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ARTICLE

TEACHERS AS DETECTIVES? PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY CONFLICT IN THE ERA OF GENERATIVE AI IN STUDENT ASSESSMENT

Professores como Detetives? Conflitos de
Identidade Profissional na Era da Inteligência
Artificial Generativa na Avaliação Discente

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ABSTRACT | Background: The rapid integration of generative artificial intelligence (AI) into higher education is transforming assessment practices and creating new challenges for EFL teachers. As generative AI becomes increasingly embedded in students' academic tasks, EFL teachers face responsibility for identifying AI-generated content and maintaining academic integrity, thereby potentially shifting their role from facilitators toward "detectives" and contributing to identity conflict. **Objective:** This study examines how generative AI in assessment reshapes EFL teachers' professional roles and identities, focusing on responsibility, cognitive workload, identity conflict, institutional ambiguity, and ethical concerns. **Methods:** Adopting an interpretivist paradigm, the study involved 15 EFL teachers. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. An abductive approach guided analysis through a four-dimensional conceptual model. Network analysis used Jaccard similarity and phi coefficients to examine thematic co-occurrence and association strength. **Results:** The findings show that AI is reshaping assessment and teacher roles through increased responsibility, cognitive workload, and identity conflict. Institutional ambiguity regarding AI policies was highly prevalent in co-occurrence, however, its relatively limited structural connectivity within the thematic network suggested that institutional ambiguity functioned primarily as a contextual condition shaping teachers' experiences rather than as a central organizing factor. Stronger structural dynamics involved frustration, loss of control, demotivation, cognitive workload, and ethical-religious concerns regarding integrity, fairness, and guilt. **Conclusion:** The findings highlight the need to move beyond detection-oriented responses toward institutional approaches supporting AI literacy, assessment reform, and human-AI collaboration. Rather than positioning teachers primarily as AI detectors, institutions should support them in using AI as a collaborative thinking partner while preserving human judgment, creativity, critical engagement, and pedagogical responsibility.

Keywords | Artificial Intelligence; Professional Identity Conflict; Assessment; Academic Integrity, AI-human collaboration.



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RESUMO | Contexto: A rápida incorporação da inteligência artificial generativa (IA) ao ensino superior vem transformando as práticas de avaliação e criando novos desafios para professores de inglês como língua estrangeira (EFL). À medida que a IA generativa passa a integrar de forma crescente as atividades acadêmicas dos estudantes, os docentes assumem maior responsabilidade pela identificação de conteúdos gerados por IA e pela preservação da integridade acadêmica. Esse cenário pode deslocar seu papel de facilitadores da aprendizagem para uma atuação semelhante à de “detetives”, contribuindo para conflitos em sua identidade profissional. **Objetivo:** Este estudo analisa como o uso da IA generativa na avaliação reconfigura os papéis e as identidades profissionais de professores de EFL, com foco na responsabilidade docente, sobrecarga cognitiva, conflito identitário, ambiguidade institucional e questões éticas. **Métodos:** Adotando um paradigma interpretativista, o estudo contou com a participação de 15 professores de EFL. Os dados foram coletados por meio de entrevistas semiestruturadas e analisados tematicamente com base no modelo de Braun e Clarke (2006). A análise seguiu uma abordagem abdução orientada por um modelo conceitual de quatro dimensões. Complementarmente, foram aplicados o índice de similaridade de Jaccard e o coeficiente phi para examinar a coocorrência temática e a intensidade das associações entre os temas. **Resultados:** Os achados demonstram que a IA vem reconfigurando tanto as práticas avaliativas quanto os papéis docentes, especialmente por meio do aumento da responsabilidade, da sobrecarga cognitiva e dos conflitos de identidade profissional. Embora a ambiguidade institucional em relação às políticas de uso da IA tenha apresentado elevada coocorrência, sua limitada conectividade estrutural na rede temática sugere que ela atua predominantemente como uma condição contextual que influencia as experiências dos professores, e não como um fator central de organização dessas experiências. Dinâmicas estruturais mais expressivas envolveram frustração, perda de controle, desmotivação, sobrecarga cognitiva e preocupações ético-religiosas relacionadas à integridade, à justiça e ao sentimento de culpa. **Conclusão:** Os resultados evidenciam a necessidade de superar respostas centradas exclusivamente na detecção do uso de IA e avançar em direção a abordagens institucionais que promovam letramento em inteligência artificial, reformulação das práticas avaliativas e colaboração humano-IA. Em vez de posicionar os professores prioritariamente como detectores de conteúdo gerado por IA, as instituições devem apoiá-los no uso da tecnologia como parceira do pensamento, preservando o julgamento humano, a criatividade, o engajamento crítico e a responsabilidade pedagógica.

Palavras-chave | Inteligência Artificial; Conflito de Identidade Profissional; Avaliação; Integridade Acadêmica; Colaboração Humano-IA.

INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, most notably large language models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT, Claude, and Gemini, has precipitated a significant transformation in educational practice that extends beyond the adoption of new classroom technologies (Xia et al., 2024; Chan and Tsi, 2024). For teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), whose professional identity has traditionally been closely linked to the assessment and feedback of student writing, the emergence of AI-assisted text generation raises new questions about the nature and boundaries of authorship, assessment, and academic integrity (Nguyen and Barrot, 2024; Zhang, 2025). In this evolving context, practices of evaluating student work are increasingly shaped by uncertainty regarding the origin of submitted texts, prompting a reconsideration of established pedagogical assumptions rather than a predetermined shift in teacher roles. The teacher–student relationship, historically grounded in trust, mentorship, and shared engagement in learning (Suarez & McGrath, 2022), is therefore being renegotiated under conditions that are still unfolding rather than fully stabilised.

Within this evolving landscape, digital and technological disruptions are not only reshaping classroom practices but also influencing how teachers understand their professional roles and



responsibilities (McDougall, 2010; Lai and Jin, 2021; Geertshuis & Liu, 2022). This makes teacher professional identity central to analysing these developments as it provides a lens for understanding how teachers interpret and give meaning to changing professional demands. Teacher professional identity is widely understood as a complex, multidimensional, and continuously evolving construct shaped by personal, social, cultural, and professional experiences, encompassing teachers' beliefs, emotions, motivations, and perceptions of their role (Zhao & Zhang, 2017; Karousiou et al., 2019). From an interdisciplinary perspective, it is continuously renegotiated through context, relationships, and lived experience (Davey, 2013; Rodrigues & Mogarro, 2019). As Sachs (2005, p. 15) argues, teacher professional identity sits at the core of the profession, providing a framework for understanding "how to be," "how to act," and "how to understand" one's work, and is shaped through experience rather than being fixed or imposed. Accordingly, it links professional action with self-understanding, enabling agency by aligning "who I am" with "what I do" (Mockler, 2020).

