

Reconfiguring Teacher Agency in AI Language Teaching: An Ecological Lens

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Abstract: The rapid expansion of AI has intensified debates about teaching work in language education. Rather than treating AI as either a threat or a substitution, this multi-case study examines how in-service language teachers interpret, adapt and recast their roles in AI practice. Drawing on an ecological lens of agency, the study uses guided online interviews, data and WeChat follow-up exchanges with four teachers who use AI for feedback, scoring, speaking practice, reading texts and lesson design.

Findings show that AI shifts tasks but does not remove teacher judgment. Teachers adopted AI outputs selectively, revised or rejected them when they conflicted with course goals, learner needs or moral concerns, and increasingly understood themselves as designers, mediators and care supporters. AI is thus conceptualised as a school condition within which agency is enacted, rather than a fixed force replacing teachers.

Keywords: agency; AI in education; identity; ecological lens; language teaching

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1. Introduction

Generative AI has entered language classrooms through tools for writing feedback, lesson plans, speaking practice, scoring and personal learning (Holmes & Tuomi, 2022; Barrot, 2026). These tools reshape teaching procedures and teachers' understanding of roles. Existing discourse often frames AI as either workload relief or professional threat (Selwyn, 2023), but this overlooks teachers' situated interpretation and adaptation. From an ecological lens, agency is achieved through the interaction of prior experience, present conditions and future aspirations (Priestley et al., 2015). This study thus asks how in-service language teachers negotiate AI use, control and identity change.

This issue is notably important in language education because classroom work depends heavily on interpretation, interaction and situated judgment. AI may produce grammatically acceptable texts or quick scoring reports, yet teachers still decide whether those outputs fit students' proficiency, course aims and affective needs. Therefore, the key question is not whether AI can perform isolated teaching tasks, but how teachers reorganise their work when AI tips become part of everyday decision making.

2. Literature

2.1 Agency as Situated Professional Action

Teacher agency refers to teachers' capacity to make choices within situated social, cultural and material conditions. Language education research increasingly views agency as social, temporal and locally achieved rather than as a fixed individual trait (Priestley et al., 2015; Tao & Gao, 2021). It is shaped by beliefs, knowledge, emotions, school resources, collegial support and imagined futures. In AI contexts, however, less is known about how teachers balance tech efficiency with humanistic care and preserve choice when facing AI tips (Qin & Derakhshan, 2025; 阮晓蕾, 2025).

2.2 AI, Professionalism, and the Redistribution of Interpretive Authority: The Agentic Turn

2.2.1 AI in Language Teaching

AI can generate materials, provide feedback and support scoring, but its key implication is the shift of teaching control. Teachers remain responsible for interpreting, placing and acting on AI output. Recent reviews describe a shift from knowledge transmission to evaluative role, where teachers curate and critique AI content (Li et al., 2025; Tan et al., 2025). This accords with hybrid intelligence, in which teachers provide moral judgment, local

understanding and creative direction (Frøsig & Romero, 2024).

2.2.2 AI, Agency and Identity

Emerging studies link AI use with agency, knowledge reconstruction and identity work. Teachers' engagement with AI involves cognition, emotion and action; tensions between efficiency, ethics and pedagogy may trigger reflection (Qin & Derakhshan, 2025). AI teaching knowledge requires teachers to connect tech with subject content, learners and pedagogy (姜霞, 2025). AI also becomes a new actor in identity negotiation as teachers move toward roles such as designer, judge-mediator and moral overseer while facing risks of AI dependence (Röhl, 2025; Topali et al., 2025).

2.3 Gaps and Questions

Existing research often isolates single aspects of AI integration, such as technical training, affective experience or student perception. Less attention has been paid to how in-service language teachers continually negotiate AI in daily work, notably how they accept, modify or reject AI outputs and protect humanistic pedagogy.

For this reason, the present study treats teachers' accounts as more than descriptions of tool use. Their narratives are examined as evidence of how agency is achieved in concrete situations: when a teacher accepts an AI tip, modifies it for a class, rejects it because it conflicts with textbook aims, or explains its limitations to students. Such moments reveal the practical boundaries between AI help and teacher duty.

