

Article

A Narrative Inquiry into Language Teacher Identity Construction in the Global GenAI Context

Mark Feng Teng

Macao Polytechnic University, Macau SAR, China

Jesse W. C. Yip *

The Education University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR, China

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Abstract

The emergence of Generative AI (GenAI) inevitably leads to changes in EFL teacher identity construction. Research exploring the discursive negotiation of teacher identity in the context of GenAI remains scarce. This study examines how English language teachers negotiate their professional identities amid the integration of GenAI in writing instruction at a university in China. Drawing upon Darvin and Norton's (2015) model of investment, this study investigates how institutional resources, emotional labor, and technological access influence identity construction. Through narrative inquiry with six Chinese EFL teachers, the findings reveal that teachers navigate ideological tensions, manage capital disparities, and evolve their roles as either "worriers" or "warriors" in response to the community changes caused by GenAI. More specifically, while one group of teachers resist AI due to concerns about the erosion of critical thinking, others embrace it to enhance efficiency and redefine their expertise. The study offers implications for enhancing teachers' professional development by addressing both technical AI skills and identity negotiation.

Keywords

GenAI, teacher identity, investment, capital, ideology

1 Introduction

The rapid advancement of Generative AI (GenAI) has driven a surge in education research, particularly following the emergence of various GenAI models. While ChatGPT has spurred widespread adoption of AI tools across industries, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has become one of the focal points for debates about AI integration (Hao et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2025; Moorhouse, 2024; Teng, 2024a). Regarding this topic, EFL teachers exhibit polarized perspectives: many advocate for GenAI's potential because it can enhance students' pedagogical efficiency in writing (Huang & Mizumoto, 2024),

*Corresponding author. Email: jwcyip@eduhk.hk

engagement (Huang & Teng, 2025; Teng, 2024b; Teng & Huang, 2025), metacognition in writing (Teng, 2025a), and motivation in writing (Teng, 2025b), whereas others express concerns about its dehumanizing effects on English language teaching (Kostka & Toncelli, 2023) and the possibility that GenAI might be as a ghostwriter, potentially replacing writing teachers in the future (Yang et al., 2024), leading to a love-hate complex feeling among language teachers (Toncelli & Kostka, 2024). Critics argue that overreliance on AI tools is likely to undermine teacher-student relationships and destabilize professional identities, prompting a complex process of identity reconstruction among language educators (Tsou et al., 2024). This duality reflects tensions between AI technological innovation and the identity construction of EFL writing teachers.

The integration of GenAI into language classrooms has prompted a critical re-examination of EFL teachers' professional identities, particularly as their roles have shifted from instructors to curators of machine-mediated learning (Gao et al., 2024). The reformulation of EFL teacher identity in relation to GenAI requires a comprehensive and systematic investigation into crucial contributive aspects, such as ideologies, resources, attitudes, and emotions. Darwin and Norton's (2015) identity and investment model provides a robust theoretical lens, as the model conceptualizes identity as a dynamic construct shaped by power relations, capital, and ideology, where "investment" reflects individuals' commitment to practices that enhance their symbolic and material resources. This model is appropriate for exploring how language teachers navigate AI adoption in enhancing EFL students' learning in writing because it highlights the tension between teachers' pedagogical beliefs—such as humanistic approaches to writing—and social or institutional pressures to adopt AI-driven tools. As Beijaard et al. (2004) note, such technological disruptions can destabilize educators' self-concepts, particularly when AI-mediated instruction clashes with deeply held beliefs about effective teaching practices (Gao et al., 2024). In other words, language teacher identity is further complicated in the context of GenAI. The complex and discursive identity construction of language teachers can thus be examined and conceptualized through the notion of "investment" in Darwin and Norton's (2015) framework. Teachers' willingness and attempt to adopt AI tools hinges on perceived returns, such as whether these technologies expand their professional capital (e.g., through data-driven instructional strategies) or threaten their authority and significance in the classroom. This dynamic underscore the ideological conflict between humanistic educational philosophies and techno-utopian narratives about AI's role in writing instruction.

This study employs Darwin and Norton's (2015) framework to understand EFL teachers' identity construction at a university in China, revealing how contextual forces, such as institutional AI mandates, interact with individual agency during teachers' identity (re)formation. The framework foregrounds the temporal dimension of identity negotiation, allowing researchers to investigate how teachers invest in the integration of AI tools with their teaching as they evaluate risks and rewards over time—a dimension often overlooked in static identity models (Beijaard et al., 2004). By prioritizing ideological and temporal conflicts, the framework advances our understanding of how language teachers navigate the shifting terrain of AI-mediated writing instruction while striving to preserve their professional values. This article begins by revisiting the latest studies focusing on discursive identity construction and development of EFL teachers in the university context, elucidating the (potential) impacts of GenAI on teacher identity. Drawing upon Darwin and Norton's model of investment (2015), the present study sheds light on theories and understanding of language teacher construction while negotiating with the opportunities and challenges brought by the global GenAI context.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Understanding identity

The discourse surrounding English teacher identity has grown increasingly intricate, shaped by evolving context. Goodson and Cole (1994) describe identity as an evolving construct shaped by the continuous

interplay between personal and professional experiences. Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) substitute “identity” with “self,” emphasizing its deeply personal nature. Moore and Hofman (1988) frame it as the degree to which individuals value their professional roles. Others, like Connelly and Clandinin (1990), portray identity as dynamic “stories to live by,” while Coldron and Smith (1999) view it as fluid and ever-changing. The ambiguity in defining identity arises from its intangible nature, as it is not an externally observable entity but rather an internalized sense of self (Beijaard et al., 2004; DeMarree & Morrison, 2011), and is discursive, dynamic, and socially mediated (Darvin, 2016).

