learning. Many participants expressed the concern that students can become overly dependent on AI tools, which can lead learners to complete tasks without engaging cognitively or learning independently. Therefore, students must use AI tools and programs responsibly and critically.

Teachers worried that students might lose their critical thinking when using AI tools. Some also doubted their ability to manage this challenge effectively. Some of the responses from participants suggest that students cannot use AI critically or reflectively, instead accepting outputs without question. It is worth noting here that Participant 7 argued that teachers should "make [students] understand that [AI] is a useful aid, but not the solution to everything" and "that it is not going to do the work for them." This assertion suggests that AI has its benefits but should not be seen as a go-to replacement for learning and critical thinking. In addition to this, another participant added that there should be "a balance between AI and independent work. Just because AI is so cool doesn't mean that I can use it for everything. I have to be able to do some things myself" (Participant 11). In other words, whilst AI and digital tools can be fun, the student should still be responsible for their learning. This concern can be addressed by teachers providing guidance and boundaries, thereby offsetting the potential lack of critical thinking and learning.

4.4 Theme 4: Challenges and Concerns with AI tools in ELT/L

The participants mentioned key challenges with AI that haven't yet been covered. They focused mainly on the reliability and bias of AI software, as well as the technical limitations in Viennese middle schools. Data protection was specifically mentioned by the interviewer but was not addressed by any of the teachers. Most of the participants were aware of various challenges concerning the data that is being used by AI software, such as ChatGPT. Two relevant aspects were discussed by two participants. Participant 11 reflected on the credibility of AI-generated content, noting that although it can appear professional and convincing, it is ultimately

based on unverified information from the internet and lacks oversight by experts, meaning students must learn to critically evaluate it. This raises important issues: AI-generated content can seem accurate, but without expert verification, it may be biased or unreliable. In this respect, Participant 1 emphasised the need to critically assess the sources behind AI content, comparing it to social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, where misinformation is common. The information provided by AI tools and chatbots cannot be taken as fully reliable, reinforcing the need for students and teachers to remain critical in their use of AI in learning. In addition to these concerns, participants also remarked on the more practical challenges of integrating AI in middle schools.

A few participants in this study noted that technical infrastructure hampered their desire to incorporate AI into their lessons. Firstly, the quality of the internet in some schools was deemed unstable and lacking (Participant 1; Participant 9). Although this issue lies beyond teachers' control, it significantly impacts the way in which they utilise digital media and AI tools in the classroom. Without oversimplifying the matter, stable internet is essential for the integration of AI tools in language lessons; the lack of it was described as "frustrating" (Participant 9). Internet problems were reported to be exacerbated by students and their digital devices. As part of the government's digital initiative scheme, all students in lower secondary school are given the opportunity to purchase a device at a reduced cost, with the school having autonomy over the decision. Participants 1 and 9 remarked on the use of these devices among students, explicitly mentioning the iPad that each child possesses at school. The teachers remarked that, frequently, these devices were not present during the lesson, not charged, or not properly maintained, rendering them essentially useless in a classroom environment. This was noted as a challenge.

4.5 Theme 5: Head Teachers' Perceptions of AI Tools amongst Teachers and Students

In comparing the headteachers' responses to the insights provided by the teachers, there is firstly a strong indication that teachers are using AI in their practices. Whilst this is not exclusively linked to ELT/L, there is an awareness from headteachers concerning the use of AI tools amongst their staff. The extent of this depends on certain factors, such as the date at which teachers completed

their training. This demonstrates a commonality between the school leader's perspective and the teachers' responses on their own usage of AI in ELT/L. However, the responses also suggest that there is contextual divergence between different schools. Whilst some schools are well-equipped and institutionally prepared, others are hampered by outdated tools that do not support AI.

In answering questions about teachers' integration of AI in their teaching and the infrastructure needed to enable this, both headteachers maintained that they were aware that their colleagues were using AI in their teaching practices. Participant 10 stated explicitly that they knew of teachers using AI in certain classes, and this was especially in relation to teachers who had recently graduated. Here they noted, "those who have just come out of their academic careers are used to using it, and they use it as a matter of course here" (Participant 10). Whilst aware that not "100% of teachers" were using AI, the headteacher expressed that some colleagues "find that it's simply faster to use AI" (Participant 10). Similarly, Participant 3 added that, "we as a school have said that we want it [AI] because it is part of our future and an essential part of the future for our children." Echoing the perceptions of the teachers, AI integration is seen by headteachers as being essential for students' prospective lives, both during and after middle school.

In terms of the schoolwide implementation of AI in teaching and learning practices, there were discrepancies between the headteachers' and the teachers' responses. Participant 3 expressed the view that their school "has always been very open to digitalisation and has already done a great deal of preparatory work in this area," being equipped with "digital boards in all classes," having "provided all children with iPads", and having "Wi-Fi throughout the school." Having already achieved this level of digitalisation on an institutional level, they described the integration of AI as being "the next logical step" (Participant 3). Here, it is essential to note that Participant 3's school is participating in the Austrian-wide, governmental AI pilot scheme for implementing AI in schools using the AI Fobizz. However, this is the only Viennese middle school taking part in the scheme. Conversely, Participant 10 mentioned technical barriers that impede the use of AI in their work practices. This was not in relation to teaching practices but rather the fact that "the system we work with is predetermined, it's this virtual workplace under Windows. And unfortunately, it is

so outdated that the programs available in it do not yet allow the direct integration of this Windows, for example, Copilot." The headteacher felt that this program would expedite their work process, but unfortunately, it was not possible to use it. Thus, technical barriers hindering the use of AI in the work environment represented an issue that was similarly raised by some teachers in the study.

Alongside general insights on teachers' integration of AI into their teaching practices, this study sought to elicit responses specifically on the middle school environment and differentiation through AI. Both headteachers agreed with the majority of teachers that AI can support differentiation and personalised learning, in the context of both teacher use and student use. Participant 10 noted that "AI helps to adapt materials, teaching materials, to these different ability levels," illustrating how AI enables teachers to tailor content to suit students' varying needs and abilities. Similarly, Participant 7 emphasised the flexibility of AI in creating multiple versions of the same task, explaining that "we can actually take one and the same task and let the tool develop three different variants," highlighting how differentiation can be practically implemented. Participant 3 extended this discussion by reflecting on how AI allows students themselves to engage in differentiated, exploratory learning. The participant explained that AI-powered educational programs can automatically adjust to a learner's level, and students who find a task too challenging can quickly recognise this and select a more suitable example, much like they would in a hands-on, game-based learning environment. This trial-and-error process enables learners to discover effective strategies independently, thereby fostering experiential learning and self-regulated differentiation (Participant 3). However, the extent to which students can independently benefit from such tools was not viewed uncritically. Participant 10 compared the current challenges of digital literacy and AI use to the early days of the internet and personal computers in education, noting that students' success depends heavily on their language proficiency and ability to craft effective prompts. They observed that "students who are simply not as eloquent and not as good at language have real difficulties" in identifying relevant information and that AI may "actually be more helpful as a tool for supporting better students," potentially widening existing achievement gaps as "the high-performing students will become even better because they know how to use an AI and the weaker students will be overwhelmed" (Participant

10). This facet of individualisation and differentiation further underscores the convergence between teachers' and headteachers' views. Both groups recognise AI's potential to enhance differentiation, though teachers tended to frame this in terms of instructional design, while headteachers offered more student-centred perspectives on experiential and autonomous learning. To build on this understanding of differentiation, we need to explore how both groups view teacher preparedness.

5. Discussion

Although this qualitative study was limited to 11 educators across five middle schools in Vienna, it nevertheless demonstrates that AI has become a significant topic in education. Teachers in ELT/L are using AI in diverse ways; there are clear benefits and potential for AI support in creating teaching materials and lesson plans. In the urban middle school context, where educators often teach large, heterogeneous classes, AI tools can help address varying language levels, learning needs, and classroom dynamics. This can be seen in their own practices or in student usage of AI tools in lessons. Furthermore, educators can more easily and effectively tailor their resources to match students' needs and provide differentiated instruction. However, while teachers show a willingness to explore AI and its uses in ELT/L, there remains a lack of structural and institutional support. Time constraints, lack of training, limited digital infrastructure, and the demands of the curriculum pose significant barriers.

Additionally, the practical, social, and ethical challenges of AI integration are pronounced in the middle school environment. Students' digital skills and basic digital literacy need to be developed before AI can be successfully introduced. This prerequisite is often assumed in literature (Ericsson et al., 2023), yet findings from this study suggest that it is a critical and under-discussed barrier. The results of this study, in relation to the research question, will be explored and examined further in this subchapter.

5.1 Integration of AI in ELT/L in Viennese Middle Schools

This study found that teachers could identify a variety of AI programs and exhibit a general awareness of AI; however, this primarily concerned GenAI. Among the 17 tools mentioned by all participants, OpenAI's ChatGPT was the most

frequently cited tool. While this research project maintained a broad stance regarding AI and the tools that may be useful in ELT/L, the responses predominantly revolved around ChatGPT. This distribution was evenly spread across all participants, regardless of age or experience. The prevalence of ChatGPT as being synonymous with AI can be observed in the numerous studies, reviewed as part of this project, which focused solely on ChatGPT as part of their research (Hong, 2023; Kohnke et al., 2023a; Kuhail et al., 2023; Kusuma et al., 2024; Shaikh et al., 2023; Young & Shishido, 2023). This further supports the finding of Moorhouse (2024), who observed a growing reliance on high-profile generative AI tools. Surprisingly, educational AI tools were mentioned far less frequently. Twee was the second tool most mentioned by teachers; nevertheless, benefits were reported to educators in terms of idea generation, creating teaching materials, lesson planning, and saving teachers' time. Twee was not mentioned explicitly in the literature reviews for this study, though its capabilities mirror those of other AI programs.

Among the tools mentioned, there is a distinction between those that are teacher-facing and those that are student-facing (Baker et al., 2019) as well as non-specific, general AI. ChatGPT, Google Translate, DALL-E2/E3, Google Gemini, Copilot, and SnapAI belong to the latter group and can be used by both teachers and students alike. Generally, teachers are not aware of AI programs that could be of use to them in their practices. Very few participants mentioned anything beyond general AI tools. Nevertheless, there are clear advantages of these teacher-oriented educational resources, as ToTeach, Twee, Fobizz, Kahoot!, and Quizlet can assist in developing teaching materials and lesson plans. However, these remained largely unmentioned or inadequately described. This indicates that, while teachers in Viennese middle schools recognise AI, they are less familiar with the specific tools that are tailored to their particular needs and practices. This suggests that while integration is occurring, it is not yet strategic or fully informed.

