Negotiating Pedagogical Change in AI-Mediated EFL Classrooms

Libyan Teachers' Agency in Response to Generative AI through a Sociocultural Theory Perspective

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التفاوض حول التغيير في طرق التدريس داخل فصول اللغة الإنجليزية التي تستخدم الذكاء الاصطناعي

كيفية استجابة المعلمين الليبيين للذكاء الاصطناعي التوليدي من خلال نظرية تشرح تأثير المجتمع والثقافة على التعلم

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الملخص:

دخل الذكاء الاصطناعي التوليدي (AI) مجال تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية بوتيرة سريعة لافتة، وقد بدأ حضوره في إعادة تشكيل ما يقوم به المعلمون، وما يعتقدون أنه ينبغي عليهم القيام به، وكذلك ما يتوقعه منهم طلابهم. في ليبيا. حيث لا يزال النظام التعليمي يعمل تحت ضغوط بنيوية كبيرة، وحيث لم يتم بعد صياغة سياسة رسمية واضحة للذكاء الاصطناعي، أصبحت مسؤولية تحديد الاستجابة لهذا التحول تقع بدرجة كبيرة على عاتق المعلمين الأفراد. تركز أغلب الدراسات القائمة حول هذه الظاهرة على ما يمكن للذكاء الاصطناعي القيام به أو على مدى تقبل المعلمين له. بينما قلّما تتناول الكيفية التي يتصرف بها المعلمون فعليًا في سياق الممارسة اليومية. تنطلق هذه الدراسة من هذا السؤال الأخير، وتتعامل مع مفهوم "وكالة المعلم" بوصفه عملية تتشكل عبر التفاوض السياقي المتوسّط اجتماعيًا وثقافيًا، وليس كصفة يمتلكها المعلم أو يفتقر إليها.

السؤال الإرشادي للدراسة هو:
كيف يمارس معلمو اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في ليبيا وكالتهم المهنية ويتفاوضون حولها داخل سياقات تعليمية تتوسطها أدوات الذكاء الاصطناعي؟
وللإجابة عن هذا السؤال، تم اعتماد تصميم وصفي–تفسيري، بالاستناد إلى استبيان منظّم(n = 42) ، إضافة إلى مجموعة من التأملات الكتابية التي أعدّها معلمو اللغة الإنجليزية في مدارس وجامعات ليبية مختلفة. وقد استند التحليل إلى النظرية الاجتماعية الثقافية (Sociocultural Theory - SCT) ، ولا سيما مفاهيم الوساطة، والسياق، والتفاعل، حيث وجّهت هذه المفاهيم بناء الفئات التحليلية وطريقة تفسير النتائج. تم تطوير أربعة محاور مترابطة:

1. إدماج مضبوط بوصفه تجسيدًا للوكالة الفاعلة
2. إعادة تموضع الدور البيداغوجي تحت وساطة الذكاء الاصطناعي
3. تشكّل الوكالة عبر التوترات المهنية
4. وكالة نشطة لكنها مقيدة سياقيًا

تشير هذه المحاور مجتمعة إلى أن معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية في ليبيا ليسوا متبنين بشكل غير نقدي للذكاء الاصطناعي، ولا هم رافضون له بشكل مطلق، بل يخوضون عملية تفاوض مستمرة—وأحيانًا غير مريحة—حول الحدود والأدوار والقيود المهنية.
تقدّم الدراسة تصورًا نظريًا مدعومًا بالبيانات حول وكالة المعلم في سياق غير ممثل بشكل كافٍ في الأدبيات الدولية، وتستخلص دلالات مهمة تتعلق بالسياسات التعليمية، وبرامج إعداد المعلمين، والتصميم البيداغوجي في بيئات تعليم اللغة المعززة بالذكاء الاصطناعي.
الكلمات المفتاحية :وكالة المعلم؛ الذكاء الاصطناعي التوليدي؛ تعليم الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية؛ ليبيا؛ النظرية الاجتماعية الثقافية؛ الوساطة

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Abstract

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) has entered English language teaching at remarkable speed and its arrival has begun to alter what teachers do, what they think they should do and what their students expect of them. In Libya, where the educational system continues to operate under serious infrastructural pressure and where formal AI policy has yet to be articulated. The burden of working out a response has fallen largely on individual teachers. Most existing accounts of this phenomenon concentrate on what AI can do or on whether teachers like it. Relatively few ask how teachers actually act in the moment. The present study takes that latter question as its starting point and treats teacher agency as something built up through situated. Mediated negotiation rather than something teachers either possess or lack. The guiding question is straightforward: how do Libyan EFL teachers enact and negotiate their professional agency within AI-mediated teaching contexts?

