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# When Feedback Must Be Human: Pedagogical Resistance to AI in EFL Speaking Classrooms

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Abstract: The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) has intensified debates about its role in language education, particularly in providing automated feedback. While existing research has largely focused on teachers' acceptance and use of AI tools, limited attention has been given to teachers' deliberate decisions not to use AI in specific pedagogical contexts. This qualitative study investigates EFL teachers' pedagogical resistance to AI-mediated oral feedback in speaking classrooms. Drawing on in-depth semi-structured interviews and reflective accounts from twelve tertiary-level EFL teachers, the study employs thematic analysis to explore how teachers explain their resistance and the pedagogical values underlying their decisions. The findings reveal that resistance is grounded in teachers' concerns about interactional immediacy, learner affect, dialogic engagement, and ethical responsibility. Oral feedback is viewed as a relational practice that requires human sensitivity to timing, tone, and emotional cues, which teachers perceive as inadequately addressed by current AI technologies. Rather than signaling technological reluctance, pedagogical resistance emerges as an enactment of teacher agency and professional judgment. Beyond reframing non-use, the study offers implications for human-centered AI policy and teacher education by clarifying when oral feedback in EFL speaking instruction must remain a human responsibility.

**Keywords:** artificial intelligence, EFL speaking instruction, oral feedback, pedagogical resistance, teacher agency

## INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies has profoundly reshaped contemporary educational practices, including the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. In recent years, AI-powered tools have been increasingly adopted to support language learning through automated assessment, speech recognition, pronunciation scoring, and instant feedback (Kohnke et al., 2023). In speaking instruction, AI applications now offer oral feedback on fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, and prosody, often promoted as efficient, objective, and scalable alternatives to teacher-provided feedback (Liu et al., 2025; Qiao & Zhao, 2023). As a result, AI-mediated oral

feedback is frequently positioned as a solution to long-standing challenges in EFL classrooms, such as large class sizes, limited instructional time, and uneven opportunities for individualized feedback.

Despite these promises, the growing presence of AI in speaking classrooms has raised important pedagogical, ethical, and humanistic concerns. Speaking is a fundamentally social and interactional skill that extends beyond linguistic accuracy to include meaning-making, affect, identity, and interpersonal engagement (Chou, 2024). Accordingly, oral feedback in speaking classrooms is not merely corrective information but a dialogic, real-time practice shaped by timing, tone, emotional attunement, and relational sensitivity between teachers and learners (Butarbutar et al., 2023; Soruç et al., 2025; Tarigan et al., 2023). Teachers interpret learners' intentions, hesitation, confidence, and communicative effort within unfolding classroom interaction, adapting feedback moment by moment in ways that are difficult to standardize or automate (Almajli & I. Saud, 2025; Wang & Dai, 2025; Yan et al., 2024). This interactional and affective nature of speaking feedback raises critical questions about the extent to which AI-mediated systems, which prioritize measurable speech features, can meaningfully support feedback practices that are inherently relational and context-sensitive.

While existing research has extensively examined the effectiveness, accuracy, and learner perceptions of AI-generated oral feedback feedback (Hirschi et al., 2025; Sayed et al., 2024; Suzuki et al., 2025), such studies largely focus on outcomes or technological performance. Less attention has been paid to teachers' moment-to-moment pedagogical judgment in deciding when feedback should or should not intervene. This absence reflects a broader tendency in AI-in-education scholarship to equate technological adoption with pedagogical progress, while implicitly framing non-use as resistance to innovation, lack of competence, or technological anxiety.

This study challenges that assumption by conceptualizing non-use not as deficit, but as pedagogical resistance. Pedagogical resistance refers to teachers' deliberate, context-sensitive decisions to refuse, limit, or postpone the use of particular technologies in order to protect essential learning processes (Williyan et al., 2025). In the context of EFL speaking instruction, such resistance becomes especially salient because feedback directly shapes learners' confidence, willingness to communicate, and sense of being heard (Akolgo et al., 2025; Liao, 2025). When AI systems provide oral feedback, they often prioritize quantifiable features such as pronunciation accuracy or speech rate, while overlooking interactional elements such as hesitation, negotiation of meaning, emotional cues, and relational dynamics (Dubey et al., 2025; Ochoa & Zhao, 2024). As a result, teachers may perceive AI-mediated feedback as insufficient or misaligned with the pedagogical goals of communicative speaking instruction.

Recent studies on AI-assisted language learning have begun to acknowledge ethical concerns such as over-reliance, learner passivity, and issues of authorship. However, much of this work remains learner-centered or tool-oriented, focusing primarily on how students perceive or benefit from AI feedback (Crompton et al., 2024; Escalante et al., 2023; Mohebbi, 2025; Shi & Aryadoust, 2024). Teacher perspectives are often examined through frameworks of acceptance, readiness, or attitudes toward technology (Getenet et

al., 2024; Marian et al., 2025; Pappa et al., 2024). Such approaches implicitly position adoption as the primary pedagogical question, leaving underexplored how teachers exercise professional judgment in deciding when AI should not intervene. This study shifts the analytical focus from adoption to decision-making, emphasizing teachers' agency in drawing boundaries between human and automated feedback.

