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Exploring the Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) in English Language Teaching: Voices from In-Service Teachers at an Early-Adopting Hong Kong Secondary School



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Abstract

The launch of ChatGPT has drawn public attention to the potential of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) tools due to its high accessibility and affordances. Many language teachers have attempted to integrate GenAI tools into their teaching practices. However, there is a dearth of research investigating the use of AI in the context of secondary schools. Although some Hong Kong secondary schools have started incorporating GenAI tools to teach science and technology-related subjects, schools integrating GenAI tools in language education are still scanty. Therefore, this qualitative case study used an in-depth focus-group interview with three in-service English language teachers in an early-adopting Hong Kong secondary school to explore their experiences of utilizing GenAI tools in actual teaching practices and the underlying factors facilitating or hindering the application of GenAI in English language teaching. The findings showed that GenAI tools could be used to assist teachers

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in various tasks, including proofreading, generating teaching and assessment materials, offering feedback and suggestions, etc. The findings indicated that environmental factors, benefits to students' language learning, and benefits to teachers' professional work, were the enablers for English teachers to integrate GenAI tools. Moreover, limitations of GenAI tools and teachers' internal hindrance were identified as the barriers to incorporating GenAI in English language teaching. Practical implications and limitations are discussed.

Keywords: Generative Artificial Intelligence; English language teaching; in-service teachers; secondary schools

Introduction

ChatGPT, an exemplary Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) tool, has attracted global attention since its release in November 2022. Many researchers have explored the promising potential of the application of GenAI tools in a wide range of fields such as medicine (Tan et al., 2024), journalism (Pavlik, 2023), physics education (Polverini & Gregorcic, 2024), translation (Zhang et al., 2025), and language education (Lee, 2023). Empowered by deep learning, GenAI tools can generate new and human-like content, including text, images, videos, and audio, through drawing on data from the Internet and other sources (Feuerriegel et al., 2024; Law, 2024; Moorhouse et al., 2025). As GenAI continues to evolve and becomes more accessible, more educators have recognized the possibility to integrate it into language teaching and learning (Mohamed, 2023). Through specific prompts, GenAI tools can assist teachers in correcting grammar mistakes, explaining the meanings of vocabulary and grammar use, and refining teaching materials (Law, 2024; Wu et al., 2025). Although GenAI tools are powerful and have the potential to support language teaching and learning, the drawbacks and potential problems such as inaccurate information (Rudolph et al. 2023), biased content (Choudhary, 2024), privacy issues (Ali et al., 2024), and damage to students' creativity (Niloy et al., 2024) while using these tools should be recognized.

Many teachers and researchers have discussed the potential application of GenAI tools in language education (Al-khresheh, 2024; Bonner et al., 2023; Hockly, 2023; Kostka & Toncelli, 2023), and there is evidence suggesting the integration of GenAI into language teachers' professional practices (Moorhouse, 2024b). To date, many studies have investigated the integration of GenAI in language teaching and learning worldwide in higher educational contexts (e.g., Chan et al., 2025; Waluyo & Kusumastuti, 2024; Wang & Ren, 2024; Zaim et al., 2024). However, studies focusing on the integration of GenAI in K-12 language education, especially at lower levels of primary and secondary schools, have been generally under-researched. This suggests a need for research on GenAI applications in secondary schools, as it is essential to understand their potential capability to enhance teaching outcomes in secondary education and how these tools can be effectively implemented to support the distinct learning needs of secondary students.

In Hong Kong, the site of the study reported here, many K-12 schools have considered promoting AI tools in education to increase the competitiveness and sustainable development of Hong Kong education (Wang & Cheng, 2021). AI tools have been applied in school-based Information and Communication Technology (ICT) or Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) subjects to support the teaching and learning of the subject knowledge (Wang & Cheng, 2021). However, traditional methods, such as lectures and textbook-based instruction, remain dominant in secondary school language classrooms. Given that little is known about the application of GenAI tools in English language teaching practices within the context of a specific Hong Kong secondary

school (Moorhouse, 2024b), through the use of an exploratory case study, the current research aimed to investigate the utilization of GenAI tools among in-service English language teachers at an early-adopting secondary school in Hong Kong, as well as to identify the factors that facilitate or hinder this process. Early adopters refer to individuals or institutions that are among the first to adopt new technologies or practices (Catalini & Tucker, 2017). They are particularly worth exploring as they often set the trend within the education field and may be indicators of the wider implications of GenAI on K-12 language education. The school invited in the study is perceived to be an early adopter since, to the best of our knowledge, it is one of the earliest Hong Kong secondary schools to incorporate GenAI tools into teaching languages. The school started promoting GenAI in March 2023 and has been invited by the local education authorities to share its practices with other schools in Hong Kong. This study particularly focused on English language teaching as the majority of GenAI tools generate texts from English corpus in the database (Siu, 2023), and scholars have found a wide range of benefits brought by GenAI tools to English language teaching and learning (Fütterer et al., 2023; Mohamed, 2023; Slamet, 2024).

The findings are useful for English language teachers, school leaders, and policymakers. First, the study sheds light on how in-service language teachers use GenAI in their professional practices. Second, it identifies the specific factors that contribute to the successful integration of GenAI within the context of an early-adopting school. Finally, it can raise the awareness of school leaders about the barriers language teachers experience in integrating GenAI in English language teaching, facilitating them to refine the institutions' AI policy and take supporting strategies to address these hindrances. The findings provide a model for other schools interested in implementing GenAI into their English language curriculum and instruction. Furthermore, an early-adopting case at a technologically advanced and highly resourced region, Hong Kong, provides a glimpse into how cutting-edge technologies like GenAI can be integrated into language teaching in secondary education. The study can serve as inspiration and a model to inform secondary schools within Hong Kong and other regions seeking to implement GenAI for educational advancement.

Generative AI and Language Teaching

Teachers' Utilization of Generative AI in Language Teaching

An increasing number of language teachers have incorporated GenAI tools into their professional practices (Huang & Zou, 2024; Mohamed, 2023). Su and Yang (2023, p. 359) proposed a four-dimensional theoretical framework, which can help us understand how language teachers apply GenAI tools in language teaching. This framework comprises (1) identifying the desired outcomes, (2) determining the appropriate level of automation, (3) ensuring ethical considerations, and (4) evaluating the effectiveness.

