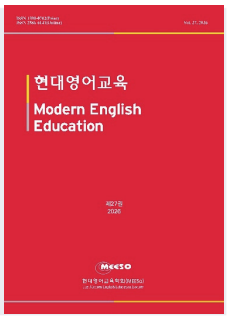
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Exploring Teacher Agency in the Use of Domestic Generative AI Tools for University English Teaching in China

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Abstract

Research on generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) in language education has largely centered on students and global platforms like ChatGPT, paying little attention to how teachers in non-Western settings adopt GenAI or how institutions mediate their practices. In China, national AI policies are implemented differently across universities, making institutional context an important condition for teachers' engagement with GenAI. This study examines why Chinese university English teachers adopt GenAI, how their use varies across professional tasks, and how variations in teacher agency relate to institutional context. Data from eight teachers were collected through semi-structured interviews, supplemented for four participants by AI usage logs and screenshots of teacher–AI exchanges, and analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis drawing on Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological model of teacher agency and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. Domestic platforms were used predominantly for their accessibility. GenAI was routinely applied in lesson planning, whereas in grading and research teachers used it more selectively. Teacher agency varied considerably across institutional environments, from proactive implementation to cautious evaluation. The study proposes Institutional AI Deployment (IAD) as a provisional concept: a bundled, AI-specific condition of teacher agency arising from a single institutional decision.

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INTRODUCTION

Since large language models became publicly available, generative AI (GenAI) has integrated into language classrooms faster than academic literature can analyze its impact (Law, 2024; Lee et al., 2026; B. Li et al., 2025). Early research has largely fallen into two categories: learner-centered studies on how students use GenAI for writing, feedback, or practice (G. L. Liu et al., 2025; Su et al., 2023; Yan, 2023), and tool-centered evaluations of globally developed systems, and their associated pedagogical opportunities and risks (Imran & Almusharraf, 2023; Kasneci et al., 2023; B. Li et al., 2024).

Both areas of research have expanded our understanding, but together they leave a gap: there remains limited empirical insight into how teachers decide whether, when, and how GenAI enters the curriculum. This gap in teacher-focused research is not new, and the following review of learner- and tool-centered literature traces its extent in more detail. Furthermore, international literature rarely covers the specific AI tools used by teachers outside the English-speaking world. In China, global AI platforms are not directly accessible (Cyberspace Administration of China, 2023). As a result, university teachers mainly rely on a domestic tool ecosystem centered on platforms like Doubao, DeepSeek, Kimi, and Ernie Bot. While Chinese-language studies have started to explore GenAI, they mostly focus on building theoretical frameworks or proposing teaching strategies (Z. Wang, 2026; Yang & Cao, 2026). Empirical research that captures teachers' own experiences and choices remains scarce (Qin & Derakhshan, 2025).

The institutional context in which teachers make these choices is a further concern of this study. AI education policy in China is advocated nationally and implemented by individual institutions, so the AI environment a teacher faces is shaped largely by the institution where they work (X. Liu et al., 2025; State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2017; Xie et al., 2024). How this institutional layer shapes teacher agency in GenAI integration remains largely a matter of general claims rather than empirical inquiry, and cross-institutional evidence is especially scarce. This study's focus is on teachers; institutional context enters the analysis as a condition of each teacher's work, and participants were selected by institution type so that this condition could be compared within the sample.

To address this gap, this qualitative study examined eight Chinese university English teachers across a range of higher education institutions. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with all participants, supplemented by AI usage logs and screenshots of teacher–AI exchanges for four of them. The analysis is framed primarily by Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological model of teacher agency, with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory used in a supporting role to locate the institutional conditions at which that agency operates. As a cross-sectional component of a broader longitudinal project, this paper focuses on teacher agency at a specific point in time. Three research questions were posed:

RQ1. On what grounds do Chinese university English teachers adopt GenAI tools?
RQ2. How do professional tasks affect their use of GenAI?
RQ3. How do their agency variations relate to their institutional context?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Generative AI in Language Education: A Learner- and Tool-Centered Literature