To address it, a descriptive–interpretive design was adopted, drawing on a structured questionnaire (n = 42) and a set of reflective written prompts completed by EFL teachers across Libyan schools and universities. Sociocultural Theory (SCT) and in particular the constructs of mediation, context and interaction informed both the analytic categories and the way findings were read. Four interrelated themes were developed: controlled integration as enacted agency; pedagogical role repositioning under AI mediation; tension-driven agency formation; and contextually constrained yet active agency. Read together, these themes suggest that Libyan EFL teachers are neither uncritical adopters nor outright resistors.

They work through an ongoing, sometimes uneasy negotiation of boundaries, roles and constraints. The paper offers a theoretically informed, empirically grounded portrait of teacher agency from a setting that is rarely heard in the international literature and it draws out implications for policy, training and pedagogical design in AI-mediated language education.

Keywords: teacher agency; generative AI; EFL; Libya; Sociocultural Theory; mediation

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Tools such as ChatGPT and Bard, alongside a growing array of dedicated educational platforms, have moved from novelty to everyday classroom companion in only a handful of years. Their spread has been uneven, but it is striking how quickly EFL classrooms in East Asia, in Northern Europe, across the Middle East have come to operate at the meeting point of human pedagogical intention and machine-generated language. The change is not simply a matter of new gadgets being added to old routines. It touches on assumptions that the field has long taken for granted: where linguistic knowledge comes from, what counts as authentic language production and what a human teacher is uniquely qualified to do.

Within Libya, this shift plays out under particularly demanding conditions. Years of political instability, a strained infrastructure and chronically under-resourced schools have produced an EFL landscape that already runs on improvisation and on the resilience of individual teachers (Abdelatia et al., 2023). Generative AI has not arrived through a coordinated ministerial roll-out or through structured professional development. It has arrived, rather, through the back door through teachers' own exploration, through students who use it on their phones at home and through informal conversations between colleagues. Hadaga and Elfalfal (2025) observe, in this regard, that teachers in the Libyan context "mostly relied on self-study to learn about these technologies rather than formal training." One implication of this informality is that the role of the teacher is no longer something settled. It is being redefined, almost daily, in relation to tools that can (write lesson plans, give feedback on student writing, hold a passable conversation with a learner and produce entire essays on demand.)

It is at this junction Libyan EFL teachers working inside constrained institutions and beside machines that perform increasingly teacher-like functions that the present study locates itself.

1.2 Problem Statement

Much of the recent work on AI in EFL education has pulled in two directions. One strand maps the technological affordances of AI systems; the other surveys how teachers and learners feel about them. Libyan

scholarship has, by and large, followed the same path. Hadaga and Elfalfal (2025), looking at EFL teachers at Benghazi University, report that "most participants had a positive attitude towards using AI in their teaching" and that "the majority believed that AI is important for helping students improve their language skills." In a related vein, Alkurtehe and Rathakrishnan (2025) examined teachers' attitudes toward using AI for vocabulary instruction with Libyan EFL learners, finding that "instructors generally hold positive attitudes toward the benefits of using AI in teaching English, particularly vocabulary."

Almashrgy and Alburki (2024), working at Elmergib University, conclude that "EFL teachers have a positive attitude towards AI tools" yet require "constant support and comprehensive training." Alnaass and Jamoom (2025), in a more qualitative vein, gathered Libyan EFL university instructors' perspectives on AI-driven academic writing and found that "teachers recognize AI tools as valuable assistants that provide immediate feedback on grammar and vocabulary, thereby promoting student autonomy." Bakori and Ahmed (2025), looking at online English teaching, push the conversation further by arguing for "a strategic framework to integrate AI in Libyan online English language education."

This body of work is valuable and the present study builds on it. What it tends to leave in shadow, however, is the agentic dimension of teaching: the everyday work of deciding, adjusting, refusing, improvising. Teachers in this literature appear most often as adopters with attitudes, sometimes as resistors with reservations, but rarely as negotiators of the technologies they live with. Agency, in the sense used here, is not a fixed personal trait.

It is something that emerges, situationally, from the meeting of teachers, tools, institutions and traditions of practice. Three conditions make the Libyan case especially worth examining through that lens: AI integration is informal and uneven; institutional guidance is largely absent; and teachers rely heavily on their own judgement rather than on shared frameworks. Together these conditions create something like a natural laboratory for the study of agency under constraint, yet to date no study has

approached Libyan EFL teachers' responses to generative AI through a consolidated theoretical lens.

1.3 Aim of the Study

The aim is to examine how Libyan EFL teachers enact and negotiate their professional agency as generative AI tools become a more visible presence in their classrooms. By placing the inquiry within Sociocultural Theory (SCT), the study moves the conversation away from the measurement of attitudes and towards an account of agency as mediated, situated and emergent.

