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Teachers' Experiences Using ChatGPT for Lesson Planning in EFL Classrooms

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Abstract: This qualitative study explores EFL teachers' experiences using ChatGPT for lesson planning, focusing on both practical interactions and reflective perceptions. Through semi-structured interviews with eight teachers, the research investigates how ChatGPT influences lesson design, professional identity, and pedagogical thinking. Findings reveal that ChatGPT enhances efficiency by providing immediate access to diverse resources and stimulates creativity by suggesting novel teaching ideas. However, teachers also face challenges related to the contextual relevance and accuracy of AI-generated content, requiring critical evaluation and adaptation to align with local curricula and student needs. Additionally, teachers experience a shift in professional identity, viewing themselves as collaborators with AI rather than sole content creators. This shift fosters deeper pedagogical reflection and more flexible lesson design practices. At the same time, concerns about over-dependence on AI and the potential loss of authenticity highlight important ethical and professional considerations. The study emphasizes the need for balanced and critical engagement with AI tools in EFL teaching, advocating for teacher training programs that address both technical and ethical dimensions. The findings contribute to understanding the complex role of AI in language education and suggest directions for future research on AI-supported teaching practices.

Keywords: AI collaboration; EFL teaching; lesson planning; professional identity; reflective practice

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in education has gained increasing attention, transforming traditional pedagogical approaches and reshaping the educational landscape. Among the most significant developments in this field is the emergence of large language models such as ChatGPT, which have demonstrated remarkable capabilities in generating human-like responses across various domains (Bucol & Sangkawong, 2025). Developed by OpenAI, ChatGPT represents a major advancement in conversational AI technology, utilizing sophisticated natural language processing to understand and respond to complex queries in ways that closely mimic

human communication patterns. This technological breakthrough has rapidly entered diverse educational contexts (Song & Song, 2023), with one of its most prominent applications found in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, where its language-generation capabilities align well with the pedagogical requirements of language instruction.

Among ChatGPT's various educational applications, lesson planning stands out as one of the most significant. Lesson planning is a fundamental yet challenging professional responsibility that demands deep pedagogical knowledge, creativity, adaptability, and contextual awareness. In EFL contexts, teachers must synthesize multiple competencies: understanding second language acquisition theories, recognizing learner characteristics and needs, aligning with curriculum standards, employing effective teaching methodologies, and designing meaningful learning experiences that bridge cultural and linguistic gaps (Hammer & Ufer, 2023). These multifaceted demands make lesson planning a time-intensive and cognitively demanding task—and one where AI support could prove particularly valuable.

For EFL teachers, planning is further complicated by the need to address diverse learner profiles, including varying proficiency levels, cultural backgrounds, learning styles, and motivational factors (Markey et al., 2023). They must also ensure alignment with national or international standards, integrate the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), and maintain a balance between linguistic accuracy and communicative fluency (Herlinawati et al., 2024). At the same time, growing expectations for digital literacy (Ilomäki et al., 2023) require teachers to integrate technology meaningfully into instruction while sustaining engagement and pedagogical soundness.

ChatGPT offers unprecedented, immediate access to extensive language-related resources that can reshape how EFL teachers approach lesson preparation. The platform can generate authentic reading materials, conversational prompts, vocabulary exercises, cultural context explanations (Xiao & Zhi, 2023), creative activity ideas, detailed grammar explanations tailored to different proficiency levels, assessment rubrics, and even comprehensive lesson frameworks that outline objectives, procedures, materials, and follow-up activities (Bonner et al., 2023). This versatility suggests that ChatGPT could reduce preparation time while enhancing the variety and quality of instructional content.

Despite these affordances, a major research gap remains regarding how teachers *experience* integrating this technology into their professional practice. Much of the current literature emphasizes the functional and technical dimensions of AI in education—what it can do, how accurately it performs tasks, and what features it offers—rather than the lived, subjective experiences of educators who engage with such tools daily. This focus overlooks the human dimension of teaching and the complex ways in which educators adapt, negotiate, and reflect when incorporating new technologies into their established professional routines.

Understanding teacher experience is particularly critical in the context of lesson planning, a process that is inherently creative, reflective, and value-laden. Lesson planning involves not only assembling activities and materials but also making pedagogical decisions informed by philosophy, learner needs, contextual realities, and professional intuition (Zaragoza et al., 2023). When AI tools like ChatGPT enter this space, they can influence both the efficiency and the *nature* of the planning process itself. Investigating teachers' experiences thus requires attention to their emotional responses, professional concerns, adaptation strategies, and evolving relationships with technology and expertise.