Systematic reviews have mapped the landscape of GenAI in language education. Law (2024) reviewed studies through 2023, while Lee et al. (2026) focused on 49 empirical classroom studies published between 2023 and 2024; both found that research is overwhelmingly concentrated in higher education, focuses on English language learning, and defaults to ChatGPT (Law, 2024; Lee et al., 2026). This concentration is especially pronounced in topic selection: Lee et al. (2026) coded 128 focus areas across these studies, with learner perceptions accounting for 101 of them and writing emerging as the most heavily researched skill. Existing writing research has centered on AI-assisted feedback, automated scoring, and writing support, examining how AI shapes students' revision behavior and argumentation (Su et al., 2023; Yan, 2023).

Meanwhile, the unit of analysis in existing literature is centered almost exclusively on learners. In the Chinese context, recent studies have frequently applied the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) framework to assess EFL learners' GenAI adoption. G. L. Liu et al. (2025) initially surveyed 867 learners on their acceptance of GPT-type tools in informal contexts; subsequent work further incorporated variables such as motivation and habit across diverse student cohorts (Moradi, 2025; Q. Wang et al., 2025). Consequently,

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questions vital to educators remain unaddressed, including how teachers incorporate AI feedback into coursework, negotiate boundaries between human and automated judgment, or adapt their pedagogical roles amid student over-reliance on AI.

This lack of teacher perspective did not originate with GenAI. Zawacki-Richter et al. (2019) raised concerns about the missing focus on educators in AI research, while Crompton and Burke (2023) showed that learner-focused studies still far outnumber teacher-focused ones. Furthermore, Celik et al. (2022) noted that studies involving teachers often oversimplify their roles, reducing them to technical operations or willingness to adopt technology.

Teacher-focused empirical research on GenAI does exist and offers valuable insights. For example, Mena Octavio et al. (2024) tracked an EFL teacher's reliance on ChatGPT for instructional support, while Kerr and Kim (2025) examined how pre-service teachers prompted GenAI for lesson planning. Similarly, Jeon and Lee (2023) argued for a complementary division of labor between teachers and ChatGPT, and Tan et al. (2025) reviewed AI's role in teacher professional development. However, these studies share a major limitation: they primarily focus on international systems operating in settings where global tools are freely accessible. It remains unclear whether their findings apply to contexts driven by domestic large language models, which operate under distinct regulatory regimes and language environments.

Teacher Agency and the Limits of Acceptance Models

Teachers facing technological change are not passive recipients (Imants & Van der Wal, 2020; Lasky, 2005; Vähäsantanen, 2015). The ecological approach to agency stems from this core premise: agency is not a fixed capacity teachers possess but something achieved within specific contexts. Varying structural and cultural conditions can enable or constrain agency for the very same teacher (Biesta & Tedder, 2007).

Priestley et al. (2015) operationalized this concept into an analytical framework. Building on Emirbayer and Mische (1998), they conceptualize agency across three temporal dimensions: the iterational (past experience and accumulated professional knowledge), the practical-evaluative (judgments made within present cultural, structural, and material conditions), and the projective (future-oriented aspirations). Agency emerges from the dynamic interplay of these three dimensions. This framework has been widely applied to examine how teachers navigate educational reforms and conflicting institutional demands (e.g., Toom et al., 2015; Vähäsantanen, 2015). For instance, Tao and Wang (2024) utilized it to show how Chinese university English teachers form collective agency under national research evaluation pressures.

Research on teachers and GenAI, by contrast, has largely focused on initial adoption and acceptance, relying heavily on the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM; Davis, 1989) and its variants, an orientation that still dominates the field (Celik et al., 2022). While these models predict adoption intention, they fail to explain how teachers actually negotiate technology use in practice. Notably, Bagozzi (2007), a co-author of TAM, acknowledged this limitation: intention and sustained use often diverge, largely because of organizational and situational factors that TAM was not designed to capture.