In speaking instruction, these boundaries are particularly critical because feedback often occurs in moments of vulnerability, such as when learners struggle to express ideas, hesitate mid-utterance, or negotiate meaning with peers (Ekşi & Can Daşkın, 2025). Teachers may resist AI-mediated feedback in these moments not to reject technology, but to preserve interactional flow, emotional safety, and dialogic engagement. Oral feedback in such contexts also serves relational and motivational functions, reinforcing learners' confidence and encouraging risk-taking in a foreign language (Ahmetovic et al., 2023). Resistance, therefore, functions as a form of pedagogical boundary-making that protects dimensions of speaking instruction that are difficult to quantify or automate.

Situating this study within EFL contexts is especially important given the diverse linguistic, cultural, and institutional conditions under which speaking instruction takes place. In many EFL classrooms, opportunities for authentic spoken interaction are limited, making teacher feedback a central site of learning. The introduction of AI-mediated oral feedback into such settings may intensify existing tensions between efficiency and pedagogy, standardization and responsiveness, and automation and care. Teachers' resistance, therefore, should not be interpreted as rejection of technology per se, but as professional judgment shaped by local pedagogical realities.

Drawing on perspectives from teacher agency, critical digital pedagogy, and interactional approaches to language teaching, this study conceptualizes pedagogical resistance as an expression of moral and instructional responsibility. Teachers are not passive recipients of technological change but active agents who continuously evaluate the pedagogical consequences of AI use (Choi, 2022). By choosing when feedback must remain human, teachers articulate implicit theories of learning that prioritize interaction, empathy, and meaning over speed and automation. Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do EFL teachers explain their decisions to resist the use of AI for providing oral feedback in speaking classrooms?
2. What pedagogical values and interactional considerations shape EFL teachers' resistance to AI-mediated oral feedback?

By exploring these questions, the study illuminates the reasoning processes behind non-use, highlighting resistance as a productive and principled pedagogical stance rather than a barrier to innovation. By foregrounding teachers' voices and professional judgment, this research contributes to ongoing debates about AI in education from an education and humanities perspective. Ultimately, the study argues that understanding when feedback must be human is essential for developing more balanced, context-sensitive, and pedagogically grounded approaches to AI integration in EFL speaking classrooms.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Analytical Lens

This study is analytically grounded in three complementary perspectives: teacher agency, interactional views of speaking and feedback, and critical digital pedagogy. Together, these lenses provide a coherent framework for understanding pedagogical resistance to AI-mediated oral feedback as a meaningful and professionally reasoned practice rather than a rejection of technological innovation.

Teacher agency offers a foundational lens for examining how educators make principled decisions within institutional, technological, and pedagogical constraints (Chaaban et al., 2021; Nezhad & Stolz, 2024). Agency is commonly understood as teachers' capacity to act purposefully and reflectively in shaping instructional practices based on their beliefs, values, and contextual realities (Jiang et al., 2022). In the context of AI integration, teacher agency involves more than deciding how to use technology. It also includes deciding when and why not to use it. Recent scholarship has emphasized that agency is not always expressed through adoption or innovation, but can also manifest through restraint, refusal, or selective use when teachers perceive potential threats to learning quality (Emans et al., 2025; Imants & Van der Wal, 2020). From this perspective, pedagogical resistance to AI-mediated oral feedback represents an enactment of deliberative and moral agency, where teachers weigh efficiency against interactional integrity, and automation against pedagogical care.

An interactional perspective on speaking and feedback further sharpens the analytical focus of this study. Speaking in EFL classrooms is widely recognized as a socially situated, dialogic process rather than a mere display of linguistic forms. Oral feedback, therefore, functions as an interactional move that shapes meaning-making, learner identity, and participation (Asif & Mehmood, 2025). Research on classroom interaction highlights the importance of timing, responsiveness, affective attunement, and co-construction in feedback practices (Wang & Dai, 2025; Yan et al., 2024). Teachers adjust feedback moment by moment in response to learners' hesitations, emotional states, and communicative intentions (Almajli & I. Saud, 2025). These interactional dimensions challenge the assumption that feedback can be effectively automated, particularly in speaking classrooms where immediacy and relational sensitivity are central. An interactional lens allows this study to examine why teachers may view AI-generated oral feedback as misaligned with the dynamic and contingent nature of spoken interaction.

Critical digital pedagogy provides a broader humanistic frame for interrogating the role of AI in education (Atenas et al., 2025). This perspective questions technology-driven narratives that equate innovation with progress and efficiency with effectiveness. Instead, it foregrounds issues of power, ethics, care, and the preservation of human judgment in educational practice (Pronzato & Kubrusly, 2025). Within this framework, resistance is not interpreted as technophobia but as a critical stance toward unexamined technological encroachment. Applying this lens to EFL speaking instruction enables the study to conceptualize teachers' resistance to AI feedback as an effort to protect pedagogical values such as empathy, learner dignity, and meaningful communication. It also draws

attention to how teachers negotiate boundaries between what can be automated and what should remain human.