2.2 Teacher identity

Recent literature highlights several research lines on English teacher identity construction. The first line is the relationship between work engagement, grit, and professional identity among English teachers. Fathi et al. (2024) delves into this connection. Based on a sample of 476 EFL teachers in Iran, the study revealed that teachers’ grit, professional identity, and foreign language teaching enjoyment were directly correlated with work engagement for EFL teachers. The second line focuses on emotions and teacher identity. For example, teacher burnout, exacerbated by factors like demanding pedagogy and a lack of institutional or collegial support, significantly affect teachers’ professional identities and overall well-being (Zhang et al., 2024). Yip et al. (2022) emphasize how the ongoing educational reforms in China evoke profound emotional responses among university English teachers, highlighting the importance of recognizing emotions in identity formation.

The third line is English teacher identity in the context of computer-assisted language teaching (CALL) and GenAI. Technological advances have revolutionized education, bringing both opportunities and challenges to language teachers. Trent and Shroff (2013) report an in-depth qualitative study of an innovative program that introduced electronic teaching portfolios in a teacher education institution in Hong Kong. Through semi-structured interviews, the study captures the voices of preservice teachers after participating in an eight-week teaching practicum in which they developed their own e-portfolios. Findings reveal that the e-portfolio process was far more than a bureaucratic requirement; rather, it became a site of tension, growth, and self-discovery. Drawing on personal narratives, field notes from EFL writing classrooms, and an interview conducted by a former student, Yang (2025) highlights the importance of conceptualizing language ideology as a diverse, dynamic, and evolving system of beliefs—one that plays a central role in identity formation among teachers and learners. The impact of another groundbreaking advancement—GenAI—on (English) teachers’ identities will be explored in the next section.

2.3 The impact of GenAI on teacher identity

The emergence of GenAI has fundamentally reshaped the pedagogical landscape, prompting a re-examination of teacher identity and professional roles. Moorhouse and Kohnke (2024) reveal that many language teacher educators in Hong Kong feel unprepared to address generative AI tools, citing a lack of confidence and digital competence. This sense of digital inadequacy, echoed in Lindfors et al. (2021), not only limits educators’ ability to act as “digital role models” but also highlights a broader challenge: the urgent need to foster digital literacies among language teachers (Moorhouse et al., 2024). These findings collectively suggest that GenAI’s rise is not simply a technical issue but one that strikes at the heart of professional self-concept and authority. Further complicating this landscape, Zhang and Dikilitas (2025) demonstrate that novice teachers’ engagement with GenAI is deeply shaped by their sociocultural backgrounds, beliefs, and values. Their study underscores the necessity for L2 teacher education to prioritize critical digital literacies—not as peripheral skills, but as central to the evolving pedagogical identity. The integration of GenAI thus requires educators to negotiate new professional identities, reconciling traditional teaching values with the demands of a digitally mediated environment.

The literature also points to a broader transformation in the roles and identities of language educators. Traditional models, which position teachers as primary sources of knowledge, are increasingly challenged by AI-driven tools that enable personalized, student-centered learning (Tang, 2024). As teachers shift toward facilitating and guiding learning—crafting activities responsive to students' needs (Tang, 2024) and fostering collaborative, interactive environments (Gao et al., 2024)—their professional identities evolve from authoritative experts to adaptive innovators.

This transformation, however, is not without tension. Concerns about AI replacing teachers (Chan & Tsi, 2024; Zhou & Hou, 2024) coexist with arguments that human educators remain indispensable, particularly in designing curricula and nurturing creativity in skill-based subjects (Tang, 2024). The nuanced interplay between human and machine is further complicated by the emotional and relational aspects of teaching, which AI cannot easily replicate (Toncelli & Kostka, 2024). These tensions reflect the complex, sometimes ambivalent responses of teachers as they renegotiate their place in an AI-enhanced educational context.

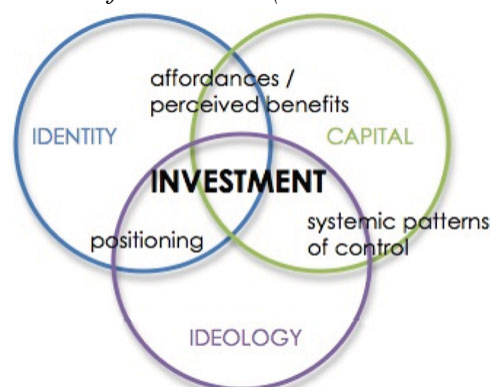
In response, scholars argue that teachers should move beyond being mere collaborators with GenAI to becoming GenAI innovators (Zhai, 2024). This involves exercising leadership in curriculum development, supporting colleagues, and engaging in research on GenAI's pedagogical applications. For instance, Yeh (2025) and Lee et al. (2025) illustrate how GenAI can empower teachers to design interactive, adaptive materials and foster collaborative learning experiences. Yet, as Lan (2024) notes, the integration of GenAI also brings to the fore significant tensions in teacher identity—between individuality and group belonging, humanity and technology, continuity and openness—highlighting the ongoing negotiation required as educators adapt to rapid technological change.

Finally, the issue of academic misconduct in the context of GenAI introduces another dimension to teacher identity. As Teng (2023) and Collie and Martin (2024) argue, educators must now assume the role of ethical guardians, guiding students in the responsible use of AI and establishing clear expectations for academic integrity. This shift necessitates not only GenAI literacy but also the redesign of assessments to emphasize critical thinking and originality—areas where human judgment and creativity remain paramount (Toncelli & Kostka, 2024).

2.4 Darwin and Norton's (2015) model of investment

Darvin and Norton's (2015) model of investment represents a significant theoretical development in applied linguistics, foregrounding the complex interplay of ideology, capital, and identity in shaping language teaching and learning. The model responds to calls for a more nuanced understanding of the sociopolitical dimensions of language practices (Block, 2007), arguing that individuals' participation in language learning is inseparable from broader structures of power and symbolic control (Bourdieu, 1987).

Figure 1
Model of Investment (Darvin & Norton, 2015, p.42)



By conceptualising ideology not simply as a collection of ideas but as institutionalised and socially embedded discourses, Darvin and Norton problematise the uneven distribution of communicative rights and legitimacy within educational spaces. Their model reconfigures capital—economic, cultural, and social—not as static assets, but as resources whose value is contextually determined and dynamically negotiated (Norton, 2013). Identity, in this framework, is theorised as multiply positioned and continually reconstructed through interaction, imagination, and resistance (Wenger, 1998). The model's critical orientation challenges reductionist views of motivation by foregrounding how investment is mediated by material conditions, intersecting social categories, and historical trajectories, thus opening up new possibilities for interrogating the formation and transformation of language teacher identities within globalized and technologized landscapes.