What actually dictates classroom integration is what happens after adoption: how teachers evaluate output reliability, adjust their practices, and balance human versus machine judgment. An agency lens addresses this gap by shifting focus from whether to adopt to how and why GenAI is used. However, teacher agency is bound by institutional conditions beyond individual control. As Eteläpelto et al. (2013) argued, Priestley's framework overlooks such power relations, a limitation particularly critical in contexts shaped by rigid institutional rules. Examining how these conditions constrain teacher agency requires first identifying the structural levels from which they operate. In this study, Priestley et al.'s framework explains how teacher agency is achieved, whereas Bronfenbrenner's ecological levels are used to locate the institutional conditions within which that agency is exercised.

Institutional Conditions and Ecological System Levels

In *The Ecology of Human Development*, Bronfenbrenner (1979) conceptualizes an individual's environment as a set of nested structures spanning from the microsystem outward to the macrosystem. Although originating in developmental psychology, this framework has been increasingly applied to teachers' institutional environments. For instance, Almughyiri (2025) utilized it to examine pre-service teachers' career choices by situating education policy within the exosystem. Adopting a similar approach, this study employs these systemic distinctions to determine the precise ecological levels at which institutional conditions shape teacher agency.

This study operationalizes three of these ecological levels: the microsystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. The innermost level, the microsystem, is defined as "a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by

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the developing person in a given setting" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 22). For teachers, this constitutes the immediate material context of instruction—the classroom, available software, and present students. One level outward, the exosystem comprises settings that "do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect, or are affected by, what happens in the setting containing the developing person" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25). In university contexts, these are settings in which teachers do not directly participate, yet which indirectly shape their work, such as administrative decisions regarding platform procurement, evaluation criteria, or usage quotas. The outermost level, the macrosystem, refers to consistencies across these lower-order systems "at the level of the subculture or the culture as a whole, along with any belief systems or ideology underlying such consistencies" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 26), corresponding here to national AI education policies. Finally, while the mesosystem involves linkages between immediate settings (e.g., classrooms and departmental offices), it yielded minimal evidence in the present data and is thus not treated as a primary analytic level.

This layered structure is central to the present study because it turns the broad notion of "institutional influence" into a clear, traceable chain. Institutional decisions made at the exosystem level, including platform procurement, evaluation criteria, and budget allocations, occur entirely outside the teacher's direct domain. These administrative decisions then translate into concrete microsystem conditions. Specifically, a budget allocation manifests as available teaching tools, while a policy requirement translates into expected classroom practices. Teachers directly engage with these localized classroom conditions rather than the distant administrative decisions that shaped them.

For this reason, institutional influence on teacher agency operates as a multi-tiered transmission process. Policy mandates and exosystem decisions filter down into specific microsystem conditions, which then form the immediate environment of instruction.

The Chinese University EFL Context and Its Domestic AI Ecosystem

English language education in Chinese higher education operates across distinct curricular tracks, each defined by its own policy framework, evaluation metrics, and pedagogical autonomy. The largest track, College English for non-majors, follows the national guidelines set by the Ministry of Education (2020). Because College English Test (CET) pass rates often tie into student graduation and faculty performance reviews (Zheng & Cheng, 2008), this high-stakes washback effect forces teachers to balance pedagogical innovation with exam preparation (Han, 2021).

The other tracks operate under different conditions. The English major track, assessed via the Test for English Majors, Band 4 and Band 8 (TEM-4/8), emphasizes disciplinary knowledge and grants instructors greater pedagogical latitude. Meanwhile, EAP and international collaborative programs (often situated in Sino-foreign institutions) require alignment with discipline-specific conventions and external language standards. Participants were therefore sampled across all three settings to reflect these structural variations.

National AI education policy has been consistent in direction. The State Council of the People's Republic of China (2017) designated AI integration in education as a strategic priority under the Next Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan. Since 2023, Chinese universities have increasingly embedded large language models into learning platforms, with some institutions incorporating AI parameters directly into faculty evaluations and research mandates. However, policy implementation remains highly fragmented. This leaves substantial room for institutional interpretation, so the conditions individual teachers face differ from one institution to another.