These analytical lenses position pedagogical resistance as a legitimate and theoretically grounded phenomenon. They support an interpretation of teachers' non-use of AI-mediated oral feedback as an informed response to the interactional, ethical, and relational demands of speaking instruction, rather than as a lack of technological readiness. Guided by these lenses, the following review reads prior AI-in-speaking research not in terms of effectiveness alone, but in terms of how teacher judgment, interactional sensitivity, and ethical care are foregrounded or overlooked.

## Previous Studies

Research on AI in language education has expanded rapidly in recent years, with particular attention to automated feedback systems for speaking and pronunciation. Many studies have examined the effectiveness of AI-powered tools that provide instant oral feedback on features such as pronunciation accuracy, fluency, and intonation (Bashori et al., 2024; Farrús, 2023; Sun, 2023; Zou et al., 2023). These studies often report positive outcomes, including increased practice opportunities, immediate feedback, and learner autonomy. From a pedagogical efficiency perspective, AI-mediated oral feedback is frequently framed as a solution to time constraints and large class sizes in EFL contexts.

Learner-focused research has also explored students' perceptions of AI-generated oral feedback. Findings generally suggest that learners appreciate the immediacy and non-judgmental nature of automated feedback, particularly for repetitive practice (Hirschi et al., 2025; Li & Kim, 2024; Wilson et al., 2024). However, several studies note that learners express concerns about the lack of personalized explanations, emotional support, and contextual understanding in AI feedback (AlNatour et al., 2025; Saqr & López-Pernas, 2024). These findings point to perceived limitations of AI in addressing the nuanced communicative and affective dimensions of speaking.

Despite these insights, much of the existing literature remains tool-centered or outcome-oriented. Studies typically evaluate the accuracy of AI feedback or its impact on measurable speaking gains, while paying limited attention to the pedagogical reasoning of teachers (Althobaiti, 2025; Suzuki et al., 2025; Zou et al., 2023). When teachers are included, their perspectives are often examined through technology acceptance models or readiness frameworks, which implicitly position adoption as the desired outcome. Within such approaches, resistance or non-use tends to be interpreted as a barrier to innovation rather than as a pedagogical stance worthy of investigation.

A smaller but growing body of research has begun to question this assumption by highlighting teachers' concerns about over-automation in language education. Some studies report that teachers worry AI feedback may reduce learners' cognitive engagement, discourage risk-taking, or promote surface-level correction rather than meaningful communication (Al-Smadi et al., 2025; Lee & Moore, 2024). In speaking instruction specifically, teachers have expressed unease about delegating feedback to AI systems that cannot interpret communicative intent, humor, hesitation, or emotional

nuance (Crompton, Jones, et al., 2024; Qassrawi & Al Karasneh, 2025; Zhou & Hou, 2024). These concerns suggest that resistance is often rooted in pedagogical values rather than technological incompetence.

Research on feedback in EFL speaking classrooms further underscores the importance of human mediation. Studies grounded in sociocultural and interactional theories emphasize that oral feedback is co-constructed through teacher-learner interaction and serves both instructional and relational purposes (Darhower & Smith-Sherwood, 2025; Ekşi & Can Daşkın, 2025). Feedback is shown to influence learners' willingness to communicate, confidence, and sense of belonging in the classroom. Teachers' choices about when to correct, when to encourage, and when to remain silent are deeply contextual and cannot be easily standardized (Ha & Nguyen, 2021)(Asif & Mehmood, 2025). This body of work provides a strong foundation for understanding why teachers may resist AI-mediated oral feedback that operates through predefined criteria and decontextualized algorithms.

However, empirical studies that explicitly focus on teachers' deliberate non-use of AI for oral feedback remain scarce. While some research mentions teacher hesitation or concern, few studies position resistance as the central phenomenon of inquiry. Even fewer examine resistance through qualitative methods that foreground teachers' voices, values, and interactional reasoning. As a result, there is limited understanding of how teachers articulate the boundaries between human and automated feedback in speaking classrooms.

In EFL contexts, particularly in settings where opportunities for authentic spoken interaction are limited, this gap is especially significant. Teacher-provided oral feedback often constitutes one of the few sustained sources of meaningful interaction in English. The introduction of AI-mediated feedback into such contexts raises critical questions about what may be gained or lost when feedback is automated. Existing studies have yet to fully address how teachers navigate these tensions in practice. Taken together, these studies leave unexplored how teachers themselves justify deliberate non-use of AI for oral feedback, positioning pedagogical resistance as a phenomenon worthy of standalone investigation.