Building on this conceptualisation, it becomes important to examine how these identity-related dynamics are experienced specifically in relation to generative AI in EFL assessment contexts, where rapid technological change is directly affecting the evaluation of student writing. While technical and policy-oriented studies have examined AI detection tools and institutional responses (Akram et al., 2023; Benarab, 2024; Kumar et al., 2024; Bower et al., 2024), less attention has been given to how teachers themselves interpret and make sense of these emerging practices in their everyday work. Rather than assuming predefined emotional or identity outcomes, this study focuses on how teachers describe and negotiate their experiences of assessing student writing in a context where AI tools are increasingly accessible. Accordingly, this paper presents the research design for a qualitative investigation into the professional experiences of EFL teachers in the context of AI-assisted student writing, guided by the following research questions:

- *RQ1:* How do EFL teachers perceive and interpret the assessment of student writing in the context of generative AI use?
- *RQ2:* How do EFL teachers describe the implications of these practices for their professional roles and responsibilities?
- *RQ3:* What concerns, if any, do EFL teachers raise regarding institutional conditions and their psychological, ethical, and pedagogical experiences of assessing AI-assisted work?

By foregrounding teachers' accounts and employing an interpretivist ontology, this study seeks to contribute to ongoing debates about assessment, professional practice, and the governance of emerging educational technologies.

1. Rethinking Assessment and Integrity in the Age of AI

Generative AI has significantly reshaped assessment practices in higher education, particularly through its capacity to generate fluent academic text and alter traditional boundaries of authorship and originality. Xia et al. (2024) conducted a comprehensive scoping review examining how generative AI transforms assessment practices, identifying key themes including the redesign of



assessment formats, the emergence of AI-resilient evaluation strategies, and the growing challenge of maintaining academic integrity in contexts where AI-generated text is widely accessible. Their analysis highlights the increasing vulnerability of conventional essay-based assessment, prompting renewed attention to what educational evaluation is intended to measure.

Complementing this systemic perspective, Bower et al. (2024) surveyed educators across multiple institutions and found broad recognition that generative AI requires substantial adjustments in teaching and assessment. However, they also documented uncertainty among educators regarding how to implement such changes effectively, alongside concerns about institutional preparedness and equity in student access to AI tools. Similarly, Lee et al. (2024) reported a wide spectrum of teacher responses to generative AI, ranging from enthusiasm to skepticism, with many educators reporting feeling overwhelmed by the rapid pace of technological change and insufficient institutional support. Chan and Tsi (2024) further explored perceptions of whether generative AI might replace human teachers. Their mixed-methods findings indicated that while full replacement was not perceived as imminent, both teachers and students recognized that AI is already reshaping instructional roles, particularly in language education where text generation capabilities intersect directly with core pedagogical practices.

Within this evolving context, academic integrity has emerged as a central concern. Kumar et al. (2024) provide an overview of how generative AI complicates traditional definitions of plagiarism, originality, and authorship. Rodrigues et al. (2025), through a bibliometric analysis, highlight the rapid expansion of literature on AI and academic integrity while identifying a gap in understanding educators' lived experiences in managing integrity in AI-rich environments. Uzun (2023) similarly emphasizes limitations in current plagiarism detection systems and raises ethical concerns regarding their adequacy in addressing AI-generated content. Padillah (2024) argues that generative AI introduces a qualitative shift in academic misconduct by enabling rapid, high-quality text production with minimal effort and reduced detectability. Sullivan (2025) critically examines institutional policy frameworks, noting that existing academic integrity categories such as plagiarism, collusion, and contract cheating are insufficient for classifying AI-assisted academic work. Collectively, these studies illustrate a structural tension between established assessment systems and the capabilities introduced by generative AI, underscoring the need for conceptual and policy-level adaptation.

2. Evaluating AI Text and Teacher Identity Tensions

The increasing integration of generative AI into student writing has made academic evaluation more complex. Chaka (2024) found that AI detection tools perform reasonably under controlled conditions but become less reliable in real educational settings, especially with non-native English writing or paraphrased AI-generated text. Alexander et al. (2023) similarly report persistent false positives and negatives in second language contexts, highlighting limitations in distinguishing human from AI-assisted writing. Empirical evidence reinforces these concerns. Akram et al. (2023) found wide variability in detection tool performance (55.29% to 97.0%), raising issues of consistency and fairness. Nguyen and Barrot (2024) emphasize that such challenges are context-sensitive,



particularly in EFL settings where linguistic variation may be misinterpreted. Waked et al. (2024) further highlight the consequences of misclassification for academic decision-making and teacher–student relations.

Against this background, professional identity offers a lens for understanding teachers' responses to technological change. Professional identity is defined as a multidimensional construct encompassing self-perception, role definition, values, and commitment to teaching (Suarez & McGrath, 2022). Lai and Jin (2021) show that identity shapes how teachers engage with technology, while Geertshuis and Liu (2022) identify tensions when new tools alter established teaching expertise. Pillen et al. (2013) conceptualize identity tensions as arising from conflicts between professional selves, role ambiguity, and institutional change, while McDougall (2010) links identity disruption to broader shifts in literacy practices. Avidov & Forkosh (2018) extend this by emphasizing ongoing identity re-negotiation in technology integration.

EFL teachers are particularly affected due to the centrality of writing assessment in their work. Zhang (2025) reports uncertainty in assessing AI-assisted writing, reflecting tensions between established assessment literacy and new realities. You and Zhang (2025) find that engagement with generative AI can lead to divergent identity responses among pre-service teachers. Yung et al. (2025) suggest alternative assessment formats such as oral tasks, while Asadi et al. (2025) show that AI-supported feedback changes traditional evaluative roles and introduces new dependencies in assessment practices.

Across the literature, three main strands are evident: disruption of traditional assessment and academic integrity by generative AI (Xia et al., 2024; Sullivan, 2025), limitations and contextual fragility of AI detection tools (Chaka, 2024; Alexander et al., 2023; Akram et al., 2023; Nguyen and Barrot, 2024; Waked et al., 2024), and emerging implications for teacher professional identity (Pillen et al., 2013; Geertshuis and Liu, 2022; Lai and Jin, 2021). In EFL contexts, these pressures are more pronounced due to the centrality of writing assessment (Zhang, 2025; You and Zhang, 2025; Yung et al., 2025; Asadi et al., 2025). However, a key gap remains in how these intersecting pressures are experienced and negotiated in everyday evaluative practice, particularly how teachers reconcile institutional expectations, technological uncertainty, and evolving professional roles in AI-mediated assessment environments.