To address this gap, this study foregrounds teachers' own accounts and asks: (1) How do in-service language teachers interpret and negotiate the integration of AI tools into their practice? (2) In what ways does AI teaching reshape teachers' perceptions of choice and control? (3) How do teachers describe the evolution of their identity within AI teaching settings?

3.Theory

This study adopts Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological lens, which views agency as achieved rather than possessed. Agency emerges through past histories, practice-based engagement with current conditions, and future aims. AI is treated as a new school element in teachers' environments: it expands some possibilities for action while producing new constraints and tensions.

This framework helps analyse how teachers draw on prior beliefs, make situated judgments about AI outputs and imagine future roles. It avoids tech determinism by viewing teachers as active agents whose professional action is enabled, constrained and reshaped within specific ecological settings.

4.Method

4.1 Case Design

This study follows a multi-case design (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018) because it examines how teachers make sense of AI within real-life contexts. Through within-case and cross-case analysis, it identifies shared patterns and individual differences in agency, choice and identity reconstruction. An interpretivist lens guides attention to teachers' meaning-making and local decisions.

4.2 Teachers and Context

Teachers were selected through purposive and convenience sampling (陈向明, 2000). Four female language teachers aged 25 to 27 participated. All had two to three years of teaching experience, had used AI tools for more than one semester, and had received some school-based AI training. One taught at primary school and three at secondary school. They were voluntarily exploring AI, which made their agency and adaptation processes visible.

The four cases provided comparability and variation. Ms Zhang used AI for picture books and speaking marks but revised AI examples to fit pupils' lives. Ms Li used pigai.org for writing feedback yet insisted on secondary evaluation. Ms Wang used AI reading tips but manually adjusted standard lists. Ms Zhao used speech recognition for

speaking practice and mediated its unfair scoring of local pronunciation. These cases show different forms of teacher judgment across tasks.

These cases also reflect the early-career stage of the teachers. Their routines were still developing, and AI thus entered their teaching at a time when they were actively forming beliefs about lesson design, scoring and class relations. This made their experiences particularly useful for examining agency as a process rather than a fixed attribute. At the same time, their differences in school level, teaching focus and AI-use scenario offered a basis for cross-case comparison without losing local detail.

4.3 Data

Data collection began in November 2025. The primary data were guided WeChat interviews on role change, choice and identity in AI teaching. Teachers gave examples of adopting, modifying or rejecting AI outputs. The four interviews totalled 2.5 hours and 11,989 words. Supplementary data included lesson plans, teaching reflections, AI-assisted designs and informal WeChat follow-ups for clarification and member checks.

4.4 Analysis

Data were analysed through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The researcher repeatedly read the transcripts, data and WeChat records, generated inductive codes on role shifts, decisions, choice, emotion and identity, and then clustered them into themes. The ecological lens guided interpretation of iterational, practice-based and projective agency. Memos, source checks, member checks and team discussion supported rigor.

The coding results are shown in the table below.

In the second stage, the first codes were compared within each case to identify how agency appeared in a participant’s own teaching story. In the third stage, cross-case comparison was conducted to examine recurring patterns and meaningful differences. The ecological lens was not used to force data into fixed categories; rather, it helped show how past experience, present school conditions and future work aims interacted in teachers’ decisions. This procedure allowed the analysis to remain both inductive and theory-informed.

