

ELL Students' Attitudes toward AI Integration in the Classroom

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Summary: This study examines high-intermediate adult ELL students' attitudes toward incorporating AI tools in English language learning at a community college. This mixed-methods research employed a survey, classroom observations, and a focus group interview. The findings revealed that while students appreciated AI's potential, 80% were initially unfamiliar with it. Most expressed reluctance to adopt these technologies, which was primarily due to perceived technological difficulties, highlighting the need for targeted training.

Keywords: AI in education, ELL students, technology, attitudes, language learning

Introduction

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) tools in educational settings has the potential to revolutionize language learning (Topsakal & Topsakal, 2022), particularly for English Language Learners (ELLs). As educational institutions increasingly embrace technology, numerous studies have focused on the potential uses and challenges of using AI in language learning and teaching contexts (Alafnan et al., 2023; Baskara & Mukarto, 2023; Hong, 2023; Kohnke et al., 2023).

The AI technology comes with a lot of benefits both for students and teachers, including the ease of content creation, instant feedback, free tutoring, etc. (Hong, 2023). It is critical to understand how such technologies can be effectively integrated into language education (Baskara & Mukarto, 2023). Research has shown that students' perceptions of AI can significantly impact their willingness to communicate and overall engagement in the learning process (Derakhshan & Ghiasvand, 2024; Zhi & Wang, 2024).

Despite recognizing the advantages of AI, many ESL students express hesitance in utilizing these technologies due to concerns about usability and technological challenges (Kohnke et al., 2023; Kruk, 2022; Zhi & Wang, 2024), privacy and security (Koraishi, 2023), and the ownership issues and bias (Pack & Maloney, 2024). This gap between awareness of AI tools and willingness to engage with them highlights the need for targeted pedagogical strategies that introduce AI while also supporting students in overcoming their apprehensions.

Understanding the ELL students' attitudes toward AI can help better tailor teachers' teaching methods to promote effective communication and improve language acquisition outcomes (Hong, 2023; Kohnke et al., 2023; Zhi & Wang, 2024). Therefore, this study investigates these attitudes among a group of high-intermediate level adult ELL students at Lake Washington Institute of Technology, aiming to identify their perceptions, experiences, and willingness to engage with AI

technologies in the classroom. The findings provide valuable insights that can guide educators in effectively incorporating AI into language acquisition processes.

Literature Review

The integration of AI technologies, particularly ChatGPT, into ESL settings has generated considerable interest among researchers exploring its potential benefits and challenges (Alafnan et al., 2023; Baskara & Mukarto, 2023; Hong, 2023; Kohnke, Moorhouse, & Zou, 2023; Koraishi, 2023; Topsakal & Topsakal, 2022). They discuss the advantages of AI in enhancing ESL teaching by personalized materials, instant/real-time feedback, authentic material generation, student support, engaging students in authentic conversations, instructor integration, experiential learning, authentic language use, personal language tutoring, innovative teaching methods, and shift in assessment.

However, they also pointing out some disadvantages such as ethical concerns, complexity, bias in output, need for evaluation, cheating and accuracy, digital competencies required to use ChatGPT, academic integrity and assessment difficulties. To eliminate these drawbacks related to academic integrity, Alafnan et al. (2023) recommend avoiding theory-based take-home assessments, designing case-based tasks requiring personalized, critical responses, utilizing plagiarism detection software for all submissions, and incorporating ChatGPT responses in class for discussion and evaluation.

There are studies that investigate the use of other AI tools in educational settings (Grassini, 2023; Guerrero et al., 2022; Hong, 2023; Kasneci et al., 2023; Kohnke et al., 2023; Koraishi, 2023; Williamson & Eynon, 2020). Topsakal & Topsakal, for instance, propose a framework for developing language learning software for children that incorporates Augmented Reality and voicebots alongside ChatGPT, suggesting that such innovative tools can create immersive and engaging

learning experiences.