Tool availability is another defining feature of this ecosystem. Mainstream international models, including ChatGPT, Claude, and Gemini, remain directly inaccessible in mainland China. Consequently, accessing these platforms requires a virtual private network (VPN), an option constrained by legal ambiguities and frequent network disruptions. In contrast, officially registered domestic models are readily accessible through native Chinese interfaces and are deeply embedded in standard office, communication, and educational software. For instructors lacking stable VPN access, these domestic systems represent the only viable option in practice. Empirical literature on English language education in China reflects this reality, showing a near-exclusive reliance on domestic large language models (J. Li, 2025; B. Wang & Nie, 2025).

This regulatory divide overlaps with a linguistic one. Global models are trained mainly on English-language corpora (OpenAI, 2023), whereas domestic Chinese models rely primarily on Chinese-language pretraining data. Consistent with this difference, empirical evaluations have found considerable variability in the English output quality of domestic GenAI platforms (Yu et al., 2025). Chinese university English teachers therefore work under a structural mismatch: the tools they can realistically access are not optimized for the very language they teach.

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Evidence on how accessibility shapes GenAI use is beginning to accumulate, though it comes mainly from students rather than teachers. Studies of Chinese university students (Xie et al., 2025) and a survey of language teachers outside China (D. Wang, 2025) both suggest that accessibility shapes not only which tools users choose but also their broader stance toward AI. Whether this holds for teachers in the Chinese context, based on their own accounts, remains to be examined.

METHOD

Research Design

This study is a qualitative interview study and forms the cross-sectional component of a larger longitudinal multiple-case project. Four of the eight teachers reported here were subsequently followed for a full semester within the longitudinal component, which is reported separately.

Research Context

Two features of this study's setting bear directly on how the data are interpreted, and the two rarely co-occur in the settings typical of mainstream GenAI research. The first is institutional stratification. Chinese higher education is stratified along several overlapping dimensions, and no single criterion fully captures the differences. Among the participating institutions, for example, some are public and some are private; some are ordinary undergraduate universities and others independent colleges or Sino-foreign cooperative institutions by governance structure; and by tier and disciplinary focus, they range from comprehensive universities to medical schools to vocational and technical colleges. Because these dimensions overlap, institutions can differ considerably in social standing and resources, and correspondingly in how English courses are structured and what evaluation pressures they impose—two differences with particular relevance to teachers' daily work. The study therefore used purposive sampling to select eight participants across different institution types, aiming to span this spectrum as far as possible. All eight share the same professional role as university English teachers but work in markedly different institutional contexts. This sampling makes institutional condition a variable that can be compared within the sample.

The second feature is the AI environment at each institution. During data collection, national policy promoted AI integration in education while leaving implementation to individual institutions (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2017; Xie et al., 2024). Combined with the regulatory and infrastructural conditions discussed in the review of the Chinese university EFL context above, this meant that the tools teachers could actually access were predominantly domestic models. Within the sample, institutional responses to GenAI varied widely. At one end were institutions with systematic deployment, which embedded local large language models in learning management platforms and tied AI use to performance evaluation; at the other were institutions with almost no formal arrangements; in between lay sponsor- or institution-led training of varying intensity. It is this inter-institutional variation that makes different forms of teacher agency observable.

Participants

Eight university English teachers were recruited through purposive sampling (Patton, 2015) on RedNote, a major Chinese social media platform. RedNote was chosen as the recruitment channel because its topic- and hashtag-based structure makes it well suited to reaching information-rich cases directly: educators already actively experimenting with and discussing AI integration in the classroom, rather than a general teacher population reached through a broader, less targeted channel.

To capture diverse institutional perspectives, sampling aimed for maximum variation in institution type, teaching experience, and courses taught. Participants' teaching experience ranged from one to thirty-five years. All had already used at least one GenAI tool before joining the study.