Table 1: Teachers’ Agency and Identity in the AI Era with Examples

Selective Coding	Axial Coding	Open Coding	Examples
Redistribution of Tasks & Retention of Authority	Task Automation	AI undertakes routine tasks AI provides initial feedback Shift from provider to reviewer	"Pigai. org completes grammar and spelling error scoring." (Li) "AI does the grammar error correction first." (Zhao) "I changed from a feedback provider to a reviewer." (Li)
	Retention of Final Judgement	Correcting AI misjudgements Adjusting AI scores	"I ultimately stood by my professional judgement." (Zhao)
Renegotiated Autonomy: Selective Adoption & Critical Mediation	Selective Adoption	Consult then modify	"I first refer to AI suggestions, then modify based on students' situation." (Li)
	Critical Mediation	Reject unsuitable suggestions Adjust AI-generated content Consider students' levels Consider teaching context	"I deleted content that exceeded syllabus standards." (Li) "I adjusted the score based on professional judgement." (Li) "I adjust based on students' actual level." (Li) "I know what my students need." (Zhang)
	Judgement as the Basis		
Shift Toward Design-Oriented Identity	From Transmitter to Designer	Becoming learning activity designer Focusing on activity design	"I should become a designer of learning activities." (Li) "I put more energy into designing activities." (Zhao)
	From Corrector to AI-Savvy Practitioner	Becoming master of AI teaching Becoming technology-integrated practitioner	"Professional competence includes AI tool selection and discernment." (Li) "My identity upgraded to a technology-integrated practitioner." (Li)
Emotional, Relational & Ethical Dimensions as Core Sites of Agency	Reconstructing Professional Worth	Enhanced sense of value Becoming true educator	"This change gives me a greater sense of value." (Zhao) "I become a true educator, not just a corrector." (Zhao)
	Seeing the "Whole Person"	Focus on AI-uncapturable Recognising student effort	"I combine this with things AI can't capture." (Li) "I'd adjust the score to 90 and explain why." (Li)
	Safeguarding the "Warmth" of Education	Providing emotional support Maintaining warm climate Facing student scepticism	"I told them: it's not your fault the machine can't understand." (Zhao) "If the classroom is cold, it's all over." (Zhao) "The AI gave a higher score... I felt lost." (Zhao)
	Confronting Identity Challenges	Reflecting on over-reliance risks	"Judgement gets weakened, easily led by AI." (Wang)
Contextual Variation: Role of Structural Supports	Empowerment Through Support	Collegial sharing PD opportunities	"We discuss tips on using AI tools." (Li) "I attend lectures on AI integration." (Li)
	Burden of Insufficient Support	Increased discernment burden Facing challenges alone	"I spend time discerning AI content, increases prep burden." (Zhao) (Daily communication)
	Gap Between Training and Practice	Short-term training lacks follow-up Reliance on autonomous exploration	(Daily communication)

4.5 Researcher Role

The researchers held both insider and outsider positions. Shared professional background and long-term acquaintance with teachers helped build trust, while reflective diaries, probing questions and peer discussion were used to reduce familiarity bias. Interpretations were continually checked against data and participant feedback.

4.6 Ethics and Rigor

4.6.1 Research Ethics

The study followed principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, privacy protection, fairness and reasonable compensation (陈向明, 2000). Teachers could withdraw, pause or stop interviews. Pseudonyms were used, identifiable details were anonymised, preliminary readings were verified by teachers, and small tokens of appreciation were provided.

4.6.2 Rigor

Trustworthiness was supported through source checks, member checks and thick description. Interviews, WeChat exchanges and texts were compared; teachers reviewed preliminary findings; and sufficient local detail was retained to support transfer.

5. Findings

5.1 Five interconnected themes show how agency is reshaped in AI language classrooms

First, AI shifted routine tasks while teachers retained judging power. Teachers used AI for grammar checking, model-text generation, oral scoring and initial feedback, but none accepted AI output as final. Ms Li used pigai.org for surface errors but reviewed scores, logic and progress. Ms Zhao referred to AI scores before filtering and revising them. AI thus shifted work from mechanical checking toward higher-level review.

This finding suggests that task shift should not be equated with deskilling. Teachers did not simply lose part of their work to AI; instead, they shifted attention from basic correction to higher-level review. Ms Li's secondary review of AI writing scores, for instance, enabled her to consider students' progress, effort and logical expression. In this sense, AI changed the division of labour, but it also made teachers' judgment more visible and more necessary.

5.2 Renegotiated Autonomy: Selective Adoption and Critical Mediation

Second, teachers renegotiated choice through selective adoption and mediation. They accepted AI output only when it matched course goals and learner needs. Ms Li overruled an AI score when an essay showed good ideas despite errors; Ms Zhao deleted vocabulary beyond textbook aims; Ms Wang replaced standard reading tips with interest-based lists. These acts reclaimed professional decisions.

The same pattern appeared in material design. AI examples were often fluent, but not always age-appropriate, culturally familiar or aligned with textbook aims. Teachers thus acted as filters and translators between AI output and class reality. Their choice was exercised not by refusing tech, but by deciding how far AI suggestions should travel before becoming teachable content. This form of mediation shows that agency is enacted through small but important teaching choices.