- (1) Identifying the desired outcomes. Language teachers should identify the objectives before they utilize GenAI tools into their teaching practices. Recent studies have shown that GenAI tools are capable of assisting teachers in many aspects of their professional work, including teaching preparation and planning, language instructions, as well as assessment and feedback on students' work (Mohamed, 2023; Su & Yang, 2023; van den Berg & du Plessis, 2023). To be specific, language teachers can use these tools to prepare texts of different genres with specific topics required and adapt the complexity for producing differentiated teaching materials (Shin & Lee, 2023). GenAI can save teachers' time on designing teaching materials (e.g., creating texts and researching pictures online) and grading students' assignments (Mohamed, 2023; Rahman & Watanobe, 2023; Tossell et al., 2024), and the time saved from these tasks could enable teachers to concentrate on other professional work (Mohamed, 2023; Su & Yang, 2023).

Moreover, GenAI could help language teachers generate comprehension questions for developing quizzes and examinations (Kohnke et al., 2023). They can also help language teachers provide tailored instructions and explanations based on learners' individual needs and language proficiency (Su & Yang, 2023). In terms of feedback and assessment, GenAI tools can assist teachers in grading and offering detailed evaluations of student performance so that they can provide more personalized guidance to individual students and keep track of students' learning progress (Mohamed, 2023). Mohamed (2023) investigated EFL teachers' experiences of the use of GenAI tools in English language teaching in Saudi Arabia. The results showed that GenAI tools can provide feedback and comments from various aspects such as expressions, vocabulary, sentence patterns, language styles, and registers to enhance language proficiency and writing skills.

- (2) Determining the appropriate level of automation. Language teachers need to determine the level of automation when seeking GenAI for assistance. It is suggested that they should not fully rely on these tools but be critical and evaluative before utilizing the GenAI-generated content into their teaching practices since responses generated by GenAI may include inaccurate and misleading information (Zhang et al., 2025).
- (3) Ensuring ethical considerations. The concerns and ethical issues involved in GenAI application in language education have been highlighted by many researchers and language teachers. For example, the possibility of cheating and plagiarism may increase, which violates the purpose of giving assignments to check students' understanding of the knowledge (Cotton et al., 2024; Su & Yang, 2023). The leakage of personal data is another ethical concern of GenAI since a large amount of personal information might be collected without obtaining users' consent (Su & Yang, 2023). Moreover, the content produced by GenAI tools may be inaccurate and misleading (Fütterer et al., 2023). For instance, Kohnke et al. (2023) found that the explanations provided by ChatGPT about the usages of articles "a" and "the" were inaccurate, which are likely to mislead users into believing the misinformation. Additionally, Mohamed (2023) used in-depth interviews to explore EFL teachers' perceptions of GenAI-assisted English language teaching. The findings revealed that many participants raised their concerns over students' over-reliance on GenAI-generated content since this may have negative impacts on their cognitive skills in real-life communications.
- (4) Evaluating the effectiveness. It is crucial to examine the effectiveness of using GenAI tools to support language teaching practices. This can be achieved through collecting feedback from students or using some assessment items to compare their performance before and after the GenAI integration. For example, Lo et al. (2025) employed a randomized controlled design to compare the writing quality between students who received feedback from GenAI on their essays and those who received feedback from a writing instructor at a Hong Kong university. They revealed a significant improvement in essay quality for students receiving GenAI feedback, while students who obtained instructor feedback achieved a limited enhancement in essay quality.

Barriers to the Integration of GenAI in Language Teaching

Recent studies have identified a range of barriers to the integration of GenAI in language teaching, which can be categorized as first-order and second-order barriers (Ertmer, 1999). First-order barriers pertain to external factors that impact teachers, such as institutional support. In contrast, second-order barriers are the internal hindrances of teachers (Ertmer, 1999). For first-order barriers, Chung and Jeong (2024) conducted a survey to explore English language teachers' perceptions of incorporating GenAI tools in language teaching at a Chinese university. The findings indicated that participants perceived a lack of clear and comprehensive policies, guidelines, and ethical standards for GenAI adoption at the institutional level. Mohamed (2024) reviewed research on the challenges and ethical issues related to

GenAI in language education. The study showed that teachers had concerns about students' privacy due to the potential leakage of data and digital footprints. Moreover, Cabellos et al. (2024) identified language teachers' heavy workload and rigid curriculum as reasons for not using GenAI. Additionally, technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge (TPACK) refers to the transcendent integration of technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge in specific contexts to perform meaningful and deeply skilled teaching with technology (Huang et al., 2024; Koehler et al., 2013). It has been widely used to illustrate teachers' intrinsic knowledge and competence towards the integration of technologies in teaching (An et al., 2023). Therefore, the three main aspects of knowledge in TPACK (i.e., technological knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and content knowledge) could be used to consider the second-order barriers in integrating AI tools into teaching and learning.

For second-order barriers, recent studies have reported that language teachers can have limited knowledge, readiness, or literacy to use GenAI tools in language teaching. For instance, Ozdemir and Mede (2024) used a survey and semi-structured interviews to explore 27 in-service teachers' perceptions and readiness to utilize GenAI tools in English language teaching at a university in Turkey. The findings showed that participants generally expressed a lack of readiness and skills to effectively integrate GenAI tools into their professional practices. Moreover, Kohnke et al. (2024) conducted semi-structured interviews with 16 language teachers at Hong Kong universities to investigate their technostress in using GenAI tools. The results indicated that most language teachers were not knowledgeable about GenAI-related concepts on account of their educational background, inadequate training for using GenAI, and lack of experience in using GenAI.

Overall, the majority of existing research on the application of GenAI tools in language teaching, as well as the factors that facilitate or hinder their integration, has primarily been conducted within the context of higher education. However, studies focusing on secondary schools are notably limited, which underscores the need for more extensive investigation into the application of GenAI in this setting using the analytical lens of first- and second-order barriers.

