

## Exploring the Ethical Issues of Using ChatGPT in Language Learning among Iranian EFL University Students

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Article Info	Abstract
<p><b>Article type:</b> Research Article</p> <p><b>Article history:</b> Received January 01, 2025 Received in revised form August 15, 2025 Accepted September 23, 2025 Published online September 28, 2025</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Academic Integrity, ChatGPT, Ethical Issues, Iranian EFL University Students, Language Learning.</p>	<p>This study investigates the ethical contours of ChatGPT-supported language learning among Iranian university students of English as a foreign language. Using semi-structured Persian-language interviews with 18 participants and a reflexive thematic analysis, the research maps how learners negotiate privacy, fairness, authorship, and learning efficacy when engaging with generative AI. Students reported privacy-first practices (removing identifiers, avoiding uploads, preferring vetted tools), persistent anxiety about detector bias toward non-native writing, and a normative boundary between scaffolding and substitution, as evidenced in prompt logs and self-justifications. They valued rapid feedback yet warned that unexamined automation can erode critical thinking, motivation, and confidence, especially when outputs default to non-local registers that require deliberate “localization.” Participants called for process-visible assessment, plain-language data notices, vetted platforms, and due-process pathways for contesting automated accusations. They also highlighted infrastructural inequities—VPN-dependent connectivity and device constraints—that condition who can benefit from AI. Taken together, the findings portray students as strategic, ethically attentive users who seek conditions under which ChatGPT augments rather than displaces language work. The study contributes a context-sensitive account of ethics-by-design for EFL, clarifying how institutional governance and classroom routines can sustain augmented autonomy, fairness, and data stewardship in Iranian higher education. Student perspectives foreground practice over hype narratives.</p>

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## Introduction

Generative AI has rapidly shifted from an experimental novelty to an everyday study companion in higher education, especially in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. As universities worldwide trial ChatGPT for feedback, brainstorming, language practice, and assessment support, the research base on educational benefits has expanded alongside concerns about integrity, authorship, bias, and privacy. As one recent review observes, “recent research highlights a variety of pedagogical applications of ChatGPT in university-level instruction” (Dos, 2025, p. 60). In Iran, empirical and conceptual work likewise points to swift uptake across teacher education and EFL classrooms, but also to unresolved questions around access, VPN-dependent connectivity, and the fit between global models and local linguistic-cultural norms (Dehghani & Mashhadi, 2024; Esfandiari & Ghamari, 2025; Javahery et al., 2025; Nushi & Saeedi, 2025; Vaccino-Salvadore, 2023). At the policy level, international guidance now urges institutions to articulate standards for transparency, fairness, privacy, and assessment redesign when integrating generative AI into teaching and research (Holmes & Miao, 2023). Against that backdrop, the ethical contours of ChatGPT-involved language learning among Iranian EFL university students—data rights, academic honesty, model bias, reliability, and learner agency—require careful, context-sensitive study. (Dehghani & Mashhadi, 2024; Dos, 2025; Esfandiari & Ghamari, 2025; Javahery et al., 2025; Holmes & Miao, 2023; Vaccino-Salvadore, 2023.)

A first axis of ethical inquiry concerns academic integrity and assessment. Institutions report both legitimate learning gains (e.g., iterative feedback, rehearsal of target forms) and new risks of plagiarism-by-proxy and hidden assistance. As Finkel-Gates (2025) puts it, “recent literature underscores AI’s expanding role and its challenges to academic integrity” (p. 2). Opinion and empirical pieces in higher education detail mitigation strategies—policy clarity on permitted uses, attribution norms, oral defenses, reflective logs, staged drafting, and redesign toward personal, local, or multimodal tasks—designed to preserve authenticity while acknowledging AI’s inevitability (Kovari, 2025). Reliability is entwined with integrity: large language models can produce confident falsehoods (hallucinations), a risk documented in both scholarly surveys and technical reports that trace structural causes in training and evaluation pipelines (Huang et al., 2024; Kalai et al., 2025). Equally salient are fairness concerns regarding AI text detection. Foundational work shows widely used detectors disproportionately flag non-native English writers—precisely the population of EFL undergraduates—raising the danger of false accusations and inequitable discipline (Liang et al., 2023). For Iranian EFL learners, then, the ethics of assessment are not merely about preventing cheating; they also implicate due process, transparency of evidence, and protection from detector bias. (Finkel-Gates, 2025; Huang et al., 2024; Kalai et al., 2025; Kovari, 2025; Liang et al., 2023.)

A second axis concerns data governance, equity, and cultural-linguistic alignment. Ethics commentators in applied linguistics underline the stakes: privacy and secondary use of learner data; opacity about training sets; and the reproduction of cultural or gendered stereotypes in

outputs (Vaccino-Salvadore, 2023). These issues take on distinctive shapes in the Iranian context. Qualitative studies with Iranian EFL teachers—noting infrastructural constraints, filtering, and the need for paid, “reliable VPN[s] to access ChatGPT”—document how connectivity, platform restrictions, and classroom practicalities shape what “ethical use” can be in practice (Nushi & Saeedi, 2025, pp. 12–13). Teachers also warn of over-reliance that may flatten creativity, discourage critical reflection, or subtly reassign authorship from students to systems, especially when prompts steer outputs toward globally dominant registers rather than locally appropriate Englishes (Javahery et al., 2025). Meanwhile, acceptance studies show that Iranian instructors perceive usefulness and ease of use, yet emphasize the need for clear rules, training, and culturally responsive integration, aligned with the Technology Acceptance Model and language-learning values (Dehghani & Mashhadi, 2024). Together, these findings suggest that “ethical use” for Iranian EFL undergraduates cannot be reduced to generic rules; it must reconcile privacy norms, infrastructural realities, and the cultivation of learner agency within locally meaningful academic literacies. (Dehghani & Mashhadi, 2024; Javahery et al., 2025; Nushi & Saeedi, 2025; Vaccino-Salvadore, 2023.)