A growing body of research has shown that AI technologies can lead to notable enhancements in academic performance (Khan et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2021). These tools contribute to improved learning outcomes and greater student satisfaction (Winkler & Söllner, 2018), ultimately optimizing learners' capabilities and overall academic success (Clarizia et al., 2018). In one study, Kohnke (2023) focused on L2 learners' perceptions on using chatbots as a language learning tool. The findings indicated that participants found the chatbot enjoyable to interact with, both in and out of class, and believed it enhanced their English language skills.

Gallacher et al. (2018) studied 253 students' perceptions of AI chatbots like Cleverbot as conversational partners in learning English. Students viewed the chatbot as a novelty rather than an effective learning tool, preferring human partners for richer interactions, natural communication, and understanding. While AI offered independence, quick responses, and exposure to new language forms, students noted its significant weaknesses, including inappropriate responses, lack of emotional cues, and inability to engage in meaningful follow-up questions.

In another study, Grajeda et al. (2024) examines the student perception of AI use in terms of its effective use of AI tools, effective use of ChatGPT, student proficiency using AI tools, teacher proficiency using AI tools advanced student skills in AI. They found potential for educational revolution with some challenges.

Many adult ESL students often struggle with language confidence and adapting to new technologies, so incorporating AI into their learning journey can help bridge these challenges. By using AI tools to build digital competencies, the goal is to empower learners to take charge of their English studies beyond the classroom. AIED in ELL not only supports language development but also enhances essential skills like digital literacy, civic engagement, and job readiness—key components for thriving in today's tech-oriented world. Therefore, understanding learner perception and readiness is critical in this research.

Methodology

This mixed-methods research involved 15 high-intermediate ELL students (13 women, 2 men) aged 22 to 72 in a community college in the USA, selected through convenience sampling due to their availability. They were taking in-person classes every day for three hours at the time of the study. The students were from all around the world, including Russia, Colombia, China, Japan, and so on. Most of them were living in the USA from 3 months to 18 months while a few of them were there for about 4 years.

They signed consent forms and voluntarily participated, with no impact on their grades to ensure reliability. The three-month study utilized initial surveys, followed by an

AI presentation which included the definition, benefits and concerns about AI, AI tools to integrate into ELL, and how to use them most effectively. After that, classroom observations and focus group interviews were conducted to explore students' attitudes toward AI tools.

Data Collection

The initial survey, adapted from Chan & Hu (2023), included Likert-scale and open-ended questions to assess participants' familiarity with AI tools before and after classroom introduction. Due to the survey's language complexity, students could use dictionaries or translators.

Classroom observations provided contextual understanding of student interactions with AI. The research, also the instructor of the class, was both teaching and taking notes while the students were involved in activities. The instructor observed her students with these critical lenses only in 5 classes when the use of AI was allowed in learning.

The whole class gathered for two focus group interviews after 5 of the classes that they used AI due to time limitation as they stayed for 30 minutes longer after classes. They discussed the instructor's questions building on each other's opinions in focus group discussions which offered deeper insights into attitudes and concerns. The questions included their experiences with AI, the difficulties they had vs the advantages they enjoyed, how they felt, and if it affected their social learning. The researcher took constant notes during discussions.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to summarize participants' responses. Mean scores for Likert-scale items gauged overall familiarity and attitudes toward AI tools, while frequency analysis identified trends in prior experience and engagement with these tools. Inferential studies were not used due to the small sample size. For qualitative data from open-ended survey responses, classroom observations, and focus group discussions, thematic analysis was conducted. This involved coding recurring themes in students' comments, such as "perceived technological difficulties," "interest in further learning," and "impressions of AI potential." The researcher went through the whole qualitative data of observation and interview notes several times to reach to these themes, which were then confirmed by another instructor working at the same college who co-analyzed the qualitative data. Combining both quantitative and qualitative analyses provided a comprehensive view of ELL students' attitudes toward AI, offering insights into barriers and facilitators to AI adoption among immigrant learners.