Similarly, in the responses regarding students' use of AI and tools specifically designed for educational purposes, the tools StudySketch and Duolingo were scarcely mentioned. This limited awareness of learning-facing tools contrasts with studies by Bonner et al. (2023) and Mohamed (2024), who found that such tools can significantly enhance language learning when used and known. While this could be attributed to the low number

of teachers participating in this study, it can be asserted that teachers exhibit a lack of awareness of tools that can be utilised in an educational context. Tools specifically designed for education, ELT/L, and student learning are less recognised and not frequently utilised. The prevalence of AI tools such as ChatGPT may be linked to their mainstream appeal; however, it can also be argued that this bias is due to educators' insufficient training. Professional development programmes would increase teachers' familiarity with these tools, thereby increasing the likelihood of their use and exploration by teachers. Neither educators nor middle school students can fully benefit from AI's potential applications if they have a limited understanding of it. Thus, whilst Viennese middle school teachers are generally aware of AI, their current use is centred on a few high-profile tools, particularly ChatGPT. Therefore, this limits their ability to exploit the broader pedagogical potential of AI in ELT/L.

In considering the way in which AI tools are used, it can be maintained that the integration of AI in ELT/L in Viennese middle schools primarily revolves around practical applications that aim to enhance and address the demands of teaching. The dominant use by teachers in this study was for creating teaching materials. Vienna's middle school English teachers use AI, especially GenAI, to generate a wide range of language learning resources for students, including reading texts, listening tasks, vocabulary, exercises, cloze texts, and full worksheets. This is supported in a considerable amount of literature for example: Bonner et al. (2023), Kusuma et al. (2024), Mohamed (2024), Shaikh et al (2023), and Shamsuddinova et al. (2024b). The value lies in automating repetitive and mundane tasks, (Shamsuddinova et al., 2024b). This aligns with a growing trend in the literature, which describes how AI tools are seen as supporting teachers in material creation. AI's generation of materials alleviates teachers' workloads and adapts to professional demands. This study found that newer teachers are particularly drawn to AI tools for material creation, echoing Moorhouse's (2024) study on pre-service and first-year teachers. Additionally, this study also found that a majority of participants were using AI regularly in this area of teaching and preparation, in contrast to Kusuma et al.'s (2024) claim that AI use was more exploratory rather than fully cemented into teaching practice. Generally, middle school teachers use AI to assist them with pragmatic aspects of their work, such as simplifying repetitive tasks. Whilst it was reported in this study that AI was

useful in helping with innovative task design, as observed in Shamsuddinova et al.'s study (2024b), this was not a key area of use for middle school teachers. In this regard, creating teaching material was one of the aspects for which teachers had implemented and integrated AI into their teaching practices for ELT/L. Teachers in this study further reported that they use AI for lesson planning, a practice also observed in previous literature on the topic of AI in ELT/L. This is especially in comparison with Kusuma et al. (2024), who also suggest the exploratory use of AI tools by teachers. A key novel contribution of this study is the finding that differentiation, rather than efficiency or inspiration, is the primary reason teachers in this context use AI tools. This contrasts with studies such as Mohamed (2024) and Shamsuddinova et al., (2024) where differentiation is mentioned but not foregrounded as the central motivation.

Furthermore, one of the uses of AI in ELT/L in middle schools that was underrepresented in comparison to previous research was for assessment. Despite this being specifically raised in the interviews, it was only mentioned by two participants and not in any particular detail. This contrasts with Nazaretsky et al. (2022), who describe AI assessment tools as emerging supports in language education. The minimal use found here points to a developmental gap in assessment applications at the middle school level. One potential reason for this is that many of the studies that were reviewed focused on university students. Only a handful of research papers used middle schools as their target audience. Whilst AI for assessment in language learning is deemed beneficial for language learning (Bonner et al., 2023; Kusuma et al., 2024; Mohamed, 2024; Nazaretsky et al., 2022), this has not been sufficiently explored in this study. This suggests a potential gap between the perceived potential of AI in assessment and its actual adoption at middle school level.

Collectively, these findings indicate that while AI is being integrated into ELT/L in Viennese middle schools, this integration is primarily functional and tool-driven rather than being pedagogically guided. Teachers rely heavily on widely known generative AI tools, often without awareness of specialised educational technologies. This limited scope of application reflects broader issues of access, training, and familiarity, which will be further explored through an analysis of teachers' motivations for AI use.

5.2 Teacher Motivation for Integrating AI

This project argues that teachers' motivations for integrating AI are largely pragmatic. Teachers' main reasons for integrating AI are to enhance their effectiveness, to save time, and to address challenges in the classroom and their preparation work. Participants frequently identified efficiency and time-saving as a significant factor in their responses. Specifically, they highlighted the automation and adaptive capabilities of certain AI tools as being beneficial for teachers. This was followed by the necessity to automate routine and repetitive tasks, and the hope of improving students' potential. Motivations found in this research study were also present in almost every study conducted on AI in ETL/L (Jiang, 2022; Mohamed, 2024; Moorhouse, 2024; Nazaretsky et al., 2022; Shamsuddinova et al., 2024a). However, this study offers fresh perspectives on why AI is being integrated into teaching practices in Viennese middle schools. A significant insight reveals that a major reason teachers adopt AI is to differentiate their teaching materials more effectively.

AI is widely recognised and utilised as a tool for differentiation, which is necessary in heterogeneous classes. This highlights one of the main reasons why teachers in this study used AI, with this context-specific application being notably emphasised in the findings. Classes of mixed abilities present a significant challenge for Viennese middle schools, given the Austrian education system's focus on academic selection and the streaming of middle school classes into different academic groups. To address this, teachers in middle schools utilise AI in ELT/L to generate multiple versions of the same language learning text and create tailored vocabulary lists or grammar exercises. The headteachers in this study strongly agreed with the teachers' perceptions regarding the ways in which they used AI to differentiate materials and aid in personalised learning. This aligns with the research showing AI's impact on addressing classroom heterogeneity (Tang et al., 2024) and its capability to generate individualised learning materials (Mohamed, 2024; Nazaretsky et al., 2022). However, the way in which the participants of this study explicitly mentioned AI's automation and adaptability suggests that differentiation through AI is a pedagogical necessity. This is especially illustrated by the example of using AI to adapt existing materials and textbooks that were deemed unsuitable for Viennese middle schoolers. Although Kuhail et al. (2023) reported

that AI can adapt existing materials, this study provides further context regarding the extent to which differentiation and adaptation of materials can be achieved through AI. In this case, AI can be employed by teachers to support them within a system characterised by a dual grading approach and classroom heterogeneity. Differentiation remains a vital application of AI by English teachers in this framework and remains a key factor in its integration. In light of equity and equitable education (Selwyn, 2021), this project argues that AI tools can alleviate some of the challenges that are recurrent in the Viennese middle school. If teachers and students have been adequately trained to integrate and implement AI tools, this can promote a more equitable school system, as students would have targeted resources to meet their needs.

Moreover, this study found that there were numerous ways in which AI can assist students in developing core language skills. This was proposed in terms of pronunciation, through passive corrections, mimicking a human teacher's approach, which was perceived as successful. This aligns with previous studies showing that AI tools can aid speaking practice with immediate feedback and improved pronunciation (Dizon & Tang, 2020; Ericsson et al., 2023; Zou & Wang, 2024). In addition, this was coupled with the benefit of using AI for writing and grammar. Participants noted AI's utility in looking up grammatical rules and tools such as Grammarly for checking spelling, punctuation and grammar. In line with this, the research highlights Automated Writing Evaluation tools such as Grammarly for improving accuracy in writing (Dizon & Tang, 2020; Kern, 2024; Klimova et al., 2023). Therefore, there is motivation for students to use AI and, similarly, reasons for teachers to adopt these tools in their teaching practices. While teachers in this study highlighted the benefits of using AI for language learning in middle schools, a primary reason for teachers' adoption was to promote independent and personalised learning among students. This project identifies that a key motivation for integrating AI into teaching practices is to benefit students. English teachers in Viennese middle schools generally support the use of AI by students, albeit with a critical perspective. AI can enhance student motivation and engagement, provide advantages for language skill development, and facilitate independent learning. Therefore, this study argues that one of the reasons teachers are utilising AI is to enhance their students' language learning and the methods they employ in education.

This study further highlights the importance of AI tools to empower students to gain independence in their education at Viennese middle schools. AI is viewed as enabling advanced learners to independently tackle extended tasks while providing repetition and support for those who struggle. Consequently, teachers can dedicate their time to students needing more direct assistance. Additionally, the use of tools such as StudySketch to create personalised exercises and tests was emphasised, for promoting student agency in developing their resources. One finding in this regard was that AI tools can scaffold complex assignments, tailor learning paths, and adjust to individual learners' thought processes, thereby encouraging students' ownership of their work. This aligns with existing literature regarding AI's role in supporting learner autonomy (Nazaretsky et al., 2022). The potential of chatbots for providing around-the-clock speaking practice and feedback outside of the classroom, enhancing autonomy and self-regulation. This supports findings that chatbots can function as personal tutors and replicate real-life dialogue, increasing student motivation (Shaikh et al., 2023). In short, teachers in Viennese middle schools see AI as a useful way to help students become more independent learners. By supporting personalised learning, breaking down complex tasks, and offering different types of support, AI allows students to take greater ownership of their learning and work at their own pace. This contributes to the current literature on learner autonomy through AI (Fryer et al., 2020; Goodwin-Jones, 2022), by grounding the benefits of AI tools to students in concrete school environments.

Essentially, it can be argued that teachers in Viennese middle schools adopt AI in order to address practical challenges in the classroom. These include reducing workload, enhancing preparation efficiency, and adapting materials to meet the needs of diverse learners. Teachers' use of AI primarily focuses on differentiation and personalised instruction, which are particularly important in the context of heterogeneous classes. The next section explores teachers' perceptions of AI in ELT/L and in the middle school context.

5.3 Teacher Perceptions of AI Tools

Teacher perceptions are a crucial element of this study as they relate to teachers' AI willingness and preparedness, and the challenges of integrating AI into Viennese middle schools. The responses provide essential background regarding

the reasons for teachers' use of AI, or lack thereof. However, this project argues that teachers in Viennese middle schools are generally willing to use AI in their practices but lack the necessary support to implement it effectively, often relying on self-study. Arguably, this latter point is the most significant contribution this study makes to the current literature, and it will be discussed in more detail below.