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TABLE 1
Participant Profiles (N = 8)

Pseudonym	Institution type	Highest degree	Years of teaching experience	Main courses	Primary tools	Reported frequency	Self-described AI role
Daisy	Municipal public; Sino-foreign cooperative	Master's	5	Academic English / EAP	Doubao (abandoned ChatGPT over VPN and cost)	Daily	Assistive tool
Celia	Independent college	Master's	4	College English	Doubao / Kimi / Jimeng AI	Daily	Designer and facilitator
Lucy	Vocational college	Bachelor's	16	ESP / Cruise, Hotel & Intercultural Business English	Doubao + embedded AI (WPS, Jianying)	Several times per week	Assistive tool
Helen	Medical college	Bachelor's	35	College English / Medical English / Graduate English	Doubao / Tencent Translator	During lesson preparation	Assistive tool
Sharon	Private undergraduate	PhD	17	Listening / Pedagogy / Intercultural Communication	ChatGPT / Kimi / Metaso / DeepSeek	Five times per week	Resource bank and knowledgeable friend
April	Applied technology college	Master's	5	College English (humanities track)	ChatGPT / DeepSeek / Doubao / Kimi / Grammarly	Daily	Assistant; sometimes collaborator
Leo	Public vocational college	Master's	4	College English / Drama / Vehicle Engineering English	Doubao / Ernie Bot / Grok / ChatGPT / Gemini / Claude	Daily	Assistive tool
Joy	Provincial vocational college	Master's	1	Public English / English major courses	ChatGPT / Gemini / Claude / Doubao / DeepSeek	Daily	Strategic advisor and convenient search engine

Note. EAP = English for Academic Purposes; ESP = English for Specific Purposes; WPS = WPS Office, a Chinese office software suite with built-in AI features. Reported frequency reflects participants' own accounts of how often they used GenAI at the time of interview.

Data Collection

Data collection had two components. The primary data were semi-structured interviews with each of the eight teachers, each lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes, conducted in Chinese via Tencent Meeting and audio-recorded with informed consent. Interviewing in participants' first language allowed them to express their professional judgments in the register they would ordinarily use when making them. The interview protocol covered six areas: background; current GenAI use; individual characteristics; perceptions of tool properties; professional reflection; and organizational environment. Passages selected for close analysis were transcribed verbatim and checked against the original recordings; the remainder were transcribed in summary form. Excerpts quoted below were translated into English by the researcher (bilingual in Chinese and English) and checked against the original recordings to ensure that wording and emphasis were preserved.

Beyond the interviews, two types of supplementary data were collected from four of the participants to corroborate the interview findings: AI usage logs (recording when, for what purpose, and how teachers actually engaged with GenAI over a period of time), and screenshots of teacher–AI exchanges (showing how teachers actually prompted the model and how they handled its output). These four teachers were also the ones followed in the longitudinal component of this project;

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supplementary data were collected only to the extent participants volunteered them, which is why they cover four rather than all eight participants. These materials allowed the study to compare teachers' self-reports with traces of their actual use. Their selection was not related to how much agency they showed in the interviews, and the supplementary material was used only to corroborate what these four teachers already reported in their interviews, not to introduce new themes; the study's central patterns are therefore drawn from the full set of eight interviews, with the logs and screenshots serving as a secondary check rather than a primary evidentiary base.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2022). The six protocol areas above provided an initial organizing structure; within it, themes were generated inductively through repeated reading, open coding, and the progressive consolidation of codes into candidate themes, checked against the full dataset. For the four participants with supplementary data, interview self-reports were cross-checked against their AI usage logs and conversation screenshots: where interview accounts aligned with these traces of use, the resulting interpretation was strengthened; where discrepancies arose, the data were revisited.

Theoretically, Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological model of teacher agency served as the primary analytic tool for explaining how teacher agency forms and diverges; Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory played a more specific, contextual role, used to locate the level at which institutional conditions operate, not to explain the mechanism of agency formation. Both frameworks were applied as interpretive tools rather than as sources for new theory-building.

Ethics and Trustworthiness

Participation was entirely voluntary and based on informed consent, and all participants' identities were protected through pseudonyms. Four measures were taken to strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings. First, for the four participants who provided supplementary data, the researcher checked interview accounts against the usage records they had actually left behind—the AI usage logs and conversation screenshots. Second, all eight interviews were coded against the same set of standards, namely the six protocol areas listed in the Data Collection section. Third, all quotations translated into English were checked one by one against the original Chinese recordings, to ensure the translation did not drift from the original in wording or emphasis. Fourth, to support the validity of the agency-type classifications reported in Table 2, each teacher's response was coded against explicit criteria rather than global impression: for example, sustained vigilance was coded when a teacher described ongoing, repeated cross-checking of AI output rather than a one-off check; role reorganization was coded when a teacher described changing her own division of labor or working routine specifically because of AI's presence; and deliberate exclusion was coded when a teacher described intentionally withholding AI from a task for a stated pedagogical or institutional reason.