Exploring these lived experiences is essential for several reasons. First, adopting AI tools in education represents not merely a technical shift but also a personal and professional transformation that touches on issues of agency, creativity, authority, and identity. Teachers' reflections and emotions toward such tools may significantly shape how they define their professional roles, make pedagogical judgments, and interact with technology (Kizilcec, 2024). These experiential factors influence whether AI integration enhances or undermines teacher effectiveness, job satisfaction, and growth. Second, understanding teachers' experiences can guide more effective integration strategies, professional development, and policy design related to AI in education. Third, qualitative insights into teachers' experiences can reveal benefits and challenges that purely technical evaluations might overlook.

A qualitative approach is therefore well suited to illuminate these nuanced, lived experiences that are often missed in quantitative research on AI in education. While surveys and experiments provide valuable data about patterns of use and outcomes, they cannot capture the contextual and subjective dimensions of teacher experience. In-depth interviews, for instance, can uncover how teachers interpret their interactions with AI, negotiate tensions between human judgment and algorithmic suggestions, and adapt their professional practices to technological affordances.

The EFL context offers a particularly rich lens for this exploration. EFL teachers worldwide work within diverse educational systems while facing high expectations for student achievement and curriculum alignment. The introduction of AI tools such as ChatGPT raises pressing questions about equity, accessibility, teacher preparedness, and the cultural appropriateness of AI-generated content. Moreover, differences in cultural and institutional settings may shape how teachers perceive and implement AI support in distinct ways.

To address this gap, the present study investigates the lived experiences of EFL teachers who have incorporated ChatGPT into their lesson planning practices. By examining their stories, challenges, and reflections, this research aims to provide a more humanistic understanding of AI integration in language education. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What specific experiences have EFL teachers had (both positive and negative) while interacting with ChatGPT during lesson planning?
2. How do EFL teachers reflect on ChatGPT's influence on their professional identity, pedagogical thinking, and lesson design practices?

Through this qualitative inquiry, the study seeks to contribute nuanced insights to the growing body of research on AI in education, offering practical implications for teachers, administrators, and policymakers navigating the integration of artificial intelligence in language-learning contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Integration of Artificial Intelligence in Education

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in education has become a central topic of research, particularly with the rise of large language models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT. These tools provide dynamic support for language processing tasks, enabling users to generate coherent texts, summarize information, correct grammar, and design teaching materials. As educators increasingly explore ChatGPT's potential, its role in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) lesson planning has gained significant attention (Derakhshan & Ghiasvand, 2024; Zhang & Tur, 2024). Collectively, these studies suggest that AI-driven tools can enhance pedagogical efficiency and creativity, but they also emphasize the need to understand the human and contextual dimensions of technology use. Despite ChatGPT's rapid adoption, relatively little is known about how teachers actually experience this technology in their daily instructional routines, a gap that motivates the current study.

AI and Lesson Planning in EFL Contexts

Lesson planning lies at the heart of instructional design, demanding that teachers align objectives with learner needs, select materials, and scaffold learning appropriately. Within EFL settings, this process becomes even more complex, as teachers must balance linguistic, cultural, and communicative goals. ChatGPT offers new possibilities in this regard, providing instant access to sample activities, comprehension questions, vocabulary lists, and grammar exercises (Kohnke et al., 2023). Studies such as Lin and Chen (2024) emphasize the tool's efficiency, flexibility, and capacity to support creativity in lesson preparation. However, other research (Al-Zahrani, 2024) raises concerns about the quality, contextual fit, and cultural relevance of AI-generated content. Taken together, these findings reveal a growing tension: while ChatGPT can streamline lesson design and reduce cognitive load, it may also produce outputs that require substantial teacher adaptation. This tension underscores the need for critical engagement and professional judgment in AI-assisted planning, rather than blind reliance on generated content.

Teachers' Experiences and Technology Adoption

Teachers' interactions with educational technologies are shaped not only by functionality but also by their beliefs, professional identities, and institutional contexts (Almerich et al., 2024). Technology adoption research has consistently shown that teachers' attitudes, self-efficacy, and perceptions of usefulness influence how and to what extent they integrate new tools (Peng et al., 2023). Yet, these studies often treat teachers as users or

implementers, rather than as reflective practitioners who actively interpret and reshape technology within their pedagogical frameworks. Few studies have examined how EFL teachers construct meaning around their experiences with AI tools such as ChatGPT, how they negotiate tensions between technological innovation and pedagogical values, and how these interactions affect their sense of professional identity. Synthesizing the literature suggests that the question is no longer *whether* teachers can use AI effectively, but *how* they experience, adapt to, and critically engage with it in authentic teaching contexts.