METHODOLOGY: RESEARCH PARADIGM AND DESIGN

This study follows an interpretivist paradigm, grounded in a *constructivist ontology* and a *subjectivist epistemology*. From an ontological perspective, the study assumes that reality is socially constructed, multiple, and shaped through individuals' interactions and experiences. Epistemologically, it recognizes that knowledge is co-constructed between the researcher and participants, and that understanding human experience requires attention to the meanings individuals attach to their actions and social worlds (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2021). The interpretivist approach is particularly well suited to investigating professional identity, as identity is itself a constructed and narrative phenomenon that cannot be adequately captured through positivist measurement alone.



This study adopts a qualitative approach, which Braun and Clarke (2022) describe as concerned with “conceptual and design thinking” that develops understandings of underexplored phenomena. It explores teachers’ experiences without testing predetermined hypotheses through semi-structured interviews that generate rich and contextualized accounts. The analysis is abductive, combining inductive theme development with pre-defined conceptual dimensions derived from the research questions and the conceptual model designed for the current study, based on existing literature and enabling iterative interpretation between data and concepts. This abductive orientation is philosophically aligned with Dewey’s view of inquiry as a reconstructive process, in which experience is not merely received but actively interpreted, restructured, and given new meaning through reflective engagement with problematic situations (Dewey, 1938). In this respect, teachers’ encounters with AI-generated student writing constitute such problematic situations; moments of uncertainty that require the reconstruction of existing professional understanding. The participants and the researchers are engaged in a continuous process of experiential reconstruction, wherein meaning is not discovered at once, but it is remade through inquiry.

The conceptual framework (Figure 1) is proposed to situate teachers’ professional identity conflict within a multilayered system of interacting factors. This framework is not intended as a predictive model but rather as an analytic lens for organizing and interpreting qualitative data, it identifies three interconnected areas of influence:

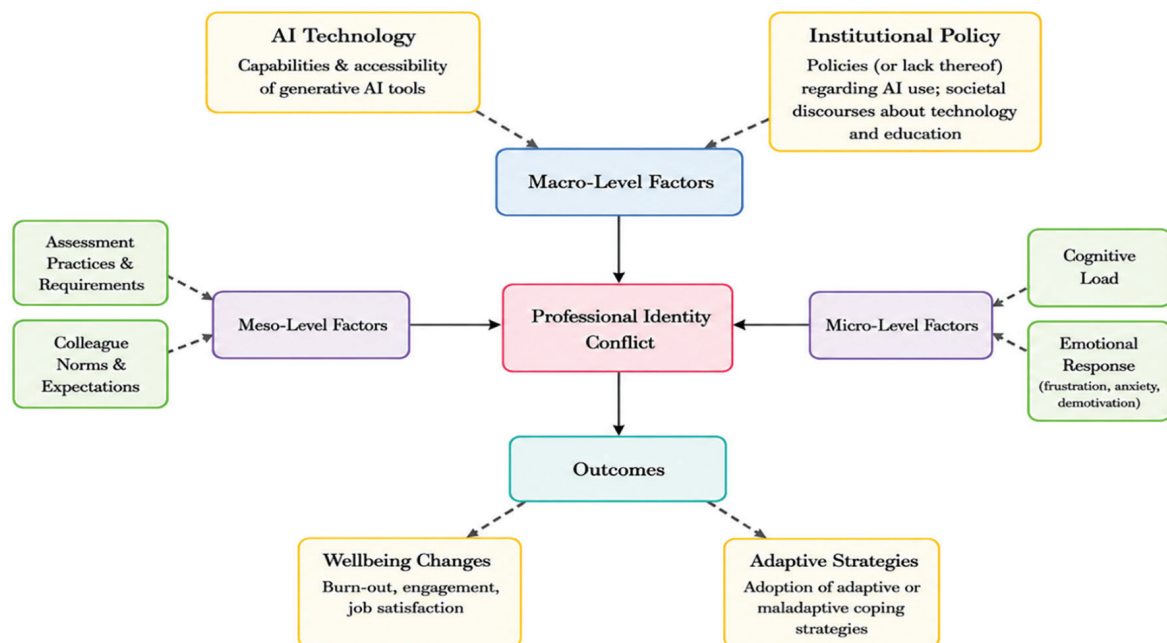


Figure 1. Proposed conceptual framework for the present study

- (1) *Macro-level factors* encompass the broader technological and institutional environment, including the capabilities and accessibility of generative AI tools, institutional policies (or lack thereof) governing AI use, wider societal discourses on technology and education, and institutional readiness, including training and preparedness for AI integration.
- (2) *Meso-level factors* operate at the level of the department or faculty, including assessment practices and requirements, colleague norms and expectations, and the availability of professional development and support.
- (3) *Micro-level factors* concern individual teachers' psychological and emotional experiences, including cognitive workload demands, emotional responses (frustration, anxiety, demotivation), and personal values and beliefs about teaching and learning.
- (4) *Outcomes* include changes in teacher wellbeing (burn-out, engagement, job satisfaction) and the adoption of adaptive or maladaptive strategies for coping with identity conflict.



Study Context

The present study is situated within Algeria's predominantly public higher education system, which included 117 institutions in 2024–2025: 55 universities, 9 university centres, 40 national higher schools, and 13 higher normal schools, alongside a growing private sector (Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research "MESRS", 2025). Algerian higher education is organised primarily according to the Licence–Master–Doctorate (LMD) system, while foreign-language programmes fall within the *Lettres et langues étrangères* field, including English language programmes (MESRS, 2026). Within this context, artificial intelligence is becoming increasingly prominent in Algerian higher education. The Ministry has expressed a national commitment to AI governance, the development of AI-related infrastructure and human capacities, and the ethical use of AI in education, including the establishment of specialised institutions such as the National Higher School of Artificial Intelligence (MESRS, 2024). However, the current policy environment appears to be *developing rather than fully consolidated*, particularly regarding specific institutional guidance on the use of generative AI in teaching and student assessment. This emerging context is particularly relevant to EFL teachers, who are increasingly required to negotiate the pedagogical opportunities, assessment challenges, and professional identity implications associated with generative AI.

Participants and Sampling

The study employs convenience sampling based on predefined criteria to select 15 EFL teachers working in various Algerian higher education contexts. This sampling technique recruits participants who have direct experience with assessing student writing tasks in the post-ChatGPT era (defined as the period from November 2022 onward), along with other diverse elements as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Inclusion Criteria for Participant Selection

Criterion	Description
Teaching writing experience	Minimum of two years of experience teaching EFL writing at higher education
Recent assessment involvement	Active engagement in student writing assessment during the 2023–2024 or 2024–2025 academic years
Experience with AI-generated work	Self-reported experience of suspecting or detecting AI-generated student submissions
Participant diversity	This diversity is sought across teaching experience levels (novice to veteran), gender, and levels of familiarity with AI tools
Availability	Willingness to participate in a 45–60-minute semi-structured interview

It is noteworthy that the sample size was determined based on principles of information sufficiency and saturation commonly employed in qualitative research (Lim, 2026). Rather than relying on numerical requirements alone, qualitative sample adequacy depends on the richness of the data and the extent to which additional interviews contribute new insights. Recent guidance suggests that data saturation in homogeneous interview studies is often achieved within a range of 9–17 participants (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). As the participants in this study shared a common professional background as EFL teachers and addressed a focused phenomenon, professional



identity conflict in the era of AI-assisted assessment, the sample of 15 participants was considered sufficient to generate rich, in-depth data. Interviews continued until recurring patterns emerged and no substantially new themes were identified, indicating an adequate level of thematic saturation.