One of the main findings of this research project is that teachers in Viennese middle schools are generally willing and open to integrating AI in their practices; nevertheless, there remains a significant gap in terms of preparedness. Unlike Belda-Medina & Kokošková (2024), who report a growing trust in AI through guided exposure, this study suggests that teacher learning and experience with AI is largely self-directed. Nonetheless, there is a need for teachers to be prepared and equipped with the necessary digital and AI literacy skills. (Hockly, 2023; Kohnke et al., 2023a; Nazaretsky et al., 2022). However, the majority of teachers in this study who were currently using AI stated that they had very little formal training in this area. Indeed, this was the first barrier to adoption noted as part of this study. Only one participant mentioned AIEd having been a part of their initial teacher training, despite still being currently enrolled in their master's programme in education. Other participants were aware of professional development programmes or were being considered by their headteachers but had no official support. Aside from the pilot study scheme, it can be argued that middle school teachers have neither prepared themselves nor have they been prepared, for the rapid influx of AI into school life. It can be argued that the integration of AI into teaching practices in ELT/L has occurred predominantly through self-study and trial and error. This lack of training and unpreparedness for AI is further evident. This represented another barrier to adoption, as participants indicated that they lacked the time to explore new tools and trial the various functions of AI. Without formal training on how to use these tools, usability and immediate success with a program are critical for teacher adoption. Therefore, the findings from this research can be interpreted through Davis's Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1989), as ease of use and perceptions of usefulness impact technology adoption. If a tool does not work quickly, motivation can be lost. While teachers in Viennese middle schools are generally open and willing to integrate AI into their English language teaching practices, a major barrier to effective integration

is their lack of formal training and preparedness, which forces them to rely on self-directed learning and limits widespread, confident adoption.

Another critical area in terms of teachers' perceptions of AI in ELT/L in Viennese middle schools' concerns students' digital literacy skills and the potential for misuse. In this respect, it can be observed that teachers' perceptions of the benefits of AI are explicitly linked to students' ability to use it. As part of this study, teachers often emphasised the need to address students' fundamental digital literacy skills before AI can become an effective tool. Age also emerged as a significant factor, with younger middle school students frequently lacking essential digital skills. This highlights the necessity of focusing on foundational skills prior to the introduction of AI. On the other hand, this challenge was often overlooked in the literature on AI's potential, which frequently assumes a baseline level of digital competency. Ericsson et al.'s (2023) study, which examined the use of AI dialogue systems by middle school students, reported positive outcomes in terms of motivation and pronunciation. However, this study provides additional insight by highlighting the disparities in basic digital literacy among this age group. In summary, it can generally be maintained that AI is subsidiary to other digital skills and should only be introduced after digital proficiency is established. This finding was frequently linked to students' abilities to use these tools critically.

Finally, middle school teachers expressed their perceptions in terms of the integration of AI in ELT/L in Viennese middle schools regarding student cheating and dishonesty related to AI. This relates critically to the other ideas explored in this section as this suggests another barrier to adoption. Academic integrity was particularly highlighted as being an issue within writing assignments. This aligns with critical viewpoints on AI, as highlighted by Mohamed (2024) and Selwyn (2021), who warn against the uncritical acceptance of AI-generated content. This study adds that in younger cohorts, academic integrity challenges are compounded by a lack of clarity over what constitutes acceptable AI use, a problem that teachers feel ill-equipped to address. A primary concern raised in this respect was the potential for students to become overly reliant on AI, which could result in diminished cognitive engagement and a decline in independent thinking. Teachers noted the danger of students uncritically accepting AI outputs without assessing their accuracy or potential biases. This

raises a fundamental pedagogical challenge: finding a balance between leveraging the benefits of AI and ensuring that students still engage in original thought. Furthermore, teachers expressed uncertainty regarding their ability to establish clear boundaries for the appropriate use of AI by students. Such findings highlight a significant challenge in integrating AI. Although teachers see its potential, they are equally aware of the risks associated with its misuse. In this respect, students, as well as teachers, need concrete guidance on how and when to use AI in ELT/L in Viennese middle schools.

In summary, this study contributes several novel findings to the literature: the key use of AI tools for differentiation in Viennese middle schools, the reliance on self-study and experimental learning with AI due to institutional unpreparedness, and the identification of digital literacy as a precursor for successful AI use amongst students and teachers for successful AI use. These findings provide a more nuanced understanding of how and why AI is used in ELT/L in the context of middle school education.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this phenomenologically informed, qualitative research project was to examine the state of AI in Viennese middle schools, as perceived by teachers in ELT/L. While the use of AI in education and its various applications in ELT/L have been investigated in scholarly literature, these studies have primarily focused on tertiary education and have not yet been situated within the Austrian context. Therefore, this study is one of the very few to investigate the uses of AI tools among teachers of younger, lower secondary learners, while also examining the Austrian education system, with a particular focus on Viennese middle schools. As such, the findings of this research were analysed according to the research question: how and why has AI been integrated in ELT/L in Viennese middle schools, and what are teachers' perceptions? The findings of this project generally align with those of many other studies conducted on this topic. However, they provide specific context to research on middle schools in Vienna, which are characterised by heterogeneity and mixed abilities. Thus, the results contribute new facets to AI in ELT/L.

Firstly, the major finding of this project was that middle school teachers generally use AI in three key areas: generating teaching materials, lesson planning, and differentiated instruction. While this is supported by previous research, it can be argued

that in this project, differentiation through the use of AI was dictated by the necessity to efficiently and effectively address heterogeneity in Viennese middle school classrooms. This was particularly in response to the lack of suitable existing materials for middle school students in Vienna. Furthermore, it can be maintained that teachers in this setting are motivated and open to using AI but face challenges in its adoption and in utilising its full potential. In this regard, teachers in this context lack formal training and sufficient institutional support. Consequently, educators find themselves in a situation where they can perceive the benefits of AI and its impact on their daily practice but are inadequately prepared. Finally, teachers involved in this study saw a great deal of potential in the use of AI programs for tackling mixed-ability classrooms and managing diverse classroom needs. Furthermore, this potential of AI is enhanced by its ability to support learner motivation and independence. Despite this potential, this study also found that there are a number of key barriers to the integration of AI. Teachers noted that they were constrained by time, perceived AI literacy as a subsidiary skill to students' overall digital competencies, and harboured numerous ethical concerns. Although these findings have been frequently reported in previous literature, the context of the Viennese middle school added nuances to the academic discussion on AI in ELT/L.

It can be argued that the contributions of this project to existing research are multifaceted. Firstly, this project adds valuable insights into a less-explored educational setting, as most of the existing literature on AI in ELT/L tends to focus on higher education rather than middle schools. It also confirms previous findings which have indicated that AI can support time efficiency and differentiated instruction, while tools such as chatbots and AI applications can promote independent learning and assist students in developing their language skills. In spite of this, the present study diverges from earlier research by demonstrating that, in the Viennese middle school context, AI is rarely used for assessment purposes. Moreover, this study indicates that teachers primarily rely on general-purpose tools such as ChatGPT rather than education-specific platforms. This may be linked to various factors, yet it could arguably stem from teachers' familiarity with these tools and the lack of targeted training or institutional guidance. Most significantly, the findings highlight the ways in which the school context itself, including curriculum requirements, classroom heterogeneity, and available resources, influences the adoption and application of AI in

practice. Not only do the insights provided by this study confirm the existing knowledge but they also introduce new perspectives relating to middle school teaching in urban centres such as Vienna. However, it is important to consider what these mean in practice for teachers in this school setting in Vienna.

6.1 Implications

As AI increasingly influences daily school life, the question is no longer whether it will be used meaningfully, but how. This transition necessitates a reflective response across educational practices, policies, and research. Teachers cannot be left to navigate this alone. Instead, they require time, professional development, and institutional support to engage critically and constructively with these tools. Targeted professional development regarding general-purpose and education-specific AI tools should be provided to support teachers. Furthermore, time and space should be dedicated in schools to learning and experimentation with AI. The primary focus of this training should be on exploring ways in which AI can enhance differentiated instruction, particularly in linguistically and academically diverse classrooms, which are typical in Viennese middle schools. Moreover, teachers should receive practical assistance to adapt assignments, organise instruction, and address individual learner needs using AI-based tools. From a policy perspective, a concerted effort is essential, including investments in digital infrastructure to establish shared conditions for AI applications across all types of schools. Teacher development programmes must systematically incorporate AI literacy, covering not only tool proficiency but also ethical reflection and pedagogical rationale. Additionally, curriculum plans must consciously acknowledge AI as a legitimate teaching aid and provide straightforward, pragmatic guidance for its responsible and pedagogically informed use. More research is needed to fill existing gaps, particularly in primary and lower secondary education, which remains underexplored in the literature. The growing significance of formative practice at these levels necessitates a closer examination of AI applications for assessment in middle schools, particularly their potential to support enhanced formative practices and alleviate workload.

6.1 Limitations

Since this is a qualitative study, the findings cannot be generalised to a larger population. The

goal here was to explore individual experiences and perspectives in depth, rather than to produce results that apply to everyone. The insights gained are closely tied to the experiences of only English language teachers in Viennese middle schools and contexts involved in the study. Although this provided rich data, interviews were all self-reported. This means data is based on participants' accounts rather than classroom observation, which may not fully represent actual practices.

Furthermore, the sample size of 11 participants constitutes a rather small yet acceptable sample size for interviews. If this study were to be conducted again, the researcher would ensure to interview teachers from more Viennese middle schools. Five schools across Vienna further limit the scope of this research. This is particularly important in considering the varying infrastructure in different schools. It is also important to consider the role of the researcher as an insider in this area. Whilst the familiarity with the subject matter allowed the researcher to ask specific questions based on AI, bias can also be introduced. These limitations were constantly reflected upon during the data analysis and writing of results.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that they have no known financial interests, personal relationships, or affiliations that could have influenced the work reported in this paper. A conflict-of-interest statement has been provided in accordance with academic and ethical publication standards.

7. Bibliography

Baker, T., Smith, L., & Nandra, A. (2019). Education Rebooted? Exploring the future of artificial intelligence in schools and colleges. Nesta. <https://www.nesta.org.uk/report/education-rebooted/>

Baumli, M. (2014). Collaborative Lesson Planning as Professional Development for Beginning Primary Teachers. *The New Educator*, 10(3), 182–200. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1547688X.2014.925741>

Bećirović, S. (2023). *Digital Pedagogy. The Use of Digital Technologies in Contemporary Education*. Springer Nature. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-0444-0>

Belda-Medina, J., & Kokošková, V. (2024). ChatGPT for language learning: Assessing teacher candidates' skills and perceptions using the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17501229.2024.2435900>

BMBWF. (2020). Die Mittelschule: Änderungen ab dem Schuljahr 2020/21 im Überblick. BMBWF. 1–44. https://www.bmb.gv.at/dam/jcr:7b6de1bc-36c1-4b54-88f0-7683120238d0/mittelschule_2020.pdf

BMBWF. (2022). Educational Paths in Austria 2022/23. BMBWF. 1–100. <https://www.bmbwf.gv.at/Themen/schule/schulsystem/sa.html>

BMBWF. (2023). Auseinandersetzung mit Künstlicher Intelligenz Bildungssystem. BMBWF. 1–18. https://www.bmb.gv.at/Themen/schule/zrp/ki/ki_asbs.html

Bonner, E., Lege, R., & Frazier, E. (2023). Large Language Model-Based Artificial Intelligence in The Language Classroom: Practical Ideas For Teaching. *Teaching English with Technology*, 2023(1), 23–41. <https://doi.org/10.56297/BKAM1691/WIEO1749>

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>

Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2018). *Research methods in education* (eighth edition). Routledge.