ChatGPT in Language Teaching: Opportunities and Concerns

Empirical research on ChatGPT in language education presents both optimistic and cautionary perspectives. On one hand, studies report that ChatGPT can enhance creativity, reduce preparation time, and offer tailored instructional ideas for language teaching (Bonner et al., 2023). On the other, scholars highlight risks such as overreliance on AI, ethical dilemmas, and the potential erosion of teacher autonomy (Pack & Maloney, 2024). The coexistence of these contrasting viewpoints reveals an important trend: enthusiasm for ChatGPT's pedagogical potential is tempered by apprehension about its implications for teacher expertise, authenticity, and critical thinking. Synthesizing across studies, it becomes evident that ChatGPT's educational impact depends less on its technical capability and more on how teachers interpret, mediate, and contextualize its outputs within their instructional realities.

The Gap in Research

Across the reviewed literature, a clear pattern emerges. While existing studies comprehensively document ChatGPT's functional affordances and associated risks, they tend to prioritize *what the technology does* rather than *how teachers experience and make sense of it*. Most investigations employ quantitative or experimental methods, focusing on measurable outcomes such as efficiency, accuracy, or attitudes. Consequently, the nuanced, interpretive dimensions of professional practice—teachers' reflections, emotions, and adaptive strategies—remain largely unexamined. A qualitative approach is therefore essential to capture these lived experiences, providing insight into how EFL teachers negotiate the pedagogical, ethical, and emotional implications of integrating ChatGPT into their lesson planning. Addressing this gap, the present study seeks to explore the meaning-making processes of EFL teachers as they engage with AI tools, offering a more holistic understanding of technology use in language education.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of EFL teachers using ChatGPT for lesson planning. Phenomenology is appropriate because it seeks to understand the meanings individuals ascribe to their experiences and how they make sense of a particular phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). By focusing on teachers' subjective experiences, this study aims to capture the richness and complexity of their interactions with ChatGPT within their professional contexts.

Participants

The participants consisted of nine EFL teachers from various secondary schools who had integrated ChatGPT into their lesson planning processes for a minimum of three months. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify teachers who could provide rich, contextually grounded insights into the phenomenon under investigation. The group represented a diverse range of teaching contexts, including both public and private institutions located in urban and semi-urban areas. Their teaching experience ranged from 2 to 18 years ($M = 9.4$ years), encompassing both novice and veteran educators with different levels of familiarity with educational technology.

Most participants taught students at the intermediate and upper-intermediate proficiency levels and were responsible for preparing learners for national examinations and communicative English programs. Several participants had prior experience using digital platforms such as Google Classroom, Quizizz, or Edmodo, while others reported that ChatGPT represented their first sustained engagement with AI-assisted tools for pedagogical purposes. This variation in experience and institutional background provided a wide lens through which to understand teachers' engagement with ChatGPT across differing professional realities. Such diversity enhances the transferability of the findings by reflecting a range of EFL teaching settings and technological competencies.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews lasting approximately 45–60 minutes each. The interviews focused on teachers' experiences, perceptions, challenges, and reflections related to their use of ChatGPT in lesson planning. Sample questions included:

- “Can you describe how you use ChatGPT when planning your English lessons?”
- “What positive or negative experiences have you encountered while using ChatGPT?”
- “How has using ChatGPT influenced your approach to lesson design and teaching?”

Additionally, follow-up prompts encouraged participants to elaborate on emotions, thought processes, and professional impacts. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-step framework, was employed to analyze the interview transcripts. This systematic approach involved familiarizing with the data through repeated reading of transcripts, generating initial codes to identify meaningful data segments related to the research questions, searching for patterns and grouping codes into potential themes, reviewing themes to ensure coherence and distinction, defining and naming themes to capture their essence, and finally producing the final report with illustrative quotes. This method allowed for an in-depth interpretation of teachers' experiences while maintaining flexibility to capture unexpected insights that emerged from the data.

FINDINGS

Research Question 1

This section presents the comprehensive thematic analysis of the key themes that emerged from in-depth interviews with EFL teachers regarding their lived experiences using ChatGPT for lesson planning purposes. Through careful examination of participant narratives, the findings reveal a nuanced and multifaceted landscape that encompasses both positive and negative dimensions of AI integration in pedagogical practice. The analysis captures the inherent complexity and contradictory nature of teachers' interactions with the AI tool, illustrating how their experiences are neither uniformly positive nor negative, but rather characterized by tensions, adaptations, and evolving perspectives that reflect the dynamic relationship between human expertise and artificial intelligence in educational contexts. These emergent themes illuminate the intricate ways in which teachers navigate the opportunities and challenges presented by ChatGPT, revealing how their professional identities, pedagogical decision-making processes, and lesson design practices are being reshaped through their ongoing engagement with this transformative technology. The findings demonstrate that teachers' experiences with ChatGPT are deeply contextual and highly individualized, influenced by factors such as their technological comfort levels, pedagogical philosophies, institutional constraints, and personal teaching styles, ultimately painting a rich portrait of the contemporary EFL educator's journey in integrating artificial intelligence into their professional practice.