Semi-Structured Interviews Structure and Process

Semi-structured interviews are chosen as the primary data collection method because they can offer the flexibility to explore emergent themes while maintaining sufficient structure to cover the core research questions (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). The interview protocol is organized around four dimensions corresponding to the research questions and the research conceptual model.

Dimension 1: Questions explore the broader institutional and technological context shaping teachers' engagement with generative AI in assessment. Example prompts include:

- *"What is your institution's official policy or guidance regarding the use of generative AI tools such as ChatGPT in student work?"*
- *"To what extent do you feel you have been trained or supported in dealing with AI-generated content?"*

Dimension 2: Questions examine teachers' assessment practices and how they identify and respond to AI-generated writing. Example prompts include:

- *"Can you describe a specific instance in which you suspected that a student had used AI to complete an assignment?"*
- *"What indicators, patterns, or cues do you rely on when assessing whether writing is genuinely student-produced?"*

Dimension 3: Questions explore how generative AI is reshaping teachers' professional identity and role boundaries. Example prompts include:

- *"How has the availability of generative AI tools changed what it feels like to be a writing teacher?"*
- *"Do you feel your responsibilities have shifted from teaching writing to monitoring academic integrity? If so, how do you experience this shift?"*

Dimension 4: Questions focus on teachers' emotional responses and coping strategies in AI-influenced assessment contexts. Example prompts include:

- *"What emotions do you typically experience when assessing student writing in the context of AI use?"*
- *"What strategies have you developed to deal with uncertainty or suspected AI use in student work?"*



Only two of the 15 interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and transcribed verbatim. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, including academic dishonesty, institutional policies, and personal experiences, the remaining 13 participants declined to have their interviews recorded. Consequently, these interviews were documented through detailed notes. Although this approach may have limited the preservation of exact wording and some nuances, detailed and immediate note-taking helped retain the substance of participants' responses.

Data Analysis: Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA)

Data analysis follows Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework for reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2019). This approach is chosen because it provides a systematic yet flexible method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data (Byrne, 2022). The six phases are:

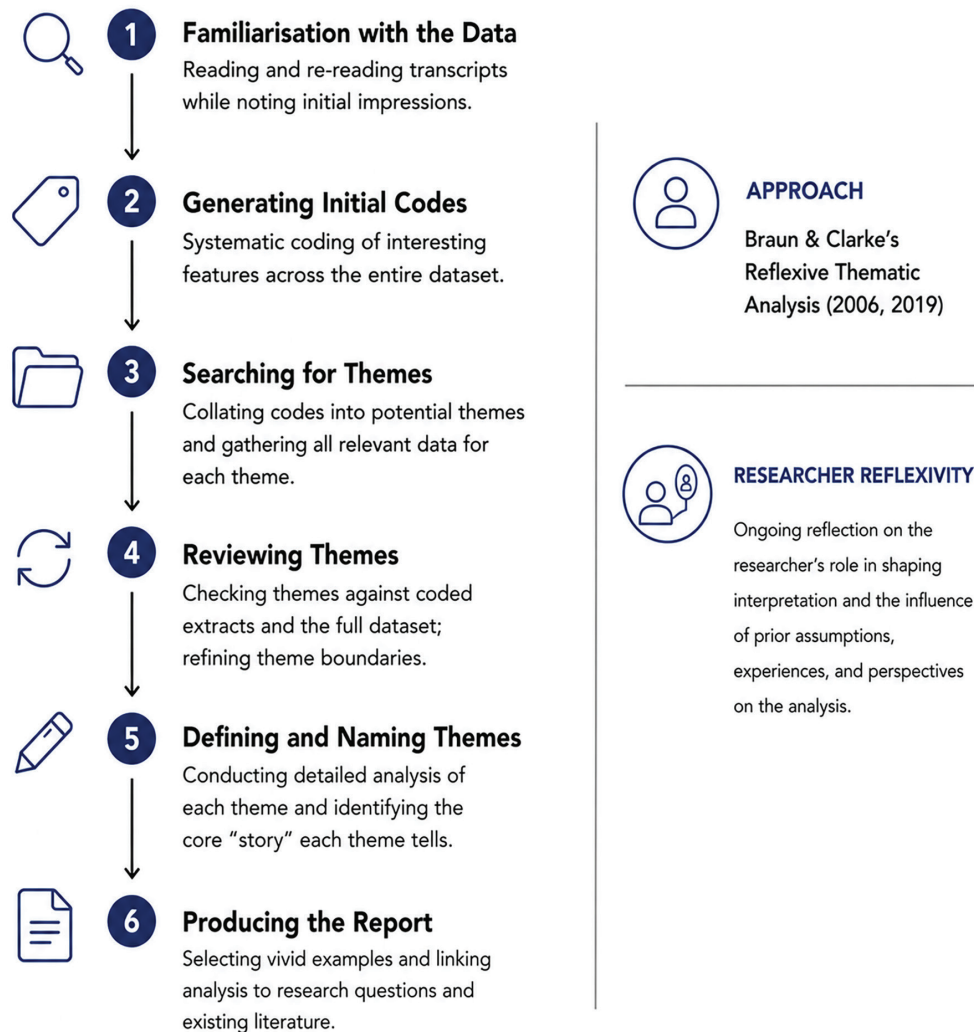


Figure 2. Thematic Analysis Process and Researcher Reflexivity Framework



The qualitative data were analyzed through systematic coding and theme development. Initially, the researchers independently coded a subset of the transcripts to identify preliminary patterns and generate initial codes. These codes and emerging themes were subsequently discussed with a colleague, whose feedback helped challenge and refine the initial interpretations.

This analytical process was informed by the principles of reflexive thematic analysis. As Braun and Clarke (2021) emphasize, quality in reflexive thematic analysis depends not solely on procedural checklists but on sustained engagement with the data, reflexive practice, and the development of a coherent interpretation. In keeping with this approach, the researchers maintained a reflexive journal throughout the analysis to document analytic decisions, emerging insights, and potential sources of bias.

