

Article

Leveraging Generative AI for IELTS Preparation: Student Perspectives on Language Learning

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Abstract

This study investigates Chinese students' perspectives on leveraging Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) to enhance reading and writing abilities in preparation for the language learning and examination. 76 students enrolled in an online virtual learning environment (VLE) and participated in forum discussions prompted by questions relating to AI use and different study practices. Analysis identified 33 detailed forum posts written by and between students that specifically engaged in discussions concerning the use of AI to support English as an Additional Language (EAL) fluency, academic reading/writing skills, and IELTS-related skills development. This article presents an analysis of these contributions using thematic analysis. An inductive approach enabled the identification of key themes relating to students' perceptions. Findings indicated that students appreciated AI's capacity for personalised language learning, reading and writing practice while expressing reservations about overreliance on digital tools. The concept of Artificially Intelligent Mediated Counterbalance (AIMC) is proposed to capture students' reported strategies for integrating AI tools with traditional study methods to maintain authentic language development. The article concludes by discussing the implications of AIMC for educators and policymakers seeking to support the responsible integration of AI into language education.

Keywords: language learning; artificial intelligence; IELTS; generative AI; English as an Additional Language (EAL)

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1. Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become increasingly prominent in language learning in higher education (HE), with prior research highlighting its potential to support writing development, feedback, and learner autonomy (Zhai et al., 2021). More recently, generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) has expanded these possibilities by enabling learners to access instant explanations, model responses, and interactive support. This is particularly relevant to language test preparation. In the context of IELTS, GenAI may assist learners in developing reading and writing strategies, improving language accuracy, and engaging more flexibly with exam preparation, especially in settings where IELTS is linked to transnational education and English-medium instruction, such as joint venture universities (Day & Zhang, 2025; Zhang, 2025). However, an important research gap remains. Existing studies have largely focused on the technical and pedagogical affordances

of AI-assisted language learning or on automated feedback systems while giving less attention to how students experience and interpret GenAI in the specific context of refining approaches to learning enhancement (Zhai et al., 2021). This gap is especially evident in relation to Chinese HE students learning English as an Additional Language (EAL), for example, whose use of GenAI may involve both perceived benefits and concerns such as reliability, dependency, and academic integrity (Ranalli, 2021; Dwivedi, 2023). To address this gap, this study investigates how Chinese HE students perceive the role of GenAI tools in supporting IELTS, language skills, reading and writing preparation. To capture how learners negotiate both opportunities and challenges, the study explores the concept of Artificially Intelligent Mediated Counterbalance (AIMC), referring to a dynamic balance between AI-enabled benefits and AI-related concerns in language learning. To reach this reflective heuristic model, the study addresses and discusses data aligned to the following research question:

- How do Chinese HE students perceive the role of GenAI tools in supporting academic, reading, writing and IELTS preparation?

Through its qualitative focus on student perspectives, the study seeks to offer an original, rigorous, and significant contribution to understanding the role of GenAI in contemporary language learning. The study focuses primarily on EAL, academic reading and writing skills, and IELTS; some student comments explored broadly EAL tasks and other study areas, helping frame the relationship between AI, disciplinary knowledge and language literacy development in universities.

2. Literature Review

The review outlined below integrates research on AI-supported reading and writing development, feedback mechanisms, linguistic enhancement, learner autonomy, student perceptions, strategy-based development, and exam-oriented preparation. By foregrounding EAL students' perspectives, the review identifies and establishes the conceptual and empirical basis for a student-centered investigation, thereby informing the methodological approach of the present study.

2.1. AI for English Language Support

AI-enabled reading tools have demonstrated strong potential for supporting EAL learners' reading comprehension and strategic reading development. Lin et al. (2025) demonstrated that AI-generated vocabulary previews, predictive questions, and text simplification significantly enhanced learners' reading comprehension accuracy, with outcomes directly transferable to EAL academic reading demands, by reducing cognitive load and facilitating the efficient processing of complex texts. Similarly, Yousefi and Askari (2024) reported that Iranian learners using AI-assisted reading tools demonstrated stronger inferencing skills, improved vocabulary recognition, and higher overall comprehension than those receiving traditional instruction, highlighting the role of AI in strengthening transferable reading strategies applicable to EAL contexts (He et al., 2025; Hu & McKay, 2012).

Beyond comprehension accuracy, AI tools also support fluency and self-regulation. Alfaleh et al. (2025) found that AI-powered oral reading tools enhanced learners' reading fluency, accuracy, and confidence, enabling them to process unfamiliar vocabulary more efficiently. Pan et al. (2024) demonstrated that AI chatbots promoted self-regulated reading through goal setting, comprehension monitoring, summarisation, and vocabulary clarification, strategies aligned with IELTS reading demands. From an instructional perspective, Hoang et al. (2025) noted that ChatGPT facilitates the creation of IELTS-style reading materials, providing EAL-relevant, exam-aligned practice opportunities.

Collectively, these studies indicate that AI supports both comprehension processes and strategic independence in EAL reading development, alongside fostering positive mental health support (Day, 2023; Huang et al., 2024; Johnston et al., 2024; Yan, 2023; Chen et al., 2025).

Building on AI-supported reading development, research also demonstrates that AI-assisted tools play a critical role in preparing EAL learners for IELTS writing assessments and academic writing tasks. Bahari (2025) demonstrated that AI-enhanced tools, such as Grammarly, ProWritingAid, and Turnitin Revision Assistant, helped learners, whose learning conditions parallel those of EAL contexts, balance syntactic complexity with clarity, thereby improving textual coherence, cohesive device use, and lexical complexity. These gains align closely with IELTS writing descriptors, where logical argumentation and precise lexical control underpin higher band scores. Similarly, Fathi and Rahimi (2024) demonstrated that AI-mediated writing guidance enhanced rhetorical organisation and argumentative clarity through model structures and targeted support. From a feedback perspective, AI tools further strengthen writing outcomes for EAL learners. Rahimi et al. (2025) found that automated written corrective feedback significantly improved the accuracy, structure, and coherence of academic writing, with learner engagement predicting stronger development. AI tools also address persistent challenges faced by EAL learners.

Seo (2024) reported that AI-assisted narrative writing reduced language learner's block and encouraged more varied vocabulary and sentence structures, while Wenqiang (2024) found that AI-supported reading-writing integration enhanced content development and discourse awareness. Collectively, these studies suggest that GenAI tools facilitate the transition from reading-based input to writing-based output, thereby strengthening foundations for IELTS writing success. Extending AI support from writing development to revision and refinement, AI-mediated feedback has emerged as a key mechanism for improving EAL writing. Hung et al. (2024) demonstrated that students engaging with automated writing evaluation (AWE) across multiple drafts in courses, relevant to EAL writing development, achieved measurable improvements in grammatical accuracy, lexical appropriateness, and structural clarity. Similarly, Wei et al. (2023), in a randomised controlled trial with Chinese ESL learners, found that AI-supported feedback produced significantly greater gains in fluency, syntactic complexity, and overall writing quality than teacher feedback alone. Unlike general writing support, AI-driven feedback provides immediate, individualised, and iterative guidance that directly informs EAL learners' agency. Beyond traditional AWE systems, AI tools enhance feedback processes by supporting dialogic interaction and learner agency. Barrot (2023) reported that automated corrective feedback substantially reduced grammatical error density, facilitating efficient micro-level revision. Ngo et al. (2024) confirmed through meta-analysis that AWE consistently yields positive effects on writing quality, with clear relevance to EAL contexts. Studies on learner-AI interaction further highlight the importance of engagement patterns. Dai et al. (2023) found that learners valued ChatGPT for providing accessible and actionable feedback, while Rong et al. (2025) showed that learners who actively questioned AI feedback and revised iteratively achieved greater linguistic gains.

These findings demonstrate that AI-mediated feedback plays a central role in shaping the IELTS writing performance of EAL learners. AI tools also provide targeted support for vocabulary and grammar development, which are foundational to reading comprehension and writing proficiency in IELTS preparation. Rohollahzadeh Ebadi (2025) demonstrated that AI-powered vocabulary instruction significantly improved EFL learners' lexical breadth, depth, and retention through adaptive learning pathways and personalised feedback. Recent research (2023–2026) in AI-assisted language learning highlights the transformative yet complex role of generative AI tools in second language development. Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that tools such as ChatGPT can

enhance writing quality, linguistic accuracy, and learner motivation by providing immediate feedback and facilitating iterative drafting processes (Poláková & Klímová, 2024). Research also indicates that students frequently perceive AI systems as supportive learning companions that assist with vocabulary development, grammatical correction, and idea generation (Teng, 2024; Meniado et al., 2024).

Systematic reviews further confirm that generative technologies guided by AI chatbots offer personalised and adaptive learning opportunities, enabling learners to engage in self-directed language practice and receive instant feedback beyond traditional classroom settings (Li et al., 2024; Law, 2024). At the same time, scholars highlight emerging concerns regarding overreliance on automated assistance, the accuracy of AI-generated feedback, and the need for developing AI literacy among learners and educators (Ma et al., 2024; Lo et al., 2024). Comparative experimental studies suggest that while AI-supported drafting and automated writing evaluation can improve linguistic outcomes, effective learning gains depend on learners critically engaging with feedback rather than adopting AI-generated suggestions uncritically (Shi et al., 2025). Overall, recent scholarship portrays generative AI as a powerful but evolving pedagogical resource that can enhance language learning outcomes when integrated alongside human guidance, critical evaluation, and responsible digital literacy practices, with patterns of adoption differing between staff and students in HE (Luo & Day, 2026).