5.3 Shift Toward a Design-Oriented Identity

Third, teachers' identity shifted toward design-oriented roles. They increasingly described themselves as designers, orchestrators and key interpreters. Ms Zhao noted that AI reduced basic grading and freed time for activity design and individual support. Ms Li's AI-training experience also reframed the teacher value as selecting tools, judging outputs and designing human-AI integration.

5.4 Care, Social and Moral Dimensions as Core Sites of Agency

Fourth, care, social and moral work became a core site of agency. Teachers stressed that AI can analyse scores but cannot understand students' effort, anxiety or class participation. Ms Li adjusted evaluations by considering progress and study attitude. Ms Zhao explained speech AI errors to students and used peer evaluation to supplement AI feedback. Agency was thus enacted through empathy, care and moral judgment.

The affective dimension was particularly important when students saw AI scores as more objective than teacher judgment. In such moments, teachers had to protect both their control and learners' confidence. Ms Zhao's response

to speech AI errors illustrates this point: she reframed low AI scores as a limitation of the tool rather than a failure of the learner, and supplemented machine feedback with peer evaluation and teacher explanation. Agency was thus expressed through care, reassurance and moral interpretation.

5.5 Contextual Variation: The Critical Role of Structural Supports

Fifth, agency varied with school support. Teachers with school encouragement, training and collegial exchange felt more confident, while those with limited support experienced heavier preparation burdens and uncertainty. Agency was thus enabled or constrained by school resources, policies and work groups.

In sum, the data show that AI use is not a single tool choice. It is a set of small daily acts in which teachers check, adapt, explain and care.

6. Discussion

The findings challenge substitution-based narratives of AI and show that agency is reshaped rather than erased.

6.1 Rethinking Professional Authority in Human-AI Hybrid Systems

AI moved teacher control from content delivery to interpretive oversight. Teachers' value appeared in judging, placing and correcting AI output, supporting hybrid intelligence in which professional oversight remains central (Frøsig & Romero, 2024; Li et al., 2025).

6.2 Teaching, Ethical and Emotional Judgment

Emotional and moral judgment remain central to agency. AI may simulate feedback, but it cannot fully replace empathy, social understanding or local duty. Professional development should thus include AI literacy, moral discernment and reflective judgment, not only tool operation (Nguyen & Barbieri, 2026; OECD, 2026).

6.3 Structural Conditions and the Uneven Enactment of Agency

Agency was unevenly enacted because school conditions differed. Providing AI tools alone is insufficient; schools need sustained training, participatory policies, technical support and professional learning groups. Without such scaffolding, AI integration may increase workload and uncertainty rather than empower teachers (Topali et al., 2025; UNESCO, 2025).

This discussion also indicates that AI integration should be understood as an organisational issue, not merely an individual teacher skill. When teachers receive only brief technical training, they may know how to operate a tool but lack support for evaluating its teaching consequences. Sustainable agency requires spaces for collective reflection, examples of good practice, and policies that clarify duty without reducing teachers to tool operators.

7. Conclusion and Limitation

7.1 Conclusion

This study investigated how in-service language teachers experience and negotiate AI. AI functioned less as a substitution than as an ecological setting within which agency is enacted. Teachers adopted AI selectively, modified or rejected outputs, and retained duty for teaching and moral decisions. Their control shifted toward judgment and local review.

AI teaching also reshaped identity. Teachers increasingly viewed themselves as designers, mediators of AI content and guardians of care and moral dimensions of teaching. Their agency was most visible when balancing AI speed with learner needs, course aims and human care, but this agency depended on school support, training and collegial exchange.

Teacher education should cultivate AI literacy rather than only technical skills. Schools and policy makers should provide sustained training, participatory policies, technical support and professional learning groups.

7.2 Limitation

The study is limited by its small local sample and reliance on case-based self accounts and texts. Future

research should examine diverse contexts, use long-term designs and compare different forms of training.

In conclusion, AI is not a fixed force but a condition that teachers actively interpret and shape. The central task is to cultivate AI-empowered professionals whose judgment, creativity, ethics and social capacity are strengthened rather than eroded by tech.

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