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FROM CONTROL TO COLLABORATION: MANAGING AI-ASSISTED LEARNING IN ESL CLASSROOMS

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Abstract.: The rapid spread of generative artificial intelligence (AI) has confronted teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) with a strategic choice between two paradigms: controlling AI through bans, detection and surveillance, or collaborating with it as a learning partner. Drawing on an integrative review of empirical studies and large-scale surveys (2023–2025), this article argues that the control paradigm is no longer tenable: in 2025, 92% of students reported using AI and 88% used it in assessments, while only 42% of staff felt well-equipped to work with it. At the same time, controlled studies show that, when used as a formative feedback partner, AI significantly improves ESL learners' writing accuracy, organisation and coherence, with the strongest gains for lower-proficiency learners — yet over-reliance can induce "metacognitive laziness". The study proposes a five-stage Control–Collaboration continuum and a practical framework in which the teacher shifts from gatekeeper to orchestrator of human–AI collaboration, grounded in sociocultural learning theory and AI literacy.

Keywords: AI-assisted learning, ESL, generative AI, ChatGPT, teacher role, collaboration, AI literacy, academic integrity, sociocultural theory.

INTRODUCTION

Since the public release of ChatGPT in late 2022, generative artificial intelligence (AI) has moved from an experimental curiosity to an everyday academic tool. The scale of this shift is unprecedented: by 2025, 92% of students reported using AI in some form — up from 66% only a year earlier — and 88% had used it in assessments, compared with 53% in 2024 [1]. A global survey of more than 130,000 learners found that 86% use AI in their studies, with 54% using it weekly and a quarter daily [2]. For teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL), whose discipline centres on the very skills AI can now imitate — writing, paraphrasing, translation and conversation — this development is both an opportunity and a challenge.

Faced with this reality, educational institutions have responded along a spectrum bounded by two opposing logics. The first is a logic of control: banning AI, deploying detection software, redesigning assessments to be "AI-proof", and treating any AI use as potential misconduct. The second is a logic of collaboration: integrating AI as a feedback tool, a writing partner and a conversational interlocutor, and reframing the teacher's task as orchestrating, rather than policing, human–AI interaction. The control logic is intuitively appealing because it preserves traditional notions of authorship and assessment; yet it sits uneasily with the empirical fact that the overwhelming majority of learners already use these tools, often with little guidance.

This tension is especially acute in ESL classrooms. On the one hand, AI offers second-language learners immediate, personalised and low-anxiety feedback that is otherwise difficult to provide at scale. On the other hand, uncritical reliance on AI risks undermining the productive struggle through which language competence develops. The aim of this article is therefore to analyse the move from control to collaboration in AI-assisted ESL learning, to synthesise current empirical evidence on its

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effects, and to propose a practical framework that helps teachers manage — rather than resist — this transition.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The collaborative use of AI in language learning can be understood through Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. Within this framework, learning is mediated by interaction with a "More Knowledgeable Other" (MKO) who scaffolds the learner through the Zone of Proximal Development — the gap between what a learner can do alone and what they can do with assistance [7]. A generative AI tutor that offers immediate, dialogic feedback can act as such a mediator, provided the scaffolding is gradually withdrawn so that learners internalise the target skills rather than outsource them. Mishra and Koehler's TPACK model further reminds us that effective integration requires teachers to combine technological, pedagogical and content knowledge rather than adopt tools uncritically [8].

Empirical evidence on AI in ESL writing is accumulating rapidly and is broadly positive. In a mixed-methods intervention study, Mahapatra found that using ChatGPT as a formative feedback tool significantly improved undergraduate ESL students' academic writing, with the experimental group outperforming the control across two post-tests and gains in idea focus, cohesion and grammatical accuracy [3]. An experimental study of 117 university learners reported substantial improvements in English for Specific Purposes writing across all measured dimensions [9], while reviews note that ChatGPT is especially beneficial for lower-proficiency users, improving grammar, vocabulary, organisation and coherence [4].

The literature also issues a clear warning. A randomised study by Fan and colleagues found that although an AI group produced significantly higher essay scores, it showed no advantage in knowledge gain or transfer — a phenomenon they term "metacognitive laziness" [5]; correspondingly, 59% of students worry that AI could reduce their critical thinking and 49% fear over-reliance [6]. Yet the same data challenge the assumption that access equals abuse: only 18% of students report inserting AI-generated text directly into assessments, while most use AI to explain concepts (58%), summarise (48%) and generate ideas (41%) [6]. Learners thus predominantly use AI to supplement, not subvert, learning — which strengthens the case for a collaborative rather than a punitive response.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs an integrative literature review and conceptual analysis. Peer-reviewed empirical studies (2023–2025) on AI in ESL/EFL learning and large-scale survey reports from recognised bodies (the Higher Education Policy Institute, the Digital Education Council and Turnitin) were purposively selected and synthesised. Findings were organised around two analytical dimensions — the teacher's stance and AI's pedagogical role — and interpreted through sociocultural learning theory and the TPACK framework. On this basis, a five-stage Control–Collaboration continuum and an accompanying classroom-management framework were developed.