Methods

Given that the primary objective of qualitative research is "to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24), the current study employed an exploratory case study with a qualitative design (Simons, 2014; Yin, 2009) to examine the implementation of GenAI tools in English language teaching from the experiences and perspectives of a group of in-service teachers within the context of an early-adopting Hong Kong secondary school. Specifically, the study aimed to address the following research questions:

- RQ1:** How do the teachers at the early-adopting secondary school utilise GenAI tools in their English language teaching?
- RQ2:** What are the enablers and barriers to integrating GenAI tools in English language teaching?

Research Context

The school being studied is a Chinese medium of instruction secondary school in Hong Kong. The principal of the secondary school announced the utilization of AI tools in teaching and learning to empower education in March 2023. The school policy specified that the proper utilization of ChatGPT and other GenAI tools can be helpful in training teachers and students AI techniques, achieving individualized learning, and reducing the effect of family background on students' learning outcomes. Furthermore, the schools' learning management system, eClass (<https://www.eclass.com.hk/>), had a built-in Large Language Model (LLM) (ChatGPT), meaning all teachers had access to a GenAI tool in

the easy availability in the school context. This means teachers and students could learn and explore the ways to utilize AI tools together to facilitate convenient and efficient teaching and learning. In spite of the benefits brought by the AI tools, the principal also emphasized the responsible use of AI tools, academic integrity, and privacy issues. Through the use of AI tools, the school hoped that teachers could nourish students' learning ability, creativity, and problem-solving skills.

Sampling and Participants

Ethical approval was obtained by the Research Ethics Committee at Hong Kong Baptist University before the implementation of this study. Participants were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling. Invitations were sent out through emails to the principal and vice-principal first, and the English panel head, who was one of the participants, was approached later. The other participants were contacted by the panel head. The invitation included information regarding the research topic, purposes of the research, target participants, and data collection method. Three female in-service teachers gave active consent to participate in the study. All participants obtained a Bachelor's Degree, while Amy also obtained her Master's Degree and Bella obtained Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE). Amy has taught for 15 years in this secondary school; Bella has taught for 3 years; Carmen has taught for 30 years. Amy and Bella teach both junior and senior form students, while Carmen only teaches senior form students. All of them started to use GenAI in January 2023 (see Table 1 for the demographic information of the participants).

Table 1 *Demographic Information of Participants*

Participant (Pseudonym)	Gender	Education	Teaching experience in this secondary school	Teaching grades	Experience in using GenAI
Amy	F	Bachelor's degree & Master's degree	15 years	F3 & F6	Yes
Bella	F	Bachelor's degree & PGDE	3 years	F3 & F6	Yes
Carmen	F	Bachelor's degree	30 years	F4 & F6	Yes

Data Collection Tool and Procedure

Group interviews provide participants with the opportunity to discuss complex issues collectively (George, 2013), which is conducive to helping researchers find valuable information from the synergy of a group of interviewees (Green & Thorogood, 2018). Therefore, to thoroughly explore the experiences and perceptions of the participants during the application of GenAI tools in English language teaching, an in-person semi-structured interview was conducted in a group with three participants in December 2023. An interview guide was developed and refined through discussion within the research team to ensure its clarity, appropriateness, and comprehensiveness (Kallio et al., 2016) (see Appendix 1 for the interview guide). Probe questions were asked according to the participants' responses to provide a more extensive discussion. The interview was conducted in Cantonese as preferred by the participants for sharing more specific detailed insights in their first language. The whole interview lasted for approximately 50 minutes. The process was audio- and video-recorded after agreement from the participants. During transcription, both the audio and video recordings were listened to and re-listened to, to make sure that the transcription was clear and accurate. The recordings were transcribed verbatim in written Chinese with Cantonese terms, and then the transcripts were translated into English for further analysis.

Data Analysis

Inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to scrutinize the participants' pedagogical use of GenAI, their experiences, and viewpoints. Themes were identified through a reflexive and discursive coding process. The steps were listed as follows: (1) the transcripts were read and reread to familiarise the researcher with the data and ensure that there was coherence between the questions and responses; (2) the ideas in the lines were identified and initial codes were generated; (3) the codes were categorized with main themes and sub-themes established; (4) continuous analysis and the refinements of theme categorization (checking main themes and sub-themes) were conducted to ensure accurate categorization. After that, (5) the themes were reviewed and finalised. Three thematic maps with both main themes and sub-themes are presented in Figure 1, Figure 2, and Figure 3. The findings were illustrated with extracts selected in the findings section below.

Findings

The Use of GenAI tools in English Language Teaching

The analysis of the semi-structured interviews revealed that teachers in the early-adopting school utilized GenAI tools in English language teaching in various ways (see Figure 1).