Research conducted by Norton and colleagues in Africa (e.g., Early & Norton, 2014; Mutonyi & Norton, 2007; Norton & Early, 2011; Norton, Jones, & Ahimbisibwe, 2011; Norton & Williams, 2012; Tembe & Norton, 2008) highlights the transformative impact of digital technology on expanding learners' and educators' social imagination and scope of identities. Despite the gap between social imagination and reality, acquiring digital skills increases cultural capital and social influence, broadening prospects for advanced education and international opportunities (Darvin, 2025; Liu & Darvin, 2024). The model of investment is a valuable framework for researching English language teacher identity in relation to the application of AI, as its emphasis on the negotiation of power, capital, and identity offers rich insights into how GenAI is transforming the professional identity of teachers in the EFL context, reshaping their access to resources, and influencing their legitimacy and agency in institutional contexts.

2.4 Research questions

Drawing upon Darvin and Norton's (2015) framework of identity and investment, this study aims to address the following research questions:

- a) What identities do EFL teachers construct in response to GenAI integration?
- b) How do teachers invest in their professional identities amid GenAI?

3 Methodology

3.1 Research context

This study was conducted at an education-focused university located in the Southern part of China. The university has emphasized training future educators, and EFL writing is a key component of its language education curriculum. The teaching context and mechanisms for EFL writing are shaped by both traditional pedagogical practices and the growing demand for innovation in teaching approaches. Conventionally, EFL writing instruction at the university has relied on teacher-centered approaches, with a focus on grammar accuracy, structural coherence, and formulaic writing. Students are often required to produce essays. Peer feedback and collaborative writing activities are occasionally used, whereas teacher feedback remains the dominant form of guidance.

In recent years, however, the university has prioritized innovation in teaching methods as part of its educational reform initiatives. The emphasis on innovation aligns with national policies encouraging the integration of technology into education. As a result, AI-based tools and platforms have inevitably become an integral part of teaching across various courses, including EFL writing courses. In the EFL writing context, the use of AI tools is seen as a way to enhance teaching and learning by providing students with immediate feedback, generating ideas, and supporting the drafting and revision process. Teachers are encouraged to incorporate AI technologies into their pedagogy to foster more interactive and student-centered learning environments. However, this shift has also introduced challenges, such

as a lack of knowledge in using AI, navigating ethical concerns, and ensuring that AI tools are used to complement rather than replace traditional teaching methods.

3.2 Participants

The participants in this study were recruited from a pool of EFL teachers at the selected university. All six participants held a PhD in language education or closely related fields. The group was purposefully diverse across several important dimensions that may shape teacher identity construction. Three participants identified as female and three as male. While all were based at the same university, their geographical backgrounds varied: two were originally from the local region, two from other provinces in China, and two had international backgrounds, having completed a portion of their education or prior teaching experience abroad.

Participants also differed in their years of teaching experience, ranging from early-career educators with fewer than five years in the profession to seasoned teachers with over 20 years of experience. In addition to their teaching responsibilities, two participants held administrative roles such as program coordinators, while the remaining four were primarily engaged in classroom instruction. Prior exposure to educational technology and GenAI tools also varied: one participant reported extensive experience integrating digital tools into the curriculum, while others had more limited or recent exposure to GenAI, reflecting a spectrum of digital literacy and confidence.

This diversity in gender, geographical background, administrative duties, and technological experience allowed us to capture a wide range of perspectives regarding the integration of GenAI into EFL writing instruction. Collecting data from participants with these varied backgrounds provided valuable insights into how different aspects of teachers' identities—shaped by career stage, cultural context, professional roles, and digital literacy—informed their navigation of the challenges and opportunities associated with GenAI in their teaching practices.

In alignment with the standards of narrative inquiry (Kim, 2016), six participants were recruited for the study. According to Kim (2016), six to twelve participants are often considered sufficient in narrative inquiry to achieve “a sufficient depth of information from various types of data as a way of fully describing the phenomenon being studied” (p. 161). Based on the voluntary nature of participation, we recruited six teachers who were willing to share their experiences and attitudes toward using GenAI in their teaching. This number allowed us to conduct in-depth, detailed interviews and closely explore their narratives, focusing on their unique perspectives during this specific moment of educational transformation. To protect the privacy and confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms were used throughout the study.

3.3 Data collection

Narrative inquiry provides researchers with the flexibility to delve into participants' stories and allows for a “versatility of data source usage” (Ghanbar et al., 2024, p. 16). For this study, data were collected over the course of a semester to ensure a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences. All participants provided informed consent prior to participating in the study. They shared their attitudes toward GenAI integration, their experiences using GenAI in teaching, their levels of confidence in employing the technology, and the specific approaches they adopted to incorporate GenAI into their EFL teaching practices.

As part of the data collection process, we observed each participant teaching a lesson of their choice. These lessons were designed by the participants and either involved using GenAI for planning and materials development or integrating GenAI directly into classroom activities with students. Following each observation, we conducted a semi-structured debriefing interview to gather detailed insights into the

instructors' planning processes, their teaching experiences with GenAI, and their immediate impressions of how GenAI contributed to teaching EFL writing. This approach allowed us to capture both the practical and reflective dimensions of their teaching practices.

Each participant took part in three 40-minute semi-structured interviews over the semester. These interviews served as the primary source of data, focusing on their evolving perspectives and experiences with GenAI integration (see Appendix for the interview prompts). The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. To ensure accuracy and maintain transparency, the transcripts were shared with the participants for member checking, allowing them to review and clarify their responses if necessary.