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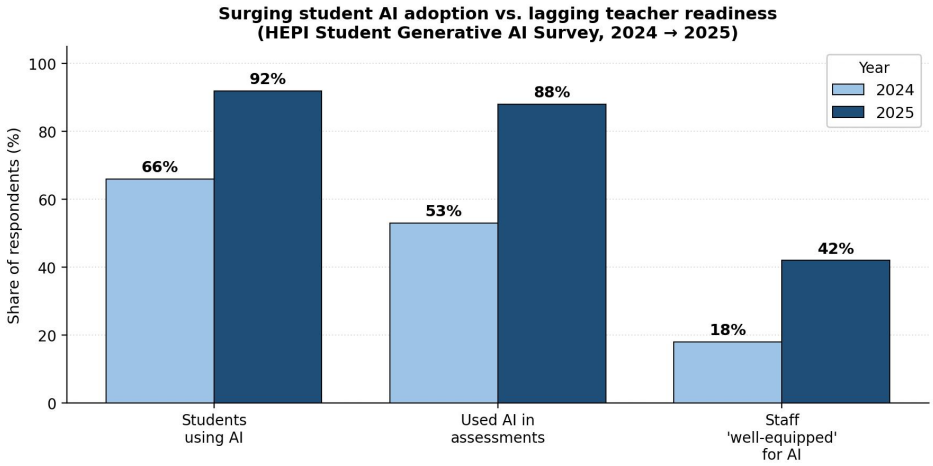


Figure 1. Surging student AI adoption against lagging teacher readiness, 2024–2025 [1].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The two paradigms

Synthesis of the evidence reveals two coherent but opposed paradigms for managing AI in the ESL classroom. The control paradigm frames AI as a threat to authorship and integrity and responds with prohibition, detection and surveillance. The collaboration paradigm frames AI as a mediating partner and responds with structured integration, transparency and the deliberate cultivation of AI literacy. Their contrasting assumptions are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. The control and collaboration paradigms in AI-assisted ESL learning

Dimension	Control paradigm	Collaboration paradigm
View of AI	Threat / cheating device	Mediating learning partner (MKO)
Teacher role	Gatekeeper, examiner, "police"	Orchestrator, facilitator, co-learner
Learner role	Suspect to be monitored	Self-regulated, critical user
Focus	Final product, detection	Learning process, transparency
Integrity strategy	Bans, AI detectors	AI literacy, disclosure, process evidence
Assessment	"AI-proof", exam-only	AI-inclusive, reflective, oral defence
Main risk	Driving use underground; skills gap	Over-reliance; "metacognitive laziness"

Source: compiled by the author from [1–6].

From control to collaboration: a continuum

Rather than a binary choice, the move from control to collaboration is best conceived as a continuum (Figure 2). At its left pole, prohibition casts the teacher as police and AI as a forbidden threat; moving rightward through restriction and permission, the teacher's stance softens from gatekeeper to permitter; at the right pole, integration and collaboration position the teacher as an orchestrator who designs tasks in which learners and AI co-construct meaning. The empirical reality documented above — near-universal student adoption alongside limited teacher readiness (Figure 1)

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— indicates that institutions clustered at the control end are managing a fiction, since the relevant behaviour has already migrated beyond their oversight.

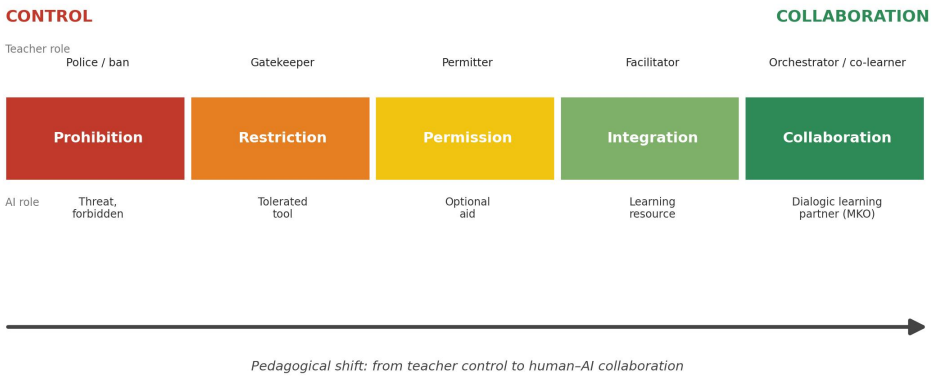


Figure 2. The Control–Collaboration continuum: shifting teacher stance and AI role (author's framework).

Managing collaboration: a practical framework

Effective management of AI-assisted ESL learning does not mean abandoning standards; it means relocating them. Five principles emerge from the analysis. First, build AI literacy: teach learners how language models work, their limits and biases, and how to prompt, verify and edit critically — currently only about a third of students receive any such training [1]. Second, make process visible: require drafts, prompt logs and brief reflections so that learning, not only the product, is assessed. Third, redesign assessment for an AI-rich world through in-class writing, oral defences and personalised, context-bound tasks. Fourth, position AI as a partner, not a ghost-writer — students use it to obtain feedback, generate examples and rehearse dialogue, then revise in their own words. Fifth, protect cognitive engagement to avoid metacognitive laziness, ensuring that AI scaffolds rather than replaces the productive struggle of second-language learning.

CONCLUSION

The evidence reviewed in this article indicates that the question facing ESL teachers is no longer whether learners will use AI, but how teachers will manage that use. With student adoption approaching saturation and controlled studies confirming that AI can substantially improve second-language writing — particularly for lower-proficiency learners — the control paradigm, built on prohibition and detection, is both unenforceable and pedagogically counterproductive, driving AI use underground and leaving learners without the AI literacy they urgently need. The collaboration paradigm offers a more sustainable response: grounded in sociocultural theory, it reframes AI as a mediating partner and the teacher as an orchestrator who designs transparent, process-oriented tasks, cultivates critical AI literacy and guards against "metacognitive laziness". The proposed Control–Collaboration continuum and five-principle framework offer ESL practitioners a concrete pathway for this transition; future research should test them empirically in diverse ESL settings, including under-resourced contexts, and examine their long-term effects on autonomous language competence.

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