Crompton, H., Edmett, A., Ichaporia, N., & Burke, D. (2024). AI and English language teaching: Affordances and challenges. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, bjet.13460. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.13460>

Davis, F. D. (1989). Perceived Usefulness, Perceived Ease of Use, and User Acceptance of Information Technology. *MIS Quarterly*, 13(3), 319–340. <https://doi.org/10.2307/249008>

Dizon, G., & Tang, D. (2020). Intelligent Personal Assistants for Autonomous Second Language Learning: An Investigation Of Alexa. *The JALT CALL Journal*, 16(2), 107–120. <https://doi.org/10.29140/jaltcall.v16n2.273>

Dörnyei, Z. (2012). *Research methods in applied linguistics: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methodologies*. Oxford Univ. Press.

- Ebadi, S., Gholami, M., & Vakili, S. (2023). Investigating the Effects of Using *Grammarly* in EFL Writing: The Case of Articles. *Computers in the Schools, 40*(1), 85–105. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07380569.2022.2150067>
- Eder, F. & Neuweg, G. H. (2024). Ausgewählte Probleme der Leistungsbeurteilung in der Sekundarstufe I. In Jesacher-Rößler, L., & Kemethofer, D. (Eds.), *10 Jahre Regelschule—Die (Neue) Mittelschule*. Waxmann. <https://doi.org/10.25656/01:29366>
- Ericsson, E., Sofkova Hashemi, S., & Lundin, J. (2023). Fun and frustrating: Students' perspectives on practising speaking English with virtual humans. *Cogent Education, 10*(1), 2170088. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2023.2170088>
- Erling, E. J., Radinger, S., & Foltz, A. (2023). Understanding low outcomes in English language education in Austrian middle schools: The role of teachers' beliefs and practices. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, 44*(5), 412–428. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2020.1829630>
- European Parliament. (2020). What is artificial intelligence and how is it used? <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/topics/en/article/20200827STO85804/what-is-artificial-intelligence-and-how-is-it-used>
- Fathali, S. (2024). Integrating a Web-Based E-portfolio to Enhance EFL Learners' Reading Skills. In J. S. Lee, D. Zou, & M. M. Gu (Eds.), *Technology and English Language Teaching in a Changing World* (pp. 31–43). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-51540-8_3
- Flecker, J., Wöhrer, V., & Rieder, I. (2020). 12. Jugendliche am Ende der NMS: Heterogenität, soziale Ungleichheit und Agency. In J. Flecker, V. Wöhrer, & I. Rieder (Eds.), *Wege in die Zukunft* (1st ed., pp. 305–328). V&R Unipress. <https://doi.org/10.14220/9783737011457.305>
- Fryer, L. K., Coniam, D., Carpenter, R., & Läpuşeanu, D. (2020). Bots for language learning now: current and future directions. *Language Learning & Technology, 24*(2), 8–22. <http://hdl.handle.net/10125/44719>
- Goodwin-Jones, R. (2022). Partnering with AI: Intelligent writing assistance and instructed language learning. *Language Learning & Technology, 26*(2), 5–24. <https://doi.org/10.1257/73474>
- Grant, Stuart. (2021). Some Possible Ways into the Question how a Phenomenology of Education might be. In E. Creely, J. Southcott, K. Carabott, & D. Lyons (Eds.), *Phenomenological Inquiry in Education: Theories, Practices, Provocations and Directions*. Routledge.
- Helm, C. & Große, C. S. (2024). Einsatz künstlicher Intelligenz im Schulalltag – eine empirische Bestandsaufnahme. *Erziehung Und Unterricht, 3–4*, 370–381. https://www.oebv.at/images/product-images/Einsatz_kuenstlicher_Intelligenz_im_Schulalltag_Helm_Grosse_E-U.pdf
- Hockly, N. (2023). Artificial Intelligence in English Language Teaching: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly. *RELC Journal, 54*(2), 445–451. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00336882231168504>
- Holmes, W., & Porayska-Pomsta, K. (Eds.). (2023). *The Ethics Of Artificial Intelligence In Education: Practices, Challenges, And Debates*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429329067>
- Hong, W. C. H. (2023). The impact of chatgpt on foreign language teaching and learning: Opportunities in education and research. *Journal of Educational Technology and Innovation, 5*(1), 37–45. <https://doi.org/10.61414/jeti.v5i1.103>
- Husserl, E. (2002). *Ideas: General introduction to a pure phenomenology*. Routledge.
- <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9781351117586/chapters/10.4324/9781351117586-7>
- Jaeho Jeon. (2023). Chatbot-assisted dynamic assessment (CA-DA) for L2 vocabulary learning and diagnosis. *Computer Assisted Language Learning, 36*(7), 1338–1364. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2021.1987272>
- Jesacher-Rößler, L., & Kemethofer, D. (Eds.). (2024). *10 Jahre Regelschule—Die (Neue) Mittelschule*. Waxmann. <https://doi.org/10.25656/01:29366>

Jiang, R. (2022). How does artificial intelligence empower EFL teaching and learning nowadays? A review on artificial intelligence in the EFL context. *Frontiers in Psychology, 13*, 1049401. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1049401>

Kern, R. (2024). Twenty-first century technologies and language education: Charting a path forward. *The Modern Language Journal, 108*(2), 515–533.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12924>

Klimova, B., Pikhart, M., Benites, A. D., Lehr, C., & Sanchez-Stockhammer, C. (2023). Neural machine translation in foreign language teaching and learning: A systematic review. *Education and Information Technologies, 28*(1), 663–682. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-022-11194-2>

Kohnke, L. (2024a). Exploring eap students' perceptions of genai and traditional grammar-checking tools for language learning. *Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence, 7*, 100279. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.caeai.2024.100279>

Kohnke, L. (2024b). Navigating the digital turn: Recent books on technological integration in ELT. *ELT Journal, 78*(2), 216–233. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccae014>

Kohnke, L., Moorhouse, B. L., & Zou, D. (2023). ChatGPT for Language Teaching and Learning. *RELC Journal, 54*(2), 537–550. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00336882231162868>

Kopuz, E. (2024). English Language Teachers' Insights on the Influence of ChatGPT on Professional Well-Being. *Journal of Educational Studies and Multidisciplinary Approaches, 4*(2), 139–154. <https://doi.org/10.51383/jesma.2024.107>

Kuhail, M. A., Alturki, N., Alramlawi, S., & Alhejori, K. (2023). Interacting with educational chatbots: A systematic review. *Education and Information Technologies, 28*(1), 973–1018. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-022-11177-3>

Kusuma, I. P. I., Roni, M., Dewi, K. S., & Mahendrayana, G. (2024). Revealing the potential of ChatGPT for English language teaching: EFL preservice teachers' teaching practicum experience. *Studies in English Language and Education, 11*(2), 650–670. <https://doi.org/10.24815/siele.v11i2.34748>

Lim, W. M., Gunasekara, A., Pallant, J. L., Pallant, J. I., & Pechenkina, E. (2023). Generative AI and the future of education: Ragnarök or reformation? A paradoxical perspective from management educators. *The International Journal of Management Education, 21*(2), 100790. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijme.2023.100790>

Lo, S. (2023). Neural machine translation in EFL classrooms: Learners' vocabulary improvement, immediate vocabulary retention and delayed vocabulary retention. *Computer Assisted Language Learning, 1–20*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2023.2207603>

Long, D., & Magerko, B. (2020). What is AI literacy? Competencies and design considerations. *Proceedings of the 2020 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, 1–16*. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3313831.3376727>

Mohamed, A. M. (2024). Exploring the potential of an AI-based Chatbot (ChatGPT) in enhancing English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching: Perceptions of EFL Faculty Members. *Education and Information Technologies, 29*(3), 3195–3217. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-023-11917-z>

Moorhouse, B. L. (2024). Beginning and first-year language teachers' readiness for the generative ai age. *Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence, 6*, 100201. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.caeai.2024.100201>

Nazaretsky, T., Ariely, M., Cukurova, M., & Alexandron, G. (2022). Teachers' trust in AI-powered educational technology and a professional development program to improve it. *British Journal of Educational Technology, 53*(4), 914–931. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.13232>

OECD. (2018). Equity in Education: Breaking Down Barriers to Social Mobility. *OECD*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264073234-en>

OECD. (2020). PISA 2018 Results (Volume V). Effective Policies, Successful Schools. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/ca768d40-en>

OECD. (2024). Explanatory memorandum on the updated OECD definition of an AI system. *OECD Artificial Intelligence Papers, 8*, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1787/623da898-en>

Piaget, J. (1970). *Science of Education and the Psychology of the Child*. Orion Press.

Pokrivčáková, S. (2019). Preparing teachers for the application of AI-powered technologies in foreign language education. *Journal of Language and Cultural Education*, 7(3), 135–153. <https://doi.org/10.2478/jolace-2019-0025>

Pokrivčáková, S. (2023). Pre-service teachers' attitudes towards artificial intelligence and its integration into EFL teaching and learning. *Journal of Language and Cultural Education*, 11(3). <https://doi.org/10.2478/jolace-2023-0031>

Quenzel, G., & Hurrelmann, K. (Eds.). (2019). *Handbuch Bildungsarmut*. Springer VS.

Selwyn, N. (2021). *Education and technology: Key issues and debates* (First edition). Zed Books. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350145573>

Selwyn, N. (2022). The future of AI and education: Some cautionary notes. *European Journal of Education*, 57(4), 620–631. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12532>

Shah, P. (2023). *AI and the future of education: Teaching in the age of artificial intelligence*. John Wiley & Sons.

Shaikh, S., Yayilgan, S. Y., Klimova, B., & Pikhart, M. (2023). Assessing the Usability of ChatGPT for Formal English Language Learning. *European Journal of Investigation in Health, Psychology and Education*, 13(9), 1937–1960. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ejihpe13090140>

Shamsuddinova, S., Heryani, P., & Naval, M. A. (2024). Evolution to revolution: Critical exploration of educators' perceptions of the impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on the teaching and learning process in the GCC region. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 125, 102326. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2024.102326>

Soukup-Alrichter, K. (2024). Vorwort. In Jesacher-Rößler, L., & Kemethofer, D. (Eds.), *10 Jahre Regelschule—Die (Neue) Mittelschule*. Waxmann. <https://doi.org/10.25656/01:29366>

Statistik Austria. (2020). *Bildung in Zahlen*. 1–170. <https://www.zal.at/>

Stickler, U. (2022). *Technology and language teaching*. Cambridge University Press.

Tang, K.-S., Cooper, G., Rappa, N., Cooper, M., Sims, C., & Nonis, K. (2024). A dialogic approach to transform teaching, learning & assessment with generative AI in secondary education: A proof of concept. *Pedagogies: An International Journal*, 19(3), 493–503. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1554480X.2024.2379774>

Tomlinson, C. A. (1995). *How to differentiate instruction in mixed-ability classrooms*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Vogtenhuber, S. (2023a). Soziale Herkunft, Leistung und Aspiration beim Übergang nach der Mittelschule in den Wiener Bezirken. *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, 48(3), 451–461. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11614-023-00546-y>

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge University Press.