3.4 Data analysis

Our analysis of the data was guided by Jackson and Mazzei's (2012) concept of thinking with theory, which emphasizes the use of theoretical frameworks to interrogate and make sense of data. This approach allowed us to engage critically with the data, asking deeper questions and exploring its complexities. Specifically, we utilized Darwin and Norton's (2015) model of identity and investment as our theoretical lens. This model provided a structured framework to interpret participants' experiences and construct meaning from their narratives, aligning with Kim's (2016) guidance on narrative inquiry.

The analysis followed a systematic coding process. First, all interview transcripts were transcribed verbatim. We began with open coding, reading through each transcript line-by-line to identify initial codes that captured significant concepts, actions, or emotions expressed by participants. These initial codes were both data-driven and theory-informed, allowing space for emergent themes while remaining attentive to concepts from Darwin and Norton's (2015) model.

Next, we engaged in axial coding, grouping related codes into broader categories that reflected common patterns or salient constructs within the narratives. Throughout this process, we continually referred back to the theoretical framework to ensure that our interpretations were consistent with the constructs of identity, investment, and digital practice. Finally, selective coding was used to organize these categories into three overarching themes that encapsulated the participants' experiences with integrating GenAI into their EFL teaching practices.

The findings are presented in alignment with the themes identified through our analysis. Each theme represents a common thread that emerged from the participants' narratives, offering insights into their attitudes, challenges, and strategies for using GenAI in teaching EFL writing. Accordingly, we have organized the findings into three main themes, each accompanied by a written narrative that captures the collective experiences of the participants. This thematic organization not only highlights the shared aspects of their experiences but also underscores the diversity of perspectives within the group, providing a rich, nuanced understanding of their engagement with GenAI in this specific EFL writing instruction context.

4 Findings

4.1 Ideology: Pro-GenAI and Anti-GenAI

With the emergence of GenAI, the participating teachers who are not accustomed to advanced computational applications are generally required to learn from scratch to ensure the quality and assessment fairness in their courses. As a result, their identity constructions can inevitably be permeated by the new component of GenAI or even transformed by its applications. It is found that the participating writing teachers uphold differing ideologies toward GenAI in their teaching practices. These ideologies are competing dominant ideas (Darvin & Norton, 2015), indicating distinct ideational and behavioral aspects of the teachers when integrating GenAI into teaching. It should be noted that the identified

ideologies are not static or absolutely contradictory to one another, as the teachers' perceptions of GenAI for teaching are likely to transform as a result of their interactions with dynamic capitals, identities and investment. For example, Teacher A expressed the burden caused by the increased workload owing to the need to check and evaluate the amounts of content generated by AI in students' writing.

Excerpt 1

At first, I tried to ban AI tools outright. My students started submitting essays where entire paragraphs sounded like a thesaurus exploded—technically correct but utterly soulless. One submission even included ChatGPT's 'As an AI model, I cannot...' disclaimer! Now, I'm experimenting with 'AI transparency logs' where they document every interaction with tools like Grammarly. It's exhausting to give scores, but necessary. What keeps me up at night? The brilliant but lazy students.

(Teacher A)

Teacher A shows her awareness of AI-generated texts contained in the students' writing which she views as 'technically correct but utterly soulless.' The essays composed of a large amount AI-generated content generally succeed in addressing the assigned topic but tend to be superficial and lack critical discussion, leaving the teachers feeling exhausted when assessing the essay quality. From the teachers' perspective, students demonstrate their capability to utilize AI to write and fulfil the course requirements but also reveal their laziness, reflected in their intention to think less and write quickly.

Despite the teachers' criticism of GenAI, the teachers recognize both advantages and disadvantages of using AI for writing assignments. Teacher B shared her approach to integrating AI components into the assessment, though challenges still remain.

Excerpt 2

I've built AI into my rubric—15% for 'ethical augmentation.' Last week, a student used Claude to generate counterarguments against her own thesis, then wrote a reflection comparing the AI's logic with her human perspective. That's the gold standard. But for every student doing that, three others paste their half-baked ideas into ChatGPT and call it 'editing.' The line between scaffolding and cheating? It's vanished. We're all becoming forensic linguists now, hunting for telltale 'however, it is important to note' phrases."

(Teacher B)

Teacher B illustrates the acceptable ways that students use GenAI in their writing assignments, highlighting the importance of showing their 'human perspective', non-AI generated ideas, and critical thinking. However, it seems unacceptable for the students to rely on AI to develop their unsophisticated ideas and then claim that they only use AI for language editing. From the teachers' perspective, this use of AI blurs the boundary between scaffolding ideas and cheating. As a result, teachers become more sensitive to the words and phrases that often appear in AI-generated texts in students' writing as means of cheat detection. Although the teachers point out that GenAI increases their burden and time for evaluating students' essay, some participating teachers seem happy to have AI assistance in marking. Excerpt 3 provides more details:

Excerpt 3

AI helps me give scores to students' essays. It did save me a lot of time. The accuracy of AI scoring is not bad, I have to say, it is better than human scoring. I highly suggest the public's bias in using AI for writing assessment. Why to exploit human labor work and think human labor work is better than AI? That is outdated ideas.

(Teacher C)

Teacher C presents himself as a supporter of GenAI, as it saves his time by helping to score students' essay with good accuracy. Since the performance of AI in marking is perceived as 'better than human', Teacher C believes the public should not uphold bias against using AI for writing assessment. From his perspective, the idea that using technology to complete tasks or duties more rapidly and efficiently is one of the mechanisms of making others else do the work is outdated. Teacher D is another GenAI supporter who proposes the integration of AI into course design:

Excerpt 4

Writing is a human act of meaning-making. But I believe it is worthy to use GenAI. I really believe this is an incredible tool. It can save us a lot of time. It can reduce teacher frustration. We can learn to integrate it for designing writing rubrics and facilitating writing assessment.