1.4 Research Questions

- Main research question:

How do Libyan EFL teachers enact and negotiate their professional agency in AI-mediated teaching contexts?

- Sub-questions:

- What patterns of agency are evident in teachers' reported practices and decision-making?
- What contextual constraints shape teachers' pedagogical decisions regarding AI use?
- How do teachers reflect on their interactions with generative AI tools and on the way their professional roles are evolving?

1.5 Significance of the Study

Three contributions follow from the inquiry. Theoretically, the study extends the conversation around teacher agency into AI-mediated environments by drawing on Sociocultural Theory to recast agency as something that emerges within mediated activity rather than as a stable individual disposition. This is a noticeable shift from much of the existing Libyan literature, which has tended to operate without an explicit theoretical scaffolding for understanding what teachers do. Empirically, the study draws on data from a setting Libya where AI integration remains informal, uneven and under-researched. Practically, it points toward more context-sensitive forms of training and policy by showing the actual conditions under which Libyan EFL teachers are absorbing technological change.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Generative AI in EFL Education

Generative AI tools have moved into language education with considerable force. Their pedagogical uses now span lesson planning, the production of authentic reading and listening materials matched to specific proficiency levels, on-demand corrective feedback on student writing, simulated conversational partners for speaking practice and assessment design. The Libyan literature reflects both enthusiasm about these affordances and a clear sense of their friction points.

Ghwela et al. (2025), for instance, examined ChatGPT's contribution to English academic writing at Al-Asmarya Islamic University and reported "a statistically significant improvement in students' writing performance following the use of ChatGPT," alongside "positive perceptions regarding ChatGPT, noting its role in idea generation, vocabulary enhancement and increased writing confidence." Alarnaout (2026) takes a different angle by tracing the influence of generative AI on the analytical skills of high school students in Tripoli; "85 percent of the respondents," she notes, "claimed using it weekly." Her account also captures a tension that runs through much of the field: for AI "to be an authentic Vygotskian scaffold, instead of a cognitive crutch, GenAI requires the Ministry of Education to introduce specialised curriculum change and encourage metacognitive AI literacy."

Such gains, however, are seldom uncomplicated. Alnaass and Jamoom (2025) sound a clear note of caution, warning that "student overreliance can undermine the development of critical thinking and independent writing skills," and pointing to "critical impediments to implementation, including limited digital literacy, insufficient institutional support and inadequate technological infrastructure." The pattern is one the literature on AI in EFL has been criticised for repeating: enthusiastic catalogues of what AI can do tend to outpace careful examination of how teachers and learners actually respond.

2.2 Teacher Agency: From Individual Attribute to Ecological Practice

How agency is conceptualised has shifted considerably over the past two decades. Earlier accounts tended to treat it as a personal capacity a

property that some teachers happened to have and others did not (Bandura, 2001). More recent work, particularly the ecological reading proposed by Priestley, Biesta and Robinson (2015), reframes agency as an achievement: it is something that comes about through the interplay between an individual's intentions, the resources available to them and the contextual conditions in which they act. On this reading, agency is temporally textured. It carries the residue of past experience, looks ahead to imagined possibilities and is enacted in the demands of the present moment.

This way of thinking is particularly well suited to the Libyan context. Grada (2025), for instance, shows that "context plays a role on teachers' current knowledge and practice," and that teachers' professional understanding "arises from a complex interweaving of context and individual understandings." Work on the professional identity of Libyan EFL teachers makes a similar point, noting that "English language teachers' professional identity" is shaped by "contextual and interpersonal factors" within a system marked by "structural and pedagogical constraints." In Libya, in other words, agency is rarely a quality teachers carry into the room with them. It is something they negotiate with the room itself.

Within the Libyan literature, the concept has been examined most explicitly in relation to the professional identities of female EFL teachers in post-conflict settings. That work "challenge[s] dominant Western-centric views of teacher identity and emotional labor" and shows that "teacher agency operates in non-binary ways, challenging dichotomous models of resistance versus passivity in fragile educational systems." That insight agency as something neither cleanly oppositional nor cleanly compliant supplies an important conceptual anchor for the present study.

2.3 AI and the Restructuring of Pedagogical Roles

The integration of AI into language teaching has provoked a recurring debate about what is happening to the teacher's role. Two readings sit in tension. One sees AI as augmenting teacher expertise: by absorbing routine work error correction, content generation, parts of grading AI may free teachers to focus on the more obviously human dimensions of the job, such as designing engaging tasks, mentoring students and cultivating critical

thinking. The other reading is more sceptical, noting that the linguistic sophistication of generative AI puts pressure on the very thing teachers have traditionally been valued for: the production and modelling of language.

