ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IS REPLACING LANGUAGE TEACHING APPROACHES: ARE TRADITIONAL ESL METHODOLOGIES BECOMING OBSOLETE IN HIGHER EDUCATION?

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Abstract. The rapid integration of artificial intelligence into higher education has significantly transformed English as a Second Language instruction. AI-powered tools such as intelligent chatbots, automated writing evaluators, adaptive learning systems, speech-recognition applications, and machine translation platforms provide learners with immediate feedback, personalised practice, and continuous access to language support. These developments have raised a controversial question: are traditional ESL methodologies becoming obsolete in university education? This paper critically examines the relationship between artificial intelligence and established approaches such as Grammar-Translation, Communicative language teaching, Task-based language teaching, the Direct method, and the Lexical approach. It argues that AI is not simply replacing traditional methodologies but is changing their functions, implementation, and relevance. Therefore, the future of ESL education lies not in the disappearance of established approaches but in the development of hybrid, human-centred, and technologically supported pedagogical models.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, ESL methodology, higher education, traditional teaching approaches, AI-assisted language learning, communicative language teaching, task-based learning, teacher role, personalised learning, hybrid pedagogy

Artificial intelligence has become one of the most influential forces transforming contemporary higher education. In the field of English language teaching, AI-based technologies are increasingly used for grammar correction, vocabulary practice, pronunciation training, automated assessment, translation, academic writing support, and simulated conversation. University students can now interact with AI chatbots, receive instant feedback on written work, practise speaking with speech-recognition systems, and access personalised learning materials without direct teacher supervision. These technological possibilities have challenged the traditional organisation of ESL instruction and have created uncertainty regarding the future of established language-teaching methodologies.

For decades, university ESL education has relied on approaches such as Grammar-translation, the Direct method, Audio-lingualism, Communicative language teaching, Task-based language teaching, and the Lexical approach. Each methodology

has contributed specific principles, classroom procedures, and learning objectives. Grammar-Translation has emphasised grammatical accuracy and textual analysis; the Direct Method has promoted target-language immersion; Communicative Language Teaching has prioritised meaningful interaction; and Task-Based Language Teaching has encouraged learners to use language for purposeful activities. However, many of the functions traditionally performed through these methods can now be supported or partially automated by artificial intelligence.

For example, AI systems can provide grammatical explanations more rapidly than conventional classroom instruction, generate unlimited communicative exercises, simulate conversations, adapt vocabulary tasks to individual proficiency levels, and evaluate written texts within seconds. These capabilities have led some educators to claim that traditional methods are gradually losing their relevance. From this perspective, AI-driven personalisation may appear more efficient than fixed classroom methodologies designed for groups of learners with different needs and abilities.

Nevertheless, the assumption that artificial intelligence can completely replace established teaching approaches is problematic. Language learning is not limited to the acquisition of grammatical rules, vocabulary items, or pronunciation patterns. It also involves social interaction, cultural understanding, motivation, identity formation, critical reflection, and emotional engagement. These dimensions are difficult to reproduce fully through automated systems. Moreover, AI-generated feedback may be inaccurate, decontextualised, culturally inappropriate, or overly dependent on standardised language models.

The increasing use of AI also raises questions about academic integrity, learner dependence, data privacy, teacher authority, and the reliability of automated assessment. Students who rely excessively on AI may become less capable of producing independent written and spoken language. Similarly, teachers may lose control over the learning process when technological tools are adopted without clear pedagogical principles. Therefore, AI should not be evaluated only in terms of efficiency but also in relation to educational quality, ethical responsibility, and long-term learner development.

The central problem is not whether artificial intelligence can perform certain teaching functions more efficiently than traditional methods. Rather, it is whether technological tools can replace the theoretical, social, and pedagogical foundations provided by established ESL methodologies. AI may generate activities and feedback, but it does not independently determine educational objectives, cultural appropriateness, methodological progression, or the human values underlying teaching.

The rapid development of artificial intelligence has fundamentally reshaped discussions on English language teaching methodology. Contemporary researchers

increasingly argue that AI is not merely a technological innovation but a pedagogical force capable of transforming curriculum design, classroom interaction, assessment, and learner autonomy. Consequently, the long-standing debate concerning the effectiveness of traditional ESL methodologies has shifted toward examining their compatibility with AI-assisted learning environments.