(Teacher D)

As shown in Excerpt 4, Teacher D views GenAI as a "incredible tool" that reduce writing teachers' frustration in compiling rubrics, reading a large number of students' essay, and maintaining grading consistency, suggesting his colleagues learn the applications of AI in writing teaching. Overall, there are English writing teachers who support or oppose GenAI in their teaching, upholding distinct ideologies. Specifically, teachers who emphasize the ethical importance using AI in writing and the originality of students' work tend to oppose it, whereas those who are concerned about efficiency and efficacy of assessing students' writing tend to support it. These ideologies probably divide the teachers into two groups with different attitudes towards GenAI for teaching. However, most of the participating teachers are aware of the necessity of being familiar with GenAI, as Teacher E says "I think it is worthy to invest more in AI as this is the future. No matter whether you love it or not, if you don't know how to use AI, then you will be replaced. Generally, the teachers are aware of the risk of being replaced by others who are more familiar with using AI in teaching and recognize the significance of learning its applications. As the university has not provided strict guidelines for incorporating GenAI into teaching, the teachers possess agency to develop and choose their own ideologies.

4.2 Identity: The Hybridity of Worrier and Warrior

The phenomenon of using GenAI to complete writing assignments seems common in schools, leading to the issue of over-reliance on GenAI in creating and organizing ideas. In confronting this issue, teachers adopt a hybrid identity that combines the ambivalent roles of worrier and warrior. On the one hand, teachers who position themselves as worriers demonstrate their struggle with the application of GenAI in classes due to concerns about their AI literacy and students' cognitive development. On the other hand, teachers—especially those who are competent and confident in using GenAI—opt for a superior position in which they manipulate GenAI to defend and consolidate their professional teacher identity. Specifically, teachers playing the role of worriers are concerned about the deterioration of students' writing capability. Teacher A shared:

Excerpt 5

Last semester, a tearful freshman confessed she'd forgotten how to structure a thesis without AI. That's when I realized: We're not just teaching writing anymore. We're rehabilitating cognitive dependence.

(Teacher A)

With the practice of generating instructions from AI when writing, students have unconsciously nurtured their "cognitive dependence" on AI. This dependence becomes more apparent when students notice that they find it difficult or even unable to structure a thesis without AI. Apart from the competence of structuring essay, the teachers also notice their students' loss of creativity in writing due to the

overreliance on AI, as Teacher B says “AI definitely led to creativity loss in writing. It is not about reliance; it is just overreliance.” Teacher B explains further the disadvantages caused by overreliance on AI in writing:

Excerpt 6

Writing is a learning activity that needs people to think, act, react, correct, and polish. To write something, you are reflect[ing], needs critical ideas and creativity. And if we use ChatGPT or other AI tools without critical thinking, can just replace that because what comes out looks like writing, I think we are ignoring all of the learning process essential to our writing instruction.

(Teacher B)

Regarding the essential cognitive processes of writing, the teachers point out that GenAI is a tool that enables humans to bypass and ignore critical steps in the process, such as structuring, evaluating, reflecting, correcting and polishing. Consequently, students who heavily rely on GenAI to write become incompetent at demonstrating their creativity and critical thinking in their essay. This is also what Teacher B mentions ‘We’re facing a new paradox: students who can “write” perfect essays but can’t explain their own thesis statements.’ Furthermore, Teacher D compare writing composition with mathematics to describe the GenAI-led difficulties in students’ writing, saying, says “writing is cognitive wrestling. When students skip the struggle, they miss crucial neural development. It’s comparable to only doing math with calculators - you might get right answers, but you never build numerical intuition.” Overall, a proportion of the participating teachers display and experience the role of worrier, concerned that the way their students utilize GenAI to write is likely to deprive them opportunities to undergo vital cognitive processes and nurture their creativity in writing. These teachers commonly uphold an anti-GenAI attitude. However, this role, as part of the hybrid identity might transform when teachers become knowledgeable and capable of utilizing GenAI for their teaching. As illustrated by Darwin and Norton (2015), identity is multiple, a site of struggle and continually changes over time and space. Teachers who receive more professional training on the application of GenAI for pedagogical purposes, along with more accessible resources that enhance their AI literacy and computational competence, are more likely to evolve their identity from worrier to warrior.

Teacher E is a typical example, who says “I think our role is no longer a teacher, but knowledge keeper in helping learners have ethical use of AI for writing.” Teacher D concurs with Teacher E’s view and add “If we don’t change our role, then we will be replaced by AI.” The teachers are generally aware of the risk of being replaced by GenAI in teaching English, especially English writing. Thus, they emphasize the ethical aspect of using AI for writing and this emphasis also helps the teachers create a line of defense that allows them to advocate for the necessity of teachers’ guidance. In other words, by playing the role of warrior, the teachers position themselves higher than GenAI and become irreplaceable, as they help develop essential cognitive competence in writing and guide them to use AI ethically and efficiently. Moreover, it is also crucial for teachers to become more knowledgeable about GenAI in order to embody the role of warriors. Excerpt 7 further illustrates the teachers’ reflection on the need to change their roles.

Excerpt 7

I often wonder who I am, or who I should be in facing the innovation brought by AI. Writing teachers only give feedback on paraphrasing? Keeping PPT unchanged for 10 years? That is outdated. We don’t change, it is not AI who diminish our creativity, it is us who stopped the creativity.

(Teacher E)

To be superior to GenAI, Teacher E believes that English writing teachers should better equip themselves by updating their knowledge of relevant AI technologies and their applications particularly for the

purpose of language teaching. Conversely, a conservative attitude towards GenAI and an insistence on teaching traditionally—without changes to teaching materials and approaches—can result in diminished teacher creativity. Therefore, instead of being worriers, some participating teachers opt to be a warrior who are capable of manipulating AI for teaching.

The teachers understand the importance of being able to utilize GenAI in their writing classes. As Teacher A said, “The issue is we shall not use or not, but how we can make use of it. Writing course is not alone”. The teachers believe the utilization of GenAI is a trend they cannot escape in their career. Teacher D shared how he uses AI in the writing classes:

Excerpt 8

I’ve started experimenting with them in my classes—asking students to use AI to generate drafts and then critically analyze what the AI produces. This is a fascinating process that makes me to see how students engage with the technology.

