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Between Help and Hesitation: How ELT Graduate Students Negotiate AI Use in Academic Practices

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Abstract
Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become increasingly integrated into higher education, creating new opportunities for academic writing, research, and learning support. However, concerns regarding academic integrity, source reliability, and responsible AI use remain significant, particularly among future educators. This study explores how English Language Teaching (ELT) graduate students engage with AI tools in their academic practices. A qualitative approach was employed involving open-ended questionnaires completed by 13 ELT graduate students, followed by semi-structured interviews with five participants and reflective written responses from four participants. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed three major themes: AI as Linguistic and Cognitive Scaffolding, negotiating trust, verification, and academic integrity, and emerging professional beliefs about responsible AI use. Participants perceived AI as a valuable resource for idea generation, academic writing, language development, and conceptual understanding. At the same time, they expressed concerns regarding fabricated references, misinformation, dependency, and originality, leading them to adopt verification practices such as source checking, cross-referencing academic materials, and revising AI-generated outputs. The findings further indicate that participants viewed AI not only as an academic tool but also as a pedagogical resource requiring critical and ethical use. Unlike studies that primarily focus on technology acceptance, this study highlights how future language educators actively negotiate the opportunities and challenges of AI through verification practices, ethical reflection, and professional responsibility. The study emphasizes the importance of integrating AI literacy, critical evaluation, and responsible technology use into teacher education programs to prepare educators for increasingly AI-mediated learning environments.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence; AI literacy; ELT graduate students; Academic integrity; Teacher education.

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INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence (AI) has rapidly become an integral part of everyday academic practices in higher education. The emergence of generative AI tools such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Copilot, Grammarly, and similar ones has altered how students search for information, develop ideas, write assignments, and engage with learning materials. These technologies promote immediate access to explanations, writing support, and content generation, making them increasingly attractive to students facing demanding academic workloads. As AI becomes more accessible and sophisticated, its influence on educational practices

continues to expand across disciplines and educational levels (Kasneci et al., 2023; Tlili et al., 2023).

In English Language Teaching (ELT), AI presents significant opportunities for language learning and teacher education. Previous studies have shown that AI tools can support vocabulary development, grammar improvement, idea generation, academic writing, and personalized learning experiences (Kohnke et al., 2023; Yan, 2023). Postgraduate students—who regularly engage in research, academic writing, and critical reading—see AI as a beneficial tool that facilitates learning by increasing efficiency. In addition, AI has begun assisting pedagogical practices by preparing lesson plans and instructional materials, which helps students relate in their career preparation in language education.

Although AI has potential benefits in educational settings, its growing integration in academic spheres raises concerns among students and teachers. This issue has garnered attention among researchers due to its relevance to academic integrity, plagiarism, overreliance on technology, diminished critical thinking, and the reliability of AI-generated content (Cotton et al., 2024; Lo, 2023). Unlike traditional digital tools, generative AI systems can produce human-like responses that may appear convincing despite containing inaccuracies, fabricated references, or misleading explanations (Chan & Hu, 2023). The consequences will require students not only to utilize AI effectively, but also to evaluate and verify the information it provides. This challenge is naturally relevant in academic contexts, in which originality, critical thinking, and evidence-based reasoning remain fundamental. Regardless of the effective AI utilization, students are expected to develop their AI literacy skills. AI literacy refers to the competencies required to understand, evaluate, and interact with AI systems in critical, ethical, and responsible ways (Ng et al., 2021). Similarly, Long & Magerko (2020) argue that AI literacy involves understanding both the capabilities and limitations of AI technologies, enabling individuals to make informed decisions on when and how AI should be used. In academic contexts, AI literacy extends beyond technical proficiency and includes the ability to critically assess AI-generated outputs, verify information, and recognize potential biases and inaccuracies. These competencies are becoming increasingly important as AI tools become embedded in students' everyday learning practices.