Within this reflexive process, the researchers' positionality as university teachers provided an insider perspective that facilitated a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and the academic context in which the study was situated. At the same time, this insider position required critical awareness, as their professional experiences and assumptions could influence data interpretation (Goundar, 2025). To address this potential influence, the researchers continuously reflected on their interpretations and maintained an awareness of their positionality throughout the analysis. Additionally, artificial intelligence (AI) was used as a research partner to support the examination of emerging themes. Importantly, all AI-generated suggestions were critically evaluated by the researchers and incorporated only when they were consistent with the data and the study's analytical framework (Dasgupta et al., 2026; Phan & Le, 2026).

Ethical Considerations

The study adheres to key ethical principles, with all participants providing written informed consent after being fully informed about the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits. Confidentiality is maintained through the use of pseudonyms and the anonymization of identifying details in transcripts. Participation is voluntary, and participants may withdraw at any time without penalty.

Given the potentially sensitive nature of the topic, including discussions of academic dishonesty, institutional policies, and personal distress, participants are informed that they may decline to answer any question and that the interview can be paused or terminated at their request.

RESULTS

Guided by the study's conceptual model, grounded in the reviewed literature and theoretical orientation, the findings reveal five interconnected themes. **Table 2** summarises these themes alongside their references, and their theoretical grounding to guide the analytic presentation displayed in **Figures 2 and 3**.



Table 2. Alignment of Emergent Themes with the Conceptual Framework and Theme Prevalence (n = 15)

Themes & Sub-themes	Conceptual Framework Alignment	Theme Occurrence (n=15)
Institutional Ambiguity and Lack of Support → Unclear institutional policies on AI integration in assessment → Limited training and preparedness for AI-related assessment challenges	Macro-level factors → Institutional policy; AI integration; professional support structures	11 (73.3%)
Erosion of Trust and the Rise of the Detective Mentality → Rising suspicion in student writing → Shift toward a "detective role" in assessment	Meso-level factors → Assessment practices; colleague norms; changing expectations around authenticity	10 (66.7%)
Cognitive Overload and Decision Fatigue → Time-consuming evaluation and marking → Second-guessing and uncertainty in grading → Anxiety and emotional strain during assessment	Micro-level factors → Cognitive workload; uncertainty in assessment; decision-making strain	9 (60.0%)
Professional Identity Dissonance → Conflict between teaching and monitoring roles → Loss of pedagogical authority and role ambiguity	Micro-level factors → Identity conflict; role ambiguity; changing perceptions of teaching	10 (66.7%)
Psychological Distress and Demotivation → Anxiety, frustration, and emotional strain → Reduced teaching satisfaction and demotivation	Micro-level factors → Emotional responses; wellbeing; motivational decline	10 (66.7%)
Ethical, Philosophical and Religious Questions → Fairness and authorship concerns → Moral uncertainty regarding AI use → Religious framing of integrity	Interpretive responses → Moral reasoning; integrity concerns; meaning-making	6 (40.0%)

Table 2 illustrates how the study's six themes align with the proposed conceptual framework by demonstrating the interconnected influence of macro-, meso-, and micro-level factors on teachers' experiences in AI-mediated assessment environments. At the *macro level*, institutional ambiguity and lack of support emerged as the most prevalent theme (73.3%, n = 11), reflecting uncertainty surrounding AI policies, governance, and professional preparedness. These conditions shaped meso-level assessment practices, contributing to an erosion of trust and the rise of a "detective mentality" (66.7%, n = 10), as teachers increasingly questioned the authenticity of student work.

At the *micro level*, participants reported cognitive overload and decision fatigue (60%, n = 9), alongside professional identity dissonance (66.7%, n = 10) and psychological distress and demotivation (66.7%, n = 10). Teachers described prolonged marking processes, uncertainty in evaluating student authorship, emotional strain, and a growing tension between facilitating learning and policing academic integrity.

Beyond practical assessment concerns, ethical, philosophical, and religious questions (40%, n = 6) highlighted broader reflections on fairness, authorship, and the meaning of learning in the age of AI. Although analytically distinct, the six themes were closely interconnected, as reflected in the Jaccard similarity analysis (Figure 3).

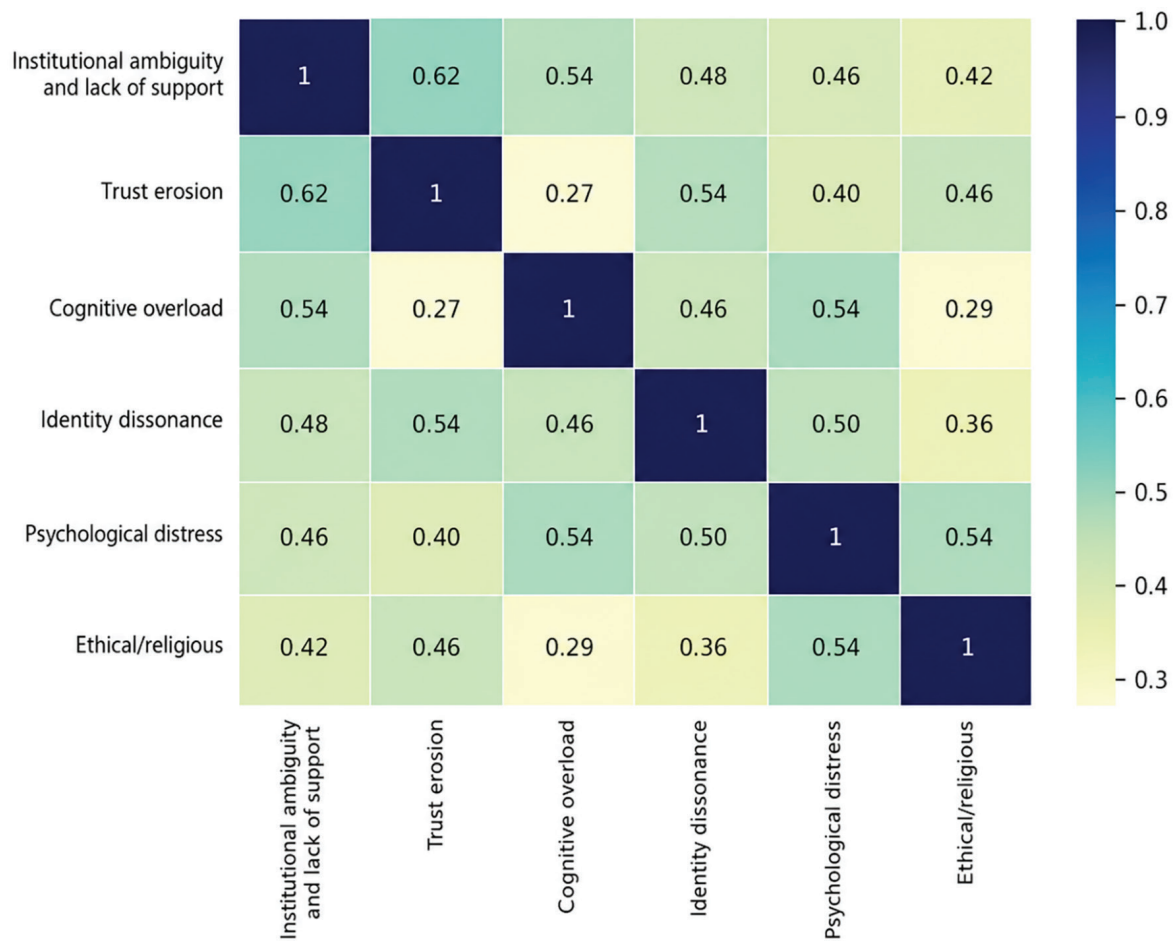


Figure 3. Theme Co-occurrence Matrix Based on Jaccard Similarity (Descriptive Overlap)