(Teacher D)

Instead of prohibiting students from using AI to generate texts for writing exercises, Teacher D makes use of AI-generated texts to train students’ analytical skills and critical thinking, observing a higher level of student engagement with the technology. Apart from criticizing the AI-generated texts, the teachers also ask students to compare the AI’s comments on their writing with their own feedback during peer review activities:

Excerpt 9

In my writing courses, I’ve started using AI tools for peer review. Students generate feedback using AI and then compare it to their own feedback. It’s a great way to discuss the strengths and limitations of AI-generated feedback and to teach them how to evaluate it critically.

(Teacher C)

As illustrated in Excerpt 9, students are given opportunities to evaluate the strength and weakness of the AI-generated feedback through comparisons. The goal of this AI-involved peer review is to nurture students’ critical attitude toward the use of AI and to avoid overdependence on AI tools. From the teachers’ perspective, GenAI can be one of the online learning tools used in classrooms, demonstrating how the teachers can be irreplaceable and highlighting the importance of teacher instructions in guiding students on how to use these tools in writing. The transformation from the role of worrier to warrior appears to be a result of the two competing ideologies (i.e. anti-GenAI versus pro-GenAI) after a process of struggle and changes in the participating teachers’ capitals and investments.

4.3 Capital and investment: Incorporating AI resources or providing emotional care

Whether displaying the role of worrier or warrior, teachers inevitably need to explore the available resources that enable them to shape their identities within the educational context. Access to GenAI has been a crucial asset for teachers who advocate integrating GenAI into teaching, and this access should be granted to both teachers and students. However, the teachers found that GenAI resources are not equally distributed in the university:

Excerpt 10

In my classroom, material resources have always been a significant challenge. Access to reliable technology is limited. When I introduced AI tools like ChatGPT for writing support, I quickly realized that not all students could access these resources equally.

(Teacher D)

Unlike teachers' access, the students' access to GenAI was restricted and they were not allowed to utilize advanced versions of GenAI due to concerns about overuse and overreliance on it in completing assessment tasks. The restricted access to GenAI caused difficulties for teachers in implementing GenAI-related pedagogies. In other words, although teachers and students appear to share the same space in the university, they possess different economic capitals that affect their affordances for the application of GenAI in teaching and learning. To address these challenges, some teachers prepared printed materials to instruct students on using GenAI to learn English writing.

Excerpt 11

Some students struggled to use the AI tools because of internet connection or a lack of familiarity with digital platforms. I created offline resources, such as printed AI-generated feedback examples, so students without access to AI technology could still benefit from the discussions.

(Teacher C)

As shown in Excerpt 11, the students face both technical problems and cultural-cognitive problems. Apart from the restriction of GenAI access, poor internet connection heavily hinders the use of GenAI in classrooms, as students can only access GenAI slowly or even cannot access it. More importantly, Teacher C noticed that students' familiarity with different GenAI platforms also affects their motivation and effectiveness in applying GenAI. As a result, the teachers opt for the traditional teaching approach of using printed notes to provide instructions for students.

Excerpt 12

Interestingly, students who already had strong cultural capital—those who had received prior training in critical thinking or creative writing—were more willing to engage with AI. They saw it as a tool to enhance their existing skills. However, students from rural areas are not willing to use AI.

(Teacher E)

The importance of students' cultural capital in critical thinking and creative writing is highlighted in Excerpt 12. Students who received relevant training in more developed cities in China are more motivated and willing to engage with AI in their learning, whereas students from relatively rural provinces tend to be passive toward AI applications. The diversity of students' learning capitals in AI-integrated English writing classes requires greater teachers' effort to seek additional learning resources for the students.

Excerpt 13

I think the school is following social practices to build AI courses, or ask teachers to incorporate AI for teaching. However, in our writing course, I found out that we lack a support system in the application of AI. It is just a lip service.

(Teacher D)

As shown in Excerpt 13, from the teachers' perspectives, the incomprehensive support for incorporating AI into teaching reflects that the university lacks thorough plan to facilitate GenAI-integrated courses and the university's advocacy was merely a "lip service". The situation seems to have ameliorated since the emergence of free-access GenAI developed by Chinese technology companies. One example is DeepSeek released in March 2025.

Excerpt 14

2025 Spring New Festival is the most excited one for me as the announcement of DeepSeek. It means our writing teaching comes to a new digital era. We can use it more fairly and equally. No more limited use of ChatGPT.

(Teacher F)

In Excerpt 14, Teacher F was joyful about the release of DeepSeek, when he/she was tormented by the issue of restricted student access to ChatGPT, a GenAI that requires the university's subscription, which can be a substantial expense. With the free-access GenAI, students are fairly equipped with significant capital that enables them to utilize AI to learn English writing. In the meantime, the university can save the cost of subscribing to GenAI services and dedicate resources to providing a stable internet connection.

In terms of social capital, the data reveals a profound paradigm shift in teacher-student power dynamics driven by GenAI adoption, with Excerpts 15 and 17 exemplifying a consistent pattern across all teacher participants. The findings illuminate critical dimensions of vulnerability as a language teacher in facing GenAI:

Excerpt 15

Students are no longer like before. Last month, a student interrupted my grammar explanation saying "ChatGPT explained. Just 10 seconds." The whole class then laughed, but I felt...like...professionally naked.

(Teacher B)

In Excerpt 15, the statement "students are no longer like before" encapsulates a recognition of inverted classroom hierarchies, where GenAI positioned teachers at a disadvantage. Students using GenAI engage in continuous implicit evaluation of teacher competency. In other words, students have recognized GenAI as another teacher who not only teaches them but also challenges the knowledge and authority of classroom teachers. This creates a paradoxical dynamic between teachers and students.

Excerpt 16

My teaching evaluation report for last term included student comments like "the teacher doesn't know as much as AI" and "[the teacher] explains things in an updated way." We're being benchmarked against algorithms now. So, we need to provide emotional care to make students happy. It's the one thing AI can't replicate.

(Teacher A)

In Excerpt 16, teachers are strategically amplifying emotional labor as compensatory professional capital, believing that their loss of social capital can be offset by providing "emotional care" that makes the students happy. As a result, emotional support becomes both a pedagogical necessity and a defensive mechanism against student complaints about the "outdated" explanatory style in classrooms. The data suggest that teachers are consciously cultivating what we term "emotional labor" (Kocabaş-Gedik & Ortaçtepe Hart, 2021) —using emotional connection as insulation against technological displacement. In other words, emotional bond becomes a more significant social capital for teachers.