Libyan accounts capture this ambivalence well. Alnaass and Jamoom (2025) describe teachers who see AI as a "valuable assistant" yet who openly worry about its potential to undermine fundamental learning aims. Al-Mashloukh (2025) widens the picture, drawing attention to a deeper pedagogical backdrop in which "traditional Grammar-Translation Methods" still dominate, alongside a "stark deficiency of resources (including basic teaching aids and ICT)." Layering generative AI onto a system that has not yet resolved its more basic pedagogical questions produces a uniquely complicated situation and one that the existing literature has not engaged with at the level of practice.

What is striking, in fact, is how little of the available work asks the simpler empirical question: how do teachers actually respond? How do they reorganise their decision-making, redraw the boundary between human and machine instruction and adjust the pedagogical role they perform in the classroom?

2.4 Theoretical Framework: Sociocultural Theory

The study is grounded in Sociocultural Theory (SCT), originally developed by Vygotsky (1978) and subsequently extended within second language education by Lantolf (2000) and Lantolf and Thorne (2006). SCT treats human action as fundamentally mediated by cultural tools, by social interaction and by contextual conditions. Three of its constructs do most of the analytic work in what follows.

The first is mediation. Mediation, in the Vygotskian tradition, refers to the way human beings make use of cultural tools both physical (computers, AI interfaces) and symbolic (language, pedagogical concepts) to regulate their activity and to reshape their relationship with the world they act in. Read this way, generative AI is not a neutral instrument that teachers either pick up or set down. It is a mediational artifact that alters the texture of pedagogical activity itself. Vygotsky's account of semiotic mediation

provides the theoretical ground for asking how AI tools restructure teachers' thinking and practice (Vygotsky, 1978).

The second construct is context. SCT does not treat context as a passive backdrop. It is, instead, an active force that shapes what becomes possible. Institutional structures, cultural norms, the availability or absence of resources and historical trajectories all condition the activity that unfolds within them. In Libya, those contextual factors include limited technological infrastructure (Shalbag, 2026), the absence of explicit institutional AI policy, the long aftermath of conflict-related disruption to schooling and culturally specific expectations about teacher authority.

The third is interaction the dynamic relationship between teacher, tool and environment. From an SCT perspective, agency does not reside in the individual; it surfaces in the interaction between individual, instrument and setting. It is visible in the decisions teachers make as they engage with AI tools, accommodate institutional constraints and renegotiate their professional role. This way of framing agency dovetails neatly with the ecological reading advanced by Priestley et al. (2015) and supplies a coherent lens for analysing what Libyan EFL teachers do in AI-mediated environments.

There is precedent for applying SCT to the Libyan context. Grada (2025), for example, adopted "a socio-cultural perspective" in her investigation of Libyan EFL novice teachers' knowledge and practice of speaking assessment, demonstrating the framework's relevance to Libyan classrooms. The present study extends that line of inquiry into the domain of AI-mediated pedagogy. Figure 1 sets out the conceptual framework in summary form.