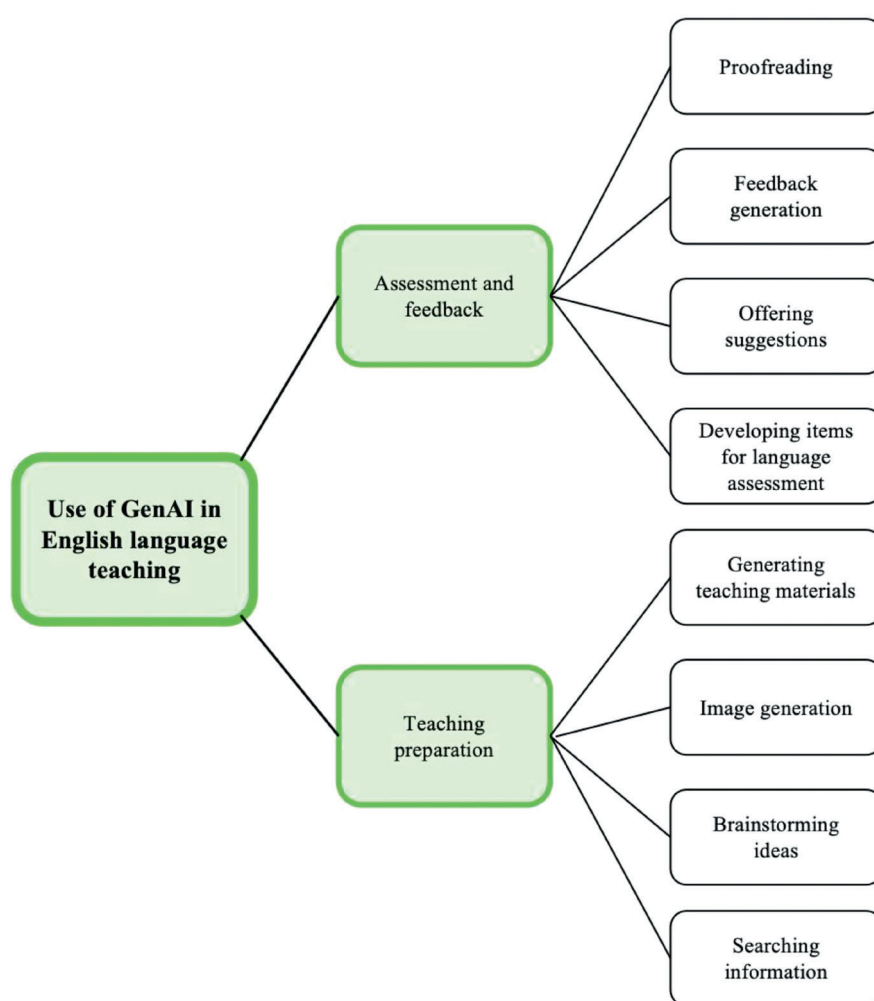


Figure 1 *The use of GenAI Tools in English Language Teaching.*

Amy put students' compositions on ChatGPT for proofreading and asked ChatGPT to give feedback and suggestions to students, "I showed the feedback to the students and let them read it". Amy reflected that the accuracy of proofreading completed by ChatGPT was satisfactory. Other than providing suggestions for students' writing, Carmen asked students to learn from the proofreading results, including "vocabulary, synonyms, and sentence patterns which are different from their usages for improving the quality of their writing". At pre-writing and pre-speaking stages, teachers guided students to use GenAI to generate an outline to support their idea generation. For example, at the pre-speaking stage of group discussion and debating team, students were instructed to use GenAI to brainstorm ideas and search information as a reference. Carmen also mentioned that students with relatively weak English proficiency were suggested to practice their listening skills through listening to the pronunciation from GenAI tools and read it out.

Generating teaching materials for lesson preparation was identified as a common reason for usage among the participants. Bella indicated that she used GenAI to generate Chinese-English vocabulary lists and create flash card formats, and then input the products to Quizlet, a flash card platform, to make flash cards for students to revise and preview at home (pre-learning stage) before teaching the vocabulary. She also provided detailed explanations on the use of GenAI platforms with prompts,

"(Show the screen - *Poe*) If we talk about the apps for characters, I think using *Poe* is more convenient. For example, I have a vocabulary list and I would like the students to learn a series of words. I will give a prompt: 'translate the words into traditional Chinese and provide the answer in a format for Quizlet import'. (With a list of vocabulary in the prompt), to the *Claude* (another GenAI tool) based on the format that I would like to have. After that, I copy and paste the product to Quizlet (open Quizlet) ... Then I can quickly import here by copying and pasting the vocabulary and the Chinese terms generated to Quizlet, and I can make a vocabulary list."

GenAI tools were also used for generating short passages with specific grammar items and questions for practice. Moreover, Bella introduced an image generator named Stable Diffusion, a function in *Poe*, to create pictures or situations for descriptive writing and contextual reference by giving appropriate prompts, such as "a girl has 5 books on her table, she looks tired" and "a happiness index with 5 scales, pointing the lowest".

Enablers to Integrate GenAI Tools in English Language Teaching

Three main themes and pertinent sub-themes (see Figure 2) related to the enablers for teachers to integrate GenAI tools in English language teaching were constructed through the thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews: environmental factors, benefits to students' language learning, and benefits to teachers' professional work.

The environmental factor, including the trend of GenAI and school-level support, was one of the main perspectives of enablers identified from the interview transcripts. Amy suggested that "e-learning is an irresistible trend" and GenAI would be commonly used in the future, and they need to learn how to use GenAI tools effectively to utilize the potential advantages brought by these tools. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, this early-adopting school held an open attitude towards GenAI tools and actively promoted the use of GenAI. The school showed public acceptance towards the use of GenAI in learning and teaching by making an official announcement when there were voices preventing students from using it due to the concerns on the potential plagiarism and misuse of GenAI. Amy pointed out that the school focused on the opportunities brought by GenAI to support learning and teaching, "our school announced that we are happy to see how this kind of technology can help us learn". The participants