FINDINGS

Thematic analysis identified three themes running across the eight teachers: the default status of domestic tools and the accessibility logic behind it; how GenAI use shifts across professional tasks; and the early divergence of teacher agency and its correspondence with institutional context.

The Default Status of Domestic Tools and Their Accessibility Logic (RQ1)

Across the group, domestic Chinese-language large language models formed the baseline of use. This default was driven mainly by local accessibility conditions rather than by comparative judgments of technical performance. Several teachers had initially tried international platforms such as ChatGPT, but switched to domestic tools once subscription costs and dependence on a VPN made daily teaching use impractical. Daisy described this shift directly:

> "I did use ChatGPT at first, but then the fees became inconvenient for me, so I switched to Doubao last year and have used it ever since. Using ChatGPT meant running a VPN—I basically don't do that anymore." (Daisy)

The same pattern appeared in Helen, the most experienced teacher in the sample with thirty-five years of teaching. She

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abandoned ChatGPT once it began charging:

> "I used to use ChatGPT too, but once it started charging I stopped. With the VPN, a lot of things just wouldn't load anyway, so I switched to a domestic one." (Helen)

The domestic ecosystem also extends beyond standalone chatbots into AI features embedded in everyday Chinese software. Lucy combined large language models with tools built into office and video-editing software:

> "I use Doubao the most, then the AI features in WPS, and the ones in Jianying and other image tools." (Lucy)

For the teachers who also provided usage logs, the logs corroborated their interview accounts: domestic tools such as Doubao appeared far more often than international ones in their day-to-day GenAI use. Taken together, tool choice in this sample was governed mainly by an accessibility logic: free access, a Chinese-language interface, and no need for a VPN. Several teachers, however, reported using international tools alongside domestic ones (see Table 1), suggesting that the dominance of domestic tools is a default rather than an exclusive pattern.

How GenAI Use Shifts Across Professional Tasks (RQ2)

GenAI use was not distributed evenly across teachers' work. Lesson preparation was a shared entry point, reported by all participants, while grading and research showed clear divergence.

In lesson preparation, teachers generally treated GenAI as an executor rather than an originator of ideas: they supplied the pedagogical direction and had the model generate content accordingly. Daisy fed the model her intended learning objectives and had it produce a lesson plan, and she named giving students feedback as the task she used it for least:

> "What I use it for most is lesson prep. I tell it the learning objectives for the class and have it generate a forty-five-minute lesson plan. Giving students feedback is what I use it for least." (Daisy)

Lucy drew the same line. She used the model to execute her own design rather than to produce the design for her:

> "I use it a lot for lesson prep, but I rarely have it generate a syllabus, because I already have my own teaching ideas—I feed those ideas to the model and have it build on that basis." (Lucy)

Both accounts follow the same pattern: the model turns the teacher's existing intent into text, while the pedagogical idea and the final judgment remain with the teacher. This "teacher-directed, model-executed" mode was common in lesson preparation.

In grading, teachers' practices diverged, and individual judgments about instructional efficiency lay behind that divergence. Lucy had AI grade a first pass before checking it herself, whereas Helen insisted on grading subjective items and handwritten work manually:

> "When there are a lot of students, AI grades the first round, and then I go over it again." (Lucy)

> "Subjective sections have to be graded by a person. A machine can't do it—it can't read students' handwriting." (Helen)

These approaches differ from one another: one teacher had AI grade first and checked it afterwards, another never delegated grading to AI at all, and a third tried it and dropped it on efficiency grounds. What they share is that none of these teachers handed grading over to AI by default. Each assessed what AI was actually worth for this task and decided, in light of her own teaching situation, whether and how far to use it.