Table 1

Thematic Categories of experiences EFL teachers had while interacting with ChatGPT in the process of planning lessons

Theme Number	Theme Title	Description	Representative Quote
1	Enhanced Efficiency and Resource Availability	ChatGPT saves time and provides diverse lesson materials	"ChatGPT helps me generate different exercises quickly..." (Teacher A)
2	Encouragement of Creativity and Inspiration	AI sparks new ideas for lesson activities	"It's refreshing and keeps my lessons interesting." (Teacher D)
3	Challenges with Contextual Relevance and Accuracy	Need for careful review and adaptation of AI outputs	"I have to spend time editing or adjusting the materials." (Teacher F)
4	Feelings of Dependence and Professional Tension	Concern about over-reliance affecting teaching identity	"I worry that if I depend too much... I might lose some of my own teaching style." (Teacher B)

Theme 1: Enhanced Efficiency and Resource Availability

The overwhelming majority of participants described ChatGPT as an invaluable pedagogical assistant that fundamentally transformed their lesson planning experience by significantly reducing the time, effort, and cognitive load traditionally associated with material preparation. Teachers consistently highlighted their appreciation for the immediate, 24/7 accessibility to an extensive array of language learning resources that

would otherwise require hours of research, compilation, and adaptation. This enhanced efficiency manifested in various forms: rapid generation of contextually appropriate vocabulary lists tailored to specific topics or proficiency levels, creation of authentic-sounding sample dialogues that could be customized for different communicative scenarios, development of diverse activity ideas ranging from traditional grammar exercises to innovative communicative tasks, and provision of ready-made assessment tools and rubrics. The immediacy of ChatGPT's responses proved particularly valuable for teachers working under tight deadlines or facing unexpected changes to their teaching schedules.

“ChatGPT helps me generate different exercises quickly, especially when I’m short on time. It’s like having a co-planner who never sleeps.” (Teacher A)

Teachers viewed the AI tool as a reliable collaborative partner rather than merely a technological resource. This metaphor of ChatGPT as a "co-planner" reveals how teachers conceptualized their relationship with the AI—not as a replacement for their expertise, but as a supportive colleague who could provide assistance during moments of creative block or time pressure. The theme of enhanced efficiency extended beyond mere time-saving to encompass qualitative improvements in resource variety and accessibility. Teachers reported being able to explore materials and approaches that they might not have encountered through traditional resource channels, effectively expanding their pedagogical repertoire and enhancing the diversity of their instructional materials. This increased efficiency also allowed educators to allocate more time to other essential aspects of teaching, such as providing individualized feedback to students, reflecting on pedagogical effectiveness, and engaging in professional development activities.

Theme 2: Encouragement of Creativity and Inspiration

A significant number of participants experienced ChatGPT as a catalyst for creative rejuvenation, reporting that the AI tool consistently challenged their established teaching patterns and inspired them to explore innovative pedagogical approaches they had not previously considered. This creative stimulation manifested through the generation of novel activity designs, unexpected content connections, creative assessment formats, and fresh perspectives on familiar topics. Teachers described experiencing moments of genuine surprise and excitement when ChatGPT proposed activities or approaches that broke through their habitual thinking patterns or suggested connections between seemingly unrelated concepts. The AI's ability to synthesize information from diverse sources and present it in unexpected ways served as a powerful antidote to the creative stagnation that many educators experience after years of teaching similar content.

“Sometimes ChatGPT gives me ideas for games or writing prompts that I wouldn’t have thought of. It’s refreshing and keeps my lessons interesting.” (Teacher D)

Teachers appreciated how ChatGPT helped them break free from repetitive lesson structures and explore new pedagogical territories. This creative inspiration often led to a snowball effect, where one AI-generated idea would spark additional creative thoughts and adaptations from the teacher, resulting in more dynamic and engaging lesson plans.

Teachers reported that their interactions with ChatGPT often functioned as brainstorming sessions, where the AI's suggestions served as starting points for further creative development rather than final products to be implemented without modification.

The creative enhancement extended beyond individual lesson activities to encompass broader pedagogical experimentation. Several participants mentioned that ChatGPT's suggestions encouraged them to try new teaching methodologies, explore different aspects of language learning they had previously neglected, and develop more student-centered approaches to instruction. This theme suggests that ChatGPT's value lies not only in what it directly provides but also in how it stimulates teachers' own creative thinking processes, leading to more innovative and varied instructional designs that ultimately benefit student learning experiences.