These issues become even more significant in ELT teacher education. ELT graduate students occupy a unique position as language learners, postgraduate researchers, and future educators. Their engagement with AI extends beyond completing academic tasks. It also shapes their understanding of teaching, learning, and the responsible use of technology in educational settings. As future language teachers, they are expected to model ethical academic behaviour, promote critical literacy, and make informed pedagogical decisions. Consequently, understanding how ELT graduate students experience and make sense of AI use is important not only for understanding current academic practices but also for anticipating how AI may influence future language teaching and learning.

The development of AI literacy is particularly important for future teachers because their decisions regarding technology use influence not only their own learning but also their future pedagogical practices. As teacher identity develops through reflection, experience, and professional decision-making (Beijaard et al., 2004), the ways in which ELT graduate students engage with AI may provide insight into how future educators position themselves in relation to emerging educational technologies. Consequently, AI literacy and professional identity development should be viewed as interconnected processes within teacher education.

The growing presence of AI in education also highlights the importance of critical digital literacy. Pangrazio (2016) emphasizes that critical digital literacy involves questioning, evaluating, and critically engaging with digital information rather than accepting it passively. In increasingly AI-mediated learning environments, students are expected not only to access information efficiently but also to evaluate its credibility, identify misinformation, and make informed judgments about its academic use. These competencies are particularly relevant for postgraduate students, whose academic work depends heavily on the quality and reliability of information sources.

A growing body of research has examined students' perceptions and acceptance of AI in higher education. Previous studies generally report positive attitudes toward AI due to its ability to support academic writing, increase productivity, and facilitate learning processes (Farrokhnia et al., 2024; Kasneci et al., 2023). At the same time, concerns regarding dependency, misuse, source reliability, and ethical

challenges have also been widely documented (Cotton et al., 2024; Lo, 2023). While these studies have contributed valuable insights into students' attitudes toward AI, much of the existing literature has focused on whether students perceive AI positively or negatively, often relying on survey-based approaches that offer limited insight into how students actually engage with AI in their everyday academic practices.

Furthermore, relatively little attention has been paid to ELT graduate students, particularly in contexts where AI technologies are becoming increasingly embedded in academic work. Existing studies have rarely explored how future language educators navigate the opportunities and challenges of AI use while also considering academic integrity, professional responsibility, and pedagogical decision-making. As AI becomes more integrated into language education, understanding these experiences is crucial for developing AI literacy and responsible technology use among future educators.

In this study, negotiation refers to the ongoing process through which students balance competing considerations when engaging with AI tools in academic contexts. Rather than simply accepting or rejecting AI technologies, students continuously evaluate their usefulness, reliability, ethical implications, and relevance to their future professional responsibilities. This perspective aligns with sociocultural views of technology use, which emphasize that engagement with digital tools involves contextual judgement, critical reflection, and meaning-making rather than passive adoption (Pangrazio, 2016; Selwyn, 2016). Thus, negotiation is understood as a dynamic process through which students reconcile the opportunities and challenges associated with AI use in academic work.

Existing technology adoption frameworks, such as the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), have explained technology use through factors such as perceived usefulness, ease of use, and behavioural intention (Davis, 1989; Venkatesh et al., 2003). While these frameworks provide valuable insight into technology acceptance, they may not fully capture how future educators critically evaluate, verify, and ethically negotiate AI use within academic and professional contexts. Therefore, this study adopts a negotiation framework to explore these more complex experiences.

Given this issue, the present study explores how ELT graduate students engage with AI tools in their academic practices. Rather than focusing solely on perceptions or acceptance, this study seeks to understand how students utilize AI, respond to concerns regarding reliability and academic integrity, and reflect on the implications of AI for their future professional roles. By examining students' experiences in an ELT postgraduate context, this study aims to deepen understanding of how future language educators negotiate the opportunities and challenges of AI use in academic settings.