Finally, there is an epistemic dimension: what counts as “learning” when students converse with a model trained on vast text corpora? Systematic and regional reviews highlight potential benefits (practice opportunities; immediacy of feedback; motivational effects) but also call for guardrails that keep students in the driver’s seat—explicit AI literacy, prompt transparency, and reflective justification of how AI outputs were adapted to task requirements (Dos, 2025; Esfandiari & Ghamari, 2025). International guidance converges on similar recommendations—disclose AI use; protect learners’ data; audit for bias; and redesign assignments to surface process, not just product (Holmes & Miao, 2023). That convergence does not erase local complexity: Iranian EFL students navigate English-medium scholarship, detection regimes known to disadvantage non-native writing, infrastructural hurdles, and pedagogical traditions that valorize accuracy and effort. The ethical task, then, is to specify conditions under which ChatGPT can augment language learning without outsourcing cognition, compromising fairness, or exposing students to data or reputational harms. Empirical work focused on Iranian undergraduates’ lived experiences—their interpretations of acceptable help, their privacy expectations, and how they manage uncertainty or model error—remains comparatively scarce and urgently needed to inform institutional policy and classroom practice. (Dos, 2025; Esfandiari & Ghamari, 2025; Liang et al., 2023; Holmes & Miao, 2023). This study mainly tries to answer one general question:

- What ethical issues do Iranian EFL university students identify in their use of ChatGPT for language learning?

## Literature review

### Ethics-by-Design for Generative AI in EFL Contexts

Ethical inquiry into the use of language models in higher education has increasingly converged on human-centered design, proportional risk management, and accountability across the AI lifecycle. Global frameworks articulate stable principles that can be localized to disciplinary and national contexts, such as Iranian EFL programs. UNESCO's guidance argues that classroom deployments must preserve learner agency and support human judgment, cautioning that generative tools "should not be allowed to usurp human thinking" (p. 27). This stance aligns with intergovernmental norms in the OECD AI Principles around human rights, fairness, transparency, robustness, and accountability, now embedded in updated 2024 guidance and widely adopted policy dashboards (OECD, 2019, 2024). In language education specifically, sectoral position papers situate integration as a matter of responsible augmentation rather than replacement, emphasizing human-in-the-loop pedagogy, clarity about AI's role, and protection of learners' data (Cambridge English, 2023; Holmes & Miao, 2023; Whalen & Mouza, 2023).

A central risk category for EFL cohorts is the ethical salience of mimicry. The FAcCT literature warns against normalizing systems optimized to imitate human discourse without guarantees of truthfulness or accountability. As Bender, Gebru, McMillan-Major, and Shmitchell (2021) put it, "applications that aim to believably mimic humans bring risk of extreme harms" (p. 9). In EFL settings where language proficiency, assessment stakes, and high-power distance can amplify tool effects, this critique is not merely abstract; it frames practical safeguards for task design, disclosure norms, and learning outcomes that prioritize critical language awareness.

### Academic Integrity, Assessment Design, and Institutional Responses

Generative AI challenges legacy integrity regimes designed for plagiarism detection and proctoring. Evidence from university policies and experiments suggests that detection-only strategies are brittle and normatively inadequate. For example, University of Liverpool guidance concludes that "an outright ban on the use of the technology... [is] impossible to enforce" (pp. 2–3), recommending transparent declaration, reflective use, and explicit assessment design that rewards human reasoning. Empirical and policy analyses converge on a shift toward assessment formats emphasizing process evidence, oral defenses, studio critiques, and data-bound tasks, rather than static product-only submissions (Cotton et al., 2024; Holmes & Miao, 2023; Whalen & Mouza, 2023).

Bias and due process are particularly salient: studies show that popular AI-detection pipelines can unfairly flag non-native writing (i.e., typical of many Iranian EFL students), with Liang et al. (2023) noting that detectors "consistently misclassify non-native English writing samples as AI-generated" (p. 1). This undermines equity and can produce false positives with serious academic consequences, implying that integrity policies must avoid automated

accusations, guarantee students' rights of appeal, and require human review calibrated to linguistic diversity (Liang et al., 2023; Holmes & Miao, 2023).

### Technology Acceptance and Use-in-Context

Adoption theory offers a complementary lens for understanding why and how students and instructors take up ChatGPT for language learning. In classic terms, perceived usefulness is “the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would enhance his or her job performance” (Davis, 1989, p. 320). Contemporary work connecting TAM/UTAUT constructs to student acceptance of ChatGPT in higher education underscores the roles of trust, social influence, innovation characteristics, and psychological need (Ofosu-Ampong, Acheampong, Kevor, & Amankwah-Sarfo, 2023). In teacher-facing contexts, mixed-methods studies report that perceived pedagogical value interacts with perceived risk and workload, shaping practical uptake in planning, feedback, and assessment routines (Dehghani & Mashhadi, 2024; Kasneci et al., 2023; Whalen & Mouza, 2023).

The Iranian EFL ecology adds contextual pressures: large classes, heterogeneous proficiency profiles, preparation for high-stakes tests, and constrained access to native interlocutors. Studies from Technology Assisted Language Education (TALE) and related venues document how AI-augmented approaches can scaffold feedback, accelerate lesson planning, and support peer assessment, while simultaneously requiring explicit norms for transparency and academic honesty (Asadi & Taheri, 2024; Mohammadi, Asadi, & Taheri, 2025). Across these strands, the theoretical upshot is a norm of *augmented autonomy*: systems and policies should enhance, not replace, learners' active language work and metacognitive control (Holmes & Miao, 2023; Whalen & Mouza, 2023).