Wang, S., Christensen, C., Cui, W., Tong, R., Yarnall, L., Shear, L., & Feng, M. (2023). When adaptive learning is effective learning: Comparison of an adaptive learning system to teacher-led instruction. *Interactive Learning Environments*, 31(2), 793–803. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10494820.2020.1808794>

Xiao, Y., & Zhi, Y. (2023). An Exploratory Study of EFL Learners' Use of chatgpt for Language Learning Tasks: Experience and Perceptions. *Languages*, 8(3), 212. <https://doi.org/10.3390/languages8030212>

Yang, H., Kim, H., Lee, J. H., & Shin, D. (2022a). Implementation of an AI chatbot as an English conversation partner in EFL speaking classes. *ReCALL*, 34(3), 327–343. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344022000039>

Yeo, M. A. (2023a). Academic integrity in the age of Artificial Intelligence (AI) authoring apps. *TESOL Journal*, 14(3), 716. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesj.716>

Young, J.C., & Shishido, M. (2023). Investigating openai's chatgpt Potentials in Generating Chatbot's Dialogue for English as a Foreign Language Learning. *International Journal of Advanced Computer Science and Applications*, 14(6), 65–72. <https://doi.org/10.14569/IJACSA.2023.0140607>

Zehetner, E., Janschitz, G. & Fernandez, K. (2022). Bildung zwischen Stadt und Land. Der Mythos Stadt-Land im Spiegel aktueller Forschungsbefunde. *Zeitschrift für Bildungsforschung*, 12(3), 165–177. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s35834-021-00327-1>

Zhao, X. (2023). Leveraging Artificial Intelligence (AI) Technology for English Writing: Introducing Wordtune as a Digital Writing Assistant for EFL Writers. *RELC Journal*, 54(3), 890–894. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00336882221094089>

Zhi, R., Wang, Y., & Wang, Y. (2024). The Role of Emotional Intelligence and Self-efficacy in EFL Teachers' Technology Adoption. *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, 33(4), 845–856. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40299-023-00782-6>

Zou, B., Liviero, S., Ma, Q., Zhang, W., Du, Y., & Xing, P. (2024). Exploring EFL learners' perceived promise and limitations of using an artificial intelligence speech evaluation system for speaking practice. *System*, 126, 103497. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2024.103497>

Zhou, Y., Zou, S., Liwang, M., Sun, Y., & Ni, W. (2025). A teaching quality evaluation framework for blended classroom modes with multi-domain heterogeneous data integration. *Expert Systems with Applications*, 127884–127884. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eswa.2025.127884>

ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

PEDAGOGICAL VOICE OR ALGORITHMIC AUTHORITY? A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF CHATGPT IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Ajla Aljović 

International Burch University, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Ajla Aljović, International Burch University, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. E-mail: ajla.aljovic@ibu.edu.ba.

ABSTRACT

Artificial intelligence-powered tutors such as ChatGPT, Duolingo, and Grammarly are increasingly integrated into language education, reshaping how authority, correctness, and learning are communicated. While these tools promise efficiency and personalized feedback, their discourse carries implicit ideologies that influence learner identity and perceptions of English. This study critically examines how AI tutors construct pedagogical authority and embed language ideologies through their responses to learner queries. Using Fairclough's three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), a corpus of 40 AI-generated responses was analyzed across five functional categories. Findings reveal three dominant patterns: (1) pedagogical authority without dialogue, achieved through modals, imperatives, and praise strategies; (2) linguistic homogenization, privileging Standard English and formal norms while ignoring multilingual variation; and (3) neoliberal framing of learning as an efficiency-driven, individualized process. These results highlight the non-neutral nature of AI discourse and its alignment with broader technocratic and neoliberal logics in education. The article concludes with implications for critical digital pedagogy, advocating for reflexive design, multilingual sensitivity, and teacher mediation in AI-supported language learning.

Keywords: AI in education, language learning, ChatGPT, pedagogical authority, digital literacy

MAP EDUCATION
AND HUMANITIES

Volume 6

ISSN: 2744-2373 / © The Authors.
Published by MAP - Multidisciplinary
Academic Publishing.

Article Submitted: 04 September 2025
Article Accepted: 09 December 2025
Article Published: 10 December 2025



Publisher's Note: MAP stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

<https://doi.org/10.53880/2744-2373.2025.6.109>



HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Aljović A. (2025). **Pedagogical Voice or Algorithmic Authority? A Critical Discourse Analysis of ChatGPT in Language Learning**. MAP Education and Humanities, 6, 109-122.
doi: <https://doi.org/10.53880/2744-2373.2025.6.109>



© The Author(s). **Open Access Article**
Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.



Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) has revolutionized education in recent years, changing both how teachers and students learn. AI is being incorporated into educational procedures more and more, from personalized learning recommendations to automated grading systems. Among these apps, ChatGPT, Duolingo, Grammarly, and ELSA Speak, all AI-powered language learning programs, have become quite popular. These resources advertise themselves as cutting-edge substitutes for or enhancements to conventional teaching, promising accessibility, effectiveness, and immediate feedback. For English as a second or foreign language learners, particularly those in underdeveloped or cross-border situations, these tools provide previously unheard-of chances to interact with the language outside of the classroom.

While there are clear benefits, the use of AI tutors in language education raises serious pedagogical, linguistic, and ideological issues. The bulk of research, for example, Beatty (2010) and Zawacki-Richter et al. (2019), has focused on the technological features, accuracy, and adaptability of these systems as a whole. Less criticism has been made on the actual language produced by these systems and the set of assumptions it presupposes. The AI-driven instructional tools for language education interact with students for more than the purpose of fixing mistakes and providing synonyms. Interactions with these platforms implicitly create relationships and hierarchies of power. They help shape the accepted set of rules and project guiding principles relating to the ideology of speaking, writing, and “knowing” English. These nuances, for the most part, go undetected, yet they make up the hidden curriculum Paulo Freire (1970) discussed – the set of immeasurable and unofficial lessons communicated through the physical and linguistic aspects of an educational institution.

Especially in the context of learning the English language, the subtext curriculum assumes greater importance. English is a global lingua franca; however, attempts to learn may reflect ideological tussle shaped by the English language’s colonial, economic, and cultural histories. The colonial English language and its standardized platforms, alongside its teaching and representation, trigger a certain degree of linguistic hegemony, neoliberalism, and native-speakerism. In this respect, AI tutors’ language is inequitable; moderation based on meagre rules, extensive

training datasets, and sweeping language biases result in preferential creativity, variation, and fluency ‘over’ standard form, communicative competence, and correctness. Such vocabulary is charged with ideology; therefore, such language choices demonstrate a culturally imbibed expectation of English and an unfair imagination of the learner as moldable to, and under the obligation ‘to’, conform to, acceptance of the language.

In this article, AI tutors are examined as discursive actors, entities that not only dispense information but also participate in the construction of meaning through language. Adopting the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the study investigates the ways AI tutors, such as ChatGPT, build educational authority, construct learner identity, and represent English language norms in their responses to learner questions. The paper argues that AI-generated discourse in the context of language learning mirrors and perpetuates certain ideologies related to English, learning, and teaching. These ideologies are consistent with the larger neoliberal and technocratic logic in education, insofar as they are driven by managerial logics to do with efficiency, standardization, and individualized improvement. In addition, they undermine dialogic pedagogy, multiculturalism, and learner agency.

To explore these dynamics, the study examines a corpus of AI-generated responses to simulated learner prompts. These prompts reflect common queries in English learning, ranging from grammar correction and vocabulary use to writing feedback and politeness strategies. The analysis is guided by three interrelated questions:

- How do AI tutors linguistically construct their pedagogical authority in their interactions with learners?
- What ideologies about English language, correctness, and competence are embedded in their responses?
- How might these discursive patterns affect learners’ perceptions of English, learning, and their own linguistic identity?

These questions are situated within broader theoretical concerns about language, power, and education. Drawing on the work of Fairclough (1995), the article employs CDA to uncover the linguistic features and discursive practices through which AI

tutors perform their pedagogical roles. It also draws on critical applied linguistics (Pennycook, 2001) and poststructuralist perspectives on English Language Teaching (ELT), which emphasize the need to interrogate the assumptions that underlie “neutral” educational discourse.

The emphasis on AI-generated language in this research is timely and important. Researchers and educators need to comprehend how AI generative language models construct knowledge and authority as these tools become increasingly embedded in education systems globally, not only to improve AI technologies but also to safeguard the critical and inclusive possibilities of education. Much of the public discussion presents AI tutors as neutral or unbiased; however, this article questions that assumption and the agency in outputs that encapsulates the human values and ideological choices.

Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to the growing field of critical digital pedagogy by offering a linguistic lens through which to examine the educational role of AI. It argues for the importance of reflective, human-centered approaches to technology integration, approaches that recognize the power of language not just to teach, but to shape how learners understand themselves, their languages, and their place in the world.

Literature Review

The use of artificial intelligence within education has garnered substantial scholarly and organizational attention in recent years. Often framed as a technological revolution, AI is viewed as a way to achieve gains in efficiency, personalizing instruction and expanding access to quality educational opportunities (Luckin et al., 2016; Holmes et al., 2019). In language education contexts, AI-enabled applications, such as ChatGPT, Duolingo, Grammarly and ELSA Speak, promise instant feedback, interactive, and adaptive feedback. Many of these applications use natural language processing (NLP), large language models (LLMs) and machine-learning algorithms to analyze, interpret and react to learners’ input and provide appropriate feedback or corrections.

Despite their increasing use, most studies to date have focused on the functionality and pedagogical efficacy of such systems (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019; Tsai, 2021). Research tends

to highlight accuracy rates, learner motivation, and comparative learning gains rather than the discursive properties of AI feedback or the ideological implications of their language choices. The implicit assumption is that AI-generated responses are neutral, technical, and primarily shaped by their training data and algorithmic efficiency. However, this assumption overlooks the fact that AI, while non-human, functions as a communicator and pedagogue. As Weller (2020) argues, educational technologies are never value-free; they are designed, trained, and deployed within sociocultural contexts that inevitably shape their discourse.

CDA provides us with a potent analytical lens through which to analyze the language of AI tutors, not merely as a means of transmitting information, but rather as an ideological practice. CDA is derived from the foundational work of Fairclough (1992, 1995), van Dijk (1993), and Wodak (1996), and views language as a site where power relations are both reflected and reproduced in society. It has been utilized in educational contexts to interrogate the language of various educational texts, including textbooks (Gray, 2010), standardized tests (Shohamy, 2001), policy documents (Ball, 1993), and teacher talk (Walsh, 2006).