AI tools also offer meaningful support for grammar development. Mohd Noor (2025) found that AI applications, such as ChatGPT and Grammarly, promoted ESL learners' self-correction, confidence, and grammatical awareness, while also raising concerns about dependency when used without guidance. Complementing these findings, Shakhmetova et al. (2025) reported that AI-integrated grammar systems, which provide real-time morphosyntactic feedback, reduced error frequency and strengthened control over complex syntactic structures. These outcomes closely align with the grammatical range and accuracy criteria of the IELTS writing. Collectively, this evidence indicates that GenAI tools enhance essential linguistic competencies for EAL learners by integrating vocabulary and grammar development into exam-oriented language use, thereby supporting IELTS preparation. Building on AI's role in strengthening linguistic foundations, research shows that AI tools are increasingly integrated into IELTS preparation to support exam-specific strategies. Afra and Jalali (2025) found that ChatGPT-supported instruction enhanced EFL learners' IELTS writing performance by promoting clearer organisation and greater linguistic control. Similarly, Jumani and Maqbool (2025) reported that AI-assisted IELTS writing classes yielded faster gains in cohesion, grammatical accuracy, and lexical variety than traditional instruction, reflecting AI's capacity to deliver targeted and immediate exam-oriented support. AI tools are also widely used in the design and assessment of IELTS reading and writing practice (Zhan & Yan, 2025).

Hoang et al. (2025) observed that teachers employed ChatGPT to generate IELTS-aligned reading passages, comprehension questions, paraphrasing tasks, and vocabulary activities. From an assessment perspective, Sun (2023) showed that AI-based essay evaluation systems approximate human scoring on several linguistic dimensions, while Sari (2024) demonstrated AI's effectiveness in formative self-assessment for IELTS writing. Asadi and Taheri (2024) further found that integrating AI feedback with peer and teacher input led to stronger writing outcomes. Collectively, these findings suggest that AI tools enhance instructional design, assessment practices, and IELTS-specific learning strategies, supporting EAL learners' exam preparation. Beyond instruction and assessment, learner autonomy is a critical factor in IELTS success, as effective preparation relies heavily on self-study, self-monitoring, and independent practice. AI tools foster autonomy by providing personalised feedback, immediate linguistic support, and opportunities for iterative engagement. Duong and Chen (2025) found that additional-language learners in

EFL contexts, with clear relevance to EAL learning environments, achieved improved writing performance and confidence through regular interaction with AI chatbots, reflecting the value of these tools for self-directed development. AI also enhances autonomous reading processes through strategic guidance. Pan et al. (2024) demonstrated that AI chatbots supported EFL learners' self-regulated reading in ways directly applicable to EAL IELTS preparation, reinforcing metacognitive strategies essential for independent study. Complementing these findings, Kundu and Bej (2025) reported that AI-driven learning environments empower learners to manage language learning progress through adaptive content and on-demand support. Given that IELTS preparation requires extensive independent practice, the autonomy-enhancing affordances of GenAI tools offer effective resources for EAL learners' exam preparation and broader language development.

Understanding students' perceptions of AI use is essential, as these views shape engagement, trust, and learning strategies. Although AI tools demonstrate instructional and linguistic benefits, research shows that students' views are informed by both positive experiences and emerging concerns. Liu et al. (2024) found that Chinese EFL students, representative of a broader EAL learner population, perceived AI as valuable for grammar correction, vocabulary development, and reading comprehension, reducing anxiety and increasing independent practice. However, students also expressed concerns about the accuracy of AI-generated content and the need for critical verification. Other studies reinforce this dual perspective. Zhan and Yan (2025) reported variations in how students engaged with ChatGPT feedback, with some evaluating AI suggestions critically and applying them selectively, while others adopted revisions uncritically, raising concerns about feedback literacy and overdependence. Similarly, Al-Sofi (2024) found that students valued AI's linguistic accuracy in academic writing but expressed concerns about its originality, ethical use, and overreliance. In IELTS-specific contexts, Khidirov and Lee (2025) observed that students appreciated ChatGPT's support for improving grammar and vocabulary in IELTS opinion essays but noted limitations on generic feedback and insufficient task-specific guidance.

Collectively, these findings highlight the importance of examining learner perceptions of GenAI in EAL IELTS preparation. Meanwhile, metacognitive awareness and strategy use have been shown to be critical in shaping how learners engage with AI during IELTS preparation. Nourazar et al. (2022) demonstrated that scaffolded metacognitive writing instruction significantly improved IELTS writing performance by enhancing planning, monitoring, and evaluative skills. Recent studies suggest that AI increasingly mediates these processes. Hwang et al. (2025) showed that ESL learners actively engage in AI-facilitated self-regulation, using AI to clarify task requirements, assess textual coherence, and identify weaknesses in their writing. Similarly, Pan et al. (2024) reported that AI chatbots supported strategic reading behaviours, such as summarisation and comprehension monitoring, enabling learners to adjust strategies independently. Recent studies have sought to develop a student-centred perspective on AI in international TNE settings, by showing that learners' engagement with digital tools is shaped not only by pedagogical utility but also by ethics, culture, trust, and social context. Day (2023) argues that AI adoption in universities must be understood in relation to ethical responsibility, cultural dynamics, and student wellbeing, particularly in Asian post-COVID contexts. Extending this, later research by Day (2025a) shows that Chinese students may associate AI with academic success, strategic advantage, interweaving this with ideas of language and culture to showcase how perceptions of AI are linked with social relations and achievement cultures in HE. This is expanded in by Day (2026) that further highlights that students often experience ChatGPT as part of a co-constructed learning process, using AI interactively to support understanding, reflection, and knowledge-building rather than merely generating answers. Meanwhile, Day (2025b), demonstrates how Chinese postgraduate students'

digital reading and study practices are influenced by convenience, access, peer norms, and pragmatic academic pressures. Taken together, these studies suggest that students' use of AI and related digital tools in higher education should be understood as socially situated, ethically complex, and shaped by a dynamic interplay of opportunity, pressure, and agency.

Hence, this evidence suggests that AI functions as a metacognitive scaffold, facilitating strategy-based development essential for IELTS success. Despite its benefits, the use of AI in EAL learning also presents limitations and risks. Wu (2025) found that AI-produced IELTS essays often demonstrate strong linguistic accuracy but lack nuanced argumentation and task-specific reasoning, the critical thinking skills expected in IELTS writing tasks. Similarly, Sun (2023) reported that AI-assisted scoring systems struggle to assess deeper dimensions of writing, such as idea development and task fulfilment, despite alignment with human raters on surface-level linguistic features. Learners also express concerns about reliability, ethical use, and dependence on AI tools. Al-Sofi (2024) found that learners questioned the trustworthiness of AI-generated explanations and worried that overreliance on AI may undermine authentic language development. Zhan and Yan (2025) noted risks to feedback literacy when AI suggestions are adopted uncritically. Understanding how learners negotiate AI's limitations and risks is therefore essential for defining AI's appropriate role in EAL IELTS preparation (Song & Song, 2023).

2.2. Research Gap and Rationale for the Present Study

Despite the growing adoption of AI in higher education, the specific experiences of EAL students, particularly those in Chinese HE, in using GenAI for IELTS, alongside academic reading and writing preparation, remain underexplored, thus highlighting the need for targeted inquiry. Shadiev et al. (2026) highlighted a lack of student-centered research in language-oriented contexts in their review of AI for English proficiency test preparation. This literature review provides evidence that AI can enhance reading comprehension, writing development, linguistic accuracy, feedback engagement, IELTS preparation, and learner autonomy. However, much of this literature prioritises performance outcomes, instructional effectiveness, system design, or teacher perspectives rather than students' lived experience of AI's usefulness, limitations, and relevance to exam preparation. Understanding student perceptions is thus crucial, as they shape tool adoption, engagement strategies, and learning outcomes. Furthermore, while existing research highlights both the benefits and risks of GenAI tools in language learning, few frameworks examine them as interdependent processes. Consequently, this study seeks to address the identified research gap, providing an empirical foundation for the responsible and effective integration of AI in TNE classrooms and international language learning contexts.

3. Methodology

This study draws on data generated within a year-long longitudinal mixed-methods research project. The wider project examined how students interpret and integrate emerging digital tools, including GenAI, within their academic learning and university teaching environments. Although the broader project employed a longitudinal mixed-methods design, the analysis presented in this article focuses specifically on the qualitative component of the study. The findings reported here are derived from thematic analysis of forum discussions relating to GenAI and language learning. Quantitative and additional qualitative elements of the wider project are reported separately in other outputs addressing different research questions, as discussed below. The present article therefore adopts a qualitative interpretive approach in order to examine in depth how students describe and reflect on their experiences of AI-assisted IELTS preparation and, more broadly, language learning.

3.1. Research Design

The broader research project explored four thematic strands: AI and teaching services, AI and language learning, AI and cultural practice (Day, 2025a), and AI and learning co-construction (Day, 2026). This structure enabled iterative exploration of students' evolving understandings of emerging technologies within their educational context (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The present article focuses specifically on the AI and language learning strand, examining students' engagement with generative AI tools for IELTS reading and writing preparation. In accordance with the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), different analytical strands of the wider dataset are reported in separate manuscripts addressing distinct research questions. These include studies examining AI and learning co-construction and AI as a digital cultural phenomenon (Day, 2025a, 2026). Each publication analyses separate aspects of the dataset, and no data are cross-reported across outputs. Epistemologically, the study adopts a constructivist–interpretivist perspective, recognising that students' perceptions of AI are socially situated and shaped by their educational experiences. This approach is appropriate for research exploring meaning-making around emerging technologies, as it foregrounds participant perspectives and contextual interpretation (Charmaz, 2024).