Figure 3 presents a Jaccard-based co-occurrence matrix, which measures the degree of overlap between themes across participants. In this study, themes were coded as either present or absent for each participant, with values ranging from 0 (no overlap) to 1 (complete overlap), where higher scores indicate stronger thematic co-occurrence (Koeneman & Cavanaugh, 2022). These values are also expressed as percentages of overlap for interpretability.

The matrix reveals several strong thematic associations. The strongest co-occurrence is observed between institutional ambiguity and lack of support and trust erosion ($J = .62$; 62% overlap), suggesting that unclear institutional guidance may closely align with declining pedagogical trust. Other strong associations include institutional ambiguity and cognitive overload ($J = .54$; 54%), trust erosion and identity dissonance ($J = .54$; 54%), cognitive overload and psychological distress ($J = .54$; 54%), and psychological distress and ethical/religious considerations ($J = .54$; 54%), indicating substantial overlap between institutional uncertainty, professional tensions, emotional strain, and moral reflections. A moderate relationship is also evident between identity dissonance and psychological distress ($J = .50$; 50%). By contrast, weaker relationships, such as trust erosion and cognitive overload ($J = .27$; 27%) and cognitive overload and ethical/religious considerations ($J = .29$; 29%), suggest more limited or context-dependent overlap.



While the Jaccard matrix shows the degree of thematic co-occurrence, the phi coefficient matrix further examines the strength and direction of these associations. The following figure presents this relational structure in more detail.

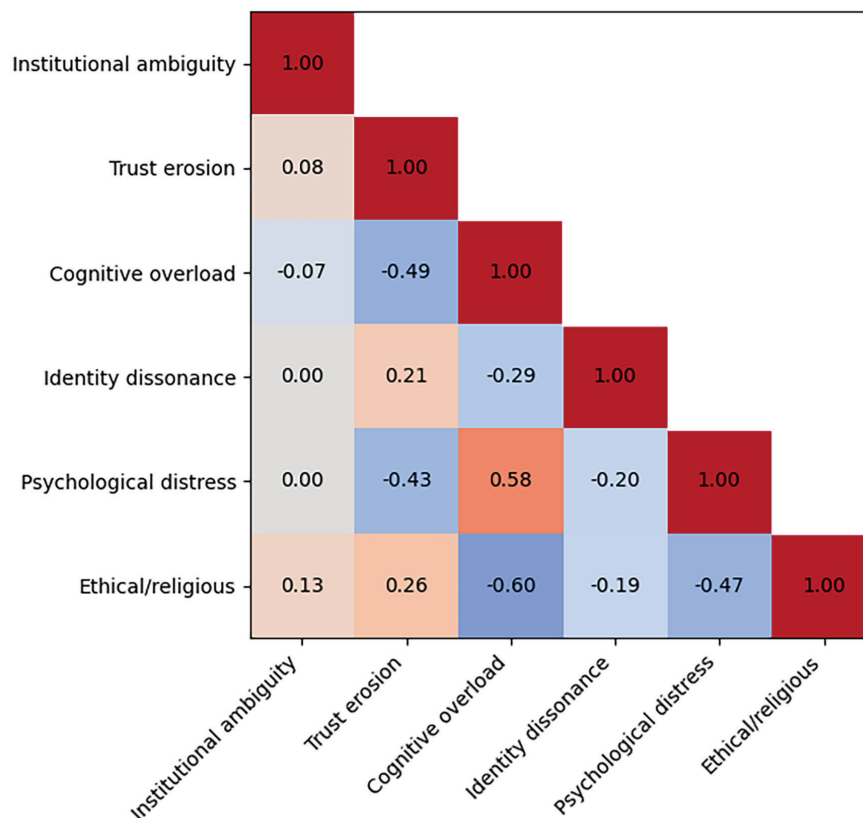


Figure 4. Network of Positive and Negative Thematic Associations (Phi Coefficient Analysis)

The phi coefficient matrix indicates a clear thematic structure, with contrasting patterns of association among the themes (Field, 2018). Cognitive overload is strongly and positively linked with psychological distress ($\phi = 0.58$), suggesting a tightly connected experience of mental strain, while showing strong negative relationships with ethical/religious framing ($\phi = -0.60$) and trust erosion ($\phi = -0.49$). In contrast, trust erosion is weakly and positively associated with identity dissonance ($\phi = 0.21$) and ethical/religious concerns ($\phi = 0.26$). Institutional ambiguity shows only minimal associations across themes, indicating a relatively peripheral role. Taken together, these findings suggest two partially opposing clusters: a cognitive–psychological strain domain and a trust–ethical interpretive domain.

Putting both results together, a clear pattern emerges regarding institutional ambiguity. Jaccard similarity suggests it is highly central due to frequent co-occurrence with other variables, but phi coefficients show weak and non-specific associations. This indicates that its apparent importance is driven by prevalence rather than meaningful structural integration. In contrast, the phi matrix reveals a coherent relational core: cognitive overload is strongly linked to psychological distress



($\varphi = 0.58$) and inversely related to ethical/religious framing ($\varphi = -0.60$), while trust erosion is negatively associated with both cognitive overload ($\varphi = -0.49$) and psychological distress ($\varphi = -0.43$). To state it differently, the system's real structure is shaped by psychological and ethical tension dynamics, not institutional ambiguity, which functions mainly as a contextual background condition.

It can be concluded that the matrix highlights a network of interconnected experiences rather than isolated thematic categories. However, the quantitative representation of thematic relationships only provides a partial picture. A deeper qualitative analysis is needed to understand how participants experienced, interpreted, and responded to these challenges in practice.

In what follows, each theme is presented with illustrative evidence from the 15 interviews. Direct quotations are used only for the two audio-recorded interviews (T7 and T12) and are reproduced verbatim from their transcripts. The contributions of the remaining 13 participants (T1–T6, T8–T11, and T13–T15) are presented through close paraphrases based on detailed interview notes, as their exact wording could not be verified.