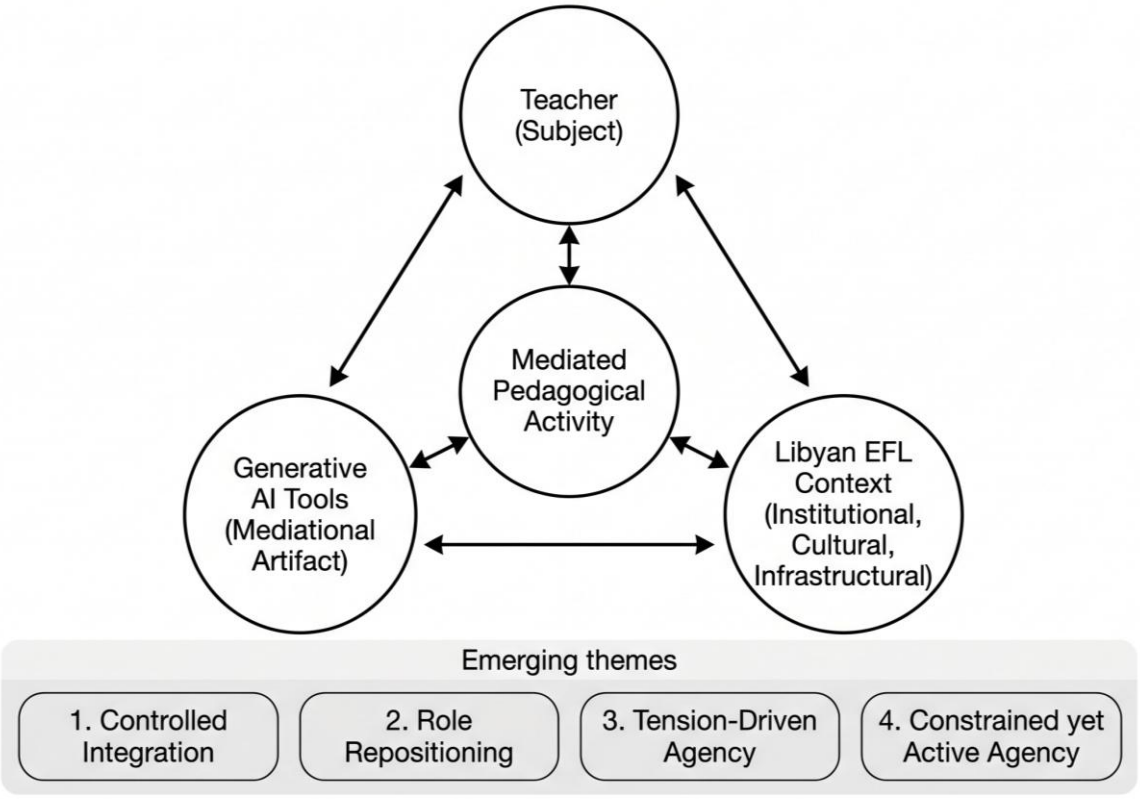

Figure 1. Conceptual framework: teacher agency in AI-mediated EFL classrooms. Adapted from Vygotsky (1978), Lantolf and Thorne (2006) and Priestley et al. (2015).

2.5 Research Gap and the Present Study

Read collectively, the literature reviewed above leaves several gaps open. First, although a growing corpus of research now examines Libyan EFL teachers' perceptions of AI, that corpus is overwhelmingly attitudinal in character. It tells us, helpfully, whether teachers feel positively or negatively and what they feel held back by, but it does not tell us what theoretically grounded agency looks like in their everyday work (Hadaga & Elfalfal, 2025; Almashrgy & Alburki, 2024; Alkurtehe & Rathakrishnan, 2025).

Second, perception-based survey designs dominate. Qualitative work does exist Alnaass and Jamoom (2025) provide a useful example but even there the analytic centre of gravity tends to fall on perspectives rather than on enacted agency.

Third, the Libyan context itself, with its informal AI integration, sparse institutional guidance and infrastructural pressure, presents a distinctive case for studying agency under conditions of heightened

uncertainty. To date that case has not received sustained attention from an agency perspective.

The present study sets out to address these gaps by examining Libyan EFL teachers' agency through the lens of Sociocultural Theory and by adopting an interpretive design that captures both breadth (through questionnaire data) and depth (through reflective written accounts). The combination is deliberate: it allows agency to emerge as a dynamic, situated and negotiated process rather than as a fixed attribute to be checked off.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A descriptive–interpretive design was adopted. The choice was practical as much as conceptual: a questionnaire offered the breadth needed to identify recurring patterns of agency across a varied sample, while reflective written accounts offered the depth needed to understand how those patterns were lived. Purely quantitative approaches, by reducing agency to a small number of measurable variables, would have flattened precisely what the study set out to examine; the combined design avoids that risk.

The interpretive orientation rests on a simple epistemological premise. Agency is not directly observable. It must be read off from accounts of practice, from the way teachers describe their decisions and from the moments of reflection in which uncertainty becomes visible. That premise fits naturally with the SCT framework, in which agency is located in mediated action rather than in individual disposition.

3.2 Rationale for Excluding Interviews

Semi-structured interviews are a familiar choice in agency research and they were given serious consideration here. They were ultimately set aside for three connected reasons. First, written reflective responses reduce the visible presence of the researcher in the data. In the Libyan setting, where power dynamics between researcher and participant can be more pronounced than they appear in English-language methodological guides, this matters. Second, written reflection allows participants to take their time.

Without the implicit pressure of a face-to-face exchange, teachers could think more carefully about complex pedagogical situations and the resulting accounts were often denser and more candid. Third, written reflections produced naturally constructed, experience-near narratives that aligned closely with the interpretive orientation of the study. The absence of interviews, then, did not weaken the design so much as it shifted where the conversational richness was located.

3.3 Participants

Forty-two Libyan EFL teachers took part, drawn from both school and higher education settings across several regions. Sampling was purposive and convenience-based; the goal was variety in teaching context, in years of experience and in familiarity with AI tools rather than statistical representativeness. The sample included teachers from the University of Benghazi, Elmergib University, Al-Asmarya Islamic University and a number of secondary schools, which together captured a reasonable spread of institutional environments. All participants reported at least some exposure to generative AI tools in their teaching practice.