3.2. Research Site and Participants

The research was conducted at a Chinese university where 103 postgraduate students were enrolled in English-language academic programmes. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling to ensure inclusion of students with recent experience of IELTS preparation or English-Medium Instruction (EMI). All participants were non-native English speakers, predominantly aged 20–26, and all were of Chinese nationality. Purposive sampling enabled the study to examine AI use within a culturally and educationally shared learning context (Patton, 2015). Within the broader project, 76 students participated in an asynchronous online discussion forum hosted on the university's Moodle virtual learning environment (VLE). For the purposes of the present study, analysis focused specifically on 33 forum posts that addressed the use of GenAI for IELTS preparation and English language learning. These posts were identified through an initial screening process that located contributions explicitly discussing AI-supported reading, writing, or exam preparation practices.

Posts addressing other themes within the broader project (such as AI in teaching or general technology use) were excluded from the present analysis in order to maintain alignment with the study's research question. Although the analysed subset is relatively small, the dataset represents a focused and information-rich sample aligned closely with the research aim. In qualitative research, smaller datasets can generate meaningful analytical insight when participants share relevant experiences and engage substantively with the research topic (Malterud et al., 2016). To ensure reporting integrity across the wider project, the dataset separation process was independently reviewed by a second researcher, supporting methodological transparency (Bryman, 2021). Ethical approval for the study was granted by the host university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) under approval ID AOFE11000068720230222195423. The research followed established ethical procedures including the provision of participant information sheets, voluntary participation, and clearly communicated opt-out rights (Bryman, 2021; Morgan, 1997).

Of the 76 students who participated in the online discussion forum, 33 contributions were identified as directly relevant to the focus of the present study. The selection process involved an initial screening of the forum dataset to identify posts that explicitly discussed the use of generative AI in relation to IELTS preparation, English language development, or academic reading and writing practices. Contributions addressing other themes within the broader research project, such as AI in teaching practice, cultural uses of AI, or general

reflections on digital technology, were excluded from this subset. The screening process was conducted through iterative review of the forum dataset to ensure that the selected contributions aligned closely with the study's research question. The resulting dataset therefore represents a thematically focused subset of forum interactions centred on AI-assisted language learning and IELTS preparation. While relatively small, the selected posts contained detailed reflections and discussion among participants, providing sufficient informational depth to support qualitative thematic analysis (Malterud et al., 2016).

3.3. Data Collection

Data were generated through a combination of classroom seminars and an asynchronous online discussion forum hosted on Moodle. Three seminar sessions were conducted to introduce key themes related to AI-assisted learning and to facilitate initial discussion among participants. Facilitated group discussions can help surface shared expectations and experiences among participants and support the development of reflective dialogue (Morgan, 1997). Following the seminars, students were invited to participate in a four-week asynchronous forum discussion. Participants were granted flexibility to discuss what themes they felt were relevant, and a range of prompt statements were also provided exploring the potential role of generative AI in learning, teaching, language development and academic study. These were optional, and non-directionally situated on the landing page of the Moodle forum (e.g., students did not have to respond to them to enter a response). For example, prompts included discussing whether AI tools will "... be used by many Chinese students' to edit or write coursework, take online tests or write letters of application" or "I already rely on artificial intelligence tools and applications for studying in EMI" and "Artificial intelligence is a tool, so students' need to be taught how to use it responsibly and acceptably within their studies at university." Students did not need to specifically respond, or answer, any specific prompt to participate, and many did not structure answers specific to the prompts, hence they were used as a sensemaking framework to engage students less confident or clear in the voluntary activity. Online forums, organised this way, are recognised as productive qualitative environments for eliciting reflective and peer-supported discourse, particularly when discussing emerging or potentially sensitive topics such as AI use in education (Im & Chee, 2012; Kozinets, 2020). Meanwhile, the asynchronous format also provided learners with additional time to formulate and refine their responses (Johnson et al., 2007).

3.4. Data Analysis

The dataset analysed in this article consisted of 33 forum contributions relating specifically to AI-assisted reading, writing, and IELTS preparation, drawn from a wider group as described above. These qualitative data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2021). The analysis proceeded through several stages. First, the researchers familiarised themselves with the dataset through repeated reading of the forum posts to gain an overview of participants' reflections on AI-supported language learning. During this stage, preliminary notes were recorded to capture recurring ideas and patterns emerging from the data. Second, initial codes were generated inductively from the dataset. Coding focused on identifying meaningful segments of text relating to students' perceptions of generative AI, including references to writing support, grammar correction, learning efficiency, ethical concerns, and potential risks associated with overreliance on AI tools. Third, related codes were iteratively grouped into broader candidate themes. The researchers compared codes across the dataset to identify conceptual similarities and differences, and candidate themes were developed through discussion between the two authors. This stage involved refining code groupings and examining how patterns of meaning related to the study's research question. Fourth, candidate themes were reviewed and refined through

further engagement with the dataset to ensure that each theme accurately represented patterns present across the forum contributions. Themes were then defined and organised into the analytical structure presented in the findings section. An inductive interpretive approach was adopted, allowing themes to emerge from participants' accounts rather than being imposed through predefined categories.

Consistent with reflexive thematic analysis, the researchers acknowledge their active interpretive role in the analytical process. Coding decisions and theme development were discussed collaboratively between the two authors in order to refine interpretations and ensure coherence in the thematic structure (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2022). As part of the coding process, an initial descriptive categorisation was also conducted to identify the overall orientation of student responses toward the use of generative AI in language learning. During the early stages of thematic familiarisation, posts were provisionally grouped according to whether they expressed broadly positive, cautious, or critical perspectives toward AI-assisted learning. This approach ultimately is less formalised, and directs more discussion between the researchers about iterative discussion, reflexive interpretation, and theme refinement, rather than quantitative verification, which is discussed as a limitation below. Hence, categorisation was not conducted using automated computational sentiment analysis and is not presented as such. Rather, descriptive interpretation of the overall patterns formed part of the qualitative interpretive coding process used to identify themes in the dataset. The resulting distribution of these orientations is a point of guidance, and should be treated cautiously and without generalisable scope, as presented in Table 1 to provide an overview of the general attitudinal landscape within the forum discussions prior to the deeper thematic analysis, which is then built upon in Table 2, that summarises the overarching themes, albeit we acknowledge that some posts contained secondary themes not reflected in the table count.

Table 1. Descriptive categorisation of student perceptions of AI use for IELTS and academic writing.

Description	(% of 33 Post Contributions)
positive	61%
cautious	30%
critical	9%

Table 2. Data themes present in the student VLE commentary.

Category/Theme	Total
IELTS-specific GenAi usage	8
writing support & skills	11
risks & limitations	6
ethical concerns & confusions	5
critical awareness of limits	3
total	33

3.5. Ethical Considerations

All forum data were anonymised prior to analysis. No identifying metadata such as IP addresses were recorded, and participants were assigned pseudonymous identifiers during coding. Following completion of the research, the discussion forum was permanently deleted to protect participant privacy. These procedures reflect established ethical standards in digital ethnography and online qualitative research (Kozinets, 2020) and align with the British Educational Research Association's Ethical Guidelines (British Educational Research Association, 2018). Given the reflexive orientation of thematic analysis, the researchers acknowledge that their interpretations are shaped by their academic

backgrounds and familiarity with research on artificial intelligence in education and language learning. Rather than assuming complete analytical neutrality, the researchers engaged in ongoing reflection during the coding and theme development process in order to remain attentive to how their perspectives might influence interpretation of the data. Regular discussions between the two authors were used to question emerging interpretations, refine thematic boundaries, and ensure that analytical decisions remained grounded in participants' accounts. This reflexive approach aligns with Braun and Clarke's emphasis on researcher subjectivity as an integral component of qualitative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2022).

3.6. Summary of Methodological Approach

The approach outlined is summarised in Figure 1, below:

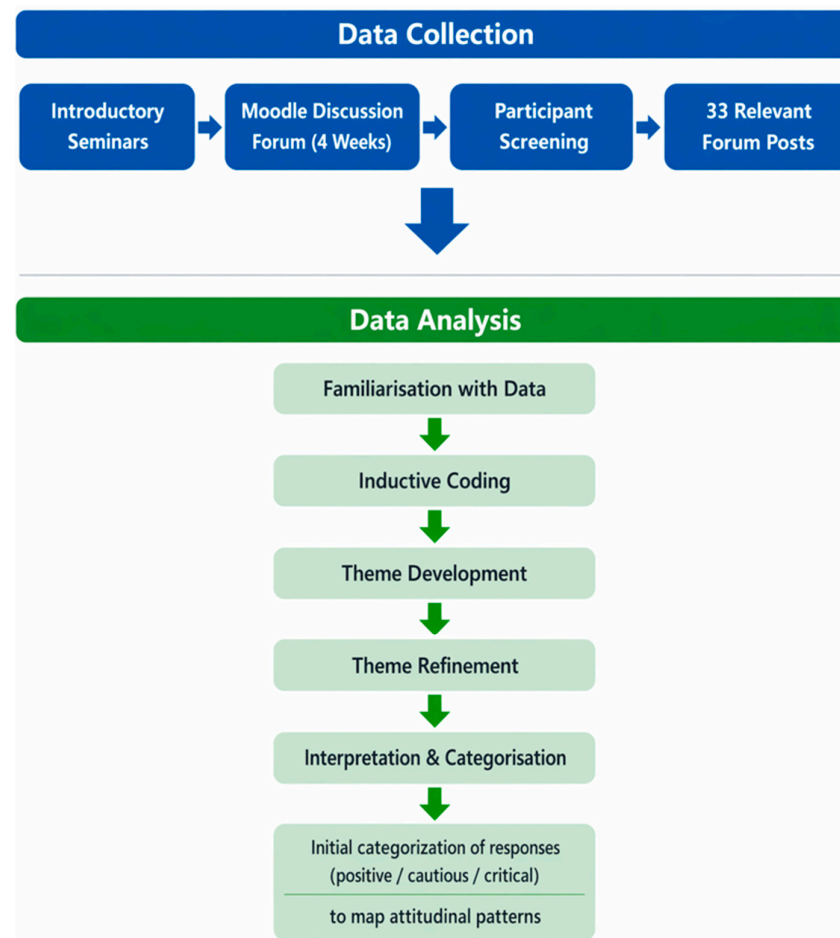


Figure 1. A summary of the research approach.