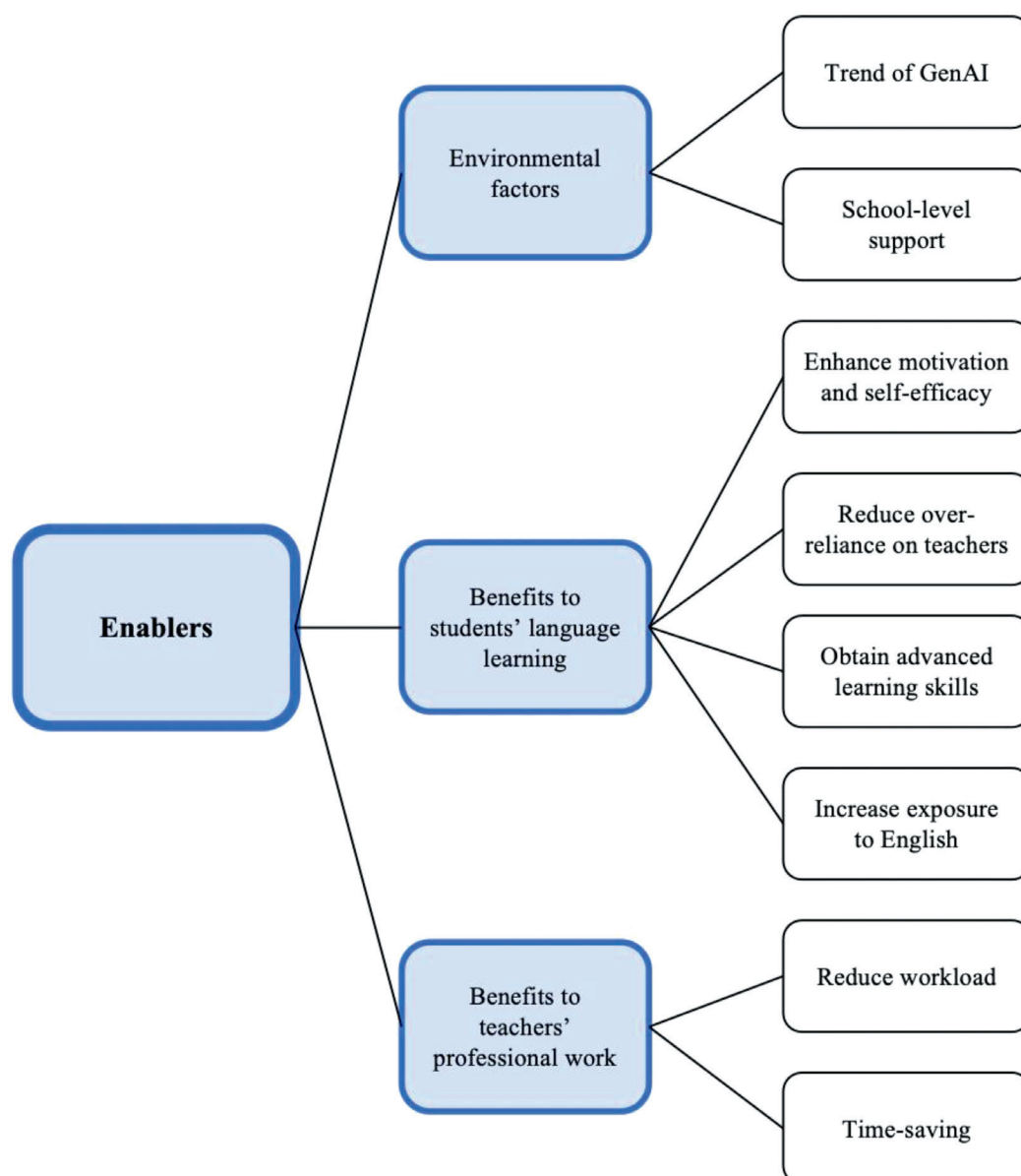


Figure 2 *Thematic Map for Enablers to Integrate GenAI Tools in English Language Teaching.*

mentioned that they have received strong support from the school. Workshops were held successively between teachers in the form of a sharing session to facilitate their learning of GenAI, “we have learned from the sharing of different teachers about their usage. We have also learned from some colleagues who are professionals in Computer Science. They taught us how to write prompts” (Bella). Carmen also praised that their school was helpful in providing IT support and other assistance.

All participants mentioned the benefits of GenAI tools to students’ language learning during the interview. The participants indicated that students could gain positive learning experiences due to the increased self-efficacy and motivation in learning English, especially for students who are less competent in English. Carmen pointed out that her students expressed excitement that learning English is manageable and they changed their impression of English, from “English is boring”, “I don’t want to learn” to “there are methods to learn”. Other than the language generated, GenAI can provide guidance and inspiration to help students who are weaker in English to think of preliminary steps when they lack ideas and enable them to make further elaborations.

Moreover, the participants suggested that the use of GenAI tools could enhance students' self-learning skills and reduce the over-reliance on teachers. Amy further explained that GenAI could facilitate continuous learning and compensate for teachers' limitations in terms of the response time and the scope of materials,

“For example, students may use AI to generate and even supplement with other software tools to continue learning so that they do not need to wait for teachers' feedback. I think it can ... improve students' self-learning ability and skills. As what we prepared could be limited, AI indeed can help.”

The participants also pointed out that the utilization of GenAI could facilitate the acquisition of advanced learning skills. The participants expressed that the training of advanced learning skills was viewed as the goal of the elite classes. It is expected that students can acquire self-learning skills from the adoption of GenAI. Amy said that questioning skills and cognitive skills were trained to make students be able to give appropriate prompts to obtain desired responses from GenAI. Training on critical thinking ability aimed to enable students to distinguish between the accurate and inaccurate content and consider how to apply the information obtained. In addition, participants pointed out that using GenAI tools could effectively increase students' exposure to English outside of the classroom.

Benefits to teachers' professional work were another main theme identified during the thematic analysis. Participants mentioned that the use of GenAI tools could help them reduce their workload. They mentioned that using GenAI assisted them in lesson preparation and homework marking, and Bella stated that “I think it is a great incentive, compared with starting everything from zero”. Time-saving was another benefit of GenAI tools to English language teaching. For example, Amy was happy that GenAI contributes to the efficiency of information searching. Bella agreed with Amy that GenAI can refer to the online resources based on the database and extract diverse information from them without the need to explore loads of resources on their own.

Barriers to Integrate GenAI Tools in English Language Teaching

Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts identified two main themes with relevant sub-themes related to the barriers to integrating GenAI tools in English language teaching (see Figure 3).

The limitations of GenAI tools were mentioned by the participants during the interview. The participants were concerned about the quality of the GenAI responses. For instance, Carmen tried to ask ChatGPT to create a passage and corresponding questions, while the questions generated were insufficient as she only had limited experience in using GenAI tools at that time. Amy agreed with Carmen's opinions and shared her experience in using GenAI to assist them in creating listening exercises, “it actually needs humans with professional knowledge to proofread. The responses generated seem to be perfect, but it is not the real case”. She indicated that teachers cannot fully rely on GenAI since it has some limitations, such as the GenAI-generated language expressions might be weird and not reach the expectations. Therefore, she highlighted that the time for simple tasks was saved by GenAI, but it was still crucial for teachers to conduct professional evaluations on the content generated by GenAI. Moreover, Amy expressed vexation about the inconvenience brought by the absence of a scanning function in GenAI for transferring students' hand-written compositions into GenAI tools and believed that this may hinder the efficiency.