3.4 Data Collection Instruments

3.4.1 Structured Questionnaire

The questionnaire was organised in three sections. Section A gathered demographic and contextual information: years of teaching experience, teaching context (school or university), the quality of technology access available to participants (reliable, limited or inconsistent), self-reported familiarity with AI tools and frequency of AI use in teaching. Section B contained 20 Likert-scale items (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), grouped into five theoretically derived constructs: Agency as Pedagogical Control (4 items), Mediated Decision-Making (4 items), Contextual Constraints (4 items), Negotiation and Tension (4 items) and Adaptive Agency (4 items). Section C comprised five open-ended prompts inviting event-based recall of specific pedagogical situations involving AI.

3.4.2 Reflective Written Prompts

Participants were also asked to produce short written reflections (150–400 words each) in response to five prompts: (i) a critical incident reflection

on an AI-related classroom challenge; (ii) a pedagogical repositioning account describing how their role has changed; (iii) a tension-and-constraint narrative; (iv) a strategy-formation account; and (v) a future-orientation statement. The prompts were designed to function as experience-near data and to give the analysis access to the lived enactment of agency rather than to abstract beliefs about it.

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis. Descriptive statistics frequencies, means and standard deviations were calculated for all Likert-scale items in SPSS. Optional correlational analyses were performed to explore relationships between demographic variables and the agency constructs.

Qualitative analysis. Open-ended responses and reflective accounts were subjected to a theory-informed thematic analysis following the six-phase procedure proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition and reporting. Coding was guided by the SCT constructs of mediation, agency enactment, contextual constraint and tension, ensuring that the resulting themes were not merely descriptive but conceptually grounded. Themes were refined iteratively, through repeated cycles of coding, comparison and renaming.

3.6 Validity and Reliability

Several measures were used to strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings. The questionnaire was pilot-tested with a small group of Libyan EFL teachers (n = 5) to refine item clarity and check construct alignment. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha; all constructs exceeded the conventional 0.70 threshold. Triangulation was achieved by cross-referencing Likert data, open-ended responses and reflective narratives. Thick description was used in reporting qualitative findings to support interpretive credibility and transferability. Member checking was carried out with a subset of participants to verify the accuracy of the interpreted accounts.

4. Findings and Analysis

What follows is organised around four interrelated themes that emerged from the questionnaire data and the reflective written responses. Each is read through the lens of Sociocultural Theory and is developed through a combination of quantitative indicators and qualitative excerpts.

4.1 Theme One: Controlled Integration as a Form of Enacted Agency

A consistent pattern, visible across both the Likert data and the reflective accounts, is that teachers do not approach generative AI as something to be wholly adopted or wholly refused. They regulate its presence in the classroom through a series of bounded practices. The Agency as Pedagogical Control construct produced a mean of 3.72 (SD = 0.68); within it, the highest-rated item was "I decide when and how AI tools are used in my teaching" (M = 4.12). The item "I modify AI-generated content before using it in class" also drew strong agreement (M = 3.89), suggesting that teachers position themselves as active mediators of AI output rather than as passive consumers of it.

One participant captured this stance in concrete terms:

> *"I allow students to use AI only for generating ideas, but not for writing full answers. I explain to them that AI is a helper, not a replacement for their own thinking."*

Similar strategies came up repeatedly across the dataset. Teachers described requiring students to submit AI-generated drafts alongside their own revised versions; permitting AI for brainstorming while reserving the final composition for student work; and designing tasks that obliged students to engage critically with AI output rather than to accept it. From an SCT angle, this corresponds closely to mediation in the Vygotskian sense: the cultural tool is not absorbed wholesale but is actively reshaped by the teacher who is using it. What is interesting, methodologically, is that the agency on display here is not the agency of refusal. It is the agency of selective appropriation. Teachers attempt to keep their pedagogical intent intact while acknowledging that the technology is, for practical purposes, here to stay. In that sense, the data support a theoretical claim that has been gaining ground

in the literature: AI does not so much shrink teacher agency as redistribute it across a wider set of pedagogical decisions.

4.2 Theme Two: Pedagogical Role Repositioning under AI Mediation

A second, more subtle pattern concerns how teachers see themselves. The Adaptive Agency construct produced a mean of 3.54 (SD = 0.61); within it, "I redefine my role in response to AI tools" received a mean of 3.67. Reflective accounts made the underlying shift more visible:

"My role is no longer to provide answers, but to guide students in using AI responsibly. I spend more time now teaching them how to evaluate AI output than giving them information."

Another participant put it this way:

"Before AI, I was the main source of language input. Now AI provides input and I help students process it critically."