4. Analysis

An initial descriptive categorisation of student responses revealed a predominantly positive outlook about the role of AI as a tutor to support IELTS, reading and writing skill development:

Approximately 61% of the students identified in the VLE discussions on this topic expressed optimism towards AI-assisted learning tools for EAL support. A further 30% described a cautiously positive stance, recognising potential benefits while remaining mindful of limitations. Meanwhile, around 10% of responses highlighted critical

perspectives, reflecting concerns about ethical issues and overreliance on AI that might prevent their abilities from growing naturally (Table 1). This distribution underscores that students do not automatically assume they can use AI for cheating, rather they adopt a nuanced landscape of attitudes with respect to discerning AI usage, whereby enthusiasm for innovation coexists with apprehension regarding the appropriate use of AI in educational contexts.

4.1. Tracing the Thematic Strands of Student Dialogue

The thematic categorisation of student commentary from the VLE further clarifies the specific areas in which GenAI tools were seen, by learners, to impact their study modalities. Comments were found to predominantly align into five key themes, which were used to identify broader reporting subheadings discussed below. Each forum post was assigned to the theme that most strongly reflected its primary focus in the discussion. These were aligned towards IELTS-specific GenAI usage (8 comments), writing support and skill development (11 comments), risks and limitations of AI for language learning (6 comments), ethical concerns and confusion about how they could use it (5 comments), alongside critical awareness of AI's limits (3 comments) (Table 2). This thematic spread suggests that while students appreciate AI's practical utility, particularly in targeted IELTS preparation and writing enhancement, they remained aware of its potential pitfalls and the ethical dilemmas that may arise from over-using it. We acknowledge, however, that Table 2 only shows the primary thematic focus of each post rather than every theme present across the entire data set, and is instead offered as a sensemaking tool for future researchers to consider as potentially useful to their own analysis as a potentially repeatable descriptive stance/orientation categorisation approach.

4.2. Students' Perceptions of AI as a Language and Learning Assistant

Students' perceptions of AI as a tailored, responsive learning assistant for language learning, with a strong emphasis on English language development for IELTS preparation, was found across various responses. Many comments highlight AI's grammar correction, writing support, and the ability to personalise learning across listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, for example. The student reflections reveal a nuanced appreciation of AI's adaptive and intelligent capabilities, particularly in supporting English language learning for high-stakes tests like IELTS. Many students emphasise the personalised and interactive nature of AI assistance. As Student V notes, they often used AI tools to help them "... learn IELTS..." and "sometimes the grammar will not be accurate when preparing for the IELTS speaking material written by myself, so I can use it to polish the speaking corpus I prepared myself, and at the same time modify my grammar questions to facilitate the preparation of the speaking test, which also saves a lot of time."

Student V also remarked "Similarly, when preparing for the IELTS Writing test, it can also be used as a marking tool, can modify grammar content and polish my essays. Of course, these also apply to the writing and other parts of other English tests, such as level 4 and 6, special 4 and 8." This account highlights how AI tools had been purposed as both a corrective and generative partner, streamlining preparation and enhancing linguistic accuracy across multiple exam formats. The value of tailored language learning support, then, was further underscored by Student E, who observed that the personalised language learning benefits were important to helping EAL students gain confidence because AI helped "... tailor its responses to your specific needs and level of understanding. It can also provide you with resources to help you further your learning on a particular topic." This sentiment is echoed by Student BB: "In terms of foreign language assistance, [AI tools are] particularly adept at helping students examine grammatical issues in writing and provide more authentic usage suggestions..." and thus it helped them learn language "...

more efficiently, allowing them to experience and enjoy the fun of autonomous learning.” Students, therefore, highlighted the efficiency and autonomy AI brings to the learning process. Student CC, for example, details the interactive possibilities of using it to practice English listening, speaking, reading, and writing, noting students can use AI tools and identify to them “... their current English level and the specific part they need to be improved and ask [an AI tool] to write a set of listening or reading test papers suitable for them practice.”

This illustrates how students felt AI can mimic the responsiveness of a human tutor, delivering customised practice materials and language tutoring that directly addressed their personal needs. Student F, for example, explained that AI helped them to understand language construction because it could think more precisely as a “... computer program that can speak and understand like a human. It has learned many words and sentences from books and articles, so it knows how to combine words into sentences. It can complete given text prompts, answer questions, and even create new text. It can be fine-tuned for specific purposes, such as answering questions, translating languages, and summarizing text.” This acknowledges, then, AI’s roots in linguistic data and its versatile applications in text generation and comprehension, suggesting the practical benefits of AI are also noted by language learners. For example, Student X noted that “AI can provide many services, such as grammar correction.” whilst Student K added that “From my point of view, AI is a smart tool, and it can help students learn more effectively. For example, AI can help students correct the writing, practice oral English and even give some reference literature. Meanwhile, the development of AI is unstoppable...” highlighting the tool’s multifaceted support, from correction to resource provision, and its ongoing evolution that would likely benefit the ability of students in the future to learn languages more easily.

Taken together, these reflections suggest that students do not perceive generative AI simply as a technological shortcut, but rather as a supplementary cognitive scaffold that supports language learning processes. Students frequently described using AI tools to refine grammar, generate practice materials, or clarify linguistic uncertainties, indicating that the technology functions as a form of on-demand linguistic assistance. In this sense, AI appears to occupy a role similar to that of a digital study partner, enabling learners to test ideas, revise written work, and receive immediate feedback during exam preparation. Such practices reflect a broader pattern of self-regulated language learning, where students actively integrate external tools to support individual study strategies rather than relying exclusively on formal instruction. At the same time, students’ accounts suggest that the perceived value of AI lies not only in efficiency but also in its ability to facilitate iterative learning processes. By generating alternative phrasing, suggesting vocabulary improvements, or modelling potential responses, AI tools appear to encourage students to experiment with language and revise their work repeatedly. This iterative interaction highlights how learners use AI not simply to produce answers but to mediate their own learning practices, particularly when preparing for high-stakes assessments such as IELTS. In this sense, AI-supported learning emerges as an interactive process in which students actively negotiate how technological assistance can complement their existing study habits.

4.3. Students’ Concerns About AI as a Language and Learning Assistant

However, students also express awareness of AI’s limitations. Student A cautions AI should “... be used to obtain some inspiration for writing, such as the structure of an article, but it is unrealistic to use it to write an entire article ...”. So, this student felt that while AI is a valuable language learning aid, it should not replace original practice, individual tutoring and may even have implications for ethical academic practice. Student D reinforced this perspective, noting AI tools do “... not hold individual thinking ability but

is able to provide information to gather resources. That is, it is useful for gathering the information, data, and clarifying understanding. Hence, it probably is useful to make literature review part of the essay as a fast and accurate searching tool." Subsequently, AI was positioned as a powerful resource aggregator and clarifier, but not a substitute for deeper cognitive engagement or more integrated language learning. Student B highlights the efficiency advantage: "[AI] update speed is incomparable. Sometimes there will be some negligence in manual operation, but the preparation of the program is often more accurate. It can be used in biology competition or even in paper writing." This reflects trust in AI's speed and accuracy, especially valued in time-pressured academic contexts. Consequently, these student voices collectively agreed and aligned that generative AI served as an important companion tool in language learning and IELTS skill development because it supported tailored language learning, grammar correction, and efficient test preparation while also recognising its current limitations. AI, therefore, was embraced not as a replacement for authentic learning, but as an enabler of effective, autonomous, and enjoyable educational experiences, in the view of students.

Students within the sample also associated their language learning through GenAI tools as efficient, time-saving, and highly motivating in both academic and IELTS preparation, with a strong emphasis on speed, convenience, and accessibility across the comments analysed. Their comments highlighted, in many instances, how AI reduces the burden of language learning and encourages sustained engagement whilst reducing a sense of embarrassment—which may be important for students from face-culture driven settings, as discussed in the literature review. However, students were also cautious about the potential drawbacks of using GenAI tools in IELTS preparation and academic life more broadly. Concerns included hallucination of information, inaccuracy, ethical risks, overreliance, and doubts about the authenticity and validity of AI-generated teaching to successfully improve their writing and speaking abilities. This suggested they viewed AI tools in a state of 'digital counterbalance' highlighting the tension between utility for language learning and risk. Student EE was in particular very cautious about this, stating that AI users "... can fake out the teacher, they can't fake out themselves. I also heard about a story about a student who chatted in an online English test and qualified. This student used the qualification to apply for university admission and was offered a place at that university. However, after he enrolled, the professor found he performed poorly in his written and oral English. The professor tried to recheck his application documents and finally found the photo in the student's qualification, even not himself. The student was punished and kicked out of school."