The present study addresses this gap by focusing explicitly on pedagogical resistance to AI-mediated oral feedback in EFL speaking classrooms. By adopting a qualitative approach and grounding the analysis in teacher agency, interactional pedagogy, and critical digital perspectives, this research moves beyond adoption-oriented narratives. It contributes to the literature by illuminating how and why teachers decide that, in certain moments of speaking instruction, feedback must remain human.

## METHODS

### Research Design

This study employed a qualitative interpretive research design to explore EFL teachers' pedagogical resistance to the use of AI for providing oral feedback in speaking classrooms (Lim, 2025). A qualitative approach was considered most appropriate because the study aimed to understand teachers' reasoning, values, and interactional judgments rather than

to measure the effectiveness or frequency of AI use. The focus was on how teachers construct meaning around their decisions to resist AI-mediated oral feedback and how these decisions are shaped by pedagogical and interactional considerations.

The study was guided by an interpretivist epistemological stance, which assumes that pedagogical practices and decisions are socially constructed and context dependent (Cena et al., 2024). From this perspective, resistance to AI is understood not as a fixed attitude but as a situated practice that emerges from teachers' professional experiences, classroom interactions, and ethical commitments. Rather than treating AI non-use as a lack of adoption, the study conceptualized resistance as an expression of teacher agency and professional judgment within specific instructional contexts.

A qualitative design also allowed for in-depth engagement with participants' narratives and reflections, enabling the researcher to capture the complexity and nuance of decision-making processes in speaking instruction. By foregrounding teachers' voices, the study sought to generate rich, contextually grounded insights into how pedagogical values are enacted in response to technological change.

## Participants

The participants of this study were EFL teachers teaching speaking courses at the tertiary level. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that they had relevant experience with both AI technologies and oral feedback practices in EFL classrooms. The primary criterion for inclusion was that participants had been exposed to AI-based tools capable of providing oral or pronunciation feedback, whether through institutional initiatives, professional development, or independent exploration, but did not consistently use such tools for oral feedback in their speaking classes.

A total of twelve EFL teachers participated in the study. They varied in terms of teaching experience, ranging from early-career lecturers with approximately three years of experience to senior educators with more than fifteen years of teaching experience. All participants were actively involved in teaching speaking-oriented courses such as basic speaking, academic speaking, or presentation skills. This diversity allowed the study to capture a range of pedagogical perspectives and resistance practices across different instructional contexts.

The participants taught in institutions where AI tools were accessible and where digital innovation was encouraged, which made their resistance particularly meaningful. Their decisions not to use AI for oral feedback were therefore not driven by lack of access or institutional prohibition, but by pedagogical considerations. To ensure confidentiality, all participants were assigned pseudonyms, and identifying institutional details were removed from the data.

## Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, reflective teaching narratives, and classroom-based vignettes. This combination of methods was used to capture both

articulated reasoning and situated pedagogical judgments related to oral feedback practices.

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data source. Each participant took part in one in-depth interview lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes. The interview protocol was designed to elicit teachers' experiences with AI tools, their perceptions of AI-mediated oral feedback, and the reasons behind their decisions to resist using such feedback in speaking classrooms. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to reflect on specific teaching moments, explain their pedagogical choices, and articulate the values that guided their decisions. Follow-up probes were used to clarify meanings and explore emerging themes in greater depth.

In addition to interviews, participants were invited to write short reflective narratives describing one or two classroom situations in which they consciously chose not to use AI for oral feedback. These narratives provided concrete examples of resistance in practice and helped bridge the gap between abstract beliefs and situated classroom action. Teachers were encouraged to focus on the instructional context, the nature of the speaking activity, and their interaction with students at the moment of decision-making.

Classroom-based vignettes were also used as a stimulus during interviews. Participants were presented with brief scenarios depicting common speaking classroom situations in which AI-generated oral feedback could potentially be used, such as pronunciation practice or impromptu speaking tasks. Teachers were asked to respond to these scenarios by explaining whether they would use AI feedback and why. This method helped surface implicit pedagogical assumptions and allowed participants to articulate boundaries between human and automated feedback in a controlled yet reflective manner.

The vignettes were researcher-designed but grounded in recurring classroom situations described by participants during preliminary interviews and reflective narratives. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Reflective narratives and vignette responses were collected in written form.

## Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach, guided by principles of qualitative rigor and interpretive depth (Braun & Clarke, 2024). The analysis was iterative and recursive, allowing themes to emerge through sustained engagement with the data rather than being imposed a priori.

The first stage of analysis involved familiarization with the data. The researcher read and reread interview transcripts, reflective narratives, and vignette responses to gain an overall sense of participants' experiences and perspectives. Initial notes were made to capture recurring ideas, salient phrases, and emotionally charged moments related to resistance and feedback practices.

In the second stage, open coding was conducted to identify meaningful units of data relevant to the research questions. Codes were assigned to segments of text that reflected teachers' explanations for resisting AI, descriptions of classroom interaction, and

references to pedagogical values. Examples of initial codes included preserving learner confidence, protecting spontaneity, valuing immediacy, and mistrust of automated judgment. Coding was conducted manually to maintain close engagement with the data.