The internal hindrance of teachers was another main theme identified. The participants faced challenges in learning how to use GenAI. Bella expressed the difficulty of exploring the ways to use GenAI on their own when the school announced the adoption of GenAI in language teaching

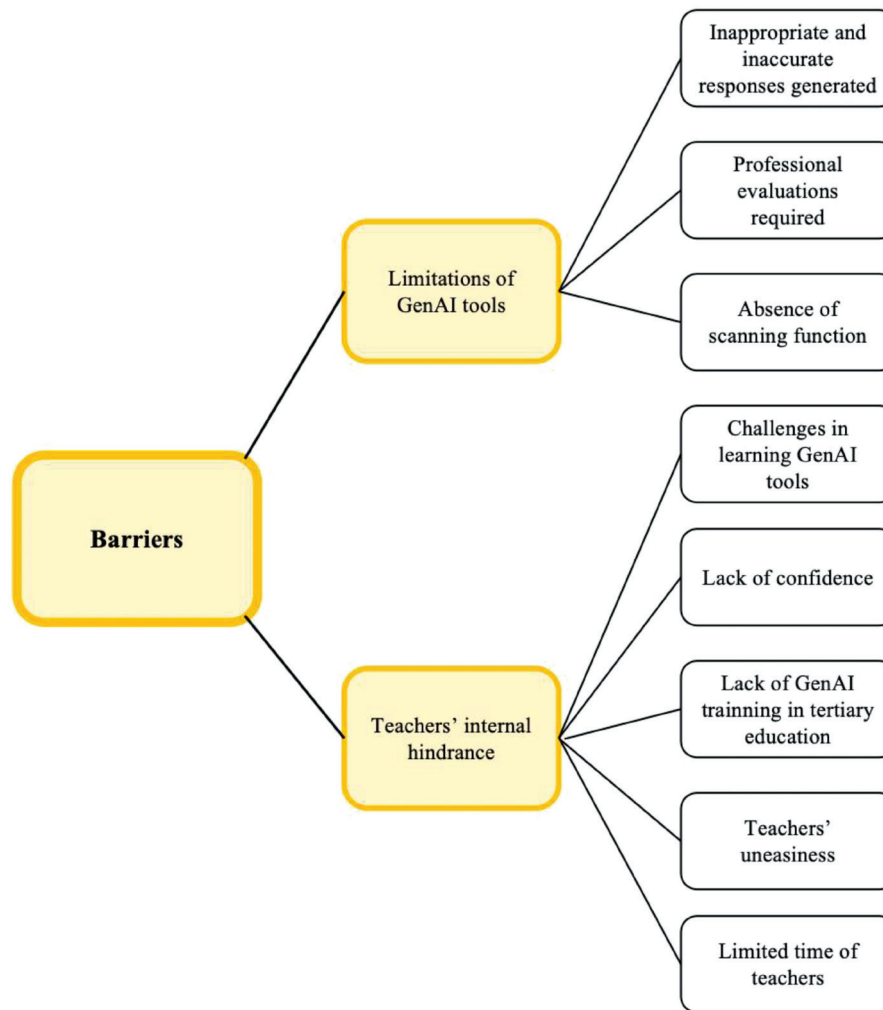


Figure 3 *Thematic Map for Barriers to Integrate GenAI Tools in English Language Teaching.*

at the beginning. She believed that the learning curve, which refers to the amount of time needed to acquire this new knowledge, was a key component for them to learn how to utilize GenAI. All three participants expressed a lack of confidence in GenAI competence. Carmen said, “I just have a shallow understanding. I find that I actually do not understand many elements, especially during sharing from colleagues”. Bella thought that they know how to use the basic functions only. Amy also regarded herself as “not that capable”, “so, with respect to the overall operation and the way to explore, I think I am still at the early stage, which I can use and handle at a basic level”. They attributed this to the fact that they had only explored GenAI for less than a year. Meanwhile, Amy pointed out that the usages of GenAI tools were not taught when they were in tertiary education, which affected their adaptability to GenAI tools further.

Teachers’ uneasiness in learning about GenAI was another obstacle indicated by the participants since they were unfamiliar with these GenAI tools. Bella elaborated that teachers tended to easily find resistance at the beginning due to the lack of exposure to the new technology, contributing to difficulties in learning it. Additionally, the searching methods and usages of GenAI were largely different from the tools they previously used, “the ways of using them are discrete, such as the words you enter and search” (Bella). Limited time of teachers was perceived as another reason for making teachers feel reluctant to learn about GenAI tools. Amy highlighted that considerable amount of time was required for teachers to explore GenAI, whereas most teachers may not have sufficient time to realize this goal.

Discussion

The current study was conducted to investigate in-service teachers' experiences and perceptions of GenAI implementation in English language teaching at an early-adopting Hong Kong secondary school. It aimed to examine how teachers use GenAI tools to teach English in the target school and explore the enablers and barriers that affect the integration of GenAI tools in English language teaching. Different from previous studies, which primarily focused on investigating the adoption of GenAI tools in the context of higher education institutes (e.g., Bonner et al., 2023; Edmett et al., 2023; Kostka & Toncelli, 2023; Liao et al., 2023), the current study contributes to our limited context-specific understanding of the applications of GenAI tools in English language teaching at an early-adopting secondary school. Specifically, the study revealed that teachers could use GenAI tools to assist them in finishing many tasks such as proofreading, generating immediate feedback and suggestions for students' written products, and generating teaching materials for lesson preparations by giving prompts with specific demands. Moreover, this study found that GenAI tools could assist language teachers in producing outlines for writing or speaking tasks and generating language assessment materials with a specific testing focus. The assistance of GenAI tools in these tasks could reduce teachers' workload and save their time to cope with other teaching-related tasks, which is similar to McDonald et al.'s (2024) claims and supported by participants' responses during the interview.

Environmental factors, benefits to students' language learning, and benefits to teachers' professional work were identified as the main enablers for teachers to integrate GenAI tools in English language teaching. The participants believed that the rapid development of GenAI and its integration into education is an irresistible trend, which means that they have realized the necessity of learning GenAI tools and utilizing GenAI tools into their language teaching practices, which is similar to Chan and Hu's (2023) findings. Besides, according to the findings of Wang and Cheng (2021), the contrasting perceptions regarding the integration of AI in education between the school's administrators and teachers may lead to teachers' concerns and insufficient readiness for AI-assisted teaching and learning. In this study, the target school's public acceptance of GenAI application and the official announcement of integrating GenAI with language teaching provides a clear direction for teachers to apply GenAI tools in their teaching practices.