All these studies identify that discourse is never neutral; language is if encoded with beliefs about knowledge, authority, identity, and belonging. In the case of AI tutors, CDA allows us to articulate the machine-generated feedback as a form of pedagogical discourse that influences students but also conveys implicit conventions for what constitutes “correct,” “appropriate, or “standard” English. Thus, there is a shift away from performance as a focus and moves towards ideology, namely, the ways that AI systems continue to reinforce certain ideologies about language and learning in the world, as they claim to be free from ideologies.

Fairclough’s three-dimensional model of CDA is especially relevant here. It includes:

- Textual analysis – examining word choice, modality, transitivity, and structure.
- Discursive practice – analyzing how texts are produced, consumed, and interpreted.
- Social practice – situating discourse within broader ideological and institutional frameworks.

By applying this model to AI tutor responses, the present study explores how linguistic choices shape perceptions of educational authority and language legitimacy.

In traditional classroom contexts, pedagogical authority arises from a relational amalgamation of expertise, trust, relational engagement, and positional consequence. Teachers will enact both content and discourse actions to assert their roles and responsibilities within the classroom (Mercer, 2000). This constructed relationship suddenly comes undone when the learning environment is digital and mediated by artificial intelligence (AI). Instead of the human figure, authority is now based on the voice of the system; an algorithm trained to simulate helpfulness, confidence, and neutrality.

The discourse of AI tutors represents a new type of pedagogical voice - one that is directive, yet abstract, and has obvious features of an instructional genre: modal verbs ("You should..."); hedging language ("It might be better to..."); and affirmations ("Great work!"). By using these linguistic features, the AI tutors create a kind of simulated affective relationship. However, there are genuine issues concerning the lack of actual empathy, the absence of dialogue and contextual awareness that are both powerful and highly problematic. Gert Biesta (2006) warns against an education strategy of "learnification," and what he means is that "learnification" positions learning as a depersonalized exchange only concerned with learning skills or content, and not relational and transformative. In AI tutoring, the dangers of "learnification" are particularly present because AI educational designs push students through a series of scripts geared to position as symmetrized what is most often envisioned as a collaborative relationship among human learners and educators. The design of AI tutoring views learning as an effect of delivery with a clear priority given to process and correctness with little space for dialogue and criticality often central to learning environments.

While English is a global language of communication and interaction, it is also a site of ideological conflict and political economy. Scholars such as Phillipson (1992), Pennycook (2001), and Canagarajah (2013) have attended to the ways in which English language teaching (ELT) can perpetuate hierarchies of race, class, and nation. The global dominance of English, especially "Standard" British or American varieties, is often

framed as pragmatic, but in practice it privileges certain accents, grammars, and cultural scripts while marginalizing others.

When considering this in the context of AI, this challenge becomes especially pronounced. Most AI models are trained on a corpus of texts with frequently standard forms of English which are dominated by, often, Anglo-American norms (Bender et al., 2021). As such, the outputs of these models (i.e. the ways in which they respond), are more disposed to reinforce hegemonic language ideologies which are dismissive of non-native or localized varieties of English and cast non-standardized forms as incorrect or non-preferable. This raises massive implications for learners with multi-lingual identities, who may not see the kinds of Englishes affixed to their identity validated, in the AI-generated feedback they receive.

Moreover, AI tutors often ignore or under-problematize sociocultural variety which is central to real-world language proficiency. For instance, the ways that requests are made, and disagreements are expressed are shaped by culturally and socially negotiated pragmatic norms, but AI tutors often generalize or flatten these particularities into a single "politeness" or "professionalism" standard. This aligns with a technocratic understanding of language-as-transferrable and measurable skill sets that fits into global labor markets, but which fails to capture the deep-seated complexity of human communication.

The examination of AI tutors is inseparable from broader critiques of neoliberal education. Within educational systems, neoliberalism focuses on standardization, accountability, self-management, and market-oriented reform (Ball, 2003; Giroux, 2004). The teacher becomes the facilitator, the learner becomes a consumer, and education becomes a product to be optimized. Digital tools (including AI tutors) are a natural fit, as they can provide scalable, data-driven, and potentially cheap solutions.

This perspective neglects the affective, ethical, and political dimensions in teaching and learning. AI tutors will tend to promote correctness, fluency, and politeness (the latter defined by decontextualized, standardized norms), and in doing so, these tutors endorse the notion that there is a narrow kind of language competence. This is an example of what Alastair Pennycook (2001) has referred to as the "myth of English as a neutral tool."

In fact, AI pedagogical choices, no matter how detached they appear, are influenced by systems of power in their training data and programming goals.

By adopting a critical digital pedagogy lens (Selwyn, 2014; Williamson, 2017), this study approaches AI-generated feedback as more than technological output. It sees it as a discursive and ideological act—one that informs learners' views not only of English but also of what counts as learning, success, and improvement. In doing so, it aligns with Freirean conceptions of education as a political practice and seeks to interrogate the invisible assumptions encoded in machine-mediated teaching.

Taken together, these literatures highlight a significant research gap. While AI in education has been widely studied in terms of performance and access, its discursive dimensions, particularly in language learning, remain underexplored. CDA, combined with insights from language ideology and neoliberal education theory, offers a powerful way to uncover how AI tutors shape pedagogical authority, learner identity, and normative representations of English. The present study contributes to this emerging field by treating AI-generated language not merely as data but as discourse, discourse that reflects, sustains, and at times challenges dominant ideologies in education.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in CDA to examine the pedagogical discourse of AI-powered English language tutors. The central aim is to explore how AI-generated responses to learner queries construct authority, encode language ideologies, and reflect broader educational values. The methodology involves the construction and analysis of a purpose-built corpus of AI-generated responses, analyzed through Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional framework.

The research design is qualitative, corpus-informed, and interpretive. Rather than testing a hypothesis or evaluating system accuracy, the focus is on uncovering patterns in language use and ideological positioning within AI tutor discourse. The central assumption is that language produced by AI systems, though machine-generated, functions discursively and socially, shaping learners' understanding of correctness, appropriateness, and educational authority.

The analysis centers on a corpus of 40 AI-generated responses to a range of simulated learner prompts. These prompts reflect typical queries submitted by intermediate-level learners of English (CEFR A2–B2), covering grammar, vocabulary, politeness strategies, writing feedback, and spoken fluency. All prompts were developed by the researcher, based on observed learner needs in preparatory and undergraduate English programs at a cross-border university context.

The corpus comprises 40 AI-generated responses, collected using the ChatGPT interface (version GPT-4, as of June 2025). Each response was elicited through a neutral browser session to prevent context accumulation across turns. This allowed each interaction to remain self-contained and free from previous conversational influence. The 40 prompts were evenly distributed across five functional categories:

Table 1.
Prompts' categories

Category	Example Prompt
Grammar correction	"Is this sentence correct: <i>He don't like coffee?</i> "
Vocabulary support	"What is a more formal word for <i>really good</i> in academic writing?"
Writing feedback	"Can you improve this email: 'I want meeting you tomorrow?'"
Politeness/pragmatics	"How do I ask for help politely in English?"
Spoken fluency	"What can I say to start small talk in an online class?"

Table 1 provides a short overview of the corpus used for analysis, which includes 40 AI-generated responses distributed across five functional categories. This categorization allowed for systematic sampling of responses reflecting different pedagogical purposes, ensuring a balanced representation for CDA.

Each AI response ranged from 50 to 150 words, yielding a corpus of approximately 4,300 words.

All responses were saved in a spreadsheet format, including:

- prompt text
- full AI response

- category tag
- notes on tone, modality, and discursive features (coded during analysis)

The data were analyzed using Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional CDA model, which allows for both micro-linguistic analysis and broader socio-ideological interpretation. The framework comprises:

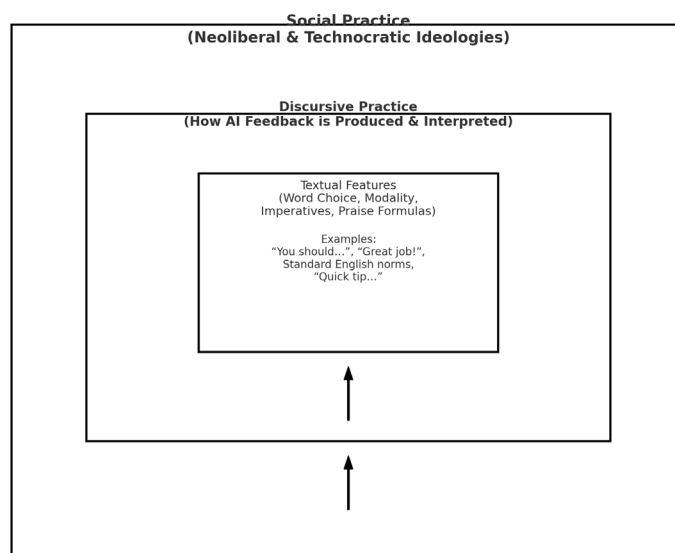
1. Textual analysis – Investigating language features such as:
 - Modality (e.g., “should,” “can,” “you must”);
 - Voice (passive/active constructions);
 - Sentence structure and tone (e.g., imperative, hedging);
 - Repetition, formulaic expressions, and lexical choices.
2. Discursive practice – Examining how the AI constructs interactional roles:
 - How is authority claimed or mitigated?
 - Are learners positioned as passive receivers or active participants?
 - What conversational norms are being reproduced?
3. Social practice – Interpreting the broader ideological implications:
 - Do responses promote linguistic standardization?
 - How do they reflect neoliberal values (efficiency, correctness, self-management)?
 - What language ideologies are privileged or silenced?

This framework enables a layered analysis, connecting surface-level linguistic features with the underlying values and assumptions embedded in AI educational discourse.

Figure 1 illustrates how Fairclough's model was adapted for AI tutor discourse, and it illustrates the interconnected layers of analysis: textual features (e.g., modality, praise formulas, Standard English norms), discursive practices (how AI

feedback is produced and interpreted), and social practices (broader neoliberal and technocratic ideologies in education).

Figure 1. Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model adapted for AI tutor discourse.



Note. From *Discourse and Social Change* (p. 73), by N. Fairclough, 1992, Polity Press. Copyright 1992 by Polity Press.

A combination of deductive and inductive coding was used. An initial coding scheme was created based on key categories from the literature (e.g., modality, prescriptivism, voice, formality). Additional codes emerged during the close reading of the responses, including:

- Praise formulae (e.g., “Great job!” / “That’s correct!”);
- Cultural flattening (e.g., ignoring register or variation);
- Efficiency emphasis (e.g., “The easiest way is...” / “A quick tip...”).

All data were coded manually and reviewed twice for consistency.

As a researcher with formal training in English language and literature, and professional experience in preparatory and cross-border educational programs, I approach AI discourse from both pedagogical and critical linguistic perspectives. I recognize that my interpretations

are shaped by this dual lens, and I embrace the CDA stance that research is inherently situated and reflexive. This study does not aim to offer a “neutral” evaluation of AI platforms, but to critically interrogate their language use in the context of power, ideology, and education.