Findings

While we acknowledge that a lack of understanding about AI

among participants may introduce biases into survey results, we aimed to eliminate misconceptions by introducing AI to be used in ELL effectively and securely. The survey findings of the study revealed that 80% of participants (n=12) were unfamiliar with AI tools prior to the study, encountering them only during the course. Of the 15 students, only three (20%) had previously used AI tools: one daily (6.6%) and two sporadically (13.3%). After being introduced to various AI applications designed to enhance English learning, 26.6% (n=4) began integrating AI into their study routines. However, interest in further exploration of AI tools remained minimal, with only one student expressing a desire to learn more, while others felt hesitant or disinterested.

Students often answered “not sure=3” for most questions. The only meaningful differences among negative statements were observed in Q5, Q17, and Q7. The mean scores indicated that students did not believe “AI tools exhibit bias” (Q5) or that “AI tools will limit their socialization” (Q17). They also believed that “AI technologies have limited emotional intelligence” (Q7).

For positive statements, significant differences were found in Q4, Q8, Q9, and Q14. Students believed they “can understand AI tools” (Q4), that “AI will help their learning” (Q8), that “students must learn AI for their careers” (Q9), and that “AI tools are great as they are available 24/7” (Q14). Although not entirely comfortable using AI tools, they disagreed that “they need AI training for ELL” (Q22).

The open-ended questions revealed that students did not fully understand what AI is. Some mistook AI tools like ChatGPT for search engines, translators, or apps, as evident from responses like “Google” or “Duolingo.” One student said, “I use AI every day because I translate new words on Google Translate.” While almost all websites and app now integrate the AI technologies, we figured that the student simply assumed that any online technology is equal to AI. This misunderstanding shifted the focus to qualitative data due to the lack of knowledge about AI and insufficient language skills.

Classroom observations and focus group discussions revealed a complex landscape of attitudes toward AI among ELL students. While many expressed admiration for AI technologies, their reluctance to adopt them persisted. Observations showed that 60% (n=9) demonstrated initial enthusiasm during introductions to AI presentation, but this did not translate into regular use. One student said, “I am interested in examples of using ChatGPT for learning English,” while another responded, “No, I’m good,” when asked about needing training.

Focus group discussions highlighted that students’ apprehension stemmed from perceived technological difficulties. 73.3% (n=11) mentioned challenges in understanding how to use the tools effectively. Although many students can use technology (mobile phones, apps, Canvas, etc.), they were reluctant and unconfident navigating new tools. They were

unaware of AI tools’ functions, whether they had websites or apps, or what the apps could do. For example, a student noted, “I don’t have this app on my phone. Can I talk to it?” Another asked, “Is it free? I don’t know because I don’t want to pay.”

Concerns about privacy or security were only raised by 13% (n=2). Only two students were concerned about sharing data on ChatGPT for privacy, while others were not significantly concerned, probably because of their lack of awareness. One student said, “I don’t want to share my email address or phone number with them.” These results were consistent with Koraiishi’s (2023) study.

Despite initial low awareness, students showed more interest as they were introduced and trained in using AI tools for language learning. One student was impressed, saying, “I had no idea I can have a story or resume or language learning with AI.” Students expressed excitement discovering how AI can aid their learning by asking for word meanings, making sentences, creating fill-in-the-blank exercises, having conversations, creating resumes and cover letters, asking for grammar clarifications, and writing paragraphs. They were warned against asking AI to do their homework, encouraged to do it themselves and seek AI feedback for effective learning. Since the students were adults, relying purely on AI tools was not an issue. They were reminded that the instructor was there to help them improve THEIR English, not to evaluate ChatGPT’s writing.

The findings indicate a significant gap between awareness and engagement with AI tools. Although students recognized potential benefits like personalized learning, their willingness to explore these tools was limited. For instance, while 80% acknowledged that AI could facilitate tailored learning experiences, only 26.6% began integrating AI into their study routines after the introduction. Only one student sought more knowledge about AI, while others felt satisfied with their current understanding or preferred to avoid additional technology. When the instructor asked if and how they practice the use of AI outside the classroom, it was revealed that only one student was practicing with ChatGPT outside the class, except the student who is engaged with it for his professional work. Although it was heavily due to their busy family schedules, this reluctance still underscores the need for targeted training and workshops to promote AI familiarity and comfort. Students who had already used AI tools were not interested in further training, as they knew how to use them. However, reasons for reluctance among newly introduced students included lack of interest, reluctance to learn new technologies, time constraints, and a lack of urgency to improve their English. Interestingly, age did not seem to be a factor in discovering new tools.