What these accounts gesture toward is not a downgrade in expertise but a different kind of expertise: metacognitive, evaluative, strategic. The teacher becomes a curator and critic of AI-generated content and that role demands at least as much pedagogical skill as the older one of primary knowledge source. From an SCT perspective, the move corresponds to a transformation in mediated action; the teacher's role is reconstructed through interaction with technological tools that redistribute epistemic authority. It would be misleading, however, to read this transformation as straightforwardly empowering. Several participants spoke about it with ambivalence.

"I feel I am becoming less important in the classroom and I am not sure if this is good or bad."

That uncertainty is not noise in the data. It is part of what role transformation feels like from the inside and it sits squarely with Alarnaout's (2026) observation that "the advantages are conditional upon the meticulous work of the teacher, as otherwise, there is a danger of developing skills and even missing cultural values."

4.3 Theme Three: Tension-Driven Agency Formation

Perhaps the most analytically interesting finding is that agency is rarely most visible in moments of smooth practice. It tends to surface,

instead, in moments of pedagogical tension and uncertainty. The Negotiation and Tension construct produced a mean of 3.31 (SD = 0.74); within it, "I experience uncertainty when deciding whether to allow AI use" drew a mean of 3.52. The reflective data elaborated this uncertainty in some detail. One teacher described an ongoing dilemma:

> *"Sometimes I am not sure if I should allow AI or stop it, because students depend on it too much. But if I forbid it completely, they will use it at home without any guidance. So, I am always in between."*

Another reflected on a specific incident:

> *"A student submitted an essay that was clearly generated by ChatGPT. When I questioned him, he said he did not know it was wrong because I had never given clear rules. I realised then that my own uncertainty was creating confusion."*

It would be easy to read this kind of uncertainty as a deficiency, as something to be eliminated through training and clearer institutional rules. The analysis here reads it differently. Uncertainty is, in many of these accounts, the very condition under which agency forms. Decisions get made because they have to be made, even when no settled answer is available. From an SCT perspective, this fits comfortably with the idea that mediated action is intrinsically tension-filled that tools simultaneously enable and constrain activity. Generative AI, in this case, functions as both pedagogical resource and source of instructional instability.

There is a useful resonance here with the notion of "proclivitic conformity" identified in studies of female EFL teachers in post-conflict Libya strategic compliance adopted "to ensure survival under systemic constraint." The teachers in the present study describe something similar: a constant negotiation between accommodation and resistance, with responses calibrated to the situation rather than to a fixed position.

4.4 Theme Four: Contextually Constrained but Active Agency

Context, finally, runs through everything teachers said. The Contextual Constraints construct produced a mean of 3.58 (SD = 0.71). Within it, the items "Lack of training limits my use of AI in teaching" (M =

3.94) and "Technical limitations affect my ability to integrate AI effectively" (M = 3.78) drew the highest endorsement. The qualitative data fleshed these numbers out, often quite vividly:

> *"We don't have clear rules about AI, so each teacher decides based on the situation. It is good that we have freedom, but sometimes it feels like we are alone with this."*

Another teacher pointed to infrastructure:

> *"The internet in our university is not reliable. Students use their own mobile data. How can I design a lesson around AI when I don't know if the connection will work?"*

These accounts sit comfortably alongside the broader Libyan literature, which has documented infrastructural and training challenges with some consistency. Shalbag (2026) reports that "the main challenges respondents face when integrating technology into language teaching include limited access to digital devices, poor internet connectivity, insufficient training and technical support and time constraints," with "61.89% of respondents either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that they had received sufficient training."

Hamidat (2023) makes a similar point at the level of higher education, noting that "the use of E-learning in Libyan higher education is still in its early stages and is challenged by numerous difficulties, the most significant of which is the country's 'immature' infrastructure." Daboba (2025) adds the absence of "computers, internet access, technical support and teachers who possess the necessary skills and expertise" as primary obstacles in Libyan universities.

The important point, for the present analysis, is that none of these constraints abolishes agency. They shape its expression and its variability. Teachers continue to act; their actions are simply conditioned by what is available and what is not. This supports a key claim that follows from SCT: human action is always contextually mediated, which means that agency is best understood as relational and situated rather than as a stable individual quantity. Al-Mashloukh (2025), arguing in relation to rural Libyan schools, suggests that "a fundamental overhaul of EFL pedagogy in Libya is urgently

required." That ambition is well placed; the data here suggest that it will only succeed if it begins from a realistic appraisal of what teachers are already doing within their constraints, rather than from idealised prescriptions issued from the outside.

4.5 Integrative Interpretation of Findings

Read across all four themes, a single pattern emerges with some clarity: AI does not replace teacher agency, but it does reorganise the conditions under which agency is enacted. Agency becomes visible in regulation, adaptation and negotiation rather than in unmediated control. Teachers set boundaries around AI use:

1. (Theme One): they recalibrate their professional identity in response to technological mediation
2. (Theme Two): they navigate dilemmas that demand agentic responses
3. (Theme Three): they continue to exercise agency within not despite institutional and infrastructural constraints
4. (Theme Four): Generative AI, in the framing offered here, operates as what Vygotsky (1978) would have recognised as a transformative mediational layer within the teaching ecology.