The findings of this study are expected to contribute to ongoing discussions on AI in language education by highlighting the ways in which ELT graduate students balance the benefits of AI with concerns related to verification, originality, and responsible use. More broadly, the study may inform teacher education programs seeking to develop AI literacy, critical digital practices, and ethical awareness among future language educators in increasingly AI-mediated learning environments.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative exploratory design to investigate how ELT graduate students engage with artificial intelligence (AI) tools in their academic practices. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and reflections regarding AI use in depth rather than measure variables quantitatively. Specifically, the study sought to understand how students perceived the benefits of AI, responded to ethical concerns, and reflected on the implications of AI use for their future professional roles as language educators. Creswell and Poth (2018) argue that qualitative research is well-suited to exploring how individuals interpret and think logically about their experiences within particular social and educational contexts.

Time and Place of Research

This study was conducted from October 2025 to May 2026 in a Master's Program in English Language Education at an Indonesian university, during which students were actively engaged in coursework, academic writing, research, and classroom discussions in which AI tools were utilized. To collect the data, the researcher utilized online questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and reflective written responses.

Research Subject

The participants of this study were 13 first-semester students enrolled in the Master's Program in English Language Education at Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta (UNY). All participants had prior teaching experience as English teachers, private tutors, or instructors in various educational settings and reported frequent use of AI tools for academic purposes. Their ages ranged from approximately 22 to 32 years old. The initial stage of data collection involved all 13 participants completing an open-ended questionnaire designed to explore their experiences, perceptions, and practices regarding AI use in academic contexts. The questionnaire responses served as a preliminary dataset and provided an overview of participants' engagement with AI technologies.

Following the questionnaire phase, purposive sampling was employed to select five participants for semi-structured interviews. The selection was based on three criteria: (1) active use of AI tools in academic activities, (2) willingness to participate in follow-up interviews, and (3) ability to provide detailed and reflective responses relevant to the research objectives. The interviews enabled a deeper exploration of participants' experiences, concerns, and reflections regarding AI use.

To further enrich the data and enhance methodological triangulation, four of the interview participants voluntarily completed reflective written responses. These reflections provided additional insights into participants' personal experiences, verification practices, ethical considerations, and emerging professional beliefs regarding the use of AI. The combination of questionnaire responses, interviews, and reflective writings allowed the study to capture both broad patterns and in-depth perspectives on ELT graduate students' engagement with AI tools.

Table 1. presents the characteristics of the study participants

Characteristics	Description
Questionnaire participants	13
Interview Participants	5
Reflective response participants	4
Academic program	Master's Program in English Language Education
Institution	Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta
Semester	First Semester
Age range	22-32 years old
Teaching experience	Prior experience as English Teachers, tutors, or instructors
AI use	Frequent users of AI tools for academic purposes

Research Procedure

The study was conducted in three stages. The first was the distribution of an open-ended questionnaire to ELT graduate students to gather preliminary information on their experiences, perceptions, and patterns of AI use for academic purposes. The questionnaire responses provided an initial overview of participants' experiences and informed subsequent stages of data collection. The second was semi-structured interviews with 5 participants. The interviews explored the participants' experiences with AI tools, perceived benefits, concerns regarding academic integrity and originality, verification practices, and views on the role of AI in language teaching. The semi-structured format allowed participants to provide more detailed descriptions of their experiences while enabling the researcher to explore emerging issues in greater depth.

Third, follow-up reflective written responses were collected from 4 interview participants. Participants were invited to reflect on their experiences using AI in academic tasks, the challenges they

encountered, and their perspectives on responsible AI use as future language educators. Reflective writing was incorporated to provide additional insights into the participants' experiences and to enrich the interpretation of findings.

Instruments and Data Collection Techniques

The study employed three complementary instruments: an open-ended questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and reflective written responses. The use of multiple instruments was intended to obtain rich and comprehensive data while enhancing the credibility of the findings through methodological triangulation (Denzin, 2017).