Excerpt 17

Students screenshot AI answers during class to "correct" me. Administrative staff sides with students - says we should "integrate the technology." Where is my capital in this GenAI world?

(Teacher B)

In Excerpt 17, teachers report an unprecedented crisis of legitimacy, as their students challenge their educators' knowledge claims through comparative benchmarking against AI systems. This represents a fundamental restructuring of classroom epistemology, where teachers, who once served as primary knowledge arbiters, now operate in a triadic relationship with students and AI knowledge repositories. This situation leads to a form of performance anxiety among teachers. With the rise of GenAI in language education, the "capital" of teachers in a world where knowledge is instant, personalized, and limitless becomes questionable. The dichotomy between AI integration and emotional care reveals a deeper crisis of value, where teachers must constantly prove their worth.

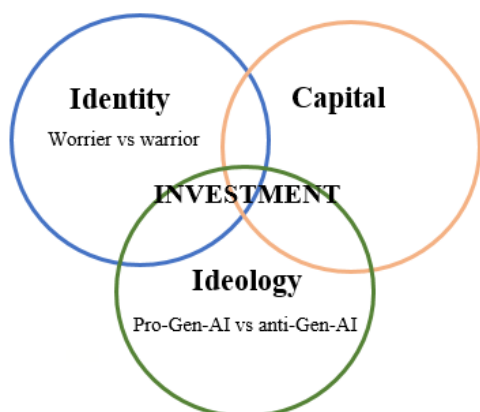
5 Discussion

Since the emergence of GenAI tools like DeepSeek and ChatGPT, their application in higher education has gained significant attention, prompting numerous studies on how to leverage these technologies to enhance professional language teachers' digital competencies (Moorhouse et al., 2024). However, the roles, beliefs, and resources of English language teachers in this evolving landscape remain underexplored. Teachers often experience complex emotions when navigating professional identity construction amid contextual changes, such as curriculum reforms, institutional and national language policies (Yip et al., 2022; Yip & Lam, 2025), and even interpersonal relationships with colleagues and students (Yip, 2024). Understanding teachers' identity formation and attitudes toward GenAI integration is crucial for developing their digital literacy and ensuring the effective incorporation of these tools into university-level language instruction (Zhang & Dikilitas, 2025). Grounded in Darvin and Norton's (2015) model of investment, this study examines the interplay between teacher attitudes and stances toward AI-integrated language learning (ideology), the roles teachers display in their professional practice (identity), institutional resource provision, and students' linguistic and technological capabilities (capital).

Based on the data and Darvin and Norton's (2015) model of investment, we reconceptualize language teacher identities. Figure 1 illustrates the dynamic interrelationships among the identities teachers construct in response to GenAI, the various forms of capital (institutional, personal, and student-derived) they possess, and the ideologies that shape their identity formation.

Figure 2

Identity and Investment of EFL Teachers in the Context of GenAI-integrated Teaching



As shown in Figure 2, EFL writing teachers in China exhibit two predominant roles worrier and warrior—when confronting the challenges and opportunities brought about by the emergence and growing popularity of GenAI in academia and education. The roles displayed in their teacher identity are influenced by the teachers' interactions with the capitals and ideologies within the university context. Specifically, both roles share similar forms of capital, including institutional resources (e.g., funding, technological infrastructure), student capital (e.g., linguistic competence, digital literacy, and interest in IT applications) and social capital (e.g. power and legitimacy of teachers in relation to those of GenAI). However, the economic and cultural capital supporting the integration of GenAI into EFL writing instruction remains limited in this context (see Excerpts 10 and 13). Participants report issues such as unstable internet connectivity (Excerpt 11) and lower engagement with AI among students from rural provinces (Excerpt 12), though accessibility has improved with the advent of free tools (Excerpt 14). Within this landscape, it is observed that one group of teachers temporarily adopts a worrier role, shaped by an anti-GenAI ideology. These teachers argue that GenAI undermines students' critical thinking, creativity, and presentation skills by reducing opportunities for independent idea generation

and organization (Excerpt 1). They contend that the ease of producing text and outlines with AI fosters academic complacency, bypassing essential learning processes. In addition, they express concerns about assessment challenges, such as verifying the originality of student work (Excerpt 2), and the pressure to continuously update teaching materials to remain relevant in an AI-driven educational environment (Excerpt 7). The emergence of the worrier role can be attributed to teachers' lack of confidence and competence in utilizing GenAI for teaching practices (Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2024) and their ability to act as role models of teachers with high digital literacy for students (Lindfors et al., 2021). As a result, these teachers opt to reject rather than embrace GenAI in their teaching, embodying the worrier role. However, they may have neglected the need to form new identities in response to the challenges brought by GenAI in educational contexts. Along with changes in capital—such as the provision of more professional training on AI literacy and more advanced and user-friendly AI applications—and their interactions with colleagues upholding differing ideologies, the worrier role is likely to evolve into the warrior role. This reflects the fluid and transitional nature of identity in Darwin and Norton's investment model.

Teachers embracing a warrior role advocate a pro-AI ideology. These teachers highlight GenAI's benefits, including time efficiency and productivity gains (Excerpts 3 and 4), and actively integrate it into pedagogy to reinforce their irreplaceable role. For example, they design activities combining GenAI with peer review and discussions (Excerpts 8 and 9), demonstrating how teacher guidance ensures AI is used effectively for academic purposes. Rather than resisting the technology, this group asserts that mastering GenAI in instruction strengthens teachers' authority and underscores their enduring importance in education. This group of teachers is sensitive to the risk of losing their jobs as a result of being replaced by GenAI (Chan & Tsi, 2024; Zhou & Hou, 2024). In the meantime, they are aware of the unpreventable trend of AI development as one of the key components in the country's development plans. Therefore, the teachers position themselves as warriors who defend their teaching careers by demonstrating their capabilities in manipulating GenAI in classrooms. However, it is noted that these teachers are puzzled at their capitals, which heavily rely on the resources provided by the university and students' perceptions towards the application of GenAI. These capitals elicit the teachers' consideration of whether to integrate AI resources into teaching and/or provide more emotional care (Excerpts 15, 16, and 17). Teachers displaying the worrier identity (Teacher A and B) emphasize emotional support for students when they exhibit incompetence in incorporating GenAI into language teaching. Conversely, teachers adopting the warrior role use emotional labour as a supplementary strategy that sharpens the significance of teacher instruction in the applications of GenAI for language learning. In other words, the teachers have distinct investment in their identity when facing the emergence of GenAI.