### Linguistic Justice, Bias, and Data Governance

Ethical analysis in EFL must also foreground linguistic justice. Detector bias against non-native writing, accent bias in speech technologies, and prompt-engineering asymmetries risk entrenching inequality if left unexamined (Jeon & Lee, 2023; Liang et al., 2023). The remedy space includes pedagogy (explicit AI literacy, reflective disclosure), institutional safeguards (no-penalty self-declaration, clear appeal processes), and system-level choices (privacy-preserving defaults, minimal data retention, and constrained sharing). These are consistent with the OECD principles on fairness, privacy, and accountability; their operationalization in courses for Iranian EFL students should include plain-language consent around data entry, opt-out where feasible, and avoidance of uploading personal or sensitive information to third-party tools (OECD, 2019, 2024; University of Liverpool, 2023; Holmes & Miao, 2023).

## Empirical Studies

### What ChatGPT Actually Does in Language Learning Activities

Empirical research across EFL/ESL settings shows that ChatGPT can scaffold micro-level language work—lexical expansion, exemplar generation, genre modeling, and metalinguistic explanation—while enabling iterative practice cycles in writing and speaking. Teacher-education syntheses emphasize opportunities in formative feedback, lesson ideation, and differentiation, provided that activities are designed to surface rather than outsource student reasoning (Kasneci et al., 2023; Whalen & Mouza, 2023; Zawacki-Richter, Marín, Bond, & Gouverneur, 2019). Qualitative studies in Iranian EFL contexts echo these affordances: learners report gains in vocabulary, grammar noticing, and confidence when tasks combine AI prompts with human feedback and peer review, with promising effects on motivation and self-regulation (Asadi & Taheri, 2024; Alshammari, 2024; Jafari et al., 2025).

AI-supported formative feedback is particularly salient for writing. Experimental and quasi-experimental designs indicate that integrated feedback (teacher + model) can yield higher gains in IELTS-style argumentative writing than teacher-only conditions, though generalization depends on transparency protocols and reflection prompts that keep students in the loop (Dehghani & Mashhadi, 2024; Asadi et al., 2025). In teacher-led workshops, AI-mediated peer assessment embedded in an engagement framework (e.g., TEC-VARIETY) has been used to increase the quality of comments and student uptake of revisions *when* the teacher curates prompts and models metacognitive criteria (Asadi & Taheri, 2024). This line of work resonates with broader findings on adoption and acceptance: Ofosu-Ampong et al. (2023) show that perceived usefulness, social influence, innovation characteristics, and psychological need are positively associated with acceptance, a structural pattern consistent with augmented TAM models in higher education.

### Integrity, Detection, and Unintended Harms

Research on integrity continues to develop in real time. Commentaries and multi-stakeholder position pieces caution that reliance on detection alone is counterproductive; EFL-focused studies document how rigid bans and opaque detection can produce chilling effects on authentic practice and due process (Cotton et al., 2024; Dwivedi et al., 2023). Controlled tests and newsroom summaries of academic experiments suggest that AI-generated responses can evade human and machine detection in authentic assessment conditions, underscoring the need for redesign rather than escalation of surveillance (Else, 2023; Liang et al., 2023). Beyond *cheating*, integrity also means crediting AI assistance, documenting process, and ensuring students can explain and defend their language choices—practices that support learning while making misuse less attractive (Cotton et al., 2024; Whalen & Mouza, 2023).

Bias poses a distinct ethical hazard for EFL populations. The implication is twofold: (a) do not use detectors as adjudication tools; and (b) train students to disclose, cite, and reflect on AI



use, with teachers assessing the *quality of reasoning* and language development rather than mere surface polish (Liang et al., 2023; University of Liverpool, 2023; Holmes & Miao, 2023).

### Teachers' Practices, Planning, and Professional Judgment

Teacher-facing studies suggest that ChatGPT can compress planning time and expand materials repertoires while preserving professional agency through curation and critique. Iranian teacher reports describe using generative tools to prepare task banks, create leveled input, and draft rubrics, alongside concerns about hallucination, domain accuracy, and alignment with local assessment policies (Dehghani & Mashhadi, 2024; Mohammadi, Asadi, & Taheri, 2025; Nushi & Saeedi, 2025). Early evidence from TALE and cognate venues underscores that the biggest gains arise when teachers orchestrate *process-visible* activities—think-aloud drafting, prompt journaling, and source-checking checklists—so that the technology serves as a catalyst for noticing and reflection rather than a surrogate author (Asadi & Taheri, 2024; Whalen & Mouza, 2023).

### Student Experiences, Motivation, and Self-Regulation

Qualitative studies in EFL contexts consistently report perceived benefits—reduction in writing anxiety, quicker feedback cycles, and increased willingness to take risks in language production—especially when teacher scaffolding is explicit about limitations and ethical use (Almanea et al., 2024). Learners describe ChatGPT as a conversational practice space, a thesaurus with explanations, and a coach for genre moves; yet they also note the temptation to over-rely on fluent surface text and the challenge of calibrating the *right* level of assistance (Kasneci et al., 2023; Ofosu-Ampong et al., 2023).