The questionnaire items, interview guide, and reflective prompts were developed based on previous literature on AI in education, AI literacy, academic integrity, teacher cognition, and reflective practice (Borg, 2003; Cotton et al., 2024; Farrell, 2015; Ng et al., 2021; Schön, 2017). The instruments were designed to explore participants' experiences, perceived benefits, concerns, verification practices, and reflections regarding AI use in academic contexts. More specifically, the questionnaire explored participants' patterns of AI use, perceived usefulness, confidence in AI-generated content, concerns regarding reliability and accuracy, perceived benefits and limitations, and reflections on how AI might influence their thinking and future professional practices as English Language educators. These areas were selected because they align with key issues identified in previous studies on AI literacy, technology use, academic integrity, and teacher cognition (Borg, 2003; Davis, 1989; Ng et al., 2021).

Prior to data collection, the instruments underwent iterative refinement through discussions and feedback sessions with lecturers during the research development process. The feedback helped improve the clarity of the questions, the relevance of the prompts, and the alignment of the instruments with the study objectives. Revisions were subsequently incorporated before the instruments were administered.

Data collection was conducted in three stages. The first stage involved administering an open-ended questionnaire to 13 ELT graduate students. The questionnaire served as an initial exploratory instrument to identify participants' experiences, perceptions, and practices related to the use of in academic activities. Participants were encouraged to provide detailed responses regarding the AI tools they used, the purposes of use, perceived benefits, challenges, and concerns associated with AI-generated content.

In the second stage, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five participants who were purposively selected based on three criteria: (1) active use of AI tools in academic activities, (2) willingness to participate in follow-up interviews, and (3) ability to provide detailed and reflective responses relevant to the research objectives. The interviews enabled a deeper exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives that could not be fully captured through questionnaire responses alone. Interview questions focused on participants' AI usage patterns, verification strategies, academic integrity concerns, and views regarding the role of AI in language education. Each interview lasted approximately 20-30 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent.

In the third stage, four interview participants voluntarily completed reflective written responses. Reflective writing was incorporated to encourage participants to revisit and critically examine their experiences with AI use beyond the interview setting. Drawing on Schön's (2017) the concept of reflective practice and Farrell (2015) the framework for reflection in language education, the reflective prompts invited participants to describe meaningful experiences with AI, discuss challenges encountered in AI use, explain how they verified AI-generated information, and reflect on the implications of AI for their future professional practices as language educators.

The combination of questionnaire responses, interview data, and reflective written responses enabled the researcher to capture both broad patterns and in-depth perspectives regarding AI use among ELT graduate students. Furthermore, integrating multiple data sources strengthened the trustworthiness of the findings by allowing themes to be examined across different forms of participant accounts and facilitating methodological triangulation (Denzin, 2017).

Data analysis technique

The data obtained from the open-ended questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and reflective written responses were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun & Clarke (2006) a six-phase

framework. The analysis began with repeated reading of the data to gain familiarity with participants' experiences and perspectives regarding AI use in academic contexts.

Relevant data segments were then systematically coded across the three data sources. Similar codes were grouped into broader categories representing recurring patterns of meaning related to participants' experiences, perceived benefits, concerns, verification practices, and reflections on AI use. Through an iterative process of reviewing and refining the categories, three overarching themes were generated: (1) AI as Linguistic and Cognitive Scaffolding, (2) Negotiating Trust, Verification, and Academic Integrity, and (3) Emerging Professional Beliefs about Responsible AI Use.

The themes were subsequently defined, named, and interpreted in relation to the research objectives and relevant literature. Findings from the questionnaires, interviews, and reflective written responses were compared and integrated to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis through methodological triangulation (Denzin, 2017). To enhance analytical rigor, the emerging themes were repeatedly reviewed against the original dataset throughout the analysis process to ensure consistency and representativeness of the findings. Table 2 presents an example of the theme development process.