Participants frequently mentioned frustration with unfamiliar interfaces, describing experiences as “overwhelming” and “intimidating.” One student said, “I want to learn, but I just don’t know where to start with these tools.” This highlights

the importance of providing structured support and clear guidance in adopting AI technologies. Overall, these insights suggest that simply introducing AI tools is insufficient; educators must create supportive environments encouraging exploration and building confidence among ELL students using AI for language learning.

Discussion

The study reveals a nuanced understanding of ELL students' interactions with AI tools in language learning. Despite AI's potential, there is a significant gap between awareness and active engagement.

Familiarity and Initial Hesitance: One significant finding is the wide gap between student awareness of AI tools and active engagement with them. Despite research suggesting learners find AI tools engaging (Kohnke, 2023), this study found that 80% of students were initially unfamiliar with tools like ChatGPT and commonly confused AI with search engines or basic translation apps. Even when informed of its potential, initial enthusiasm often failed to translate into consistent use. This indicates that mere exposure or access to AI is insufficient; confidence, competence, and guided application are critical factors in sustained adoption.

Perceptions of AI Technologies: The survey results showed mixed sentiments. While students acknowledged certain limitations, such as biases and lack of emotional intelligence, they also believed in AI's positive impact on their learning practices. High mean scores for statements about AI's usefulness in enhancing learning experiences and the necessity of learning AI for future careers indicate recognition of AI's value. However, the ambivalence towards using these tools, particularly the hesitance to seek further training, underscores a complex relationship between perception and willingness to engage. Although many students reported feeling comfortable with technology, they struggled with the specific demands of using AI tools, highlighting the need for structured support and training. Compared to younger learners or those in K-12 settings, adult ESL students often show greater hesitation due to limited digital exposure and fear of failure. Unlike findings from studies involving younger or more digitally fluent participants (e.g., Topsakal & Topsakal, 2022), our data suggest that adult learners require more explicit, ongoing scaffolding to feel confident using AI tools.

Qualitative Insights

Qualitative data revealed deeper insights into students' experiences and challenges. The confusion surrounding AI tools suggests that students may benefit from explicit instruction to

demystify these technologies. Concerns regarding privacy were minimal, indicating that the primary barriers to engagement stemmed more from a lack of understanding. The study also found that most students were eager to learn about AI when properly introduced. This willingness indicates that with the right support and resources, students could significantly benefit from integrating AI into their studies. This reinforces the idea that AI integration should be learner-centered, aligning it with students' immediate goals, so that it will be meaningful and enjoyable for students (Gallacher et al., 2018).

Implications for Educators

Educators should develop targeted training programs focusing on practical applications of AI tools to ensure students feel equipped and empowered (Kasneci, 2023; Rudolph & Tan, 2023). This targeted instructional design could include structured support, embedded AI literacy, peer support system, and instructor modeling. Creating institutional support frameworks, such as AI mentors, faculty learning communities, or shared repositories of AI-integrated lesson plans, can further bridge this gap.

Conclusion

This study underscores the importance of understanding ELL students' attitudes toward AI integration in education. The findings indicate that while AI tools can enhance language acquisition, current training methods may not fully engage learners, highlighting the need for improved support and training.

To maximize AI effectiveness in the classroom, educators should implement engaging and interactive learning opportunities that encourage autonomous exploration. Examples include AI-based projects, gamified learning, and collaborative tasks.

Creating a supportive environment for AI adoption can bridge the gap between awareness and practical application. Continuous support, hands-on workshops, and integrating AI literacy into the curriculum can empower students to use these tools confidently.

Future research should examine the long-term impacts of AI on language learning and explore methods to address specific barriers identified by students. Such studies can optimize AI integration and improve language learning experiences for immigrant ELLs.