Theme 3: Challenges with Contextual Relevance and Accuracy

Despite the substantial benefits reported by participants, teachers frequently encountered significant challenges related to the cultural, pedagogical, and contextual appropriateness of ChatGPT's suggestions. These challenges manifested across multiple dimensions: cultural misalignment where AI-generated content reflected Western perspectives or contexts that were unfamiliar or inappropriate for local student populations, linguistic complexity issues where suggested materials were either too advanced or too simplistic for students' actual proficiency levels, curriculum incompatibility where generated content failed to align with specific educational standards, learning objectives, or assessment requirements, and factual inaccuracies or outdated information that required careful verification and correction.

“Sometimes the examples or vocabulary it gives are too advanced or don’t fit our syllabus. I have to spend time editing or adjusting the materials.”
(Teacher F)

Many participants found that ChatGPT's outputs often required substantial modification before being suitable for classroom use. This need for extensive editing and adaptation sometimes undermined the efficiency gains that initially attracted teachers to the tool, creating a paradox where the time saved in initial content generation was offset by the time required for customization and verification.

Teachers also expressed concerns about ChatGPT's tendency to generate content that, while grammatically correct and pedagogically sound in general terms, lacked the nuanced understanding of local educational contexts, student backgrounds, and cultural sensitivities that experienced educators bring to their lesson planning. Some participants noted instances where ChatGPT suggested activities that were culturally inappropriate, topics that were sensitive in their particular context, or methodologies that conflicted with established institutional practices or student expectations. These experiences highlighted the irreplaceable value of human judgment and contextual knowledge in educational planning, reinforcing the notion that AI tools, regardless of their sophistication, cannot fully replicate the nuanced decision-making that characterizes expert teaching practice.

The accuracy concerns extended beyond cultural and contextual issues to include factual errors, outdated information, and occasionally inconsistent explanations of grammatical

concepts or language rules. Teachers reported developing heightened vigilance in reviewing AI-generated content, often cross-referencing suggestions with authoritative sources or relying on their professional expertise to identify and correct inaccuracies. This theme underscores the critical importance of maintaining teachers' roles as educational experts who must critically evaluate and adapt AI-generated content rather than accepting it uncritically.

Theme 4: Feelings of Dependence and Professional Tension

A particularly nuanced and emotionally charged theme emerged around participants' complex feelings regarding their increasing reliance on ChatGPT and the implications this dependence might have for their professional identity, autonomy, and creative capabilities. This theme encompassed concerns about skill atrophy, questions about professional authenticity, anxiety about technological dependence, and uncertainty about the evolving nature of teaching expertise in an AI-enhanced educational landscape. Many teachers experienced internal conflicts between their appreciation for ChatGPT's practical benefits and their fears about potentially compromising their professional independence or creative integrity.

“I worry that if I depend too much on ChatGPT, I might lose some of my own teaching style or skills in creating materials.” (Teacher B)

Teachers grappled with questions about the appropriate balance between AI assistance and human creativity. This concern reflected deeper anxieties about professional identity and the unique value that human educators bring to the teaching process. Teachers wondered whether excessive reliance on AI-generated content might gradually erode their ability to create original materials, think creatively about pedagogical problems, or develop their distinctive teaching personalities.

The professional tension manifested in various ways: some teachers reported feeling guilty when using ChatGPT extensively, as if they were somehow "cheating" or not fulfilling their professional responsibilities, others worried about becoming intellectually lazy or losing touch with their creative instincts, several participants expressed uncertainty about how to present AI-assisted lesson plans to colleagues or supervisors, and many teachers struggled with questions about ownership and authenticity when using AI-generated materials. These concerns were often accompanied by philosophical questions about the nature of teaching expertise and creativity in an era of increasingly sophisticated AI tools.

Interestingly, this theme also revealed how teachers were actively negotiating their relationship with AI technology, developing personal strategies and boundaries to maintain their sense of professional agency while benefiting from ChatGPT's capabilities. Some participants described implementing self-imposed limits on AI use, others developed hybrid approaches that combined AI assistance with their original ideas, and many emphasized the importance of viewing ChatGPT as a starting point rather than an endpoint in their creative process. This ongoing negotiation suggests that teachers are not passive recipients of AI technology but active agents in defining how these tools integrate into their professional practice.