In Iranian samples, mixed-methods reports point to measurable gains in writing accuracy and motivation when AI is embedded in structured sequences that require human elaboration and verification. Classroom interventions pairing teacher feedback with ChatGPT guidance improved IELTS Task 2 performance relative to teacher-only conditions, with reflective tasks mediating sustained benefit (Asadi et al., 2025; Jafari et al., 2025). However, studies also document emergent risks: uncritical copying, reduced practice in productive skills, and diminished metacognitive monitoring when assignments lack process requirements (Cotton et al., 2024; Dwivedi et al., 2023; Holmes & Miao, 2023).

### Policy, Pedagogy, and the Case for Co-Regulation

Across jurisdictions, research-informed guidance now converges on co-regulation of AI use in coursework: formal disclosure, tiered permissions by task, explicit teacher modeling, and assessment designs that elicit process evidence (Galaczi, 2023; Whalen & Mouza, 2023). In EFL courses, that translates into prompt logs, drafts annotated with rationales for AI edits, oral defense of revisions, and hybrid rubrics that reward accuracy, appropriateness, and reflection. Such measures can convert *use* into *learning signals*, allowing instructors to diagnose interlanguage development and ethical judgment. They also mitigate inequities associated with

detector bias by shifting scrutiny from unverifiable provenance to observable learning processes (Jeon & Lee, 2023; Liang et al., 2023).

Method

Design

This study employed a qualitative, interpretivist design to elicit rich, situated accounts of how Iranian EFL university students perceive and navigate the ethical dimensions of using ChatGPT in language learning. Semi-structured interviews were chosen to balance consistency (so that core ethical domains were probed across participants) with flexibility (so that unanticipated issues could surface) (Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson, & Kangasniemi, 2016). Given the rapid diffusion of generative AI and the contextual sensitivities surrounding access, data practices, and academic integrity in Iran, a qualitative approach was best positioned to illuminate meanings, practices, and rationales rather than to estimate population parameters. The analytic strategy followed reflexive thematic analysis (TA) as articulated by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019, 2021), supplemented by pragmatic guidance on qualitative coding (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Saldaña, 2021). This approach emphasizes depth, reflexivity, and conceptual development over coding reliability statistics, aligning with our aim to theorize ethically salient patterns in student talk.

Participants

Eighteen Iranian EFL university students participated. Purposive strategies sought maximum variability across age, degree stage, and geography to capture a range of experiences with ChatGPT (Patton, 2015; Palinkas et al., 2015). Recruitment combined direct outreach (departmental lists and student groups), social-media announcements, and snowballing from early volunteers. Eligibility required current enrollment in an Iran-based university program with English as a major or the principal medium of instruction, age ≥18, and at least one substantive episode of ChatGPT use for language learning in the prior six months. Sample size was guided by information power (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016): the study’s narrow objective, relatively specific sample, and focused interview guide, together with strong dialogic quality, indicated that n≈15–20 would yield sufficient analytic traction; ongoing analysis suggested diminishing returns by the seventeenth and eighteenth interview. Following reflexive TA conventions, we did not attempt probabilistic “saturation,” which has limited applicability when themes evolve through interpretive work (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Guest, Namey, & Chen, 2020).

**Table 1.** *The Demographic Information of the Participants*

Participant	Age	Degree	City
1	22	Bachelor’s	Tehran
2	28	Master’s	Gorgan



3	24	Bachelor's	Karaj
4	33	Bachelor's	Mazandaran
5	37	Bachelor's	Karaj
6	25	Master's	Gorgan
7	29	Bachelor's	Bojnoord
8	40	Master's	Tehran
9	21	Bachelor's	Shiraz
10	23	Bachelor's	Kermanshah
11	31	Bachelor's	Mazandaran
12	25	Master's	Kermanshah
13	42	Bachelor's	Shiraz
14	29	Master's	Bojnoord
15	37	Bachelor's	Mazandaran
16	23	Bachelor's	Gorgan
17	48	Bachelor's	Kermanshah
18	36	Master's	Tehran

Procedures complied with institutional ethical standards and the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval was granted by the authors' institutional research ethics committee [blinded for review]. Participants received a Persian consent form describing the study's purpose, voluntary participation, confidentiality safeguards, and data-handling procedures; consent also covered audio recording and the use of anonymized quotations. Pseudonyms replaced names; indirect identifiers (e.g., specific program names) were generalized in transcripts. Audio files and transcripts were stored on an encrypted drive with access restricted to the analysis team, and will be deleted after the retention period specified in the ethics protocol. Because interviews addressed AI use that might intersect with course assessment, care was taken to emphasize that no course staff would have access to raw data and that disclosures would not have academic consequences. Translation and reporting practices attended to meaning preservation in a cross-language context (Temple & Young, 2004; van Nes, Abma, Jonsson, & Deeg, 2010).

### Instruments

The semi-structured interview guide was constructed via a staged process: (a) scoping of recent research on generative AI in EFL higher education and ethics (to delimit domains such as academic integrity, disclosure and authorship, AI-text detection and due process, privacy/data governance, bias/equity, cultural-linguistic fit, infrastructural access, and learning processes); (b) expert review by two applied-linguistics faculty and one educational-technology specialist; (c) pilot interviews with two EFL students to refine clarity, ordering, and probes; and (d) iterative revision to ensure coverage and conversational flow (Kallio et al., 2016). Example core

prompts included: “Walk me through a recent assignment where you used ChatGPT—what did you ask it to do and why?”; “How do you decide what counts as acceptable help?”; “What concerns, if any, do you have about privacy or data when you type prompts?”; “How do you think instructors and universities should handle AI-text detection?” Probes elicited concrete episodes, decision processes, and reflections (Miles et al., 2014).