Consequently, students were very cautious about the accuracy of AI tools to help them to learn and improve their language and writing skills. Student FF noted that one flaw of AI technologies was if "... a user asks a question that no one has studied, i.e., there is no corresponding information in the database. The machine cannot answer it." In a similar regard, Student GG felt using it for IELTS and academic "... practice tests might be detrimental to my academic growth." For Student R, this was a problem because the un-human nature of AI teaching technologies meant the student did not feel confident in what they were being taught, and was concerned the advice it gave, for learners of language and engaged in academic study, "... can lead to misunderstanding, confusion or dissatisfaction from users. It can also be used or abused maliciously, causing social and ethical harm." As Student T summarised, a consensus was that we "... need to use AI as a tool for our learning needs, not as a tool to avoid learning." Student U agreed with this, suggesting AI needed to be framed by safer guidance and thus "Self-interest drive is more important. Moral regulations should be published and kids should be taught from the young that AI cannot be a tool for cheating. Moral education makes sense. The mode to testify student's academic level can be diverse, not only depending on the grades and

assignments, but also have some conversations to evaluate. (e.g. 1V1 talk). Encourage students to create more useful learning outcomes, not rubbish file work.”

While students frequently acknowledged the usefulness of generative AI, their reflections also reveal a clear awareness of its limitations. Concerns about hallucinated information, inaccurate explanations, or excessive reliance on automated feedback indicate that learners recognise the potential risks associated with uncritical use of AI tools. Rather than rejecting the technology outright, however, many participants described the need to exercise judgement when interpreting AI-generated responses, suggesting an emerging form of critical engagement with digital learning tools. This awareness reflects a broader pattern in which students position themselves not as passive recipients of AI outputs but as active evaluators of the information these systems provide. These reflections are particularly significant in the context of IELTS preparation, where success ultimately depends on learners’ ability to demonstrate independent language proficiency during formal assessment. Students therefore appear to recognise that while AI may assist with practice, revision, and idea generation, it cannot substitute for the cognitive effort required to develop authentic language competence. This tension between efficiency and authenticity illustrates the broader dynamic explored in this study: students simultaneously embrace the opportunities provided by generative AI while remaining attentive to the need to maintain independent language development. It is this negotiation between perceived benefit and potential risk that forms the basis of the Artificially Intelligent Mediated Counterbalance (AIMC) conceptual framework discussed later in the paper.

4.4. Students’ Insights About Limitations of AI in a Language and Learning Context

The discussion amongst participants revealed that, despite students’ general enthusiasm for GenAI, there is widespread awareness of its risks and limitations. A key concern is overreliance on AI, where students may become dependent on external tools and lose the ability to think critically or produce authentic work independently. AI was described as having key drawbacks in producing false or fabricated examples, thereby requiring constant human verification. This was echoed when students cautioned that while AI is useful for drafting or revising, true learning still requires memorisation, critical engagement, and personal effort in high-stakes contexts like IELTS testing. Several students raised ethical concerns and called for responsible AI use when using it to develop their academic skills, with students aware of the potential for confusion, dissatisfaction, and even harm if AI is used inappropriately. There were efforts amongst the students to re-frame the issue: students were acutely aware of a need to learn how to use AI rather than avoid it entirely, and this emphasised that avoiding learning through misuse is the central problem, not AI itself. Across these points of discussion, then, students were not simply fearful of or resistant to using AI nor blindly adhering to its use; rather, they display nuanced critical awareness. They acknowledged the power of AI but also stressed that human judgment, ethical guidance, and personal responsibility must remain at the centre of education.

Discussion showcased how the students felt AI tools were enablers of efficiency, task completion, and personalised learning. However, Student Z cautioned that AI tools were only useful in certain contexts, noting that AI is “... helpful to some extent, such as when your leader asks you to write a meaningless weekly report or report, which is helpful for me who is not good at organizing language. Of course, [AI tools] has fatal drawbacks. It can create an untrue evidence or example for you, which means that you need to recheck whether the answer it gives you is what you need. Therefore, it is helpful for my learning to a certain extent, but I cannot completely rely on it.” Student DD agreed and noted that the “... breadth of artificial intelligence information makes it easier for us to write about it. Nonetheless, completing the assignments and tests still demands our own efforts. We

still need to memorize the information on our own as we cannot ask for assistance during the exam. Even though AI provides you with guidance for the article, you still need to conduct the final investigation and gather reliable data." This was likewise echoed by Student T, who noted that "AI is a tool and that we need to learn to accept and use it responsibly in our university studies. In the age of artificial intelligence we need to do more learning rather than running away from AI and forbidding its existence. As a university student we need to think critically, there is no such thing as always being right or absolutely right, things are constantly evolving and we need to look at something with an evolving perspective. Learning to use AI responsibly is also a very important thing."

Taken together, these reflections indicate that students approach generative AI with a degree of caution rather than uncritical acceptance. Although participants recognise the efficiency and linguistic support that AI tools can provide, they also demonstrate awareness of potential drawbacks such as inaccurate information, superficial learning, and the ethical implications of overreliance on automated systems. Importantly, these concerns are framed not as a rejection of AI but as a recognition of its appropriate role within the learning process. Students repeatedly emphasised that AI should assist rather than replace their own effort in developing language proficiency. This perspective suggests that learners actively negotiate how technological assistance can support exam preparation while preserving the independent thinking and linguistic competence required for high-stakes assessments such as IELTS. The discussion of AI's limitations reveals that students possess a relatively sophisticated understanding of the boundaries of generative technologies in language learning. Participants frequently highlighted the need to verify AI-generated information and to maintain their own responsibility for knowledge acquisition, particularly in contexts where external assistance cannot be used during formal examinations. These observations indicate that students do not perceive AI as a definitive source of knowledge but rather as a provisional tool that must be interpreted and evaluated critically. Such reflections illustrate how learners attempt to balance the convenience of AI-supported learning with the recognition that authentic language development still requires sustained practice, memorisation, and independent cognitive engagement.

4.5. Students' Insights About Opportunities for AI

However, students generally agreed that in terms of writing support for EAL learners, AI tools were unmatched in both speed and capacity. Student W noted they used it "... to generate ideas for topics, provide quotes or statistics to support arguments, and help structure the overall content of the paper. It can also be used to check grammar and spelling errors and suggest alternative word choices." Interestingly, Student AA highlighted that in addition to "... general questions, languages, problem solving guidance." it can also be used by students for "... emotional support or personal development...". Student G acknowledged both the promise and the potential drawbacks of AI: "AI can be a powerful tool, meanwhile, it may drag out our feet if we don't know the appropriate way of use." Echoing the need for greater emphasis being placed on digital literacy, Student H states, "... students should acquire digital skills, knowledge, and understanding to enable themselves to use technology responsibly and effectively..." Student I suggested a more open-minded approach to writing using AI, remarking, "So why don't we use its extremely powerful search ability, plus our own writing ability, to complete the paper together. This not only saves the search time, we also through our own ability to complete the paper." Student J reflects on the broader implications of AI, observing, "It is true that AI would replace large amounts of job positions in the future but it still serves as a stimulus to tap human's potential and help human make progress in their field." Student M adds that AI "... can undeniably give us some ideas and direction to study when we are confused or have no way to write for an assignment."

Student N points out its usefulness for Chinese students learning in another language, identifying it will "... help us save a lot of time that originally will be devoted to searching information." Student P stressed, therein, for robust guidance: "... support for reshaping higher education and promoting the transformation of learning modes, teaching models and research paradigms. There's no denying AI tools like ChatGPT, Jasper and Grammarly are here to stay. And they can be genuinely helpful in your school and working life, if you use them correctly." However, Student Q cautioned that without encouraging students to use AI tools to support their reading and writing development, it would likely lead them towards other forms of academic outsourcing, because of "... the increasing requirement of the grade and performance of paper, more and more students may choose pay to let others write for themselves, which may save some time and energy. The reason why I know it well is that once we join some WeChat group related to our school, it is a frequent situation that some strange one would like to add friends with you, and the first sentence they send to you is asking you whether you need the paper service. Also, these people usually show their order in their WeChat moments especially in festivals. Therefore, I think this is a very common situation nowadays."

Despite the concerns raised, students therefore consistently identified significant opportunities associated with generative AI for language learning and academic study. Many participants emphasised the capacity of AI tools to provide rapid access to information, generate ideas for written tasks, and support vocabulary and grammar development. These benefits were often framed in terms of improving study efficiency and helping learners overcome moments of uncertainty during the writing process. At the same time, students' comments suggest that the perceived value of AI lies in its ability to complement existing learning practices rather than replace them. AI therefore appears to function as a supportive learning resource that can guide students when they encounter difficulties, while still requiring them to apply their own reasoning and linguistic skills to complete academic tasks effectively (Han et al., 2023).

