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BETWEEN SUPPORT AND SUBSTITUTION: THE PROBLEM OF AI TOOLS ADOPTION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract. The explosion of GenAI, and especially Large Language Models (LLMs) (e.g., ChatGPT), poses a stark dual challenge to Foreign Language Learning (FLL). Despite the transformative impact of AI on training, including personalized practice, instant feedback, and personalized content, the uncritical nature of learners' adoption of AI typically results in substitution—a transfer of foundational cognitive and language skills to the technology. This paper, rooted in pedagogical principles and empirical evidence of global HE policy responses, demonstrates how an excessive overuse of GenAI tools can subvert the critical processes of language acquisition, the error-correction circularity and socio-pragmatic competence. The article maintains that the responsible pedagogical move depends on institutional clarity as well as a deep reconfiguration of learning materials, and of shifts away from actions that permit passive substitution, toward activities that demand critical, supportive integration.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence (AI), Generative AI (GenAI), Foreign Language Learning (FLL), Second Language Acquisition (SLA), support, substitution, overdependence, academic integrity, scaffolding, learner autonomy*

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Introduction

The contradiction between AI and Institutional Reality. The future of language learning is transforming as a result of the adoption of Artificial Intelligence. AI tools offer an unprecedented scaffolding to FLL, where it would also offer personalized learning experiences, access to immediate correction of grammar and pronunciation as well as access to practice environments in an unprecedented range (Gupta et al., 2025). The impact of increasing efficiency and convenience in the learning environment is driving a progressive and wide-spread dissemination across global Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Jin et al., 2024; McDonald et al., 2023). Yet this broader institutional embrace is only undermined by the inevitable threat of cognitive offloading. The tools that can facilitate learning can be quickly used as a means to circumvent the arduous act of learning. While global HEIs navigate this terrain, policy responses underscore phases of procrastination, remediation, and adaptation, where many universities are currently encouraging AI use, yet struggle to provide clear, detailed guidance, especially externally to writing instruction (Cheng & YIM, 2024; McDonald et al., 2023). From the multicultural perspective, we find strong awareness and application of learners for information retrieval and text paraphrasing amongst others, accentuating the need for explicit ethical and academic integrity frameworks (Yusuf et al., 2024). This study assumes that the main issue of language pedagogy and materials development is not technological failure, but, rather, the absence of conceptual distinction between AI as temporary assistance and AI as permanent replacement for linguistic work that needs to continue.

Theoretical Background: Support versus Substitution? The pedagogical value of AI comes down to what the AI says. A psychology-based framework on the psychology of learning allows for the crucial difference:

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- AI as Support (Scaffolding): In this mode, the aid is used as a tool to help ease the initial hurdle to access complex tasks. It is not only consistent with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), but it also enables the learner to perform a task with assistance that is beyond their ability to do independently. Crucially, the learner is the active cognitive agent, relying on the AI's assistance (e.g., writing drafts, checking of complex vocab) to attend to higher order tasks, which ultimately contributes to autonomy.

- AI, then (Substitution is cognitive offloading), is when a learner "substitutes" an AI by offloading the intellectual core of the task and instead automates the work for the AI, which enables the learner to produce its own work without the assistance of assistance. For example, using an LLM to produce a whole essay or turning to an AI translator for complex comprehension removes all internal linguistic processing necessary to master the skill. Research conducted empirically on this substitutive use has shown a disturbing negative correlation with general learning performance and an increase in learning-related anxiety (Frontiers, 2025).

In some ways, a technology addiction, overreliance on AI for generating and understanding language completely undermines proven mechanisms of Second Language Acquisition (SLA):

- Impaired Error-Correction Cycle: Correcting errors immediately and accurately, by an AI tool, can eliminate the cognitive dissonance required for deep learning. When a machine corrects an error, the learner loses out on the chance to do the reflective corrective efforts that consolidate their grammar and vocabulary knowledge and thus has a reduced ability to reflect on their learning and correct errors himself.

- Erosion of Socio-Pragmatic Competence: Language-proficiency is not just for grammatical correctness but also its use; It is the use of linguistic proficiency in a

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social context where language is not just a simple grammatical accuracy, but needs communicative competence – where individuals can only use correct grammar and/or language in the proper form in the social, cultural, linguistic and moral space. And while AI can mimic conversation, it is devoid of the human-to-human experience needed to produce a human-to-human social context that fosters empathy, negotiate meaning, decipher the context, interpret meaning, read between the lines, interpret non-verbal clues, and appreciate the subtlety of culture. Having an overuse of chatbots in question would train learners to work effectively only with a nonjudgmental, not human operator.

- Metacognitive Laziness Development: Instant solutions lead to expectation of effortless outcome. This metacognitive laziness discourages learners from engaging with complicated linguistic structures, negatively affecting the development of strong internal linguistic models and self-regulated language learning (SRL) strategies. If learners feel that "AI will be able to do it for me," motivation for in depth engagement inevitably wanes (Sanako, 2025). The Need for Institutional Responsibility and Pedagogical Redesign. The antidote to overdependence requires an approach that integrates policy-makers and pedagogies, moving the discussion from dystopia, utopia of all definitions, to a focus on pragmatic, ethical integration (McGrath et al., 2025).

The HEIs are still tasked to step beyond reactionary measures and create a coherent policy framework that reinforces academic integrity, equity, and improves teaching and learning (Jin et al., 2024). Universities should adopt timely and explicit guidance by updating course outlines and syllabi that specify the permissible use of GenAI in each and every learning activity (Cheng & YIM, 2024; McDonald et al., 2023). This brings clarity to students, but it also gives a framework for faculty. The policies should focus on addressing the ethical implications, as well as the potential

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for algorithmic bias and concerns around data privacy. Moreover, the dependence on high-cost AI systems ought to be weighed against the objective of educational equity and access for all students (McDonald et al., 2023).

FLL and Materials Development Pedagogy Repositioning. The answer to substitution is pedagogical design that renders positive, critical AI application as the foundation of success. This will demand new material:

- Developing AI Literacy Educators and materials developers should explicitly teach students how to use AI as a critical partner. All kinds of lessons are required: how to write meaningful prompts or feedback with AI generation; how to verify AI-generated content accuracy and fit into the culture; and finally when tools have stretched into the role from scaffolding up and down to substitution.

- Designing Tasking for Immersed in AI-Leveraged and AI Resistance.

For an *AI-Leveraged Task*: the output of AI need to be used as input for a higher-order critical task ("Use an LLM to generate three different email responses. Now, critique and revise them for cultural appropriateness and professional tone, justifying your edits."). *AI-Resistant Tasks* need skills or contexts that AI cannot copy, whether that be negotiating in person, giving public speeches in real-time, working with a multi-cultural team — or synthesizing deeply contextualized, non-digitized information.

A learning environment will allow for required reflective steps within which students must examine whether what the AI offers them a correction or output, instead of accepting it. That strengthens the metacognitive step that connects effort to acquisition.

Incorporating Generative AI into Foreign Language Learning represents a new paradigm of pedagogy. While the potential for support for individualized learning is vast, the threat of replacing the critical cognitive challenge from the introduction of

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such a model remains a notable threat to the long-term success of both linguistic competency and learner autonomy. For teachers of languages and developers of such materials, the way forward is not prohibition, but reformation. Establishing clear institutional policies and designing learning experiences that require critical engagement, justification, and reflection is key to making sure that the AI provides a strong, accelerating tool that elevates the learner rather than completing the process for them.

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