The third stage involved grouping related codes into broader categories that reflected patterns across participants. These categories were then refined into themes that captured the central dimensions of pedagogical resistance. Throughout this process, constant comparison was used to examine similarities and differences across participants and data sources. Attention was paid to both convergent and divergent perspectives in order to avoid oversimplification.

To enhance analytical credibility, the emerging themes were continuously checked against the original data to ensure that they accurately represented participants' meanings. Reflexive memos were also written to document analytic decisions and to reflect on the researcher's positionality and assumptions. This reflexive practice helped mitigate potential bias and supported transparency in the analytic process.

To further strengthen trustworthiness, credibility was supported through the use of multiple data sources (interviews, narratives, and vignettes) and the inclusion of thick, illustrative excerpts in the findings. Reflexivity was addressed through ongoing memo writing, in which the researcher critically examined assumptions and positionality in relation to AI and speaking pedagogy. An audit trail documenting analytic decisions, code development, and theme refinement was maintained throughout the research process to enhance transparency and dependability.

Finally, themes were interpreted through the analytical lenses of teacher agency, interactional pedagogy, and critical digital perspectives. This interpretive step connected empirical findings to broader theoretical discussions, enabling the study to move beyond description toward conceptual contribution.

## FINDINGS

This section presents the findings of the study based on a thematic analysis of interview transcripts, reflective narratives, and vignette responses. The findings are organized according to the two research questions. For each research question, themes are presented with illustrative excerpts to demonstrate how EFL teachers articulate and justify their pedagogical resistance to AI-mediated oral feedback.

### RQ1 Findings: How EFL teachers explain their decisions to resist the use of AI for providing oral feedback in speaking classrooms

Analysis of the data revealed three major themes that explain teachers' resistance to AI-mediated oral feedback: protecting pedagogical moments, asserting professional judgment, and rejecting pedagogical misalignment.

#### *Theme 1: Protecting Pedagogical Moments of Vulnerability*

Teachers consistently explained their resistance as an effort to protect sensitive pedagogical moments during speaking activities. Participants described speaking

classrooms as emotionally charged spaces where learners are often anxious, hesitant, or afraid of making mistakes. In such moments, teachers believed that feedback must be carefully calibrated. One teacher explained:

> *"When students are speaking spontaneously, they are very vulnerable. If an AI suddenly points out errors, it can shut them down. Sometimes the best feedback is to let them finish and feel safe." (Rina)*

Teachers viewed AI feedback as potentially intrusive, especially when delivered immediately or without awareness of learners' emotional states. Resistance, therefore, was framed as a pedagogical strategy to sustain learner confidence and willingness to communicate. While most participants emphasized emotional vulnerability as the primary concern, a small number of teachers framed their resistance more in terms of preserving students' momentum and flow rather than emotional safety alone.

*Theme 2: Asserting Professional Judgment in Feedback Decisions*

Another dominant theme concerned teachers' assertion of professional judgment. Participants emphasized that oral feedback involves rapid interpretation of contextual and interactional cues that cannot be captured by AI systems. As one participant noted:

> *"I decide feedback based on their intention, not just accuracy. AI only hears pronunciation, but I hear meaning, effort, and progress." (Dedi)*

Teachers resisted AI feedback because they perceived it as overly mechanical and detached from instructional goals. For them, delegating feedback to AI meant surrendering pedagogical authority to a system that lacks instructional discernment. Senior lecturers tended to articulate this resistance in terms of accumulated professional intuition, whereas early-career teachers more often emphasized instructional responsibility and control over classroom decision-making.

*Theme 3: Rejecting Pedagogical Misalignment with Speaking Objectives*

Teachers also explained their resistance by pointing to a mismatch between AI feedback and the objectives of speaking instruction. While AI systems tend to emphasize accuracy and error detection, teachers prioritized fluency, interaction, and meaning-making. One teacher reflected:

> *"In speaking class, I want students to communicate ideas, not worry about every sound. AI feedback makes them focus on mistakes, not messages." (Sari)*

Teachers thus resisted AI-mediated feedback when it conflicted with the communicative purpose of speaking tasks. Resistance was framed as alignment with pedagogical intent rather than rejection of technology. Notably, a few participants acknowledged that AI feedback might be useful for controlled pronunciation practice, but still resisted its use during communicative speaking activities.

**Table 1**
Summary of the themes related to RQ1.

| Theme | Core Explanation |
|---|---|
| **Protecting pedagogical moments** | Avoiding feedback that may disrupt learner confidence |
| **Asserting professional judgment** | Maintaining teacher control over feedback decisions |
| **Rejecting pedagogical misalignment** | Ensuring feedback supports communicative goals |

## RQ2 Findings: Pedagogical values and interactional considerations shaping EFL teachers' resistance to AI-mediated oral feedback

Four interrelated themes emerged in relation to the pedagogical values and interactional considerations underlying teachers' resistance: affective care, interactional immediacy, dialogic feedback, and relational responsibility.