5. Discussion

Student perspectives collectively highlighted the significant potential of generative AI (GenAI) to support learning in EAL contexts, particularly in relation to reading, writing, and comprehension. At the same time, participants expressed concerns regarding misuse, ethical implications, and the limitations of AI-generated feedback. This dual perspective reflects patterns identified in prior research, where AI-assisted language learning has been shown to enhance linguistic development while simultaneously raising questions regarding reliability, ethical use, and learner dependence (Al-Sofi, 2024; Zhan & Yan, 2025). The findings therefore reinforce existing literature suggesting that students perceive AI not merely as a technical tool but as a resource requiring critical and responsible engagement. Across the dataset, students described generative AI tools as highly useful for IELTS preparation and wider academic tasks, particularly for generating ideas, modelling responses, and providing immediate feedback. These perceived benefits support earlier studies demonstrating that AI tools can strengthen reading comprehension, vocabulary recognition, and inferencing abilities among language learners (Lin et al., 2025; Yousefi & Askari, 2024). Similarly, the use of AI to generate practice materials and scaffold reading strategies corresponds with findings from Hoang et al. (2025), who observed that ChatGPT can produce IELTS-style reading materials and practice activities that support exam-oriented learning. Together, these findings suggest that GenAI tools can function as effective resources for supporting the strategic reading processes required for IELTS preparation.

Students also emphasised the value of AI in supporting writing development, particularly through grammar correction, structural modelling, and iterative revision. This aligns closely with research demonstrating that AI-assisted writing tools can improve

coherence, lexical complexity, and grammatical accuracy in second language writing (Bahari, 2025; Rahimi et al., 2025). The present findings also resonate with studies showing that automated writing evaluation systems support multi-draft revision processes and promote measurable improvements in writing quality (Hung et al., 2024; Wei et al., 2023). In this sense, the student experiences reported here confirm broader evidence that AI-mediated feedback can play a meaningful role in strengthening EAL learners' writing proficiency and exam preparation. These findings can also be interpreted in relation to the assessment criteria used in the IELTS writing examination. The IELTS Writing Band Descriptors (International English Language Testing System, 2023) evaluate performance across four dimensions: task response, coherence and cohesion, lexical resource, and grammatical range and accuracy. Students' reflections on the use of GenAI tools correspond particularly closely with the latter three criteria. Participants, as discussed, frequently described using AI to refine grammatical accuracy, improve vocabulary choice, and restructure sentences or paragraphs to produce more coherent written responses. Such practices suggest that students perceive AI-assisted tools as supporting the linguistic and structural dimensions of writing assessed in IELTS tasks.

At the same time, participants recognised that the development of task-specific argumentation and independent idea generation remains their own responsibility, reflecting the importance of task response within IELTS writing assessment (International English Language Testing System, 2023). However, unlike some performance-oriented studies that emphasise the effectiveness of AI-supported instruction, the reflections presented in this dataset reveal a more critically informed stance among students. Participants frequently warned against overreliance on AI tools and highlighted the importance of maintaining independent learning processes. This concern echoes findings reported by Mohd Noor (2025), who noted that AI tools can support grammatical awareness while also raising concerns about learner dependency when used without guidance. Similarly, Zhan and Yan (2025) identified risks associated with learners adopting AI-generated feedback uncritically, potentially weakening feedback literacy. The present findings therefore extend existing research by illustrating how students themselves actively recognise and negotiate these risks within exam-oriented learning contexts.

A recurring theme across the dataset was the perception that AI should function as an enabler rather than a shortcut for IELTS preparation and academic skill development. Students valued AI as an efficient tool for low-stakes practice but stressed that success in high-stakes examinations requires deeper engagement with reading materials, vocabulary acquisition, and independent thinking. This perspective aligns with studies suggesting that AI tools are most effective when integrated into learner-centred strategies that promote self-regulated learning and metacognitive awareness (Pan et al., 2024; Hwang et al., 2025). In particular, previous research has shown that AI chatbots can support strategic reading behaviours such as summarisation, monitoring comprehension, and goal setting, all of which are essential for IELTS preparation (Pan et al., 2024). The findings of the present study reinforce the idea that AI can function as a metacognitive scaffold, supporting strategy-based development rather than replacing cognitive effort. While several of the patterns identified in this study resonate with broader research on AI-assisted language learning, the findings take on particular significance within the context of IELTS preparation, which is characterised by time-constrained tasks and clearly defined assessment criteria for reading and writing performance. Students frequently described using generative AI to practise essay organisation, refine grammar, and generate practice prompts that resemble IELTS-style tasks. These uses align closely with the specific competencies assessed in IELTS, including coherence, lexical resource, and grammatical accuracy. At the same time, participants recognised that AI-generated assistance cannot substitute for the independent linguistic competence required during the examination itself, where external

support is not available. This context therefore shapes how students position AI tools within their preparation strategies, using them primarily as practice and feedback resources rather than as direct substitutes for exam performance.

Despite recognising the usefulness of AI tools, students emphasised that GenAI cannot substitute for the deeper learning processes required for success in IELTS examinations. Participants highlighted the importance of memorising vocabulary, engaging with authentic reading materials, and developing critical thinking skills. These reflections are consistent with research suggesting that AI-generated writing may demonstrate strong linguistic accuracy but lack the nuanced reasoning and task-specific argumentation expected in high-level language assessments (Wu, 2025). Similarly, studies examining AI-based essay scoring have found that automated systems often focus on surface-level linguistic features rather than deeper dimensions of idea development and task fulfilment (Sun, 2023). The present findings therefore reinforce concerns that AI tools cannot fully replicate the cognitive and communicative competencies required for high-stakes language performance.

Ethical considerations emerged strongly across the student reflections. Participants described concerns regarding misuse of AI and the potential consequences of dishonest practices, particularly given that IELTS functions as both an academic and migration credential. These concerns echo earlier research highlighting student anxieties about academic integrity and the authenticity of AI-assisted work (Al-Sofi, 2024). Students' awareness of these ethical challenges suggests that learners are increasingly conscious of the broader implications of AI use within educational and professional contexts. Students additionally demonstrated awareness of the technical limitations of AI systems. Several participants noted that generative tools often struggle with context-specific or nuanced questions, particularly in tasks requiring interpretive reasoning or communicative interaction. This observation corresponds with earlier research showing that AI-generated writing may lack contextual sensitivity and nuanced argumentation (Wu, 2025). Participants also warned that poorly structured AI-supported practice activities could encourage superficial engagement rather than deeper learning. These reflections reinforce the importance of thoughtful instructional design when integrating AI into language learning environments.

Across these insights, a central theme was the importance of fostering responsible and reflective engagement with AI technologies. Students neither rejected AI nor embraced it uncritically; instead, they demonstrated a balanced perspective that recognised both its affordances and its limitations. This dynamic interaction between opportunity and caution reflects what this study conceptualises as Artificially Intelligent Mediated Counterbalance (AIMC). The AIMC framework captures how learners simultaneously leverage AI tools for linguistic support while regulating their use through ethical awareness, critical evaluation, and independent learning strategies. As generative AI technologies continue to evolve, these findings highlight the need for universities, educators, and assessment bodies to provide clearer guidance on responsible AI use and to support the development of students' digital literacy skills. By fostering critical engagement alongside technological competence, higher education institutions can ensure that AI tools enhance rather than undermine language learning processes. The constellation of opportunities, cautions, and ethical awareness expressed by students is summarised visually in Figure 2, which presents a matrix model of AI-mediated language learning. This matrix provides the conceptual basis for the Artificially Intelligent Mediated Counterbalance (AIMC) framework developed later in the paper and illustrated in Figure 3.

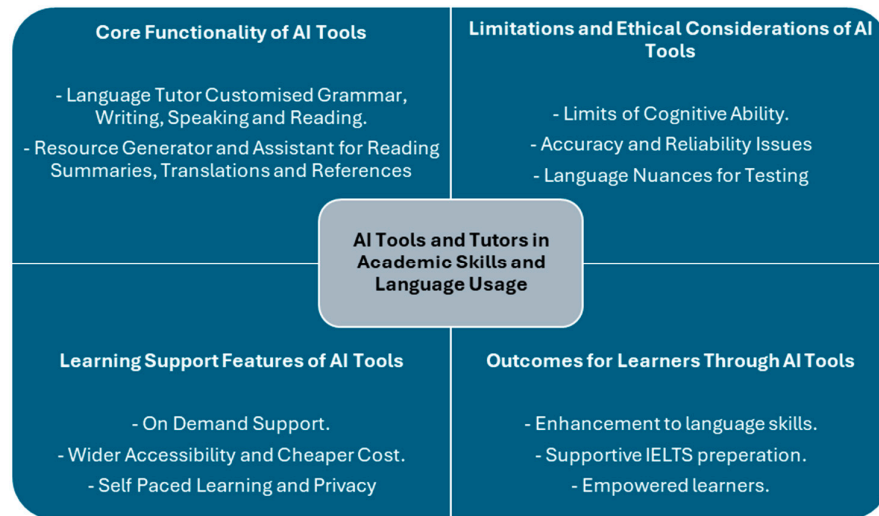


Figure 2. Matrix model of AI-mediated language learning.

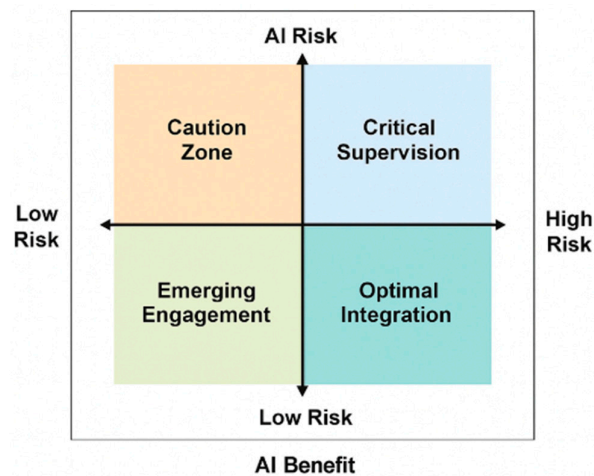


Figure 3. Artificially intelligent mediated counterbalance (AIMC) concept model.