Research Question 2

This section delves into the profound and often transformative ways in which teachers reflect on ChatGPT's influence that extends far beyond its immediate practical applications in lesson planning, focusing specifically on the deeper, more fundamental changes occurring in their professional identity, pedagogical thinking processes, and evolving approaches to lesson design methodology. Through careful analysis of participant reflections and introspective accounts, four major interconnected themes emerged from the data that collectively illuminate how EFL teachers are grappling with fundamental questions about their roles, expertise, and professional practices in an increasingly AI-integrated educational landscape. These themes reveal that teachers' engagement with ChatGPT is not merely a matter of adopting a new tool or streamlining existing processes, but rather represents a complex renegotiation of their understanding of what it means to be a language educator, how pedagogical knowledge is constructed and applied, and what constitutes authentic, effective lesson design in the contemporary classroom. The findings demonstrate that teachers are actively reflecting on how AI integration challenges traditional notions of educational expertise, creativity, and professional autonomy, while simultaneously considering how these technological capabilities might enhance or potentially diminish their unique contributions to student learning. This reflective dimension of the research captures the deeply personal and professional journey that educators undergo as they navigate the integration of artificial intelligence into their teaching practice, revealing both the opportunities for professional growth and the tensions surrounding changing professional identities in an era of rapid technological advancement.

Table 2

Thematic Categories of How EFL teachers reflect on the influence of ChatGPT on their professional identity, pedagogical thinking, and lesson design practices

Theme Number	Theme Title	Description	Representative Quote
1	Enhanced Efficiency and Resource Availability	ChatGPT saves time and provides diverse lesson materials	"ChatGPT helps me generate different exercises quickly..." (Teacher A)
2	Encouragement of Creativity and Inspiration	AI sparks new ideas for lesson activities	"It's refreshing and keeps my lessons interesting." (Teacher D)
3	Challenges with Contextual Relevance and Accuracy	Need for careful review and adaptation of AI outputs	"I have to spend time editing or adjusting the materials." (Teacher F)
4	Feelings of Dependence and Professional Tension	Concern about over-reliance affecting teaching identity	"I worry that if I depend too much... I might lose some of my own teaching style." (Teacher B)

Theme 1: Reimagining Professional Identity with AI Collaboration

Teachers consistently described experiencing a fundamental paradigm shift in how they conceptualize their professional identity, moving away from the traditional model of

educators as sole creators and authoritative sources of lesson content toward a more collaborative framework that positions them as facilitators and co-creators working in partnership with AI technologies. This transformation represents more than just a change in practice; it signals a profound evolution in professional self-perception that challenges long-held assumptions about the nature of teaching expertise and the boundaries of educational authority. Participants articulated this shift through various metaphors and descriptions that revealed their growing comfort with shared agency in the lesson planning process, describing ChatGPT using terms such as "teaching assistant," "creative partner," "brainstorming companion," and "tireless collaborator."

“Using ChatGPT makes me feel like my role is changing. I’m not just a teacher anymore but also a facilitator working alongside AI.”
(Teacher C)

Teachers described experiencing an expansion rather than a diminishment of their professional role. This expanded identity encompasses new competencies and responsibilities: becoming skilled at prompting and directing AI tools effectively, developing expertise in evaluating and refining AI-generated content, learning to synthesize human intuition with algorithmic suggestions, and maintaining the delicate balance between leveraging AI capabilities and preserving human pedagogical judgment. Teachers reported that this collaborative approach often enhanced their sense of professional efficacy by providing them with powerful tools that amplified their creative and planning capabilities while allowing them to focus more attention on higher-order teaching tasks such as understanding individual student needs, building relationships, and facilitating meaningful learning experiences.

This emerging identity also reflected a progressive mindset that views technological integration not as a threat to traditional teaching roles but as an evolution that enhances educators' capacity to serve their students effectively. Many participants described feeling empowered by their ability to harness AI capabilities while maintaining their essential role as pedagogical decision-makers, relationship builders, and learning facilitators. This reimagined professional identity suggests that teachers are actively constructing a new paradigm of educational expertise that embraces technological collaboration while preserving the fundamentally human aspects of teaching that cannot be replicated by artificial intelligence.

Theme 2: Reflection and Critical Evaluation in Pedagogical Thinking

The integration of ChatGPT into lesson planning practices paradoxically led to heightened levels of pedagogical reflection and critical evaluation among participants, with many teachers reporting that AI-generated suggestions prompted them to examine their teaching practices, assumptions, and decision-making processes more deliberately and systematically than they had previously. This increased reflective practice manifested in several dimensions: teachers found themselves questioning the rationale behind their habitual teaching approaches, critically evaluating the pedagogical soundness of both AI-generated and self-created materials, considering alternative methodologies and perspectives they might not have encountered otherwise, and developing more explicit criteria for assessing the appropriateness of instructional strategies for their specific contexts and student populations..