### *Theme 1: Valuing Affective Care and Emotional Safety*

Teachers strongly emphasized affective considerations when explaining their resistance. Speaking was viewed as the skill most closely tied to learners' emotions and identity. Participants expressed concern that AI feedback, perceived as impersonal, could increase anxiety and discourage participation. One teacher stated:

> *"Students already feel nervous speaking English. If feedback feels cold or judgmental, even if it is accurate, it can hurt their confidence." (Andi)*

This theme highlights that resistance is driven by a care-oriented pedagogy that prioritizes emotional safety over efficiency. While this concern was shared across participants, teachers with experience teaching lower-proficiency learners emphasized affective risks more strongly than those teaching advanced classes.

### *Theme 2: Prioritizing Interactional Immediacy and Flexibility*

Another key consideration was interactional immediacy. Teachers valued their ability to adjust feedback in real time based on classroom dynamics. Participants described making moment-by-moment decisions to delay, soften, or reframe feedback. As one teacher explained:

> *"Sometimes I correct immediately, sometimes I wait. It depends on the moment. AI cannot feel the atmosphere of the class." (Maya)*

Teachers resisted AI-mediated feedback because it lacks the flexibility required to respond to unfolding interaction. This resistance reflects a commitment to responsive teaching. Some teachers noted that this immediacy became particularly important during spontaneous discussion tasks, compared to more structured speaking exercises.

*Theme 3: Sustaining Dialogic Feedback Practices*

Teachers conceptualized oral feedback as a dialogic process rather than a one-way correction. Participants emphasized that meaningful feedback often involves negotiation, clarification, and follow-up interaction. One participant commented:

> *"When I give feedback, students can ask why, or explain what they meant. With AI, feedback is final. There is no conversation." (Budi)*

Teachers resisted AI feedback because it disrupts the dialogic nature of speaking instruction and limits opportunities for shared meaning-making. A small number of participants contrasted this with AI's usefulness for individual practice outside class, reinforcing that resistance was context-specific rather than absolute.

*Theme 4: Maintaining Relational Responsibility and Pedagogical Presence*

Finally, teachers' resistance was shaped by a sense of relational responsibility. Participants expressed that providing oral feedback is part of their moral and professional duty as educators. One teacher reflected:

> *"Feedback is my responsibility. If students feel discouraged, I am accountable. I cannot give that responsibility to a machine." (Lina)*

Resistance, in this sense, functioned as an ethical stance to preserve teacher presence and accountability in the learning process. This sense of responsibility was articulated more explicitly by teachers who viewed speaking instruction as central to learner identity development rather than skill acquisition alone.

**Table 2**
Summary of themes related to RQ2.

| Theme | Pedagogical Value |
|---|---|
| **Affective care** | Protecting learners' emotional well-being |
| **Interactional immediacy** | Responding flexibly to classroom dynamics |
| **Dialogic feedback** | Encouraging interaction and negotiation |
| **Relational responsibility** | Maintaining teacher presence and accountability |

Across both research questions, the findings demonstrate that EFL teachers' resistance to AI-mediated oral feedback is intentional, principled, and deeply rooted in pedagogical and interactional values. Teachers do not resist AI because of technological anxiety or lack of competence. Rather, they resist when feedback practices risk undermining learner confidence, interactional quality, and the relational foundations of speaking instruction. These findings position pedagogical resistance as a meaningful expression of teacher agency and as a critical dimension of responsible AI integration in EFL speaking classrooms.

## DISCUSSION

This study set out to examine EFL teachers' pedagogical resistance to AI-mediated oral feedback in speaking classrooms, focusing on how teachers explain their decisions and the values that shape those decisions. Rather than interpreting resistance as reluctance or lack of readiness, the findings position resistance as an expression of professional judgment and pedagogical responsibility. This discussion interprets the findings by situating them within broader theoretical and empirical conversations on teacher agency, interactional pedagogy, and the human dimensions of AI integration in education (Chaaban et al., 2021; Emans et al., 2025; Atenas et al., 2025).

Before elaborating these implications further, it is useful to explicitly summarize the key contributions of this study. First, at a conceptual level, the study reframes teachers' non-use of AI-mediated oral feedback as pedagogical resistance, positioning non-use as a deliberate, principled instructional stance rather than a deficit or failure of adoption. Second, at a theoretical level, the study advances interactional and humanistic accounts of feedback in EFL speaking instruction by demonstrating how affect, immediacy, dialogic engagement, and relational responsibility shape teachers' boundary-making between human and automated feedback. Third, at a practical and policy-oriented level, the findings provide guidance for teacher education and institutional AI policies by clarifying when and why oral feedback in speaking classrooms must remain a human responsibility. Together, these contributions extend current AI-in-education scholarship beyond adoption-focused narratives toward a more pedagogically grounded and ethically attentive understanding of AI integration.