This study adheres to ethical standards for discourse research involving non-human data sources:

- No human subjects were involved.
- All AI-generated texts were produced through public interfaces and anonymized prompts.
- No personally identifiable data were collected.
- The corpus will not be used for commercial or exploitative purposes.

AI-generated content is treated as a form of public discourse and analyzed as linguistic artefact rather than confidential data.

The following section discusses how Fairclough’s three-dimensional CDA model manifested in the corpus through four dominant themes.

Analysis and Findings

Constructing Pedagogical Authority

A key aim of this study was to investigate how AI tutors construct pedagogical authority—how they “sound like teachers.” Across the corpus, AI responses consistently employ modal verbs, imperative structures, and praise strategies to guide learner behavior and frame correct answers.

a) Modality and Directive Language

Most responses contain modal auxiliaries such as should, can, need to, and it’s best to. These construct soft authority through suggestions rather than commands. For example:

“You should use ‘doesn’t’ here instead of ‘don’t’ because ‘he’ is third person singular.”

The use of should marks obligation but retains politeness. More direct imperatives also occur, especially in writing tasks:

“Replace ‘want meeting’ with ‘want to meet.’”

“Try rewriting the sentence for clarity.”

This instructional style reflects a didactic, monologic model of teaching (Biesta, 2006), where the tutor corrects rather than negotiates. It suggests authority is constructed not through dialogue but through linguistic scaffolding of correctness.

b) Praise and Encouragement Formulas

AI tutors frequently use phrases such as *“Great job!”*, *“You’re on the right track!”*, or *“That’s almost perfect!”* This performative feedback serves both affective and pedagogical functions. While seemingly supportive, it also reinforces the instructor–learner hierarchy by positioning the AI as evaluator.

c) Hedging and Politeness

Interestingly, ChatGPT often employs hedging (*“You might consider...”*, *“One way to say this is...”*), softening its authority. This can create the illusion of negotiation, but the lack of interactive follow-up renders it rhetorical. There is no real dialogic co-construction of meaning.

AI tutors adopt a hybrid voice – polite, semi-authoritative, and affectively affirming – yet ultimately monologic. This affirms their role as algorithmic instructors rather than conversational partners, subtly embedding a technocratic pedagogy based on optimization, not exploration.

“You should always use the past tense here.”

“Make sure you follow this rule.”

“That’s incorrect; the correct form is...”

These examples reinforce the authoritative, prescriptive stance with no negotiation or dialogic space.

Language Ideologies in AI Feedback

The second key finding relates to the ideologies about English embedded in AI-generated feedback. The corpus reveals a strong preference for standardized, formal, and grammatically prescriptive norms, suggesting an implicit endorsement of native-speaker, standard-English ideology.

a) Prescriptivism and Standard English

AI responses repeatedly prioritize correction of grammar, word order, and collocation based on standard norms:

"Instead of saying 'very big car,' you could say 'enormous car'—which is more formal."

"Avoid using 'gonna' in writing; use 'going to' instead."

The corrections align almost entirely with British or American Standard English, with little acknowledgement of World Englishes or regional variation. For instance, non-native syntactic patterns or lexico-semantic innovations are marked as incorrect, even when pragmatically acceptable.

b) Formality and Politeness as Norms

AI tutors promote hyper-formality, especially in writing tasks:

"To sound more professional, avoid contractions and use formal connectors like 'however' or 'moreover.'"

In responses about pragmatics, politeness is framed as universal and formulaic rather than culturally specific. For example:

"Always say 'Could you please...' to sound polite in English."

Such statements suggest a flattened view of pragmatics, ignoring sociolinguistic variation and cultural norms in politeness strategies (e.g., in Korean, Turkish, or Brazilian Portuguese contexts).

c) Absence of Cultural or Contextual Flexibility

Notably, AI feedback rarely offers alternatives for contextual variation. For instance, slang, informal greetings, or local accents are often ignored or discouraged. This reflects a deficit model toward non-standard Englishes.

AI tutors act as gatekeepers of a narrow linguistic ideology—upholding standard English, discouraging multilingualism, and privileging formality. Their discourse subtly promotes linguistic homogeneity, aligning with institutional pressures in global ELT and marginalizing alternative English identities.

"The standard form is 'color'."

"It's better to avoid contractions in formal writing."

"Use 'whom' instead of 'who' in this sentence."

These illustrate the prioritization of Standard British English and formality.

Depersonalization and Uniformity in Feedback

While AI tutors offer personalized responses in appearance, a closer analysis reveals a strong pattern of discursive uniformity and depersonalization. The same lexical structures, sentence templates, and correction patterns appear repeatedly across distinct learner prompts.

a) Repetition and Template-Based Output

Many responses include phrases such as:

- *"This sentence is incorrect because..."*
- *"You could say it this way instead..."*
- *"Here's a better way to phrase it..."*

Although such phrasing maintains clarity and consistency, it also contributes to the mechanical tone of the AI's pedagogical persona. Instead of dynamically adapting to learner style, context, or emotional tone, the feedback is algorithmically templated, which flattens variation and nuance.

b) Lack of Dialogic Interaction

Unlike a human tutor who might ask a clarifying question or adapt feedback based on the student's intent or background, AI tutors do not invite clarification or negotiation. The AI's role is evaluative and corrective, not interactive. For instance:

Learner Prompt: *"I want meeting you."*

AI Response: *"This is incorrect. Use: 'I want to meet you.'"*

There is no invitation for follow-up, no exploration of alternative phrasings based on purpose or register. This presents a banking model of instruction (Freire, 1970), where the

learner passively receives corrections without co-constructing knowledge.

c) Absence of Personalization or Affect

Even when AI tutors use praise (e.g., “Nice try!”), they rarely reference the learner’s individual context, prior errors, or learning goals. The tone is friendly but generic, lacking personalization. In this sense, the AI tutor simulates empathy but cannot generate affective presence, which is vital in human-centered language teaching (Mercer, 2000).

Despite mimicking interactivity, AI tutors operate through a one-size-fits-all instructional script. Their discourse prioritizes structure, uniformity, and reproducibility—hallmarks of automated pedagogy, but far removed from the adaptive, relational nature of human teaching.

Neoliberal and Technocratic Framing of Learning

The final theme reveals that AI tutors often frame language learning through a neoliberal lens, emphasizing efficiency, correctness, self-optimization, and clarity—rather than critical thinking, creativity, or cultural negotiation.

a) Emphasis on Clarity, Simplicity, and Efficiency

Phrases such as “*The easiest way to say this...*” or “*To make your writing clearer...*” occur frequently in writing-related responses. These expressions reinforce an instrumental view of language, that is language as a tool to be optimized.

Such discourse implicitly promotes a utilitarian model of learning, aligning with neoliberal educational values: self-improvement, measurable outcomes, and productivity (Ball, 2003; Selwyn, 2014). For example:

“To improve your writing, remove unnecessary words and use more precise vocabulary.”

The focus is not on argumentation or voice, but on compression and lexical accuracy.

b) Erasure of Cultural and Political Dimensions

Language is inherently cultural and political. Yet AI tutors rarely acknowledge this. In prompts

relating to politeness or idioms, responses often present a universalized English:

“The polite way to ask is: ‘Could you please...’”

“To sound natural, say: ‘Nice to meet you.’”

There is no mention of variation across Englishes, or of cultural communicative norms (e.g., how indirectness is valued in some cultures). The AI’s feedback thereby neutralizes context, which risks reproducing hegemonic norms as “objective” or “correct.”

c) Learner as Autonomous Consumer

By design, AI tutors target individual users, not classrooms or communities. The learner is framed as an independent agent, responsible for identifying and correcting their deficiencies. This mirrors the logic of learnification (Biesta, 2006), where learning becomes a product and the learner a self-managing client.

There are no references to collaboration, discussion, or collective meaning-making. Even metalinguistic comments (e.g., “Here’s why this is incorrect...”) are diagnostic rather than exploratory. This reflects a technocratic logic of education—learn fast, alone, and with minimal friction.

The AI tutor’s discourse encodes a neoliberal pedagogy, where success is equated with clarity, correctness, and self-management. Absent are critical, pluralistic, or emancipatory views of language learning.

“Here’s a quick tip to improve faster.”

“Optimize your writing with these simple steps.”

“Boost your English skills in just 5 minutes a day.”

These reflect the productivity-oriented, efficiency-driven language that aligns with neoliberal discourse.

The following table summarizes all the findings mentioned above.

Table 2 summarizes the three dominant discursive patterns identified in the analysis: pedagogical authority without dialogue, linguistic homogenization, and neoliberal framing of learning.

Each theme is illustrated with representative textual features and corresponding interpretative claims, demonstrating how micro-level choices connect to macro-level ideologies

Table 2.
Summary of Findings

Discourse Theme	Key Features Identified
Pedagogical Authority	Modal verbs, directives, praise formulas, softened authority but strong correctional tone
Linguistic Ideologies	Standard English preference, formality bias, lack of acknowledgment of World Englishes
Depersonalization	Template repetition, lack of interaction, generic tone, absence of affective response
Neoliberal Framing	Emphasis on clarity, efficiency, self-correction, individual responsibility, technocracy

CDA Coding Framework

Table 3.
CDA Coding Framework

Code	Definition	Example from Corpus
MOD – Modality	Use of modal verbs to guide or suggest	“You should...” / “You can...” / “It’s best to...”
IMP – Imperatives	Direct commands or instruction	“Try replacing...” / “Use this instead.”
HED – Hedging	Use of language to soften or mitigate authority	“You might consider...” / “One way to say this is...”
PRS – Praise Formula	Use of evaluative, encouraging language	“Great job!” / “Nice try!”
STD – Standard Norms	Emphasis on British/American Standard English	“Use ‘doesn’t’ for third person singular.”
FOR – Formality Bias	Preference for formal/academic register	“Avoid contractions.” / “Say ‘therefore’ instead of ‘so.’”

UNI – Universalism	Claims that a phrase/strategy is “always correct” or polite	“Always say ‘please’...”
MUL – Multilingualism	Acknowledgment of linguistic or cultural variation	Rare (flag absence more often than presence)
EFD – Efficiency Discourse	Language promoting speed, optimization, or simplicity	“The easiest way is...” / “Quick tip...”

Table 3 outlines the coding framework adapted from Fairclough’s three-dimensional model, including linguistic, discursive, and ideological markers. This framework guided the identification of modality, prescriptive language, praise strategies, and references to efficiency, which were crucial for mapping how authority and ideology are embedded in AI discourse.

Discussion

The analysis of AI tutor responses reveals a discourse that is structured, supportive, and ostensibly helpful, but also deeply shaped by ideological assumptions about language, learning, and authority. By interpreting these patterns through a critical discourse lens, we gain insight into how pedagogical AI not only teaches language but also teaches what language is, how learning should occur, and who the learner is supposed to become. This section reflects on these findings considering broader debates in applied linguistics, digital pedagogy, and the political economy of education.