Table 2. Example of Theme Development

Initial Codes	Categories	Themes
Brainstorming ideas	Academic support	AI as Linguistic and Cognitive Scaffolding
Understanding concepts	Academic support	AI as Linguistic and Cognitive Scaffolding
Learning vocabulary	Language development	AI as Linguistic and Cognitive Scaffolding
Checking references	Verification practices	Negotiating Trust, Verification, and Academic Integrity
Fear of plagiarism	Integrity concerns	Negotiating Trust, Verification, and Academic Integrity
Cross-checking sources	Verification practices	Negotiating Trust, Verification, and Academic Integrity
Lesson planning	Pedagogical use	Emerging Professional Beliefs about Responsible AI Use
Ethical concerns	Professional responsibility	Emerging Professional Beliefs about Responsible AI Use
Future teaching practices	Professional responsibility	Emerging Professional Beliefs about Responsible AI Use

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of questionnaire responses, semi-structured interviews, and reflective written responses revealed three interconnected themes regarding ELT graduate students' engagement with artificial intelligence (AI) tools in academic practices. The themes include (1) AI as Linguistic and Cognitive Scaffolding, (2) Negotiating Trust, Verification, and Academic Integrity, and (3) Emerging Professional Beliefs about Responsible AI Use. These findings demonstrate that participants neither fully embraced nor rejected AI technologies. Instead, they continuously negotiated the opportunities and challenges associated with AI use throughout their academic experiences.

Table 3. Themes Generated from Thematic Analysis

Theme	Description
AI as Linguistic and Cognitive Scaffolding	AI supports idea generation, academic writing, conceptual understanding, and learning preparation.
Negotiating Trust, Verification, and Academic Integrity	Students actively verify AI-generated outputs due to concerns regarding reliability, fabricated references, and academic integrity.
Emerging Professional Beliefs about Responsible AI Use	Students reflect on the pedagogical and ethical implications of AI as future language educators.

AI as Linguistic and Cognitive Scaffolding

Participants consistently described AI as a valuable academic resource that facilitated learning, academic writing, and conceptual understanding. Across interviews and reflective responses, AI was frequently used to generate ideas, organize information, simplify difficult concepts, and improve academic writing.

One participant explained:

> "*I often ask AI to explain concepts in a much simpler way. Sometimes I even ask it to explain things as if I were a child so that I can understand difficult concepts more easily*." (P1)

Similarly, a reflective participant highlighted the role of AI in supporting academic writing:

> "*ChatGPT helped me brainstorm ideas and organize my thoughts more systematically. Grammarly helped me improve grammar and clarity, while QuillBot helped me paraphrase repetitive sentences*." (R3)

Participants also emphasized the role of AI in increasing preparedness and confidence. One stated:

> "*I felt much more prepared for class discussions because AI helped me explore the topic beforehand and deepen my understanding*." (P4)

Another participant stated:

> "*I have learned a lot of new vocabulary from AI, especially vocabulary that I can use in academic writing*." (P3)

These findings suggest that participants primarily noted AI as a form of linguistic and cognitive scaffolding. Rather than replacing learning, AI served as a supportive partner that reduced cognitive burden and facilitated academic engagement. Participants frequently relied on AI to brainstorm ideas, structure arguments, summarize information, and clarify theoretical concepts.

The role of AI as a supportive learning resource can also be understood through the concept of scaffolding. According to Vygotsky (1978), learning is enhanced when learners receive temporary support that enables them to perform tasks beyond their current level of independent capability. In this study, participants frequently described AI as a tool that helped them understand complex concepts, organize ideas, and develop academic arguments. Such experiences suggest that AI served as a form of digital scaffolding, supporting participants' cognitive and linguistic development.

The notion of scaffolding in this study extends beyond simple task completion. Participants did not perceive AI as replacing their learning efforts but rather as supporting understanding, exploration, and knowledge construction. This finding aligns with those who argue that AI technologies can serve as learning partners, augmenting human intelligence and facilitating deeper engagement with learning tasks.