A short form collected background variables to contextualize analyses: age; degree stage; field (e.g., TEFL, English language and literature, translation studies); university type (public/private); year of study; self-reported English proficiency (CEFR band or IELTS-equivalent); months of ChatGPT use; typical weekly use frequency; primary purposes (planning, feedback, idea generation, translation, editing); access modality (direct/VPN); and primary device. Variables were operationalized in simple categorical bands to protect anonymity and facilitate descriptive synthesis.

### Procedure

Interviews were conducted in Persian via secure audio/video channels commonly used in Iran (e.g., WhatsApp/Telegram/Skype) to respect participants’ platform constraints. Conversations lasted 40–65 minutes (median  $\approx$  52), were audio-recorded with permission, and were followed by brief field notes capturing contextual details (setting, interruptions), interactional observations (tone, hesitations), and analytic hunches (Saldaña, 2021). Participants could choose audio-only to reduce bandwidth/visibility concerns. Recordings were transcribed verbatim in Persian; a bilingual research assistant checked transcripts for accuracy. For analysis, coding was conducted on the Persian transcripts to retain nuance; translated English excerpts are provided only for illustration in reporting (Temple & Young, 2004; van Nes et al., 2010).

To balance fidelity and readability, we used a two-step translation approach. First, analytic coding and theme development proceeded on the Persian texts. Second, when exemplar quotations were selected, they were translated into English and independently back-checked by another bilingual team member, who compared the English translation with the Persian to avoid semantic drift (van Nes et al., 2010). Disagreements were resolved through discussion, with attention to culturally loaded terms (e.g., *eftekhar* [pride in authorship], *hezfi* [omission] when describing detector false positives) that might not map cleanly to English.

### Data Analysis

The interview corpus was analyzed using a reflexive thematic analysis that privileged meaning-making over procedural enumeration, proceeding iteratively through close engagement with the Persian transcripts, analytic memoing, and progressively theorized theme construction oriented to the study’s ethical focus (academic integrity, privacy, equity, authorship, and cultural–linguistic fit) (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2021). Coding was primarily inductive while remaining sensitized to concepts from the literature; codes were organized, merged, and refined within a CAQDAS environment to support rigorous retrieval and constant comparative work, with interpretive decisions documented in an audit trail and refined through critical-friend

debriefs rather than positivist reliability statistics, in keeping with the reflexive TA paradigm (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Saldaña, 2021). To preserve nuance, all analytic work was conducted on the Persian texts, and only selected illustrative extracts were translated for reporting with attention to cross-language fidelity (Temple & Young, 2004; van Nes, Abma, Jonsson, & Deeg, 2010). Trustworthiness was addressed through prolonged engagement with the data, transparent documentation of analytic moves, and credibility practices consistent with “big-tent” criteria for qualitative quality, emphasizing rich evidence–claim linkages and conceptual coherence of the final themes and model rather than count-based generalization (Nowell et al., 2017; Tracy, 2010). The resulting thematic account and accompanying conceptual model articulate how contextual constraints and governance arrangements shape student practices of AI use and, in turn, condition fairness, privacy, and learning outcomes in Iranian EFL settings (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Miles et al., 2014).

## Findings

### Privacy and data governance

Privacy surfaced as a persistent, practical worry that shaped day-to-day behavior. Participants described stripping prompts of identifying information, avoiding uploads with embedded metadata, and, where possible, preferring institution-vetted tools. One student explained: *“I never include names or student numbers—I just don’t know what happens to that data once it leaves my screen”* (P06). Another noted: *“We are encouraged to try AI, but I cannot locate clear statements about storage, retention, or who has access”* (P12). These accounts echo long-standing concerns from learning-analytics ethics: when data flows are opaque, learners will default to defensive practices and withhold information that could otherwise enrich learning (Slade & Prinsloo, 2013; Pardo & Siemens, 2014). Participants wanted plain-language notices at the point of use and university-level standards for consent and retention, arguing that privacy should be treated as a design requirement rather than an afterthought.

### Algorithmic bias and representation

Students regularly questioned whether outputs reflected their context, idioms, and disciplinary conventions. *“Sometimes the examples feel imported; I spend time ‘localizing’ the answer to make it fit Iran and our courses”* (P03). Others worried about more subtle stereotyping: *“It is polite and fluent, but the tone is not ours—it erases local references”* (P14). Such perceptions are consistent with work on social bias in NLP, which shows that training data composition can lead to stylistic homogenization or stereotype carryover (Hovy & Spruit, 2016; Blodgett, Barocas, Daumé III, & Wallach, 2020). A linked fairness thread concerned evaluation: *“Even when I write my own text, I fear a detector will call it ‘AI’ because my English is not native”* (P09). Rather than punitive detection, students favored process-visible assessments that shift attention from provenance to reasoning and revision.

### Academic integrity and authorship

While acknowledging temptations to shortcut effort, most participants articulated a boundary between scaffolding and substitution. *“I use it as an idea bank for structure and vocabulary, then I rewrite and justify the changes”* (P15). Anxiety focused less on “catching cheaters” and more on due process and credibility: *“If a tool labels my work ‘AI-written,’ what evidence can I bring to defend myself?”* (P10). These concerns align with integrity research that emphasizes fostering authentic assessment and transparent authorship practices over escalation of surveillance (Bretag, 2019; Jisc, 2023). Participants endorsed disclosure statements, prompt logs, and viva-style defenses, not as bureaucratic burdens but as mechanisms to show their thinking and protect against false accusations.