“ChatGPT sometimes gives me ideas that challenge my usual methods, so I have to think carefully about what fits my students’ needs.” (Teacher E)

EFL teachers in this study articulated a common experience where AI suggestions served as a catalyst for deeper pedagogical contemplation. This process of critical evaluation often led teachers to develop more nuanced understanding of their own teaching philosophies and practices, as they were compelled to articulate why certain approaches were more suitable than others for their particular circumstances. The need to evaluate AI-generated content forced educators to make their tacit pedagogical knowledge more explicit, leading to increased self-awareness about their teaching decisions and the theoretical foundations underlying their practice.

Furthermore, teachers reported that the diversity of suggestions provided by ChatGPT exposed them to pedagogical approaches and techniques they had not previously considered, prompting them to reflect on the assumptions and limitations of their existing practices. This exposure to alternative methodologies served as a form of informal professional development, encouraging teachers to expand their pedagogical repertoires and question established routines. The process of determining which AI suggestions to adopt, modify, or reject required teachers to engage in sophisticated pedagogical reasoning that considered factors such as learning objectives, student characteristics, cultural context, and assessment requirements. This enhanced critical evaluation extended beyond individual lesson planning to encompass broader questions about teaching effectiveness, student engagement, and learning outcomes, ultimately strengthening teachers' capacity for reflective practice and professional growth.

Theme 3: Flexibility and Adaptation in Lesson Design Practices

Participants consistently reported experiencing unprecedented levels of flexibility and adaptability in their lesson design practices as a direct result of ChatGPT's capacity to generate multiple variations, alternatives, and options for instructional activities, materials, and approaches. This enhanced flexibility manifested in both the planning process and the implementation phase of instruction, enabling teachers to be more responsive to the dynamic and unpredictable nature of classroom environments. The availability of numerous AI-generated alternatives empowered educators to move beyond single-option planning toward more adaptive and contingent approaches that could accommodate varying student needs, unexpected circumstances, and emerging opportunities for learning.

“Having several versions of activities from ChatGPT lets me tailor lessons better, depending on the class mood or level.” (Teacher G)

EFL teachers in this present study highlights how the abundance of options provided by AI enabled more nuanced and responsive pedagogical decision-making. This increased flexibility supported several key aspects of effective teaching: differentiated instruction that could address diverse learning styles, proficiency levels, and interests within a single classroom, responsive teaching that allowed educators to adjust their plans based on real-time assessment of student engagement and understanding, contingency planning that provided backup options when primary activities proved insufficient or inappropriate, and

iterative refinement of lessons based on ongoing evaluation of student responses and learning outcomes.

Teachers described feeling liberated from the constraints of single-path lesson planning, reporting that the availability of multiple options reduced their anxiety about lessons that might not proceed as anticipated and increased their confidence in their ability to maintain student engagement throughout the instructional period. This flexibility also supported more experimental and innovative teaching approaches, as educators felt more comfortable trying new activities knowing that they had readily available alternatives if their initial choices proved unsuccessful. The theme of enhanced flexibility extended beyond individual lesson planning to encompass broader curriculum adaptation, with teachers reporting greater ability to modify their teaching approaches in response to changing student needs, institutional requirements, or external circumstances.

Theme 4: Ethical and Professional Concerns about Dependence and Authenticity

Despite their overall positive experiences with ChatGPT, teachers grappled with complex ethical and professional concerns regarding the implications of AI dependence on their teaching authenticity, professional integrity, and long-term pedagogical development. These concerns manifested across multiple dimensions: questions about intellectual honesty and transparency in using AI-generated materials, worries about the potential erosion of their unique teaching voice and personal pedagogical style, concerns about creating appropriate boundaries between AI assistance and personal creativity, and anxiety about the long-term implications of technological dependence on their professional skills and autonomy.

“I worry that relying on ChatGPT might make my lessons less personal, so I try to keep my own touch.” (Teacher H)

EFL teachers shared concern about maintaining pedagogical authenticity in an age of AI assistance. This statement reflects deeper questions about what constitutes genuine teaching practice and how educators can leverage AI tools while preserving the personal connections, cultural sensitivity, and intuitive understanding that characterize effective human instruction. Teachers reported developing various strategies to address these concerns: establishing personal limits on AI usage to ensure continued development of their own creative capabilities, consciously infusing AI-generated materials with their personal teaching style and cultural perspectives, maintaining transparency with colleagues and supervisors about their use of AI tools, and viewing ChatGPT as a starting point for creativity rather than a substitute for original thinking.

The theme of ethical concern also encompassed broader questions about professional responsibility and the appropriate role of AI in education. Some teachers worried about whether extensive use of AI-generated materials might compromise their ability to understand and respond to their students' unique needs, while others questioned the fairness of using AI assistance when creating materials that would be evaluated by supervisors or used in comparative assessments of teaching effectiveness. These ethical considerations led many participants to engage in ongoing self-reflection about their teaching practices and to develop personal codes of conduct for AI usage that balanced technological benefits with professional integrity.