This finding supports Kasneci et al. (2023)those who argue that generative AI can facilitate learning through personalized explanations and immediate feedback. Similarly, Kohnke et al. (2023) highlight the potential of AI tools to support language learning and academic communication. In the present study, AI was perceived not merely as an information provider but also as a cognitive companion that enhanced academic preparedness and confidence in postgraduate learning contexts.

Negotiating Trust, Verification, and Academic Integrity

Although participants acknowledged the benefits of AI, concerns about reliability, fabricated references, misinformation, and academic integrity were consistently reported across the dataset. Participants repeatedly emphasized that AI-generated information should not be accepted uncritically and, therefore, requires careful verification.

One participant shared:

> "*One of the most frustrating experiences is when AI provides references that do not actually exist*." (R1)

Similarly, another one explained:

> "*I always cross-check the information generated by AI because I cannot fully trust it without verification." (P4)*

Concerns regarding source reliability also appeared in reflective responses:

> "*I do not rely on AI one hundred percent. Every citation provided by AI must be checked again for accuracy*." (R2)

To address these concerns, participants developed various verification strategies, including manually searching for references, comparing outputs across different AI platforms, consulting journal articles, and cross-checking information against original sources. One participant described AI as a co-assistant rather than an authority:

> "*I use AI as a co-assistant rather than an authority. I still need to verify everything myself*." (P4)

Participants also expressed concerns regarding originality and academic integrity. One participant recalled:

> "*The first time I checked my work using GPTZero, it showed an AI detection rate of around 80%, which made me feel overwhelmed and worried*." (P3)

Another participant explained:

> "*I usually revise AI-generated content using my own understanding, add personal analysis, and check information from academic journals to maintain originality*." (R3)

These findings demonstrate that participants did not view AI as an unquestionable source of knowledge. Instead, they continuously negotiated between efficiency and credibility. While AI accelerated academic work, participants remained cautious about its reliability and ethical implications. Participants' verification practices also reflect important dimensions of critical digital literacy. Pangrazio (2016) argues that digital literacy extends beyond accessing information and involves the ability to question, evaluate, and critically engage with digital content. The participants in this study demonstrated such practices by cross-checking references, comparing information across sources, and evaluating the credibility of AI-generated outputs before incorporating them into academic work.

The concerns expressed by participants also reflect broader discussions surrounding academic integrity in higher education. Bretag (2013) defines academic integrity as a commitment to honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage in academic work. Participants' efforts to paraphrase AI-generated content, verify references, and maintain originality suggest an awareness of these principles despite the increasing availability of AI-assisted writing technologies.

This finding aligns with Cotton et al., (2024), Lo (2023), and Tlili et al., (2023), who identified hallucinations, misinformation, and academic integrity as major concerns associated with generative AI. However, the present findings extend previous studies by demonstrating that postgraduate ELT students actively developed verification practices and critical evaluation strategies rather than passively accepting AI-generated outputs.

Emerging Professional Beliefs about Responsible AI Use

The third theme reflects participants' awareness of their future roles as English language educators. Beyond discussing AI as a learning tool, participants frequently reflected on how AI might influence their future teaching practices and professional responsibilities.

Several participants viewed AI as a valuable resource for lesson planning, materials development, classroom activities, and language-learning support. One participant explained:

> "*I usually turn to AI when I run out of ideas and need inspiration for classroom activities*." (P3)

Similarly, another participant reported:

> "*AI made lesson preparation much easier and helped me create materials and explanations that were more accessible to learners*." (P4)

These responses suggest that participants recognized the practical benefits of AI in educational contexts. AI was perceived as a tool that could support creativity, efficiency, and instructional preparation. Nevertheless, participants consistently emphasized that AI should not replace human judgment, creativity, or professional expertise. One reflective participant stated:

> "*AI can be used to find information, organize ideas, and understand concepts, but it should not be used to copy content directly*." (R2)

Another participant reflected:

> "*As a future English teacher, I believe AI should be used as a learning assistant, not as a replacement for human thinking and creativity*." (R3)

These reflections indicate that participants were already developing professional beliefs regarding responsible AI use. Rather than focusing solely on personal academic benefits, they considered broader pedagogical and ethical implications. Participants emphasized the importance of teaching students how to evaluate information critically, verify sources, avoid plagiarism, and use AI responsibly.