### Learning and assessment impacts

Students credited ChatGPT with accelerating practice, generating alternatives, and offering quick language feedback: *“It gives me multiple phrasings; I compare, choose, and then adapt to my purpose”* (P02). Yet they highlighted a risk of over-smoothing: *“If I accept the answer as-is, I notice I stop thinking critically about wording and sources”* (P08). The pattern mirrors wider syntheses that see learning gains when AI is embedded as *scaffold* and critiqued—rather than as an unexamined shortcut (Zawacki-Richter, Marín, Bond, & Gouverneur, 2019; Kohnke, Zou, & Zhang, 2023). Students judged assessments most credible when they rewarded explanation and adaptation (process portfolios, oral explanations of revisions, and source-checking), ensuring that grades reflected cognition rather than just surface polish.

### Misuse risks and safeguards

Participants worried about fabricated references, polished text passed off as original, and privacy breaches. *“It can produce confident text with fake citations; it looks real until you check them”* (P13). Suggested safeguards were constructive rather than carceral: permitted-use exemplars for each assignment, structured verification steps, random mini-orals, and clear processes for documenting appropriate AI assistance. This aligns with broader guidance that couples AI literacy with assessment redesign to reduce incentives for misuse (Sutherland-Smith, 2010; Jisc, 2023). Students asked that courses teach how to test claims, trace sources, and cite AI contributions, so integrity is learned rather than merely policed.

### Emotional and psychological effects

A subset described ambivalent affect, oscillating between reassurance and self-doubt. *“It’s a safety net, but sometimes I feel my progress is artificial—like I’m fixing form, not building skill”* (P01). Detector anxiety compounded this: *“I am more worried about being misjudged by a tool than by a teacher”* (P11). The pattern aligns with research on self-efficacy and academic emotions: feedback that bypasses reflection can reduce perceived control, while structured self-regulation buffers anxiety (Pekrun, 2011; Panadero, 2017). Students reported that explicit

norms for acceptable help and chances to justify edits restored agency and reframed AI as a coach rather than a judge.

### **Institutional policy and guidelines**

Across interviews, participants asked for clear, local guidance. *“Show us acceptable and unacceptable uses for each task and what exactly to disclose”* (P07). They favored assignment-specific instructions over generic statements and wanted templates for AI-use declarations, prompt logs, and evidence expectations. These preferences map to sector recommendations that encourage transparent, context-sensitive adoption supported by staff development (HEPI, 2023; EDUCAUSE, 2023). Students also requested institutional vetting of tools on privacy grounds and training so instructors can model critique, not just compliance.

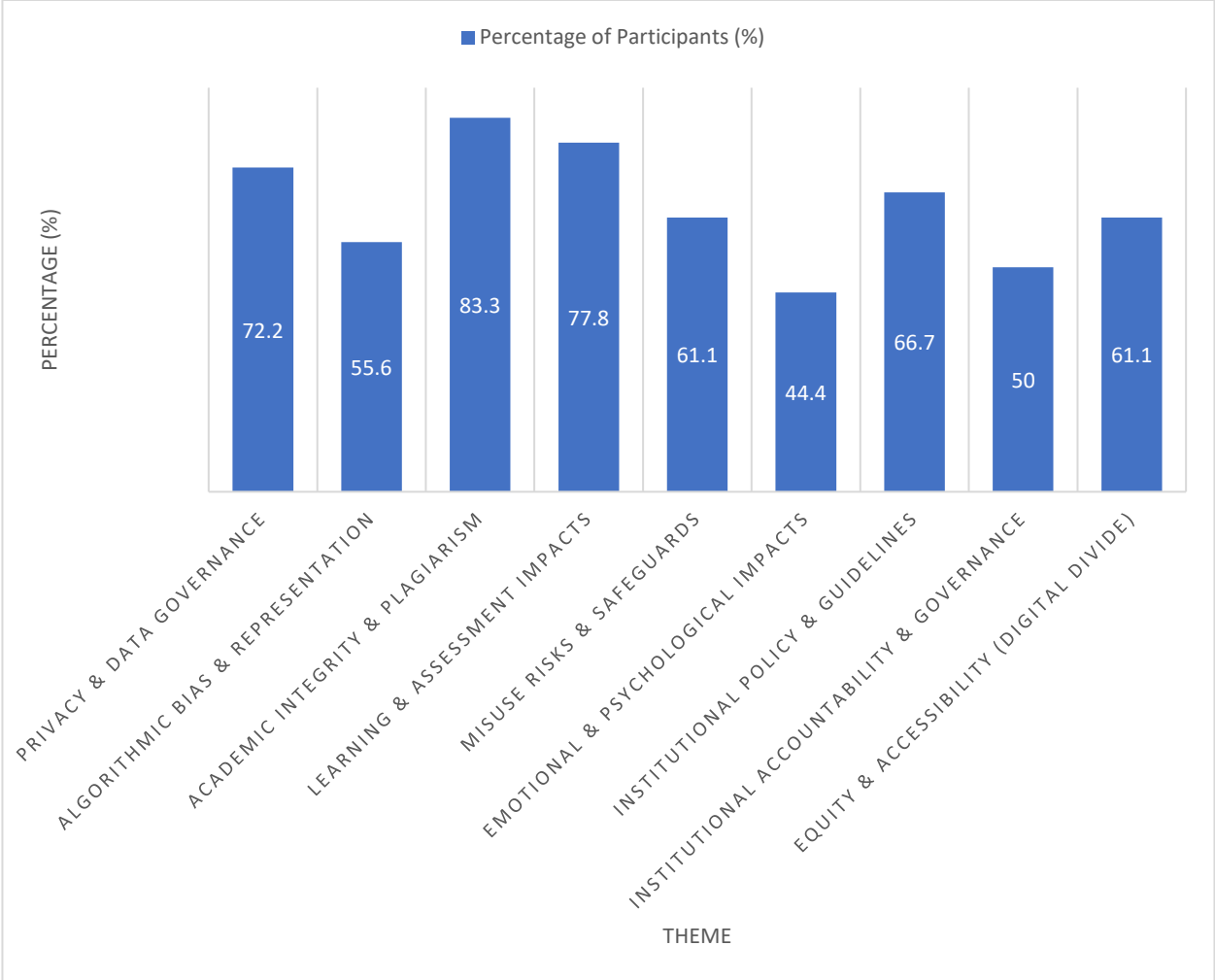
### **Institutional accountability and governance**