Identity is “multiple, a site of struggle, and continually changing over time and space” (Darwin & Norton, 2015, p. 45). This study reveals that EFL writing teachers position themselves as both *worriers* and *warriors* when confronting the opportunities and challenges brought by GenAI. The roles of these teachers can shift over time and space, influenced by changes in their capital. As the university context offers similar economic capital, students' cultural capital and flexibility for teachers to implement GenAI-integrated pedagogy, the teachers can exercise their agency to assert and shift their own identities. A significant factor facilitating identity formation is the interactions among teachers upholding nuanced or even contradictory roles and ideologies—that is, the social capital of the participating teachers. The interactions provide opportunities for exchanging ideas, receiving advice, and even gaining assistance, all of which may lead to the reformulation of their identities and ideologies through intersubjectivity. As Yang (2025) contends, poststructuralist theorizations of identity overlook a critical dimension: the necessity of engaging with a more comprehensive and dynamic understanding of multilingual teachers' and students' shifting ideologies. Along with richer material resources provided by the university (economic capital), such as professional development courses and subscriptions to advanced AI tools, and stronger digital literacy of the teachers and their students (cultural capital), teachers become more likely to perform the role of warrior.

6 Conclusion, Limitations and Implications

This study explored the complex interplay between English language teachers' professional identities and their integration of GenAI in EFL instruction, framed through Darwin and Norton's (2015) identity and investment model. The findings reveal that teachers navigate two major roles—worrier and warrior—in response to GenAI's challenges and opportunities. The study underscores how institutional capital (e.g., resources, training and power dynamic) and ideological stances (pro- or anti-GenAI) constitute these roles in teacher identity formation, with emotional labor emerging as a compensatory strategy to assert irreplaceable human value in an AI-driven classroom. In the era of AI emergence, when most teachers are learning about GenAI and its applications in teaching, EFL writing teachers have undergone the struggle and trajectory of becoming competent in utilizing GenAI for teaching.

The study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample scope was limited to six EFL teachers at a Chinese university, which restricts the generalizability of findings to broader contexts. Second, the data were collected during the early stages of GenAI adoption; longitudinal research could provide deeper insights into how teacher identities evolve as AI tools become more sophisticated. Third, the cultural specificity of the study, particularly China's unique educational policies and technological landscape, may not apply universally. Finally, while narrative inquiry offered rich qualitative data, incorporating quantitative measures such as surveys could have strengthened the study's claims about the prevalence of certain identity constructs.

Despite its limitations, the findings have important implications. At the pedagogical level, teacher training programs should address both technical GenAI skills and identity negotiation strategies, helping educators reconcile humanistic pedagogy with AI integration. Institutions must also develop clear ethical frameworks for AI use, such as critical AI-literacy tasks, to mitigate cheating concerns while fostering innovation. Additionally, ensuring equitable access to GenAI tools and stable infrastructure is crucial to preventing disparities in capital among teachers and students. At the policy level, there is a need for robust support systems, including funded AI mentorship programs and peer communities where teachers can share strategies and process anxieties. At the theoretical level, Darwin and Norton's (2015) identity and investment model provides a robust framework for understanding the complex dynamics of teacher identity construction in the context of GenAI integration. This study extends the model's application beyond language learning contexts to illuminate how power relations, capital, and ideology shape teachers' professional identities amid the GenAI world.

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ChatGPT version 4.0 has been used for proofreading the language. However, all content is from ours.

Appendix

Interview prompts

1. How would you describe your current approach to EFL teaching?
2. What has been your general experience with incorporating technology into your teaching before using GenAI?
3. What were your initial thoughts or feelings about using GenAI in your teaching?
4. How do you perceive the role of GenAI in EFL writing instruction? Do you see it as an enhancement, a challenge, or both? Why?
5. What do you think are the potential benefits of using GenAI in EFL teaching? Did you use GenAI for materials development, lesson planning, or any other aspect of your teaching? If so, how?

6. Are there any concerns or challenges you have encountered (or anticipate) while using GenAI in your teaching?
7. How confident do you feel about using GenAI tools in your teaching?
8. What kinds of support or training (if any) have you received to help you use GenAI effectively?
9. Do you think AI will replace human teachers in EFL teaching? What about creativity?
10. Do you see GenAI as a tool for empowerment, or does it risk diminishing students' agency in their writing process?
11. Do you see any role change in teaching after the emergence of GenAI?

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Mark Feng Teng is Professor in Applied Linguistics at Macau Polytechnic University. He was the recipient of the 2017 Best Paper Award from the Hong Kong Association for Applied Linguistics (HAAL). His research portfolio mainly focuses on L2 vocabulary acquisition, Reading and writing. His publications have appeared in international journals, including *Applied Linguistics*, *TESOL Quarterly*, *Language Teaching Research*, *System*, *Applied Linguistics Review*, *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, *Computers & Education*, *Foreign Language Annals*, and *IRAL*, among others. His recent monographs were published by *Cambridge*, *Routledge*, *Springer*, and *Bloomsbury*. He is currently editor-in-chief for *International Journal of TESOL Studies* (IJTS). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-51348504>

Jesse W. C. Yip is Assistant Professor in Department of Linguistics and Modern Language Studies at The Education University of Hong Kong. His research interests include discourse analysis, identity studies, health communication, pragmatics and social interactions, and corpus linguistics. His publications can be found in journals, such as *Journal of Pragmatics*, *Health Communication*, *Applied Linguistics Review*, *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, and *Cambridge Journal of Education*.