



BEYOND REPLACEMENT: HUMAN-AI COMPLEMENTARITY IN EFL WRITING AND SPEAKING

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Abstract. The increasing use of artificial intelligence (AI) in English language education has introduced new possibilities for providing feedback on learners’ productive skills. This thesis examines AI-assisted feedback in EFL writing and speaking through the concept of human-AI complementarity. Rather than considering AI as a replacement for teacher feedback, the thesis explores how the different strengths of AI and teachers can be integrated into the feedback process. Recent empirical evidence indicates that AI can provide immediate, accessible, and language-focused support, contributing to improvements in areas such as writing accuracy, learner autonomy, speaking fluency, and syntactic complexity. At the same time, teacher feedback remains important for contextual interpretation, deeper-level language development, pedagogical decision-making, and interpersonal support. Evidence from teacher-mediated and hybrid feedback models further suggests that combining AI capabilities with teacher expertise can provide broader support for learners’ productive skills. The thesis argues that the pedagogical value of AI-assisted feedback lies not in replacing human feedback but in extending and complementing it. A human-AI feedback model may therefore offer a more flexible and comprehensive approach to the development of EFL writing and speaking skills.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, AI-assisted feedback, teacher feedback, human-AI complementarity, EFL writing, EFL speaking, hybrid feedback

Introduction

Feedback plays a central role in the development of EFL learners’ productive skills because it helps learners recognize problems in their language use and make informed improvements. The rapid development of generative artificial intelligence has expanded the possibilities for providing such feedback. AI tools can now respond to learners’ written and spoken production, provide language-focused suggestions, and support repeated practice beyond the classroom. This development, however, raises an important pedagogical question: should AI feedback be understood as an alternative to teacher feedback or as a resource that can complement it?

Recent evidence suggests that AI has particular strengths in providing immediate and accessible support. In writing, AI-assisted feedback can help learners identify grammatical and lexical problems and support the revision process. It has also been associated with improvements in writing performance and learner autonomy (Li & Tuo, 2026; Maleki, 2026).



In speaking, AI-supported practice can provide additional opportunities for oral production and interaction, with positive effects reported particularly in fluency and syntactic complexity (Karami et al., 2026). These advantages make AI a potentially valuable component of contemporary EFL instruction.

However, feedback is not limited to the correction of linguistic errors. Effective feedback also requires attention to context, communicative purpose, discourse, individual learner needs, and affective factors. Teacher feedback can address these dimensions through professional judgement and direct interaction with learners. Research indicates that teachers may be particularly valuable when learners need guidance on deeper-level writing problems or emotional and interpersonal support (Li & Tuo, 2026; Maleki, 2026). Consequently, the growing capabilities of AI do not eliminate the need for teacher expertise.

This perspective is supported by research on teacher-mediated and hybrid feedback. ChatGPT-supported teacher feedback can expand the amount and range of feedback available to learners while allowing teachers to interpret and adapt AI-generated suggestions (Li & Han, 2024). Hybrid feedback has also demonstrated potential for producing strong improvements in several aspects of EFL writing (Khojasteh et al., 2025). In speaking instruction, teacher-guided integration of ChatGPT-supported conversational practice has similarly produced positive learning outcomes (Al-khresheh & Alruwaili, 2026).

Therefore, the key issue is not whether AI or teachers provide “better” feedback. A more productive perspective is to consider how their different capabilities can work together. This thesis argues that the most promising role of AI in EFL feedback is **complementary rather than substitutive**. It examines how human and AI contributions can be integrated to support the development of writing and speaking skills.

Human–AI Complementarity in EFL Feedback

AI-assisted feedback changes the traditional feedback process by making support more immediate, accessible, and continuous. Unlike teacher feedback, which is naturally constrained by teachers’ time and workload, AI tools can respond to learners’ language production repeatedly and on demand. This can be particularly valuable for learners who need multiple opportunities to identify, revise, and reconsider their language choices.

In writing, AI can serve as an efficient source of language-focused feedback. It can identify grammatical and lexical problems, suggest alternative formulations, and assist learners during different stages of the writing process. Evidence suggests that such support can contribute to improvements in writing performance, particularly in areas related to linguistic accuracy (Li & Tuo, 2026; Maleki, 2026). AI-supported feedback can also encourage learners to take greater responsibility for their own revisions because feedback is available without direct dependence on teacher availability.