It changes not only what teachers do but how they think about what they do. The picture aligns with recent work on teacher agency in post-conflict Libyan contexts, which emphasises the non-binary nature of agency operating between resistance and passivity in fragile educational systems (Abdelatia et al., 2023).

5. Discussion

Three lines of implication run from these findings.

Theoretical implications

The study presses against individualistic readings of teacher agency. What the data show, repeatedly, is that agency is enacted through mediated interaction with cultural tools. Generative AI is not simply a technology that teachers either choose or reject. It is a mediational artifact that restructures pedagogical relationships and decision-making.

To that extent, the study extends the ecological perspective on teacher agency proposed by Priestley et al. (2015) into the specific domain of AI-mediated language education. It also offers some evidence for the analytic value of Sociocultural Theory in this space; the SCT constructs of mediation, context, interaction and tension surface dimensions of teacher experience that an attitudinal survey, however well designed, would have difficulty reaching.

Empirical contributions

This is, to the author's knowledge, one of the first qualitative investigations of how Libyan EFL teachers enact agency in response to generative AI. Existing Libyan work has done valuable mapping of perceptions and challenges (Hadaga & Elfalfal, 2025; Almashrgy & Alburki, 2024; Alkurtehe & Rathakrishnan, 2025; Alnaass & Jamoom, 2025); the present study complements that work by showing the mechanisms through which agency is exercised boundary-setting, role recalibration, dilemma navigation, contextually adaptive practice. The added depth is, in part, methodological: reflective written accounts make visible something that closed-ended items cannot.

Contextual specificity

The Libyan setting matters here and not only as a backdrop. The combination of informal AI integration, an institutional policy vacuum and infrastructural constraint shapes the expression of agency in distinctive ways. The teachers in this study describe a form of agency that is improvisational, individualised and frequently undertaken in isolation. That picture is markedly different from settings in which AI integration arrives accompanied by institutional frameworks and structured professional development. The continued enactment of agency under such conditions echoes the broader observation that Libyan teachers have long worked within "a challenging context" demanding resilience and adaptability (Shalbag, 2026; Alhlmi, 2025).

Practical implications

Several directions for policy and practice follow. The first concerns the production of policy itself. Because teachers are already developing

context-sensitive strategies for managing AI in their classrooms, institutional AI policies are likely to work better when co-constructed with teachers rather than imposed from above; they should build on existing practice instead of overriding it. The second concerns professional development. The role-repositioning evidence in §4.2 suggests that training programmes should focus less on tool proficiency and more on the meta-pedagogical skills required to orchestrate AI-mediated learning environments judgement about when to defer, when to intervene, when to refuse.

The third concerns infrastructure. The centrality of contextual constraints in the data, particularly around training and technical reliability, makes it clear that pedagogical interventions on their own will not move very far. As Bakori and Ahmed (2025) put it, "by leveraging AI effectively, Libya can not only enhance English proficiency among its learners but also contribute to the broader global discourse on AI in education." Realising that potential, however, depends on coordinated investment across infrastructure, training and policy.

6. Conclusion

The study set out to ask how Libyan EFL teachers enact and negotiate their professional agency in AI-mediated teaching contexts. Working with Sociocultural Theory as an analytic frame and a descriptive–interpretive design, it has tried to show that agency, in this setting, is not a question of adoption versus rejection. It is an ongoing negotiation of boundaries, roles and constraints uneven, sometimes uncertain and rarely tidy.

What the findings suggest, in summary form, is that Libyan EFL teachers actively regulate AI use through boundary-setting practices; they recalibrate their professional identity in response to technological mediation; they exercise agency in and through moments of pedagogical tension; and they adapt their practice within rather than despite the contextual conditions under which they work. Generative AI, on this reading, does not diminish teacher agency. It reorganises the conditions under which agency is expressed.

The implications run in several directions. They speak to how teacher agency is theorised, to how AI integration is supported in developing educational contexts and to how professional development is designed. Future work might profitably extend the inquiry through longitudinal designs that track how agency evolves as AI tools become more deeply embedded in everyday classroom practice. Comparative studies across national and institutional contexts would help illuminate the role of context in shaping agentic responses and research that includes student perspectives would deepen our understanding of how teacher agency and learner agency co-construct the AI-mediated classroom. Read in this light, teacher agency is best understood not as a stable attribute to be measured but as a negotiated, contextually mediated process one that is fundamentally reshaped, but not erased, by the growing presence of generative AI in language education.

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