Beyond classroom rules, students wanted visible governance and due process. *“Who is accountable if an approved tool leaks data, or if a detector wrongly flags my work?”* (P16). They suggested oversight committees to evaluate tools, hear appeals, and update policies as systems evolve. This mirrors calls in the governance literature to move from individual policing to system-level accountability mechanisms that recognize uneven risk exposures across learner populations (Veale & Binns, 2017; Selwyn, 2019).

### **Equity and access**

Separate from algorithmic fairness, infrastructural constraints shaped who could use AI productively. *“Sometimes I spend more time getting a VPN to work than writing the essay”* (P04). Others noted advantages for peers with paid subscriptions or faster devices. These conditions reflect long-studied “second-level” digital divide dynamics—differences in skills and quality of access, not merely connectivity (van Dijk, 2020). Participants argued for institution-level support—campus access points, reliable connection pathways, and equitable alternatives—to prevent AI from amplifying pre-existing inequalities.

To visualize salience across participants, a spreadsheet was created that calculates the percentage of students who mentioned each theme at least once.



**Figure 1.** *Share of Participants Mentioning Each Theme*

**Discussion**

The present study reveals a privacy-first stance among Iranian EFL undergraduates: students routinely remove identifying information from prompts, avoid uploading files with embedded metadata, and seek institution-vetted tools before engaging with ChatGPT. These tactics corroborate learning-analytics ethics research showing that opaque data flows push learners toward defensive self-protection and data minimization (Slade & Prinsloo, 2013; Pardo & Siemens, 2014). What distinguishes our corpus is not mere anxiety but a granular grasp of risk: participants ask about retention horizons, data controllers, and cross-border transfers, shaped by VPN-dependent access and platform filtering. This diverges from global accounts that portray students as naïve adopters dazzled by novelty (Dos, 2025). Instead, respondents align with arguments that responsible use presupposes intelligible consent and organizational accountability rather than individual vigilance (Holmes & Miao, 2023; Vaccino-Salvadore, 2023). They also broaden the privacy frame beyond compliance to epistemic legitimacy: when exchange conditions are unclear, students withhold personal context that might enrich feedback, dampening the personalization celebrated in adoption studies (Dehghani & Mashhadi, 2024).



Alongside privacy, participants scrutinize cultural–linguistic fit, reporting that unlocalized tone can erase local references. This resonates with evidence that model outputs mirror training distributions and power relations (Hovy & Spruit, 2016; Blodgett et al., 2020). Taken together, the findings complicate optimistic narratives by showing how ethical caution and contextual editing are prerequisites for pedagogical upside. Trust, in this account, is thus not a personality trait but a policy outcome, produced when consent is legible and stewardship is demonstrable.

Findings on academic integrity similarly nuance the literature. Participants describe a boundary between scaffolding and substitution—brainstorming structures or surface realizations while documenting prompts and revisions—thereby operationalizing authorship rather than outsourcing it. This departs from alarmist accounts that cast students chiefly as would-be cheaters and aligns with integrity research prioritizing authentic assessment, attribution, and oral defense over technological policing (Bretag, 2019; Jisc, 2023; Cotton et al., 2024). Notably, fear centers on due process: several worried they could be falsely accused by AI-text detectors despite composing their own prose, a concern borne out by evidence that detectors over-flag non-native writing (Liang et al., 2023). Where some policy commentaries propose expanding detection or raising penalties (Finkel-Gates, 2025; Kovari, 2025), our data suggest such moves erode trust without solving provenance. Students endorsed process-visible routines—prompt logs, staged drafting, short viva voce checks—that make reasoning auditable, dovetailing with research recommending assessment redesign rather than surveillance escalation. They also recognized hallucinations and overconfident errors, consistent with technical accounts of systemic unreliability (Huang et al., 2024; Kalai et al., 2025). In this respect, integrity is inseparable from reliability: when systems fabricate citations, the ethical burden shifts from detecting deceit to designing tasks that require verifiable sources and defensible choices. Thus, our findings complicate binary debates and reframe integrity as a form of cognition manifested in probabilistic outputs. Rather than a technological arms race, students endorsed pedagogical transparency and dialogue as the legitimate basis for adjudicating authorship and assistance.

The study refines claims about learning impact by showing how students turn ChatGPT into a practice amplifier while guarding against passivity. Consistent with systematic reviews, participants credited rapid exemplars, alternative phrasings, and immediate feedback with helping them iterate drafts (Zawacki-Richter, 2019). Yet they also reported over-smoothing, in which fluent suggestions dull attention to sources and genre moves—an effect mitigated when teachers require justification of edits and comparisons among alternatives (Kohnke et al., 2023). These experiences map onto research on self-regulated learning and academic emotions: structured reflection and goal setting increase control and reduce anxiety, whereas unexamined automation can erode self-efficacy (Panadero, 2017; Pekrun, 2011). Our data add a distinctively Iranian layer: because outputs often default to globally dominant registers, students spend effort on localization and voice preservation, a form of critical language awareness rarely foregrounded in global accounts (Hovy & Spruit, 2016; Blodgett et al., 2020). Rather than mere style correction, participants cast localization as identity work that keeps alignment with local

academic literacies even as they appropriate helpful scaffolds. This both complements and challenges adoption studies: perceived usefulness remains high, but usefulness is contingent on reflective structures that keep the student—not the model—at the center of meaning-making (Dehghani & Mashhadi, 2024; Dos, 2025). In sum, learning gains depend less on access than on designs that convert model output into occasions for reasoning, editing, and explanation. Where such structures were absent, several students reported drifting toward uncritical copying, a slippage they recognized and sought to correct through self-imposed prompts and logs.