Teachers believed that the use of GenAI tools can train students' advanced learning skills, increase students' exposure to English in an accessible way, and boost their self-efficacy and motivation to learn English. This aligns with the findings of studies in other contexts (Chiu, 2023; Ironsi, 2024; Kohnke et al., 2023). As Fütterer et al. (2023) suggested, the teachers realized that they could seize the opportunity to equip students with high cognitive skills by using GenAI in language teaching. The advanced skills include self-learning skills with personalized recommendations and multimedia content to cope with individual learning needs (Mohamed, 2023; Su & Yang, 2023), questioning skills for refining appropriate prompts to get targeted responses (Kohnke et al., 2023), and critical thinking skills to distinguish misinformation and decide how to apply the information obtained (Chiu, 2023). Chiu (2023) emphasized that teachers should train students' critical reasoning and awareness so that they are capable of evaluating the information generated by GenAI since it may include inaccurate and inappropriate content. Furthermore, teachers suggested that GenAI tools could increase students' exposure to English with rich input through engaging students in authentic content, including specific genres and texts, conversation partners, text analysis, and translation (Ironsi, 2024; Moorhouse, 2024a). Teachers reported that their students have positive learning experiences with increased learning motivation and self-efficacy due to the sense of achievement and attainment obtained in learning English with the assistance of GenAI tools, especially for students who previously struggled to learn English. The ability to generate more accurate and targeted responses eases students from searching

for massive information aimlessly and allows customized guidance for analytical thinking to achieve self-directed learning 24/7 (Chan & Hu, 2023; Mohamed, 2023; Su & Yang, 2023), which may to some extent prevent their over-reliance on teachers. However, GenAI tools should not be viewed as the replacement of human teachers but as the assistant or facilitator of them. Although GenAI tools may be cost-saving for educational institutes, the social and emotional values of human educators that are crucial for students' learning and personal development cannot be substituted by GenAI tools (George, 2023). Therefore, policymakers and educational institutes should develop relevant rules and regulations to guide educators to appropriately use GenAI tools to support language education.

The effectiveness of GenAI tools on students' learning outcomes has been examined by many prior studies (Wang & Ren, 2024; Zhu et al., 2025), while its impacts on students' psychological states such as self-efficacy have been neglected. The current study found that language teachers perceived that the use of GenAI could enhance students' self-efficacy, particularly for those with limited English proficiency. Students encountered various challenges in English language learning, which implied that they may need to receive support from teachers to help them overcome these difficulties. However, due to time and energy constraints, teachers are unlikely to be able to regularly offer individualized instructions tailored to each student's different language proficiency and diverse needs (Liang et al., 2023; Mollick & Mollick, 2023). This may lead to students' increased cognitive stress and difficulties in comprehending the teaching content, negatively impacting students' self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977; Huang & Wu, 2022), especially for low achievers since they might struggle with understanding and accomplishing the regular tasks with moderate difficulty. Nevertheless, the application of GenAI tools may have the potential to address this issue since GenAI tools can offer personalized feedback and realize differentiated instructions by generating tailored content such as reading materials and quizzes based on students' linguistic proficiency (Mollick & Mollick, 2023; Noroozi et al., 2024). More importantly, the support from GenAI tools is available 24/7. This study suggests that teachers recognize the potential that an individualized learning environment created by GenAI has on enabling students to be more likely to experience successful English learning experiences (Peres et al., 2023) so that their self-efficacy can be developed, which is because performance accomplishment is one of the main sources of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977).

GenAI tools could reduce teachers' workload and save time due to the support provided for lesson preparations, such as help with creating teaching materials, activities, and exercises, which are consistent with the findings of previous studies (Lan & Chen, 2024; Liu et al., 2023; Moorhouse et al., 2024; Söğüt, 2024). In addition to lesson preparations, teachers were contented with the use of GenAI tools in assisting in grading and providing feedback on students' assignments. The support for lesson preparation and evaluation aligns with the previous studies (Mohamed, 2023; Moorhouse, 2024a). Teachers have also tried to use GenAI for creating reading and listening comprehension passages with items for language assessments, and such affordances of GenAI have also been found by Aryadoust et al. (2024). However, it should be emphasized that the teaching materials and items for language assessment generated from GenAI tools may include inaccurate content (Mao et al., 2024). Therefore, teachers are suggested to use their TPACK to critically evaluate these GenAI-generated materials and adapt them before applying them into the actual teaching practices.

However, some barriers to the use of GenAI tools in English language teaching were recognized, including the limitations of GenAI tools and teachers' internal concerns. Different from the apprehension identified in previous studies on the potential ethical issues caused by GenAI tools (Su & Yang, 2023), the participants in the current study were not concerned about ethical issues such as plagiarism, which might be attributed to the official announcement and clear regulations established by the school. However, participants were worried about the sound-convincing but inappropriate and inaccurate content, biased content (e.g., cultural, gender, racial), privacy, and copyright issues caused by GenAI

tools, which is in line with the findings of Chan and Hu (2023) and Michel-Villarreal et al. (2023). They also reported that there were insufficient questions and unnatural language style in the texts generated from GenAI, which requires teachers' professional evaluations and further refinements. Therefore, previous research strongly suggested that teachers should develop specific digital competencies to facilitate the effective and ethical applications of GenAI (Kohnke et al., 2023).

The teachers expressed relatively low confidence in their knowledge, awareness, and ability in using GenAI. According to the participants, they only have limited understanding of GenAI as they have only explored it for less than one year, and the knowledge and usages of GenAI was not instructed in their tertiary education. The inadequate understanding of GenAI and the perceived sense of incompetence in GenAI could further cause teachers' avoidance in adopting GenAI tools (Kohnke et al., 2024). In addition, it was reported that they relied on predecessors' experience rather than being forward-thinking to take the initiative in paying close attention to the technology development due to the rapid development of GenAI. This brought up the difficulties faced by the in-service English language teachers since they are much less likely to have received training on GenAI tools after their graduation. In addition, they may find it more difficult to understand GenAI concepts, especially applicable for teachers with language or education-related backgrounds. Although the influence of teachers' educational background on their use of GenAI has not yet been examined, it is presumed that it is one of the factors affecting their adaptability to GenAI integration. A survey of 68 university teachers by Barrett and Pack (2023) revealed that less than half of the teachers believed that they had a good understanding of how to apply GenAI tools into teaching practices, calling for the provision of GenAI training to help teachers effectively utilize GenAI in education. Time is also needed to learn how to give proper specific prompts and get familiar with the tools. It can enable teachers to obtain information more quickly and receive reliable resources from it. However, the limited time of teachers was perceived as another restriction and reason for making teachers feel reluctant to learn about GenAI. Such concern about the time constraint is consistent with the findings of Wang and Cheng (2021). It is also found that teachers' uneasiness in learning about GenAI could increase resistance. The uneasiness may stem from an insufficient understanding of new technologies as well as the salient differences between GenAI tools and the traditional educational technologies they previously used (Wang & Cheng, 2021).