Theme 1: Institutional Ambiguity and Limited Support for the Effective Integration of AI in Assessment

A key theme emerging from the interviews was the tension between participants' recognition of the potential of generative AI and the lack of institutional support for its effective integration into assessment. While most participants acknowledged that AI is becoming an inevitable part of higher education and could support learning when used responsibly, several expressed uncertainty about how to incorporate it into assessment because of unclear policies and insufficient guidance.

Participants generally viewed AI as a tool that institutions should engage with rather than avoid. T2 described the absence of formal institutional guidance and indicated that teachers were largely developing their own approaches to AI-related assessment issues. T4 emphasized the lack of training available to teachers, while T9 reported receiving general warnings about AI without clear instructions on how to respond when its use was suspected. T10 similarly expressed a sense of being inadequately prepared to manage emerging AI-related assessment challenges. T15 highlighted the difficulty of responding confidently to suspected AI-generated work because of uncertainty about the procedures that should be followed. In contrast, T12 captured the broader institutional concern directly: *"AI is not going away, so we need to adapt our assessment practices. What makes it difficult is the lack of clear institutional direction."*

Theme 2: The Erosion of Trust and the Rise of the Detective Mentality

Among participants, there was a clear shift from a pedagogy grounded in trust toward one increasingly shaped by suspicion. Many described feeling compelled to scrutinize student writing in ways that conflicted with their professional values.

T7, a novice instructor, described moving from reading essays primarily for students' ideas and development toward examining them for possible indicators of AI use, including inconsistencies,



unusually advanced grammar or vocabulary, highly structured paragraphs, and writing perceived as "robotic." T2 similarly described a growing sense of doubt concerning whether students were genuinely the authors of their submitted work. T11 reported feeling that the role of the teacher was increasingly shifting from encouraging students toward monitoring and policing their work.

These accounts suggest that AI-related concerns were altering not only assessment practices but also teacher–student relationships.

Theme 3: Cognitive Overload and Decision Fatigue

Participants consistently reported that AI-related concerns introduced a significant cognitive burden into their assessment practices. Evaluating student writing was no longer perceived as a straightforward process but had become an ongoing cycle of checking, questioning, and second-guessing.

T4 described grading as mentally exhausting because of the repeated need to determine whether students' work was authentic and whether judgments might be unfair. T9 emphasized the additional time required to examine students' writing for possible AI-related patterns and explained that assessment design had also become more complicated because teachers increasingly had to consider how easily tasks could be completed using AI. T15 further indicated that uncertainty surrounding institutional procedures contributed to a continuing sense of doubt when AI use was suspected.

Theme 4: Professional Identity Dissonance

A strong theme across the data was the tension between participants' established professional identities and their evolving roles. Teachers who traditionally viewed themselves as facilitators of learning increasingly felt repositioned as monitors of academic integrity.

T6 explained that, although the participant had been trained primarily as a writing teacher, increasing attention was being directed toward identifying possible AI use. T1 similarly described a fragmentation of the teaching role, with attention divided between teaching writing and determining whether students had independently produced their work. T13 reported that students' familiarity with AI tools sometimes appeared to exceed that of the teacher, contributing to a perceived reduction in classroom authority.

Theme 5: Psychological Distress and Demotivation

The emotional impact of AI-related changes was pronounced, with participants reporting frustration, anxiety, and reduced motivation. These responses were frequently associated with uncertainty, loss of control, and perceptions of unfairness.

T8 described persistent anxiety during grading and indicated that assessment had become more tense and less enjoyable. T13 emphasized the emotional difficulty of suspecting AI use without



being able to establish it with certainty. T10 reported reduced enthusiasm for teaching writing and questioned its purpose when students could readily rely on AI tools rather than engage fully with the writing process.

Theme 6: Ethical, Philosophical, and Religious Questions

Beyond practical concerns, participants engaged with deeper ethical and philosophical questions concerning writing, learning, and authorship in the age of AI. T5 questioned the meaning of learning when students could generate an essay almost instantaneously. T12 also raised the question of whether AI assistance should be regarded as fundamentally different from other forms of support, stating: *"Is using AI really that different from using a grammar checker or getting help from a tutor? I'm not sure where the line is anymore, honestly."*

Questions of fairness were raised by T14, who pointed to differences in students' access to AI tools and their ability to use them effectively as potential sources of inequality. T9 expressed uncertainty about how teachers should respond ethically to suspected AI use, particularly whether such cases should be penalized, addressed through guidance, or overlooked.

Religious and moral considerations also emerged in the interviews. T3 emphasized the importance of *niyyah* (intention) in determining the ethical value of students' use of AI, particularly when AI was employed primarily to avoid effort. T1 similarly viewed excessive reliance on AI as morally problematic when the resulting work could no longer be considered genuinely the student's own. T7 connected academic responsibility to the concept of *amanah* (trust and responsibility), emphasizing students' responsibility to approach academic work sincerely: *"It's an 'amanah'... (a kind of trust). Students are responsible for how sincerely they take it."*

From macro-, meso-, and micro-level perspectives, these experiences are linked to the thematic patterns and their occurrence, which inform the following discussion.

DISCUSSION

The findings reveal six interconnected themes grounded in established theoretical frameworks. *At the macro level*, the findings show that institutional ambiguity and lack of support, reflecting inconsistent AI governance, unclear policy implementation, and limited professional preparation, shape teachers' engagement with generative AI in assessment practices. Although participants acknowledge the pedagogical potential of AI and its growing relevance in higher education, they consistently report that the absence of structured guidance constrains their ability to integrate it effectively and confidently into assessment design. Within the broader AI-mediated assessment environment, institutional ambiguity functions primarily as a contextual rather than structuring condition: it is highly visible and frequently co-occurring with other themes (Jaccard), yet shows weak relational specificity (ϕ), indicating that it does not organize the experiential structure but provides the background conditions in which other dynamics unfold.



At the *meso level*, the erosion of trust and emergence of a "detective mentality," informed by trust theory and role theory (Mayer et al., 1995; Merton, 1957), reflect a shift in how student work is perceived and evaluated. This shift is accompanied by cognitive overload (Sweller, 1988), as teachers invest increased time, attention, and mental effort in evaluating submissions under uncertainty. Together, these dynamics signal a transition from pedagogical trust toward surveillance-oriented assessment practices (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000), reinforced by role conflict (Biddle, 1986). This transformation is institutionally produced, as unclear policies and responsibilities compel teachers to assume evaluative roles that are not formally supported.