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Appendix A

Survey on the Attitudes of ESL Students Toward Using AI

This is a survey conducted by Professor XXX at XXX to search the attitudes of ELL students about the use of AI technologies in learning. The survey data will only be used for this research and not shared elsewhere. You have the option to opt out from the research at any time. Your participation is solely voluntary. Please contact to Professor XXX at xxx@xxx.edu any time. Thank you for your participation.

___ I understand the above statement and give consent to participate in the research.

Name _____ Signature _____

Part A: Please read the statements and choose the best option as follows:

5: Strongly agree 4: Agree 3: Not sure 2: Don't agree 1: Strongly disagree

Statements	5	4	3	2	1
I understand generative AI technologies like ChatGPT:					
1. have limitations in their ability to handle complex tasks					
2. can generate incorrect output.					
3. can generate out of context or inappropriate output.					
4. can exhibit biases and unfairness.					
5. have limited emotional intelligence and empathy.					
6.I believe AI technologies will help my learning practices in the future.					
7.Students must learn how to use AI technologies well for their careers.					
8.I believe AI technologies can improve my digital knowledge.					
9.I believe AI technologies can help me save time.					
10.I believe AI technologies can provide me with unique ideas and perspectives that I may not have thought of myself.					
11.I think AI technologies can provide me with personalized and immediate feedback and suggestions for my assignments.					
12. I think AI technologies are great because they are available 24/7.					
13. I think AI technologies are to support students.					
14.Using AI technologies to do assignments decreases the value of university education.					
15.AI technologies will limit my interaction and socialization with others.					
16.AI technologies will prevent my development of skills such as teamwork, problem-solving, and leadership skills.					
17.I can become over-reliant (use too much/addicted) on generative AI technologies.					
18. I feel comfortable using AI tools.					
19. I want to learn to use different AI tools to improve my English.					
20. I need my college/professor to give training to use AI for ELL.					
21. I don't think AI tools know about my culture/religion. I don't think it represents me.					

22. How often do you use AI?
23. Which AI tools do you know/use?
24. When was the first time you thought/were told about using AI for ELL?
25. What did you know about AI before you started my classes?
26. What did you learn about how to use AI in ELL?
27. Are you using AI in this class? How?
28. Do you need help to use AI? Would you like your instructor to help you use AI?
29. What are some ways you can use AI in ELL?
30. Are Google and AI technologies the same?

Additional comments:

Appendix B

Resources AI Tools

AI Tool Name	Use For
ChatGPT	AI Writing
Copilot Personal AI Assistant	AI assistant
Youchat	Chat
LanguaTalk	Speaking
Grammarly	Grammar and Editing
Talkpal: AI Language Teacher	Speaking
AI pronunciation trainer	Pronunciation
Elsa AI	Speaking
Play.ht	Speaking
Small talk to me	Speaking
Orai	Speaking
Speak	Speaking
Google speaking practice	Speaking
Yoodli	Speaking
Zaplingo AI tutors	Speaking
Mizou	Chatbot
Unverbal	Speaking
Praktika.ai	Speaking
Getpronounce	Speaking
Quizlet	Learning
Loora	Speaking
Lingvist	Vocabulary
Tutor Lily	AI tutor
Duolingo	Gamified learning
Presentation practice	Presentation with speaker
MakesYouFluent	Speaking
Quillbot	Paraphrasing
Google Gemini	Research
ChatPDF	Research
Natural Readers	Text to Speech
Mubert	Text to Music
Doctrina AI	Learning
Tutor AI	Learning
AskCodi	Coding
Hocoos	Website Building
Kickresume	Resume Building
Replika	Personal Assistance
ElevenLabs	AI Voice Generation
BypassGPT	Humanizing AI Content
Offer AI	Meeting transcription and summary
PDF AI	Chat with PDF
Gamma AI	AI Presentation
Rockett.ai	For Teachers
Lingoteach	For Teachers
Twee	For Teachers
ELLcation	For Teachers
Bypassgpt.ai	Learning
Resume	Create resumes
Ask Codi	Chatbot
Tutor.ai	Language tutor

References for the resources:

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CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Dogan, Secil Horosan. (2025). ELL Students' Attitudes toward AI Integration in the Classroom. *WAESOL Educator*, 50(2), pp.28-34 .