Although the findings do not indicate fully developed teacher identities, they suggest emerging professional beliefs and orientations regarding responsible AI use among future language educators. Beijaard et al. (2004) argue that teacher identity is continuously constructed through experiences, reflection, and interaction with professional contexts. As participants considered the ethical and pedagogical implications of AI use, they were simultaneously shaping their identities as future language educators who must balance technological innovation with professional responsibility.

This finding resonates with Borg's (2003) the concept of teacher cognition, which emphasizes the role of beliefs and experiences in shaping pedagogical decision-making. Furthermore, participants' reflections align with Schön (2017) the notion of reflective practice, as they continuously evaluated their own AI use and considered its implications for future professional contexts.

The present findings also extend existing technology adoption frameworks. Models such as the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) explain technology use primarily through factors including perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, social influence, and behavioural intention (Davis, 1989; Venkatesh et al., 2003). While these dimensions were evident in participants' positive perceptions of AI, the findings suggest that AI engagement among future educators also involves ethical reflection, source verification, professional responsibility, and critical evaluation. Thus, participants' experiences appear to extend beyond technology acceptance toward a more complex process of negotiation.

Overall, the findings indicate that ELT graduate students perceive AI neither as a threat nor as a complete solution. Instead, they engage in a continuous process of negotiation between efficiency, reliability, originality, and professional responsibility. The novelty of this study lies in revealing how future language educators move beyond simple acceptance or rejection of AI and instead develop reflective strategies for integrating AI into their academic and professional practices. These findings suggest that AI literacy in teacher education should extend beyond technical skills to include critical evaluation, ethical awareness, source verification, and reflective engagement with AI-generated content.

CONCLUSION

This study explored ELT graduate students' engagement with artificial intelligence (AI) tools in academic practices through questionnaire responses, semi-structured interviews, and reflective written responses. The findings revealed that participants perceived AI as a valuable resource for supporting academic writing, idea generation, conceptual understanding, and learning preparation. AI served as a form of linguistic and cognitive scaffolding, helping students manage demanding academic tasks more efficiently.

At the same time, participants demonstrated critical awareness of AI's limitations. Concerns about fabricated references, inaccurate information, academic integrity, and overreliance led students to develop various verification strategies, including cross-checking sources, consulting academic literature, and revising AI-generated outputs to incorporate their own interpretations. These practices indicate that participants did not passively accept AI-generated content but actively negotiated between efficiency and credibility.

The findings also revealed emerging professional beliefs regarding responsible AI use among future English language educators. As future English language educators, they viewed AI not only as a learning tool but also as a pedagogical resource that should be used responsibly and ethically. Participants emphasized the importance of critical thinking, source verification, originality, and ethical use of AI in future teaching practices.

The study contributes to the growing body of literature on AI in language education by demonstrating that ELT graduate students move beyond simple acceptance or rejection of AI technologies. Instead, they engage in an ongoing negotiation process that balances the opportunities and challenges associated with AI use. This negotiation process represents the central contribution of the study.

Based on these findings, teacher education programs should consider integrating AI literacy into their curricula. Such initiatives should focus not only on technical competencies but also on critical evaluation, ethical awareness, source verification, and reflective engagement with AI-generated content. Future research may involve larger participant groups, multiple institutions, or longitudinal designs to examine how AI-related beliefs and practices develop over time among language educators.

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