At the *micro level*, these conditions manifest as professional identity dissonance (Pillen et al., 2013), where teachers experience tension between their pedagogical identities and their emerging role as monitors of academic integrity. This is reflected in psychological distress, frustration, anxiety, and reduced motivation (Demerouti et al., 2001), alongside ethical, philosophical, and religious concerns regarding fairness and authorship in AI-mediated assessment contexts (Kumar et al., 2024). The expectation to identify AI-generated text further intensifies cognitive burden (Chaka, 2024; Akram et al., 2023), producing uncertainty, second-guessing, and decision fatigue, particularly in the absence of institutional guidance and reliable detection frameworks (Khlaif et al., 2024), as also noted in second language education research (Alexander et al., 2023). Given this, these conditions generate sustained identity dissonance and reduced professional confidence (McDougall, 2010), alongside negative emotional responses such as frustration, anxiety, perceived unfairness, and demotivation (Lee et al., 2024), which are structurally conditioned by the delegation of AI-related assessment responsibilities without adequate institutional support, training, or policy clarity (Pillen et al., 2013; Geertshuis and Liu, 2022).

Furthermore, these conditions intensify cognitive demands as teachers must detect possible AI use, interpret ambiguous linguistic cues, and repeatedly reassess grading decisions under uncertainty. Consistent with Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988), such demands contribute to decision fatigue and reduced grading confidence, while the combination of high job demands and limited institutional resources may generate sustained psychological strain (Demerouti et al., 2001). At the same time, surveillance-oriented expectations create professional identity dissonance by conflicting with teachers' roles as educators and mentors (Pillen et al., 2013), while generative AI introduces epistemic uncertainty about assessment judgments and the future of teaching roles. Taken together, these interconnected pressures extend beyond practical assessment challenges to raise ethical, philosophical, and religious concerns regarding authorship, fairness, and academic integrity (Kumar et al., 2024), particularly through culturally and religiously grounded understandings of authenticity, responsibility, and moral intent. These challenges therefore call for a shift from AI detection toward human-AI collaboration through collaborative thought (Wilson & Burleigh, 2026) within a *hybrid intelligence framework* (Dellermann et al., 2019), integrating human judgment, creativity, and ethical reasoning with AI capabilities while preserving human agency and avoiding dependency.

In synthesis, the findings have important implications for institutional responses to AI-related challenges. Although institutional ambiguity is widespread and frequently co-occurs with other themes according to the Jaccard coefficient, its weak phi associations suggest a



primarily contextual rather than structural role. Institutions should therefore address it through clear policies, consistent guidance, and professional development, while recognizing that these measures alone may not resolve teachers' core challenges. The stronger phi associations among cognitive overload, psychological distress, trust erosion, and ethical tension point to areas requiring more targeted support, including workload-sensitive assessment practices, wellbeing support, clearer responsibilities, and opportunities to negotiate emerging professional roles. Thus, Jaccard identifies areas requiring broad institutional attention, whereas phi highlights more structurally interconnected areas for targeted intervention.

CONCLUSION

The integration of generative AI into education has introduced new tensions in the professional identities of EFL teachers, who increasingly find themselves positioned in roles involving the monitoring and identification of AI-generated student work. This study explored the nature and consequences of this shift, highlighting how it is shaped by academic integrity concerns, institutional ambiguity, and evolving assessment practices. The findings reveal a multilayered identity dynamic shaped by macro-level institutional uncertainty, meso-level workplace expectations, and micro-level psychological and emotional responses. Rather than reflecting resistance to AI, these tensions stem primarily from insufficient guidance, limited training, and unclear institutional frameworks for its pedagogically meaningful integration. Collectively, these conditions generate uncertainty, cognitive strain, and ongoing identity negotiation among teachers.

This evidence contributes to an urgent conversation on the human dimensions of educational technology. As generative AI continues to evolve, the central challenge is not its presence in education, but how institutions can support its responsible and pedagogically sound integration while safeguarding teachers' professional agency and well-being. By foregrounding teachers' voices, this study emphasizes the need to place human experience, institutional readiness, and ethical responsibility at the centre of discussions on AI in education.

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings have implications for *institutions and teachers*. Widespread institutional ambiguity calls for clearer and adaptable guidance on AI use, academic integrity, and suspected misuse. The stronger links among cognitive overload, psychological distress, trust erosion, and ethical tension also highlight the need to address teachers' workload, wellbeing, and changing professional responsibilities as AI becomes increasingly integrated into education.

Assessment practices should avoid over-reliance on AI detection and give greater attention to students' learning processes through oral components, authentic tasks, staged assignments, and reflective activities. Teacher training and professional development should equip teachers with the skills needed for collaborative thought and responsible human–AI collaboration, alongside AI literacy, critical evaluation, ethical reasoning, and prompt engineering self-efficacy. Such preparation



can help teachers maintain pedagogical agency while engaging with AI as a collaborative cognitive resource, rather than merely as a tool requiring continuous surveillance.

Future research should examine how generative AI reshapes teachers' professional identities and pedagogical agency. Studies could explore whether hybrid intelligence in EFL education, where human and AI capabilities complement one another, can reduce identity tensions and strengthen teachers' roles. Distributed Cognition Theory (DCT), supported by longitudinal and mixed-methods designs, could further illuminate how teachers' identities and assessment practices evolve as AI becomes increasingly embedded in education.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, given the interpretivist paradigm and convenience sampling, the findings are not statistically generalizable but provide context-specific insights that may be transferable to similar educational contexts. Second, the rapidly evolving nature of generative AI means that participants' experiences and institutional responses may change over time. Third, the focus on EFL teachers in higher education limits the applicability of the findings to other educational contexts, although the broader dynamics of professional identity conflict may remain relevant.

A further methodological limitation concerns participants' willingness to support the research process. Within the local academic context, a culture of helping and supporting colleagues' research may facilitate participation; however, this willingness does not necessarily extend to audio recording, particularly when interviews address sensitive issues such as academic dishonesty, institutional policies, and personal experiences. This reluctance to be recorded resulted in note-taking rather than audio recording for most interviews. Although this approach enabled the researchers to retain the substance of participants' responses, the absence of recordings may have limited the preservation of exact wording, interactional nuances, and some contextual details.

Finally, researcher reflexivity remains important, as the researchers' positionality and prior assumptions may have influenced the interpretation of the data despite efforts to maintain critical self-awareness throughout the analysis. Methodologically, the use of an abductive approach strengthened interpretive depth by enabling the researchers to move iteratively between the data and relevant theoretical perspectives. However, this approach also carries a risk of methodological circularity, whereby emerging interpretations may be repeatedly shaped and reshaped through existing theoretical lenses, potentially constraining the emergence of entirely novel categories.

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Declaration of AI Use: ChatGPT (OpenAI) was used as a research partner to support qualitative data coding, theme refinement, and language editing. All AI-generated outputs were critically reviewed, verified, and approved by the authors, who take full responsibility for the final content of the manuscript.



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