Nevertheless, efficiency does not necessarily equal pedagogical completeness. A written text contains more than isolated grammatical or lexical forms. Learners also need to develop coherence, rhetorical effectiveness, appropriate word choice, and sensitivity to context. These aspects require interpretation of the learner’s communicative purpose rather than simple



identification of linguistic errors. Teacher expertise is therefore essential in transforming feedback into meaningful learning. Teachers can determine which problems are most important, explain why a particular choice is inappropriate, and adapt feedback to the learner's level and needs.

The distinction between these functions provides a basis for human–AI complementarity. AI can undertake some of the more repetitive and immediate aspects of feedback, while teachers can concentrate on interpretation, pedagogical guidance, and higher-level development. In this model, AI does not reduce the importance of the teacher; instead, it can allow the teacher to allocate attention more strategically.

Teacher-mediated AI feedback provides a practical example of this approach. Li and Han (2024) demonstrated how ChatGPT-generated corrective and rhetorical feedback could be incorporated into a teacher-led feedback process. Rather than transferring responsibility for feedback entirely to AI, teachers evaluated and adapted the generated feedback before providing individualized support. Such integration combines the efficiency of AI with the contextual and pedagogical judgement of the teacher.

The same principle is reflected in hybrid feedback. When learners receive both AI-generated and teacher feedback, they can benefit from two different sources of support. AI can contribute immediacy and detailed language-level information, while teachers can provide contextualization and individualized interpretation. Khojasteh et al. (2025) reported particularly strong improvements among learners receiving hybrid feedback, suggesting that the combination of feedback sources can address a broader range of learning needs than either source alone.

The complementary relationship is also relevant to speaking development. One of the major advantages of AI-supported speaking practice is the possibility of increasing learners' opportunities to produce language. Conversational AI can provide an additional space for learners to practise, experiment with language, and receive immediate responses. Research has reported positive effects of ChatGPT-assisted speaking practice on fluency and syntactic complexity (Karami et al., 2026). These findings suggest that AI can extend opportunities for oral production beyond the limited speaking time available in many classrooms.

At the same time, effective speaking development involves more than increased interaction with an AI system. Learners need guidance on communicative appropriateness, task performance, pronunciation, organization, and interactional strategies. Teacher involvement can provide the structure and pedagogical direction necessary for these aspects. Al-khresheh and Alruwaili (2026), for example, integrated ChatGPT-supported conversational scaffolding with role-play and task-based oral production under teacher guidance. The positive outcomes of this model illustrate the potential of combining technological practice opportunities with structured instruction.

Thus, human–AI complementarity can be understood as a division and integration of pedagogical functions. AI is particularly suited to **immediacy, accessibility, repetition, language-focused feedback, and additional opportunities for practice**. Teachers remain



particularly important for **contextualization, pedagogical judgement, deeper-level guidance, individualized support, and human interaction**. The goal is not to assign all feedback responsibilities to one source, but to use each resource where it can contribute most effectively.

This approach also implies a changing role for the teacher. In an AI-supported classroom, teachers do not necessarily need to provide every correction manually. Instead, they can become mediators and evaluators of AI-generated feedback. Their role involves selecting relevant information, identifying inaccurate or inappropriate suggestions, explaining complex issues, and helping learners use feedback constructively. AI can therefore support the teacher's work without assuming the teacher's pedagogical responsibilities.

Ultimately, the question of **human versus AI feedback** may be less useful than the question of **human with AI**. The evidence reviewed in this thesis indicates that AI can strengthen several dimensions of EFL writing and speaking development, while teachers provide forms of support that remain difficult to reproduce through automated systems. Their combination may therefore create a feedback environment that is simultaneously more immediate, individualized, context-sensitive, and pedagogically meaningful.

Conclusion

AI-assisted feedback represents an important development in EFL education, but its greatest potential may lie not in replacing teachers but in complementing their work. AI can provide immediate and accessible language-focused support, facilitate repeated practice, and contribute to aspects of writing and speaking development such as accuracy, fluency, and complexity. Teachers, meanwhile, remain essential for contextual interpretation, deeper-level guidance, pedagogical decision-making, and interpersonal support.

The evidence considered in this thesis supports a human–AI complementarity model in which AI extends the possibilities of feedback while teachers retain responsibility for its pedagogical interpretation and integration. Such an approach moves beyond the binary opposition between technology and human instruction and instead emphasizes their potential to function together. For EFL writing and speaking, this integrated perspective may provide a more flexible and comprehensive framework for supporting learners' productive language development.

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