Conclusion

This qualitative case study identified a wide range of functions that GenAI tools can play in English language teaching among teachers in the early-adopting Hong Kong secondary school. Environmental factors, benefits to students' language learning, and benefits to teachers' professional work were constructed as the three overarching enablers to facilitate the integration of GenAI tools in English language teaching. Furthermore, limitations of GenAI tools and teachers' internal hindrances were constructed as the main barriers to utilizing GenAI tools in English language teaching.

Practical Implications

Based on the findings of this study, some practical implications are proposed. The benefits of using GenAI should be instructed to teachers as incentives to encourage them to integrate GenAI tools into their teaching practices. Furthermore, according to the findings of the current study, language teachers generally lack the necessary technological knowledge and have not received systematic training on how to use GenAI tools for teaching purposes. Accordingly, in order to help in-service teachers develop technological and pedagogical skills and be adaptive to the rapid development of GenAI tools, schools are advised to provide adequate support such as arranging workshops for GenAI tools to facilitate in-service teachers' professional development for the successful integration of GenAI in English language education. Schools should also provide teachers with continuous learning opportunities for

GenAI use, such as online courses or webinars, to keep teachers updated on the latest advancements in GenAI and emerging best practices for its integration into teaching practices. Further, the knowledge and techniques of using GenAI tools should be incorporated into the training of future English language education programs, which would be beneficial to equip pre-service teachers with GenAI literacy prior to their teaching practices and facilitate their professional development. Moreover, given that the content generated by GenAI tools may be inaccurate, biased, and misleading, it is advised that teachers have the awareness to use GenAI tools critically and ethically in their teaching practices. Besides, the school leaders are suggested to establish a professional learning community where teachers can share experiences, challenges, and successful strategies for using GenAI in the language classroom. This can facilitate them to exchange and innovate their knowledge about GenAI integration. Such communities were found to be useful during the educational disruptions brought about by COVID-19 and could be equally useful in helping teachers respond to the impact of GenAI (Moorhouse & Wong, 2022). Additionally, teachers should have the awareness to reduce students' over-reliance on GenAI tools for language learning. The issue of over-reliance on GenAI could be a more serious issue in the context of secondary schools (Zhai et al., 2024). At this educational stage, students are developing critical thinking, problem-solving, basic literacy, and numeracy skills, which are essential for their cognitive, linguistic, and academic growth (Pinter, 2017). Dependence on GenAI tools may hinder the development of these skills since GenAI can offer direct answers without encouraging the necessary inquiries and independent exploration. Additionally, students at the lower level of education might not yet have the capability to critically evaluate the information generated by GenAI, which could potentially lead to the misunderstanding of some knowledge and concepts. Therefore, teachers are recommended to employ some coping strategies to prevent students' over-reliance on GenAI tools. For example, teachers can establish clear guidelines on when and how GenAI can be used in assignments so as to balance AI assistance with students' independent work. In addition, group projects can be used for assessment. This allows students to collaborate and share ideas with their peers, which can reduce their dependence on GenAI and emphasize human interaction and collective problem-solving.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This qualitative case study, focusing on a specific-subject language education of an early-adopting secondary school, is limited due to its relatively small sample size. This could limit the generalizability of the findings. Therefore, a larger sample size is recommended for future studies, such as by inviting more early-adopting schools as the cases to conduct cross-case analysis, which could allow comparisons between cases and provide more insights from diverse perspectives. Another limitation of the current study is that the focus-group interview was the only source of data for exploring the utilization of GenAI tools in English language teaching and the enablers and barriers influencing this process. It is recommended that a mixed-methods study be conducted to investigate this issue further since the mixed-methods approach can help us have "a more comprehensive and complete understanding" of the issue (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 33). Moreover, given that the current study has identified many barriers negatively affecting the incorporation of GenAI in English language teaching, future studies are advised to explore the external support that language teachers require to help them address these problems. Furthermore, GenAI tools will continue to develop, which means that their potential uses and the factors facilitating and hindering the integration of GenAI tools in English language teaching may change over time. Therefore, additional studies can be conducted to follow the further development of GenAI tools.

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Appendix 1

Interview Guide

1. Can you describe an English lesson in which you use Generative AI? What teaching activities are conducted? How do you use Generative AI in the lesson?
2. How did you prepare your students to learn with Generative AI?
3. Why would you choose to use Generative AI in English teaching?
4. What is the attitude of school administrators towards the use of Generative AI in language teaching?
5. How does the school support you in using Generative AI in your teaching? How important is this kind of support?
6. What is the effectiveness of utilising Generative AI in English teaching?
7. How would you rate your knowledge and awareness towards Generative AI?
8. How would you rate your pedagogical skills with the use of Generative AI in your teaching?
9. Do you face any challenges when using Generative AI in teaching?
10. Have you encountered any student issues in your teaching when you utilised Generative AI? / Do you have any concerns about students' use of Generative AI in learning?
11. How did you solve the issues? / How would you deal with the concerns?
12. What advice would you give to those teachers and school administrators who have not started to use Generative AI in English teaching?

Declarations**Author Contribution**

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Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study obtained ethical approval from the Ethics Review Committee of Hong Kong Baptist University. All methods performed in the study were carried out following the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants involved in the study.

Data Availability

We confirm that the data supporting the findings are available within this article. Raw data supporting this study's findings are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

Code Availability

Not applicable.

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Not applicable.