Finally, calls for clear rules, visible governance, and equitable access position this study within a shift from individual compliance to institutional accountability. Participants distinguished course-level guidance (what to disclose, how to cite AI help) from system-level duties (tool vetting, privacy standards, appeals when detectors misfire), echoing sector reports advocating policy clarity paired with staff development (EDUCAUSE, 2023; HEPI, 2023; Holmes & Miao, 2023). They also highlighted infrastructural inequities—VPN dependence, device constraints, variable bandwidth—that track second-level digital divide dynamics, where skills and the quality of access shape benefits (van Dijk, 2020). Contrasted with studies in less constrained settings, the Iranian context makes equity inseparable from ethics: the same rule that mandates disclosure may be experienced as risky when connectivity is fragile or when model behavior deviates from local norms (Esfandiari & Ghamari, 2025; Javahery et al., 2025; Nushi & Saeedi, 2025). The preference for process-visible assessment intersects with reliability concerns, since hallucinations and citation fabrication complicate provenance checks and press evaluators to privilege explainable choices over polish (Huang et al., 2024; Kalai et al., 2025). From a governance scholarship perspective, these findings align with calls to embed fairness and accountability at the system level rather than delegating risk to individuals (Veale & Binns, 2017). Taken together, the results advance an ethics-by-design account for EFL in which institutional rules, infrastructural supports, and classroom routines jointly sustain augmented autonomy and system-level accountability, with roles and processes.

## Conclusion

The study shows that Iranian EFL undergraduates do not embrace generative AI with uncritical enthusiasm; they actively negotiate its risks, utility, and fairness. Students' privacy-first practices (removing identifiers, avoiding uploads, preferring vetted tools) confirm that opaque data flows suppress disclosure and thereby constrain pedagogical personalization (Slade & Prinsloo, 2013; Pardo & Siemens, 2014). Their boundary-setting between scaffolding and substitution reframes academic integrity as evidence of cognition rather than as policing provenance, a stance that resonates with research arguing for authentic, process-visible assessment over surveillance (Bretag, 2019). The most distinctive contribution is how participants re-center context: they treat "localization" of ChatGPT output—not merely style polishing—as identity work to preserve voice and disciplinary appropriateness in Iranian settings, anticipating critiques of homogenization and representational bias in NLP (Hovy & Spruit, 2016; Blodgett, Barocas, Daumé III, & Wallach, 2020). In short, the findings complicate

simple narratives of benefit or harm: educational value emerges when privacy is designed in, authorship is made inspectable, and cultural–linguistic fit is deliberately curated.

The practical upshot is a shift from individual vigilance to institutional design. At the course level, instructors should treat AI use as a source of evidence about learning—requiring prompt logs, annotated drafts, brief viva checks, and verification steps that reward comparison, justification, and adaptation—so grades track reasoning rather than surface fluency (Zawacki-Richter, Marín, Bond, & Gouverneur, 2019; Kohnke et al., 2023). At the institutional level, governance needs to move beyond generic statements: publish plain-language privacy notices at the point of use; vet tools against retention, access, and cross-border transfer standards; and replace detector-driven adjudication with due-process pathways that recognize documented bias against non-native writing (Liang, Yuksekgonul, Mao, Wu, & Zou, 2023). Equity must be treated as part of ethics, not a downstream concern: VPN dependence, device constraints, and bandwidth variability demand supported access routes and AI-agnostic alternatives so that participation is not contingent on infrastructure (van Dijk, 2020). Finally, teacher development should focus on two literacies at once—critical AI literacy (limits, hallucinations, calibration) and dialogic assessment—so that students experience ChatGPT as a promptable coach inside a reflective workflow rather than an answer machine (Pekrun, 2011; Panadero, 2017; Holmes & Miao, 2023).

There are boundaries to what these data can sustain, and they point directly to productive next steps. The interpretivist design privileges depth over breadth; perspectives come from 18 volunteers in specific programs and cities, analyzed in Persian and selectively translated, so transferability—not statistical generalization—is the relevant standard (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Future inquiry should therefore be programmatic rather than incremental: design-based research that co-creates process-visible assessments with instructors and students across multiple Iranian universities; longitudinal diary studies that track how privacy practices, self-efficacy, and localization strategies evolve over a semester; and quasi-experimental comparisons of assessment regimes (detector-led vs. process-evidence-led) on both achievement and perceived justice. Methodologically, two gaps merit priority: robust fairness evaluations of AI-text detectors using Persian-accented and EFL corpora, and model-audit work that quantifies representational drift and stereotype carryover in prompts tuned for Iranian academic genres (Veale & Binns, 2017; Blodgett et al., 2020). Finally, mixed-methods acceptance studies should revisit TAM constructs under new governance conditions—testing whether legible consent, vetted tools, and graded reflection tasks shift perceived usefulness and trust (Dehghani & Mashhadi, 2024)—so that adoption metrics capture the *designed* environment students actually inhabit rather than a hypothetical, policy-free baseline.

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**First Author:** collected data, designed, conducted the procedure, and wrote the first draft.

**Second Author:** read, made necessary revisions, and approved the final manuscript.

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