Despite these promising developments, the integration of GenAI into language learning and IELTS preparation presents several notable challenges. Foremost among these concerns is that GenAI may lead students to bypass sustained cognitive effort and critical engagement, thereby undermining the very competencies that IELTS and academic programmes are designed to cultivate. Institutions and educators must therefore develop robust guidelines and promote a culture of responsible AI use, emphasising that such technologies should support, rather than supplant, authentic learning processes. Therefore, maximising the benefits of GenAI for IELTS preparation and language learning thus requires a balanced, ethical approach. This includes embedding AI literacy within language curricula so that learners develop a clear understanding of the capabilities and limitations of these tools. It also necessitates rethinking assessment designs to account for AI’s growing influence, shifting emphasis toward higher-order thinking and communicative competencies that are less susceptible to automation. The findings of this study indicate that students’ engagement with GenAI does not align neatly with binary “good” or “bad” narratives. Instead, learners situate themselves along a fluid continuum of perceived benefits and risks. The proposed Balanced Integration Framework (BIF), outlined in Table 3 below, consolidates this:

Table 3. A balanced integration framework (BIF) for GenAi language learning.

Quadrant	Label	Interpretation	Recommended Actions
1. High Benefit/ Low Risk	Optimal Integration Zone	Learners demonstrate informed, strategic use of AI that enhances language development, autonomy, and awareness of AI's pedagogically meaningful capabilities.	Encourage strategy-sharing; design structured AI-mediated tasks; promote feedback literacy as part of co-constructed language-learning processes.
2. High Benefit/ High Risk	Critical Supervision Zone	Learners gain substantial value from AI but are vulnerable to overreliance or ethical lapses due to limited training in digital and AI literacy.	Provide teacher-led modelling; integrate explicit ethics instruction; monitor AI-supported drafting; embed AI-aware learning opportunities across the curriculum.
3. Low Benefit/ Low Risk	Emerging Engagement Zone	Learners use AI minimally or inconsistently, resulting in limited gains but also limited risk.	Offer prompt-design training; scaffold exploratory tasks; integrate introductory AI activities into early coursework.
4. Low Benefit/ High Risk	Caution Zone	Learners may distrust AI, misuse it, or receive inaccurate and uncritical outputs.	Introduce quality-assurance frameworks; design comparison activities (AI vs. human output); emphasise verification and reliability checks.

Consolidated, this provides the foundation for an Artificially Intelligent Mediated Counterbalance (AIMC) concept model, reflecting the priorities outlined in Figure 2 and discussed in Table 3, consolidates these dynamics into an actionable model. By mapping student behaviours across four outcome zones, the BIF enables educators to identify more precisely where intervention, scaffolding, or policy clarification may be required at both classroom and institutional levels. The proposed approach, then, synthesises these dynamics into a practical model. By mapping student behaviours onto four outcome zones, educators can more precisely mediate where instructional support is needed. This framework translates findings into clear pedagogical pathways, offering educators a practical tool for guiding AI-integrated language development. The conceptual framing developed in this study builds on existing research examining how learners engage with educational technologies while negotiating both opportunities and constraints. Prior scholarship on AI-assisted language learning has highlighted the potential of generative systems to support writing development, feedback engagement, and learner autonomy, while also emphasising concerns related to reliability, overreliance, and ethical use (Kasneci et al., 2023; Law, 2024; Li et al., 2024). These tensions reflect broader theoretical discussions in educational technology research regarding how learners balance technological affordances with critical evaluation and self-regulated learning practices. Studies of AI-supported writing and feedback processes similarly suggest that meaningful learning gains depend on learners' ability to engage critically with automated support rather than adopting AI-generated outputs uncritically (Shi et al., 2025; Zhan & Yan, 2025). Situating the present findings within this wider body of research therefore highlights the need for conceptual frameworks that capture how learners actively negotiate both the benefits and limitations of generative AI within their study practices.

Figure 3 presents the Artificially Intelligent Mediated Counterbalance (AIMC) concept model as a four-quadrant map that helps educators interpret student AI use for language learning, through the intersecting dimensions of 'AI Benefit' and 'AI Risk'. In the Optimal Integration Zone (high benefit/low risk), learners appeared, in the analysis undertaken, to recognise a need to use AI strategically to strengthen language development, autonomy, and feedback engagement, so instruction can focus on extending effective practices through structured AI-mediated tasks and shared learning strategies. The Critical Supervision Zone (high benefit/high risk) captures contexts where AI adds substantial value but students remain vulnerable to overreliance or ethical lapses, requiring teacher modelling, explicit AI-ethics and literacy instruction, and curriculum-embedded monitoring of AI-supported drafting. In the Emerging Engagement Zone (low benefit/low risk),

learners use AI minimally or inconsistently, producing limited gains but few risks; here, educators can scaffold exploratory use through prompt-design training and introductory tasks to build confidence and capability. Finally, the Caution Zone (low benefit/high risk) reflects situations where learners distrust or misuse AI, or accept inaccurate outputs uncritically, making quality-assurance routines, AI-versus-human comparison activities, and verification checks essential.

Together, the four zones translate AI-use dynamics from the discussion above, into a consolidated actionable framework, enabling educators and institutions to identify where targeted EAL scaffolding, intervention, or policy clarification is most needed to support responsible, effective AI-integrated language learning. Hence, the conceptual contribution of this study is articulated through the framework of Artificially Intelligent Mediated Counterbalance (AIMC). AIMC conceptualises students' engagement with generative AI as a dynamic process in which learners simultaneously leverage the opportunities provided by AI tools while actively regulating associated risks, including overreliance, inaccuracies, and ethical concerns. Rather than framing AI use within a binary distinction between benefit and harm, AIMC highlights how learners negotiate these tensions as part of their everyday language learning strategies.

The empirical basis for this conceptual framework emerges from the thematic analysis of the forum dataset. Table 1 provides an initial descriptive overview of students' general orientations toward AI-assisted language learning, categorised as broadly positive, cautious, or critical. While this overview illustrates the overall attitudinal landscape of the discussion, the deeper qualitative interpretation is developed through the thematic patterns identified in the dataset. These thematic patterns are summarised in Table 2, which presents the key analytical categories derived from the reflexive thematic analysis of the 33 forum contributions. The themes represent recurring areas of discussion in students' reflections on generative AI, including its role in IELTS preparation, writing development, perceived risks, and ethical considerations. The following subsections elaborate on these themes through illustrative excerpts from student contributions, demonstrating how participants interpreted and engaged with AI-supported language learning in practice.

Building on these empirical findings, the study develops the Artificially Intelligent Mediated Counterbalance (AIMC) model, illustrated in Figure 2, which conceptualises the broader dynamic identified in the dataset: students' simultaneous recognition of AI's pedagogical affordances and its potential limitations. To further operationalise this concept for educational interpretation, the study introduces the Balanced Integration Framework (BIF) presented in Table 3 and visualised in Figure 3. The BIF translates the AIMC concept into four interpretive zones defined by different combinations of perceived benefit and perceived risk in AI-supported learning. These zones provide a practical framework through which educators can understand patterns of student engagement with AI tools and identify where pedagogical guidance or intervention may be required. In this way, the analytical structure of the study progresses from descriptive attitudinal overview (Table 1) to empirical thematic patterns (Table 2), and finally to conceptual interpretation (Figure 1 and Table 3 and Figure 3). This progression ensures that the conceptual models are grounded in the thematic evidence derived from the forum discussions while offering a broader framework for understanding how learners integrate generative AI into their language learning practices.

The conceptual framing of Artificially Intelligent Mediated Counterbalance (AIMC) is a heuristic sensemaking tool grounded directly in the qualitative patterns identified in the forum dataset. Analysis of the 33 contributions showed that students did not position generative AI (GenAI) as either wholly beneficial or wholly problematic. Instead, participants consistently described AI use in terms of both opportunity and limitation, often within the same account. For example, students highlighted the usefulness of GenAI for generating

ideas, improving grammar, and providing immediate feedback, while simultaneously expressing concern about overreliance, inaccurate outputs, and reduced independent thinking. This recurring pattern of simultaneous endorsement and caution forms the empirical basis of the AIMC concept. To make this analytical foundation explicit, the dimensions of “benefit” and “risk” were interpreted inductively from participants’ accounts. In this study, perceived benefit refers to the extent to which students described GenAI as supporting their learning processes and outcomes, particularly in relation to IELTS reading and writing preparation. This included references to idea generation, structural modelling, vocabulary development, grammar correction, and access to immediate feedback or practice materials. In contrast, perceived risk refers to the extent to which students identified potential drawbacks associated with GenAI use, including concerns about dependency, superficial engagement with learning tasks, unreliable or misleading outputs, and ethical issues surrounding academic integrity. These dimensions were not predefined categories but emerged through iterative coding and comparison across the dataset.