Among Western scholars, Richards and Rodgers (2014) maintain that language-teaching methods have continuously evolved in response to changing educational needs rather than becoming entirely obsolete. Their historical analysis demonstrates that approaches such as Grammar-Translation, the Direct Method, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) continue to provide valuable pedagogical principles despite technological advances. Similarly, Harmer (2015) argues that successful language instruction depends not on the method itself but on the teacher's ability to select appropriate strategies according to learners' needs and the educational context.

The emergence of artificial intelligence has intensified this discussion. Luckin (2018) views AI as a tool capable of personalising learning through adaptive feedback, intelligent tutoring systems, and automated assessment. Holmes, Bialik and Fadel (2019) similarly argue that AI can significantly improve learning efficiency by providing immediate feedback and analysing learner performance. However, they also emphasise that artificial intelligence cannot replace teachers' professional judgment, emotional intelligence, or intercultural guidance.

Russian scholars have likewise explored the relationship between technology and language education. Passov (2010) stresses that communicative competence develops primarily through meaningful social interaction, suggesting that technological tools should support rather than replace communicative pedagogy. Shchukin (2018) argues that innovative educational technologies become effective only when integrated into a coherent methodological system based on clearly defined educational objectives. Solovova (2017) further notes that digital technologies should complement established teaching approaches instead of eliminating their theoretical foundations.

Recent Russian studies on digital pedagogy support this perspective. Galskova and Gez (2019) contend that foreign-language education in the digital era should preserve its communicative, intercultural, and personality-oriented orientation while incorporating intelligent technologies to increase learner autonomy and individualisation. Their research highlights that technological innovation must remain subordinate to pedagogical goals.

In Uzbekistan, the digital transformation of higher education has encouraged researchers to investigate AI-supported language learning within the framework of educational modernisation. J.Jalolov (2012) emphasises that communicative competence remains the principal objective of foreign-language teaching regardless of

instructional technology. According to Jalolov, modern digital resources should enrich rather than replace communicative interaction. Similarly, Q.Musayev (2005), discussing translation pedagogy, argues that technological tools cannot substitute for linguistic competence, cultural awareness, or critical thinking, all of which remain central to professional language education. Recent studies by researchers at the Uzbekistan State World Languages University also indicate that AI-assisted instruction enhances vocabulary acquisition, writing accuracy, and learner motivation, while teachers continue to play a decisive role in organising meaningful communication and evaluating learning outcomes.

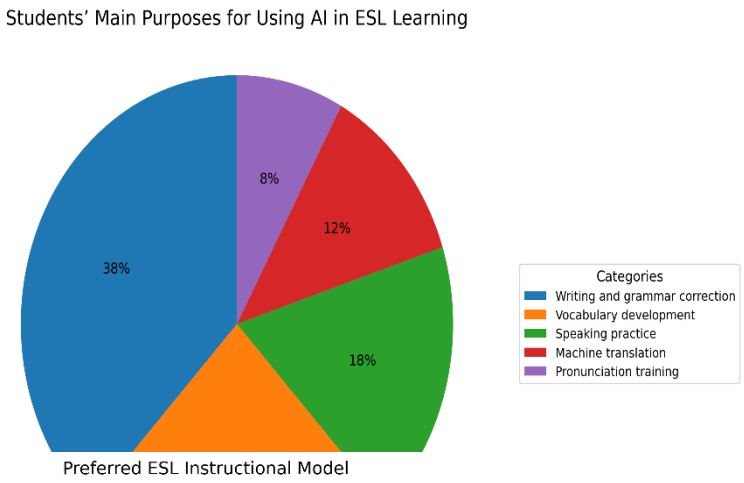
Despite the growing body of research on artificial intelligence in language education, an important research gap remains. Most studies focus on the effectiveness of AI tools, adaptive learning platforms, or automated assessment systems, whereas relatively few directly examine whether artificial intelligence is rendering traditional ESL methodologies obsolete. Existing evidence suggests that AI changes the implementation of teaching approaches rather than replacing them entirely. Therefore, further research is needed to determine how classical methodologies can be reinterpreted within AI-supported university learning environments and which pedagogical functions should remain under human guidance.