A key contribution of this study lies in its reconceptualization of non-use as an active pedagogical stance. Existing AI-in-education research often frames adoption as the default indicator of innovation, while non-use is implicitly associated with deficiency or technological hesitation (Getenet et al., 2024; Marian et al., 2025). The findings of this study challenge this binary by demonstrating that teachers' refusal to use AI for oral feedback is grounded in careful deliberation about learning processes, learner affect, and interactional quality. From a teacher agency perspective, this resistance reflects deliberative and moral dimensions of agency, where teachers weigh competing pedagogical values under technological pressure (Imants & Van der Wal, 2020; Jiang et al., 2022). Teachers are not merely responding to technological availability but are actively shaping the boundaries of AI use in alignment with their instructional beliefs and ethical commitments (Choi, 2022; Nezhad & Stolz, 2024).

The findings also extend interactional understandings of feedback in EFL speaking instruction. Oral feedback emerged not as a technical act of error correction but as an interactional practice embedded in moment-to-moment classroom dynamics. Teachers' resistance highlights the centrality of timing, tone, and relational sensitivity in speaking feedback, which have been widely recognized as crucial to effective oral interaction (Asif & Mehmood, 2025; Wang & Dai, 2025). While AI systems are increasingly capable of analyzing speech features such as pronunciation accuracy and fluency (Farrús, 2023; Suzuki et al., 2025), they remain limited in their capacity to interpret communicative intent, emotional cues, and classroom atmosphere (Dubey et al., 2025; Ochoa & Zhao,

2024). This study therefore underscores that the pedagogical value of feedback in speaking instruction lies not solely in accuracy but in its interactional and relational dimensions (Darhower & Smith-Sherwood, 2025). By choosing to withhold AI feedback, teachers protect these dimensions and reaffirm the fundamentally social nature of language learning (Chou, 2024).

Another important implication concerns the role of affect and care in speaking classrooms. The findings suggest that teachers' resistance is strongly shaped by concern for learners' emotional safety and confidence. This aligns with humanistic approaches to language education, which emphasize that learning to speak a foreign language involves identity work, emotional exposure, and interpersonal risk (Ahmetovic et al., 2023; Akolgo et al., 2025). Automated feedback, when perceived as impersonal or overly corrective, may intensify learners' anxiety and discourage participation, particularly in vulnerable speaking moments (AlNatour et al., 2025; Sayed et al., 2024). Teachers' decisions to resist AI feedback can thus be interpreted as an enactment of care ethics, where pedagogical choices are guided by responsibility for learners' well-being rather than efficiency or standardization (Atenas et al., 2025). This perspective shifts the discussion of AI ethics from abstract principles to everyday classroom practices.

The study also contributes to critical digital pedagogy by illuminating how teachers negotiate human–AI boundaries in practice. Rather than rejecting AI wholesale, participants articulated nuanced positions about where AI might be appropriate and where it should be excluded. Teachers generally acknowledged the potential usefulness of AI for isolated practice or self-directed learning, a position echoed in prior research on AI-supported language learning (Mohebbi, 2025; Li & Kim, 2024). However, they drew clear boundaries around feedback moments that require human presence. This boundary work reflects teachers' implicit theories of what aspects of teaching can be automated and what aspects must remain human (Pronzato & Kubrusly, 2025; Qassrawi & Al Karasneh, 2025). Such insights are often missing from technology-centered research, which tends to focus on tool capabilities rather than pedagogical judgment (Crompton, Edmett, et al., 2024). By foregrounding teachers' boundary-making, this study highlights the importance of involving educators as ethical and pedagogical decision-makers in AI integration.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that AI-mediated feedback can play a complementary role in certain instructional contexts. Several participants recognized the usefulness of AI for low-stakes pronunciation practice, individual rehearsal, or self-directed learning outside the speaking classroom. In these contexts, AI feedback was viewed as supportive rather than intrusive, particularly when learners could engage with it privately and without evaluative pressure. Such uses typically involve controlled, repetitive, or asynchronous practice, where the pedagogical focus is on form rather than interaction, and where immediate human mediation is less critical. Clarifying these conditions helps delineate pedagogical resistance not as an absolute rejection of AI, but as a context-sensitive judgment about when automated feedback is appropriate and when feedback must remain human. This distinction reinforces that teachers' resistance is not oppositional to AI per se, but pedagogically selective.

The findings also raise critical questions about prevailing notions of efficiency in AI-supported education. AI-mediated oral feedback is frequently promoted as a way to save time and increase instructional efficiency, particularly in contexts characterized by large class sizes and limited instructional time (Liu et al., 2025; Qiao & Zhao, 2023). However, teachers in this study problematized this narrative by emphasizing that efficiency does not necessarily equate to pedagogical effectiveness. In speaking instruction, slower, dialogic, and emotionally attuned feedback may be more beneficial than immediate automated responses, a position supported by interactional and sociocultural research on oral corrective feedback (Ha & Nguyen, 2021; Ekşi & Can Daşkın, 2025). Teachers' resistance thus challenges techno-efficiency discourses and calls for a more nuanced understanding of what counts as productive pedagogical labor in language classrooms.