Building on these empirically derived dimensions, the Balanced Integration Framework (BIF) was developed as a heuristic representation of the patterns observed in the data. The four quadrants of the framework reflect different combinations of perceived benefit and perceived risk as expressed in students’ reflections. For instance, some participants described strategic and critically aware uses of AI that enhanced their learning while minimising risk, whereas others emphasised both the high utility of AI and the potential for misuse or overdependence. Additional responses reflected more limited or cautious engagement, as well as cases where AI was viewed as offering limited value while still posing concerns. The framework therefore organises, rather than imposes, the range of orientations evident in the dataset. The relationship between AIMC and BIF can thus be understood as analytical and interpretive rather than hierarchical or prescriptive. AIMC represents the overarching conceptual lens that captures the dynamic balancing process evident in students’ accounts, while BIF translates this dynamic into a structured, practice-oriented framework. Importantly, this model is not intended as a definitive or universally generalisable typology of learner behaviour. Rather, it is offered as a data-grounded heuristic derived from this specific qualitative context, designed to support interpretation of how learners negotiate the benefits and risks of GenAI in IELTS preparation and EAL learning.

Yet the conceptual interpretation presented in this section should not be overstated. It is offered as an educational development reflection that should be understood as an analytical framework derived from the qualitative patterns identified in the forum dataset rather than as a definitive theoretical model. This recognition is important as the dataset analysed in this study is relatively focused, thus the recurring patterns in students’ reflections on GenAI reveal a consistent tension between the perceived benefits of AI-assisted learning and concerns regarding overreliance, reliability, and ethical use. The conceptual models introduced below therefore function as interpretive tools that synthesise these empirical insights and organise them into a coherent analytical perspective. In this sense, the framework is intended to provide a heuristic for language teachers and policy makers and not as an absolute for how learners may negotiate the opportunities and limitations of GenAI in language learning contexts. The model therefore provides a foundation, one recognising that further empirical research across different settings would be required to test and refine the model.

6. Conclusions

This study explored how Chinese postgraduate students perceive the role of generative AI tools in supporting IELTS reading and writing preparation. The findings demonstrate that students view GenAI as a valuable learning resource that can support

vocabulary development, writing revision, reading comprehension, and exam-oriented practice. At the same time, students expressed a clear awareness of the limitations and risks associated with these technologies, including concerns about reliability, overreliance, and ethical misuse. Rather than treating AI as a substitute for learning, participants generally positioned it as a supplementary tool that can support language development when used critically and responsibly. The findings reveal that students actively negotiate the opportunities and limitations of GenAI in their learning practices. While AI tools were valued for providing immediate feedback, modelling responses, and generating practice materials, students consistently emphasised the importance of maintaining independent cognitive engagement in reading and writing tasks. This balanced perspective reflects an emerging form of digital literacy in which learners critically evaluate AI-generated outputs and recognise the need to verify and contextualise automated feedback. In the context of high-stakes assessments such as IELTS, students therefore appeared to integrate AI strategically rather than relying on it uncritically.

The study contributes to the growing literature on AI-assisted language learning by foregrounding the perspectives of EAL learners preparing for high-stakes language examinations. In doing so, it introduces the concept of Artificially Intelligent Mediated Counterbalance (AIMC) as a framework for understanding how students simultaneously leverage and regulate AI assistance. The AIMC framework conceptualises AI use as a dynamic balance between pedagogical affordances and potential risks, offering a lens through which future research can examine how learners negotiate emerging technologies in academic language development. These findings have practical implications for higher education institutions, language educators, and assessment bodies. As generative AI becomes increasingly embedded within language learning environments, universities should prioritise the development of students' digital literacy, ethical awareness, and critical evaluation skills when engaging with AI tools. Clear guidance on appropriate AI use in academic and exam preparation contexts may help ensure that these technologies support rather than undermine language learning outcomes. Future research could extend this work by examining AI use across different institutional contexts, proficiency levels, and assessment environments, further developing understanding of how AI shapes evolving practices in EAL learning.

Yet, the implications of this study should be interpreted cautiously given the qualitative scope of the dataset. Rather than providing definitive policy recommendations, the findings offer preliminary insights into how generative AI tools may be integrated into language learning contexts such as IELTS preparation. The results suggest that educators and institutions may benefit from providing clearer guidance on responsible AI use, including encouraging students to critically evaluate AI-generated feedback and to maintain independent language practice. In this sense, the AIMC and Balanced Integration Framework proposed in this study are intended as interpretive tools that may inform future pedagogical discussion rather than as prescriptive policy models. Further research across larger and more diverse learner populations would be necessary to determine how such frameworks could inform institutional policy or curriculum design.

6.1. Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, the analysis draws on qualitative data from an online virtual learning environment (VLE) involving dialogue interactions aligned with prompted questions related to the focus of the article and occurring among Chinese students: a subset of forum posts analysed from a larger participant group in a broader study. While this approach enables thematic exploration, it limits the generalisability of the results. The perspectives represented may not fully capture the broader diversity of experiences among Chinese learners engaged in

IELTS, EAL, or academic skills development, nor those situated in different educational contexts or possessing varying levels of digital literacy, which appeared notably high in this sample. The reliance on self-reported data from online discussions introduces additional challenges related to objectivity and potential researcher bias. Students who chose to participate, and particularly those who engaged actively in AI-related discourse on the theme of the article, may already have held stronger views or possessed greater familiarity with digital tools than their peers with respect to using AI for language learning. This self-selection effect could skew the data toward more technologically engaged learners, making it more difficult to draw conclusions about students who are less comfortable with digital platforms. Another limitation relates to the constraints of generative AI tools themselves. Although these technologies provide immediate feedback and can simulate exam-like tasks, they continue to lack genuine contextual understanding and often struggle to interpret nuance in language use. This may lead to inconsistent or misleading feedback, potentially shaping learner perceptions negatively, especially in areas requiring inferencing, idiomatic accuracy, or cultural appropriateness.

Further limitations concern the intercoder process. The data were coded independently by two researchers, who then compared interpretations and resolved discrepancies through discussion. This collaborative approach enhanced the transparency and consistency of the analysis; however, it also has limitations. Both coders shared similar professional backgrounds, employment and research ties, which may have introduced shared assumptions into the analytical frame. We adopted this approach with an analysis that sought a collaborative reflexive process, rather than a quantitatively verified process. Such a verified process may have strengthened the replicability of the process, we acknowledge. Meanwhile, Table 1 suggests that negative experiences did not overwhelmingly influence this sample, the variability of AI output nonetheless highlights the need for cautious interpretation. The study's reliance on a single analytic framework and a relatively narrow sample further restricts the breadth of possible interpretations. Consequently, the findings should be viewed as indicative rather than definitive, providing a foundation for future research. Expanding the sample size, incorporating mixed methods approaches, and examining diverse learner populations would enhance our understanding of how AI can most effectively support language learning and IELTS preparation. This article acknowledges it uses a smaller, qualitative subset of data from a broader mixed-methods project, which necessarily narrows the scope of interpretation. It offers modest recommendations, then, that are rooted in educational development focusing towards shaping ideas about new approaches in learning enhancement. The limitation of the scope of potential claim and generalisability, then, is acknowledged, and the reported data should be treated as what it is: a thematic exploration of students' perceptions. Future research could direct additional triangulation across other data sources within the wider project, to further strengthen analytical convergence (Denzin, 2012). Participation in the online forum was voluntary, and students who chose to contribute may differ from those who did not engage, a dynamic commonly observed in online qualitative research (Im & Chee, 2012). Nevertheless, the dataset provides contextually rich insights into students' experiences of AI-assisted IELTS preparation.

6.2. Practical Contributions

The findings of this study have several practical implications for language educators, institutions, and designers of AI-supported learning environments. First, the results suggest that generative AI tools can play a productive role in IELTS preparation when integrated as scaffolded learning resources rather than substitutes for independent practice. Educators can therefore incorporate AI-assisted activities such as guided writing revision, vocabulary exploration, and practice question generation while encouraging students to

critically evaluate AI-generated responses. Second, the AIMC framework highlights the importance of developing AI literacy and critical engagement skills among language learners. Institutions should provide guidance on how students can use generative AI responsibly for language development, including strategies for verifying AI-generated content, identifying potential inaccuracies, and maintaining independent writing and reading practice. Embedding such guidance within language courses may help students balance the efficiency benefits of AI with the need for authentic language development. Third, the Balanced Integration Framework (BIF) offers a practical tool for educators seeking to evaluate patterns of AI use in language learning environments. By recognising different combinations of perceived benefit and perceived risk, educators can identify when students may require additional support, such as guidance on ethical AI use, strategies for critically reviewing automated feedback, or encouragement to engage more actively with independent language practice. In this way, the framework provides a structured approach for integrating generative AI into language education while maintaining pedagogical oversight. Together, these implications suggest that the effective integration of generative AI in IELTS preparation should focus not only on technological access but also on developing learners' critical and reflective engagement with AI-assisted learning tools.

6.3. Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, this study illustrates that AI is a powerful catalyst for innovation in language learning and academic skills development, particularly within the context of IELTS preparation for Chinese university students. When thoughtfully integrated into curriculum design and pedagogical practice, AI can enhance personalised learning, foster critical academic competencies, and prepare learners more effectively for the communicative demands of higher education and global engagement. Ensuring that technology functions as a meaningful partner in learners' development requires attention to responsible use, digital literacy, and the cultivation of AIMC, discussed above: learners' ability to weigh opportunities against risks and to use AI tools judiciously. By embracing this dual focus, leveraging the potential of GenAI while fostering critical, ethical, and balanced engagement, the language education community can harness AI to empower learners in their increasingly digitally mediated futures.

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