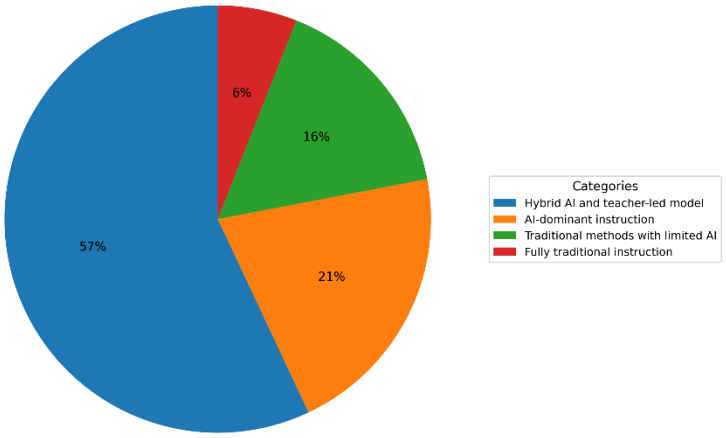
Results. The findings of the study demonstrate that artificial intelligence is significantly transforming university ESL instruction, although it is not completely replacing traditional language-teaching methodologies. Data obtained from student questionnaires, teacher interviews, classroom observations, and comparative assessment revealed that AI-supported instruction was particularly effective in improving writing accuracy, vocabulary development, grammatical competence, and learner autonomy. However, its effectiveness was more limited in areas requiring spontaneous communication, emotional engagement, intercultural interpretation, and direct social interaction.

The survey results indicated that students primarily used artificial intelligence for academic writing and grammar correction. Approximately 38% of the participants reported using AI tools mainly to identify linguistic errors, improve sentence structure, and refine academic style. Vocabulary development was the second most common purpose, accounting for 24% of student responses. Conversational AI tools were used for speaking practice by 18% of the participants, while 12% relied mainly on machine

translation. Pronunciation applications represented the least frequently used form of AI support, with only 8% of students identifying them as their primary learning tool.

These results suggest that learners associate artificial intelligence mainly with individual, written, and technically measurable activities. AI systems provide immediate correction and unlimited opportunities for language practice, making them especially attractive for assignments completed outside the classroom. Nevertheless, classroom observations showed that some students accepted AI-generated corrections automatically without investigating the causes of their mistakes. As a result, the quality of the final written product improved, but the students' independent understanding of grammar and academic style did not always develop at the same rate.





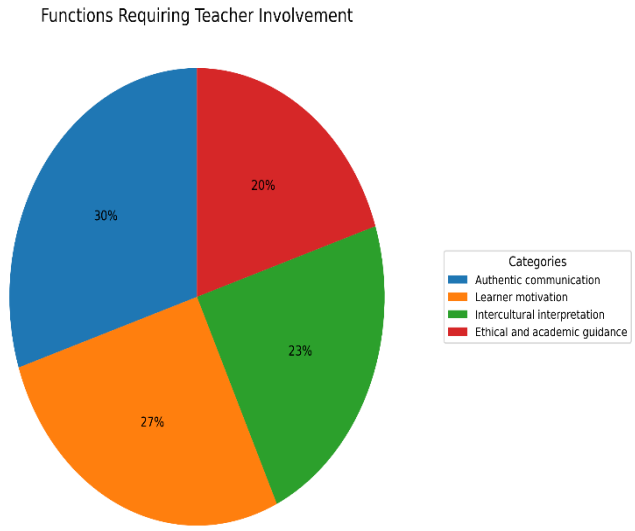
Students' attitudes toward different instructional models also revealed a clear preference for hybrid education. Fifty-seven per cent of the respondents considered a combination of teacher-led instruction, traditional ESL methodologies, and AI-supported learning to be the most effective model. Twenty-one per cent preferred an AI-dominant approach, whereas 16% supported traditional teaching supplemented by limited technological assistance. Only 6% selected fully traditional instruction without artificial intelligence.