DISCUSSION

This study explored EFL teachers' lived experiences using ChatGPT for lesson planning, focusing on both practical interactions and reflective perceptions. The findings reveal a complex and dynamic relationship between teachers and AI tools, encompassing efficiency gains, creativity stimulation, professional identity shifts, and ethical considerations. These results contribute to the growing discourse on AI integration in education, particularly within language teaching contexts.

Consistent with prior research on AI-assisted teaching tools (e.g., ElSayary, 2024; Hojeij et al., 2024), teachers in this study valued ChatGPT for streamlining lesson preparation and expanding resource availability. The ability of ChatGPT to quickly generate varied instructional materials aligns with the increasing need for flexible and responsive lesson design in EFL classrooms (Liao & Li, 2023). Importantly, participants also highlighted how ChatGPT stimulated their creativity by proposing novel ideas, reinforcing the notion that AI can function not just as an assistant but as a source of inspiration (Williyan et al., 2024). This challenges traditional views of technology as purely mechanistic and underscores its role in supporting teacher agency and innovation.

Despite these benefits, teachers faced challenges related to the contextual relevance and accuracy of AI-generated content, echoing concerns from previous studies about the cultural appropriateness and alignment of AI outputs with local curricula (Walter, 2024). The need for critical evaluation and adaptation illustrates that AI cannot replace teacher expertise but must be integrated thoughtfully. This finding supports the idea that technology integration is a co-constructive process requiring teachers' pedagogical judgment (Lachner et al., 2024). Thus, ChatGPT functions as a tool that augments rather than supplants teacher knowledge.

The shift in teachers' professional identity—from sole creators to collaborators with AI—resonates with contemporary conceptualizations of teacher agency in the digital era (Priestley et al., 2016). Participants' recognition of AI as a co-teacher reflects an adaptive mindset that embraces technological change while maintaining pedagogical responsibility. This aligns with Tammets and Ley (2023), who argue that effective AI integration involves redefining teacher roles rather than diminishing them. Furthermore, the increased pedagogical reflection stimulated by AI suggestions suggests that ChatGPT acts as a reflective mirror, prompting teachers to reconsider and refine their instructional decisions. This enhances professional growth and supports continuous improvement in teaching practice.

The ambivalence teachers expressed about dependence on ChatGPT highlights an important ethical dimension of AI use in education. Concerns about losing authenticity and personal teaching style echo broader debates about the implications of AI for professional identity and autonomy (Gentile et al., 2023). This tension indicates that while AI can empower teachers, it also challenges them to navigate boundaries between assistance and over-reliance. Maintaining a balance requires critical awareness and ethical engagement, which should be emphasized in teacher training and professional development programs.

The findings suggest several practical implications. Teacher education programs should incorporate training on AI tools like ChatGPT, focusing not only on technical skills but also on critical pedagogy and ethical considerations. For novice teachers, such training can provide guidance and confidence in lesson design, while for experienced teachers it can stimulate creativity and encourage reflective re-examination of established practices. School leaders and policymakers need to recognize the dual nature of AI as both an enabler and a challenge, providing support systems that encourage reflective and responsible use. Moreover, AI developers should collaborate with educators to improve the cultural and curricular relevance of AI-generated content to better serve diverse teaching contexts. These implications are particularly important across varying educational environments; for example, teachers in urban schools may have access to more robust technological infrastructure, whereas those in rural or resource-limited settings may require institutional support and capacity building to ensure equitable access and effective AI integration.

While this study offers valuable insights into EFL teachers' experiences with ChatGPT-assisted lesson planning, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the relatively small sample size and focus on a specific educational context limit the generalizability of the findings. The teachers' experiences may reflect contextual factors such as institutional policies, access to technology, and regional educational practices. Second, the study relied on self-reported data from interviews, which may be influenced by personal interpretation or selective recall. Finally, the rapid evolution of AI technologies means that teachers' perceptions may change over time. Future studies could employ longitudinal or mixed-method designs to explore how teachers' practices and attitudes develop as AI tools continue to evolve and become more integrated into language education.

CONCLUSION

In sum, this study illuminates the multifaceted experiences of EFL teachers integrating ChatGPT into lesson planning. By enhancing efficiency and creativity, fostering reflective practice, and prompting identity renegotiation, ChatGPT holds considerable potential as a pedagogical aid. However, the challenges of contextual adaptation and ethical concerns underscore the necessity for balanced, critical engagement. Future research should further investigate longitudinal effects and student perceptions to provide a more comprehensive understanding of AI's role in language education.

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