From a methodological standpoint, this study contributes to the growing body of qualitative research that centers teacher voice in discussions of AI in education. Much existing research relies on surveys or experimental designs that capture attitudes or outcomes but overlook the reasoning processes behind pedagogical decisions (Lee & Moore, 2024; Shi & Aryadoust, 2024). By adopting a thematic analysis of teachers' narratives and reflections, this study provides insight into how resistance is constructed and justified in situ, consistent with calls for more interpretive and context-sensitive approaches to studying teacher agency (Lim, 2025; Cena et al., 2024). This approach enriches the literature by revealing the complexity of teachers' engagement with AI beyond binary categories of acceptance or rejection.

The findings also have important implications for teacher education and professional development. Rather than training teachers simply to use AI tools, professional development initiatives should create space for critical reflection on when and why AI should not be used. Encouraging teachers to articulate their pedagogical values and to reflect on the interactional consequences of AI use aligns with recent calls for more ethically grounded and reflective technology integration in language education (Kohnke et al., 2023; Zhou & Hou, 2024). This study suggests that empowering teachers to resist inappropriate uses of AI is as important as equipping them with technical skills.

At the policy level, the study calls for caution in institutional mandates that promote AI adoption without attending to pedagogical context. When AI use is framed as an institutional requirement, teachers may experience tension between compliance and professional judgment, potentially constraining their agency (Nezhad & Stolz, 2024). Recognizing pedagogical resistance as legitimate can help institutions develop more flexible guidelines that respect teacher agency and pedagogical diversity. This is particularly relevant in EFL contexts where speaking instruction often relies heavily on teacher mediation due to limited exposure to authentic English interaction (Butarbutar et al., 2023).

Finally, this study invites a reframing of innovation in language education. Innovation need not mean increasing automation or reducing human involvement. Instead, innovation can involve developing more thoughtful, ethical, and pedagogically grounded approaches to technology use. These findings clarify that "when feedback must be

human" is not a rejection of AI, but a recognition of pedagogical moments in which relational judgment, affective sensitivity, and professional responsibility cannot be meaningfully automated. By illuminating moments when feedback must remain human, this study argues for a model of AI integration that is guided by pedagogical wisdom rather than technological determinism (Atenas et al., 2025; Pronzato & Kubrusly, 2025).

In sum, the discussion advances the argument that pedagogical resistance to AI-mediated oral feedback is not an obstacle to innovation but a critical component of responsible educational practice. By interpreting resistance as an expression of teacher agency, interactional sensitivity, and ethical care, this study contributes a humanistic perspective to ongoing debates about AI in EFL education. It underscores the need to place teachers' professional judgment at the center of AI integration and affirms that, in speaking classrooms, the value of feedback lies not only in what is said but in how, when, and by whom it is delivered.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined EFL teachers' pedagogical resistance to AI-mediated oral feedback in speaking classrooms, foregrounding resistance as a deliberate and professionally reasoned practice rather than a deficit or rejection of innovation. By exploring how teachers explain their decisions and the pedagogical values that shape those decisions, the study demonstrated that oral feedback is widely understood as a fundamentally human, interactional, and ethical practice. Teachers' resistance was rooted in concerns for learner affect, interactional immediacy, dialogic engagement, and relational responsibility, all of which are central to effective speaking instruction. These findings contribute to current debates on AI in education by challenging technology-driven narratives that prioritize efficiency and automation over pedagogical judgment and care. Instead, the study highlights the importance of recognizing teacher agency in defining the boundaries of AI use, particularly in instructional moments that involve vulnerability, identity, and interpersonal connection.

From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that institutions should avoid mandating the use of AI-mediated oral feedback in speaking courses without allowing space for teacher discretion and professional judgment. Policies and professional development initiatives that recognize when feedback must remain human are more likely to support ethical, context-sensitive, and pedagogically sound AI integration.

Future research can build on these findings in several ways. First, comparative studies across different educational levels or cultural contexts could examine whether similar forms of pedagogical resistance emerge in secondary or primary EFL classrooms, or in settings with differing institutional pressures regarding AI adoption. Second, classroom-based observational studies could complement teacher narratives by examining how resistance to AI feedback is enacted in real-time interaction and how learners respond to human versus automated feedback. Third, future research might explore learners' perspectives on teachers' decisions to withhold AI-mediated oral feedback, particularly in relation to confidence, motivation, and willingness to communicate. Finally, longitudinal studies could investigate how teachers' boundary-making practices evolve

over time as AI technologies become more sophisticated and embedded in language education. Such research would further deepen understanding of how human judgment, ethical care, and pedagogical values continue to shape responsible AI integration in EFL speaking classrooms. Ultimately, preserving teacher judgment in speaking feedback is not optional but essential to ethical and effective EFL instruction in the age of AI.

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