The strong preference for hybrid instruction demonstrates that university students do not generally view AI and traditional methodologies as opposing systems. Instead, they expect technological tools to be incorporated into established pedagogical frameworks. Students valued AI for its speed, accessibility, personalisation, and immediate feedback. At the same time, they regarded teachers as more reliable sources of detailed explanations, motivation, contextual interpretation, and academic guidance.

The comparative instructional experiment supported these perceptions. Students taught through a hybrid model achieved the highest overall improvement in all six

assessed language areas. Their writing performance increased by approximately 28%, speaking by 25%, vocabulary by 24%, grammar by 23%, listening by 21%, and reading by 20%. These results showed that combining AI-based support with communicative and task-based classroom activities produced relatively balanced language development.

The group receiving AI-dominant instruction also achieved substantial progress, particularly in writing, vocabulary, and grammar. Writing performance improved by approximately 25%, vocabulary by 23%, and grammar by 21%. However, improvement in speaking and listening was considerably lower. Speaking increased by only 16%, while listening improved by approximately 15%. This imbalance indicates that artificial intelligence can efficiently support controlled and individualised language practice but cannot independently reproduce all the conditions of authentic interpersonal communication.



Students taught predominantly through traditional teacher-led instruction demonstrated moderate and relatively balanced progress. Their reading and speaking skills improved more consistently than those of the AI-dominant group, but their writing, vocabulary, and grammar gains remained lower. Traditional instruction provided stronger opportunities for direct explanation, classroom discussion, and immediate human interaction. However, students received less individual feedback and had fewer opportunities for autonomous practice than those using AI-supported learning.

Teacher interviews further revealed a distinction between instructional functions that can be effectively automated and those that require human involvement. Most teachers considered grammar correction, vocabulary exercises, pronunciation feedback, and routine task generation suitable for AI support. These activities are repetitive, measurable, and relatively easy to individualise.

In contrast, the teachers were considerably more cautious about using AI for learner motivation, ethical guidance, intercultural explanation, and authentic communication. Only a small minority believed that AI could effectively replace the teacher in these areas. Participants emphasised that motivational difficulties often require empathy, personal knowledge of the learner, and awareness of classroom relationships. Similarly, intercultural meanings cannot always be explained accurately without contextual and cultural sensitivity.

The findings also revealed that traditional methodologies continue to operate within AI-enhanced education. Grammar-Translation principles remained visible when students compared machine-generated translations with original texts and analysed grammatical differences. Communicative Language Teaching was preserved through discussions, role-plays, interviews, and collaborative activities supported by AI-generated materials. Task-Based Language Teaching was strengthened when students used AI to collect information, plan projects, develop vocabulary, and revise final products.

The Lexical Approach was similarly enhanced through the automated identification of collocations, lexical bundles, and contextual examples. Elements of the Direct Method remained relevant in AI-supported speaking practice conducted primarily in English. Consequently, artificial intelligence did not eliminate the principles of traditional methodologies. Instead, it modified the tools and conditions through which these principles were implemented.

Another important result concerned the relationship between AI use and learner independence. Students who received structured guidance on the appropriate use of artificial intelligence became more autonomous and reflective. They used AI suggestions selectively, compared alternative responses, and corrected their own mistakes. In contrast, students who used AI without pedagogical supervision frequently copied generated answers and demonstrated weaker independent production.

This finding indicates that AI itself does not automatically promote autonomy. Its effect depends on how teachers organise its use. When learners are required to justify corrections, compare AI output with their own work, and evaluate the reliability of generated information, artificial intelligence can promote critical thinking. When used merely as an answer-producing mechanism, it may weaken independent learning and contribute to academic dishonesty.

Overall, the results do not support the claim that artificial intelligence is making traditional ESL methodologies obsolete. AI-dominant instruction was more effective than conventional instruction in certain areas, especially writing correction, lexical development, and rapid feedback. However, it produced weaker results in spontaneous speaking, listening interaction, intercultural competence, and sustained motivation.

The hybrid model proved to be the most effective because it combined the technological advantages of artificial intelligence with the pedagogical structure of established language-teaching approaches and the professional guidance of teachers. The results therefore suggest that the future of university ESL education lies not in the replacement of traditional methodologies but in their purposeful transformation within human-centred, AI-enhanced learning environments.

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