The Algorithm as a Teacher: Authority Without Dialogue

One of the most salient findings is the way AI tutors construct pedagogical authority. Their responses project confidence, expertise, and correctness through modals, imperatives, and prescriptive feedback—yet they do so without dialogue. This challenges traditional understandings of teacher authority as something negotiated in interaction, through rapport, empathy, and responsiveness (Mercer, 2000; Biesta, 2006). AI tutors simulate this interpersonal dynamic through praise formulas and hedging, but their discourse remains monologic, transactional, and scripted.

This form of algorithmic authority aligns with what Williamson (2017) describes as automated expertise: trust in the machine not because of its humanity or relational credibility, but because of its data-driven rationality and consistent output. However, such trust is not neutral. As Fairclough (1995) notes, institutional discourse that appears impartial often serves to obscure power asymmetries. In this case, the AI's seemingly objective feedback masks its lack of contextual understanding and erases the possibility for negotiation or resistance—a key component of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970).

Standard English as Ideology, Not Neutrality

The second main theme, AI's privilege of Standard English and formal correctness, signals a reproduction of linguistic hegemony as a type of helpfulness. Following Canagarajah (2013) and Pennycook (2001) the ideology of Standard English as only form of English privileges certain voices, accents and ways of expression over others. AI tutors in the corpus treat non-standard expressions as errors, do not acknowledge pragmatic variation across cultures, and privilege Anglo-American norms as superior and universally applicable.

This exposes an important tension: although AI systems tout their accessibility for a global audience, they universalize a narrow set of language norms that reinforce a global hierarchy of English. The feedback provided by the system performs what Phillipson (1992) calls linguistic imperialism – not through forced explicitness, but through the default linguistic assumptions in the training data and in the goals of the design.

By privileging the standard in formal ways to avoid informal, hybrid or even creative language use, AI tutors miss the opportunity to celebrate the diversity of World Englishes and translanguaging, familiar to real-world users of English as a *Lingua Franca*. Their discourse thus reflects an ideology of conformity, not communicative competence.

Learning Without Learners: Depersonalized Pedagogy

AI tutors promise personalization—but what they offer is automated customization, not relational adaptation. The repetition of phrases, fixed feedback patterns, and absence of context-specific advice illustrate a pedagogy of functional uniformity.

Learners are positioned as interchangeable users receiving static, rule-based guidance.

This depersonalization stands in contrast to contemporary language teaching theories that emphasize learner identity, agency, and affect (Norton, 2000; Ushioda, 2011). Without affective engagement, AI tutors cannot support motivation, identity work, or critical thinking—only correction and surface fluency.

From a discourse perspective, this lack of dialogic adaptability reflects what Fairclough (1992) calls synthetic personalization: language that mimics personal concern but remains impersonal in function. AI-generated encouragement (“Great job!”) thus becomes a linguistic performance—emotionally empty but strategically designed to appear caring. This invites ethical questions about authenticity, trust, and the boundaries of technological empathy in education.

Neoliberal Logics in AI Tutor Discourse

Perhaps most critically, the language of the AI tutor reflects an overarching neoliberal ideology of learning as individual self-improvement oriented towards efficiency, correctness, and clarity. The tutor offers “quick tips,” suggests simplified structures, and puts a priority on self-regulation rather than collaboration. Importantly, collective learning, classroom discourse and critical literacy are entirely absent, and are supplanted instead by a focus on optimizing.

This is consistent with Ball's (2003) and Selwyn's (2014) critiques of neoliberal education where the learner is remade as a self-managing client, who is required to develop valuable skills through manageable steps. The AI tutor fits neatly into this model of education, dispensing small, performance-based, information nuggets that resolve to meet global assessment systems and productivity definitions.

This instrumental framing constrains what language education can do. Instead of being a space for creativity, intercultural discovery, or critical inquiry, English assumes a role as a means for employability and correctness. The AI tutor, become an agent of discipline that can subtly influence how learners should speak, write, and think—not via force but via constant reiteration without critique.

Reframing AI Tutors Through a Critical Pedagogical Lens

The findings suggest that AI tutors, though often framed as neutral tools, act as ideological actors in language education. Their discourse embeds assumptions about what counts as good English, good learning, and good teaching. While they may improve access to feedback and reinforce grammatical rules, they also reproduce dominant ideologies under the banner of neutrality and efficiency.

A critical pedagogical perspective urges us to ask: What is lost when the teacher is replaced by a machine? Beyond accuracy, what kinds of relationships, identities, and values are being shaped through these interactions?

To address these concerns, language educators and technologists must move beyond surface evaluations of AI efficiency and engage with their discursive politics. This means:

- Questioning which Englishes are being taught.
- Designing AI systems that can recognize and validate linguistic diversity.
- Embedding opportunities for critical thinking and learner agency.
- Making explicit the assumptions behind AI training data and pedagogical choices.

Such moves will not “fix” AI tutors, but they may make their integration into language learning more transparent, reflexive, and human centered.

Conclusion

This study critically examined the discourse of AI-powered English language tutors using a corpus of 40 responses generated by a large language model in response to typical learner prompts. Through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis, the article explored how these AI tutors construct pedagogical authority, promote particular language ideologies, and embody broader neoliberal logics in their feedback practices.

The findings reveal that, while AI tutors appear supportive and helpful, their language reflects deeper ideological patterns. They consistently construct a pedagogical voice that

is authoritative yet impersonal, directive yet non-dialogic. Their discourse privileges Standard English promotes a formal and prescriptive view of correctness, and frames learning as an individual, efficiency-driven process. Moreover, these systems show little capacity for context sensitivity, cultural awareness, or genuine personalization—despite claims of adaptability and learner-centeredness.

In this sense, the AI tutor does not merely respond to learners; it performs an institutional role. It reinforces normative assumptions about what it means to learn English “well” and who gets to decide what counts as correctness, politeness, or professionalism. These assumptions are not neutral. Rather, they echo long-standing hierarchies in English language teaching that privilege native-speaker norms, decontextualized fluency, and instrumental goals.

Crucially, this study positions AI-generated feedback as more than functional language: it is pedagogical discourse—a carrier of ideology and values. From the use of modals and imperatives to praise strategies and avoidance of linguistic diversity, the AI tutor becomes a digital actor in the ongoing negotiation of language, identity, and power. Its authority stems not from its expertise or empathy, but from its repetition of institutional norms embedded in data and code.

These insights call for a more critical approach to the integration of AI into language education. While AI tutors may be helpful for basic feedback and repetition-based learning, they risk narrowing learners’ experiences and identities if their discursive frameworks go unexamined. Designers, educators, and researchers must remain attentive to the politics of language in machine-mediated instruction.

Implications

The research illustrates various implications for future research and development:

Pedagogical Design: Developers of AI language tools should seriously consider the multilingual awareness, cross-cultural pragmatics, and usage of varieties of English in their training data and feedback logic.

Teacher Mediation: Teachers can play an important mediating role in which they support learners in interpreting feedback from AI as just one source of feedback—not an authoritative source.

Ethical Use: When institutions adopt AI tools, they should develop guidelines for teachers and learners that emphasize transparency, learner autonomy, and respect for the multitude of languages and the diversity of uses of English.

Critical Literacy: Students need to be empowered with the tools to question the feedback they are presented with, not just accept it, so that students develop metalinguistic awareness and critical awareness of their learning.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited by its small, purpose-built corpus and focus on a single AI system. Further research might expand the dataset, compare multiple AI platforms, or include real learner interactions. Longitudinal studies could examine how repeated exposure to AI feedback shapes learner beliefs, identity, and writing practices over time.

Additionally, there is scope for interdisciplinary collaboration between applied linguists, AI developers, and educational theorists to co-create systems that reflect a wider range of linguistic and pedagogical values.

Final Reflection

AI tutors are not teachers, but they increasingly teach. They do so not through human experience or social dialogue, but through patterned language that reflects deeply entrenched educational and ideological systems. This article argues that these systems must be interrogated, not only for their linguistic content but for their cultural assumptions and pedagogical consequences.

As educators and researchers in a time of technological transformation, we must ask: What kind of English do we want our learners to encounter? What kinds of voices do we want them to hear—and to develop? And what happens when those voices are shaped not by people, but by patterns of language generated in silence?

Only by critically engaging these questions can we ensure that AI in education supports—not constrains—the diverse, dialogic, and democratic potential of language learning.

Future research should explore AI-human collaborative pedagogies and multilingual design to mitigate ideological biases.

References

- Ball, S. J. (2003). The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity. *Journal of Education Policy*, 18(2), 215–228.
- Bender, E. M., Gebru, T., McMillan-Major, A., & Mitchell, M. (2021). On the dangers of stochastic parrots: Can language models be too big? *Proceedings of the 2021 ACM Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency* (pp. 610–623). ACM.
- Biesta, G. (2006). *Beyond learning: Democratic education for a human future*. Paradigm Publishers.
- Canagarajah, S. (2013). *Translingual practice: Global Englishes and cosmopolitan relations*. Routledge.
- Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and social change*. Polity Press.
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. Longman.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Herder & Herder.
- Giroux, H. A. (2004). *The terror of neoliberalism: Authoritarianism and the eclipse of democracy*. Routledge.
- Gray, J. (2010). *The construction of English: Culture, consumerism and promotion in the ELT global coursebook*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Holmes, W., Bialik, M., & Fadel, C. (2019). *Artificial intelligence in education: Promises and implications for teaching and learning*. Center for Curriculum Redesign.
- Luckin, R., Holmes, W., Griffiths, M., & Forcier, L. B. (2016). *Intelligence unleashed: An argument for AI in education*. Pearson Education.
- Mercer, N. (2000). *Words and minds: How we use language to think together*. Routledge.
- Pennycook, A. (2001). *Critical applied linguistics: A critical introduction*. Routledge.
- Phillipson, R. (1992). *Linguistic imperialism*. Oxford University Press.

Selwyn, N. (2014). *Distrusting educational technology: Critical questions for changing times*. Routledge.

Shohamy, E. (2001). *The power of tests: A critical perspective on the uses of language tests*. Pearson Education.

Van Dijk, T. A. (1993). Principles of critical discourse analysis. *Discourse & Society*, 4(2), 249–283.

Walsh, S. (2006). *Investigating classroom discourse*. Routledge.

Weller, M. (2020). *25 years of ed tech*. Athabasca University Press.

Williamson, B. (2017). *Big data in education: The digital future of learning, policy and practice*. SAGE.

Wodak, R. (1996). *Disorders of discourse*. Longman.

Zawacki-Richter, O., Marín, V. I., Bond, M., & Gouverneur, F. (2019). Systematic review of research on artificial intelligence applications in higher education – Where are the educators? *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, 16(1), 1–27.