In research, the reverse pattern appeared. April described her background as humanities-oriented and said she lacked confidence in statistics. On data analysis, she followed the model's guidance rather than directing it:

> I'm just not good at SPSS at all. When I have data now and don't know how to handle it, I ask AI what method to use, it analyzes it for me, and I follow the approach it suggests. Sometimes it's almost like it's playing the role of an advisor. (April)

Set against the "teacher-directed, model-executed" relationship in lesson preparation, the roles here are close to reversed:

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the teacher follows the model's suggestions, and the model comes near to acting as the guide. Only April reported this reversal clearly in the present sample, and it is offered here as an illustrative case rather than a pattern across the group. Whether it holds more widely awaits testing with a larger sample.

Beyond these task-specific variations, one use drew nearly all teachers together: drafting administrative documents such as meeting minutes and reports. Helen, Sharon, Joy, and Daisy, among others, all noted that such paperwork used to take considerable time and had become much lighter with AI's help. Unlike lesson preparation, grading, and research, administrative writing was the area of most consistent AI use in this sample. The contrast is itself telling. Teachers held back on instructional tasks because those tasks involve professional judgment or students' language learning; administrative writing involves neither, and they handed it to AI with almost no reservation. The trade-offs teachers made, in other words, were not arbitrary.

GenAI use therefore shifted with the task. On tasks where teachers felt confident, such as lesson preparation, they directed the model and had it carry out an intent they had already set. In one illustrative case, where a teacher felt less equipped, as with April in research statistics, the direction of that relationship appeared to reverse. On administrative matters, which involve neither professional judgment nor student learning, teachers handed things over almost entirely. What shaped their use of GenAI was thus not the task alone, but whether they felt equipped for it and whether it touched the core of their professional judgment.

The Early Divergence of Teacher Agency and Its Correspondence with Institutional Context (RQ3)

Even at this early stage of integration, the eight teachers exercised agency in markedly different ways, and these differences corresponded to the AI arrangements at their respective institutions (see Table 2). Each case is presented in the same order: first, the decision the institution made at a level in which the teacher took no part (exosystem); then the concrete form that decision took once it reached the classroom (microsystem); and finally, the response the teacher developed toward that form. This sequence follows the exosystem-to-microsystem-to-response chain set out in the review of institutional conditions and ecological system levels above, and each response is read through the practical-evaluative dimension of Priestley et al.'s (2015) model.

Sharon's institution had the most systematically integrated AI arrangement in the sample. AI use was written into teacher evaluation and program applications, domestic models such as DeepSeek were embedded in the learning management platform, and AI use in undergraduate theses was capped at 30 percent. These are all exosystem-level decisions. In her classroom, they meant that the learning platform she relied on already had AI built in: she had students debate each unit's topic with AI and complete after-class oral practice through it, and she could see their questions and their patterns of use. Her response to this deeply embedded environment combined heavy use with constant vigilance. Her attitude toward the institution's official AI shows this most clearly. Although the platform already had AI built in, she often worked around it and used a browser that could reach several models at once, on the grounds that relying on a single model left her "not quite reassured" and in need of cross-checking:

> "It starts to leave things out—cutting corners partway through. I wish its knowledge base were larger, and that it could rule out AI hallucinations." (Sharon)

For her, AI remained a tool for the time being, not yet a trustworthy assistant.

Daisy's Sino-foreign cooperative college took a different path. It had not deployed AI systemically, had no unified teaching platform, and explicitly discouraged teachers from using AI to grade, requiring manual grading with spot-checks instead. These were all exosystem-level arrangements. Within this environment, Daisy used AI heavily for lesson preparation but graded by hand throughout. She explained this partly as a response to the college's position on AI grading and to its wish that teachers retain a visible share of the work:

> The college itself doesn't encourage using AI to grade directly. The college also worries that if student answers and the answer key were uploaded to AI, some students would get in the habit of searching AI for answers. After our first round of grading, the department head reviews it, and other teachers cross-grade each other's work too—there'd be a gap between teachers who used AI to grade and those who did it by hand. (Daisy)

Her reasoning was also pedagogical. She worried that once student work was handed to AI, students would in turn learn to generate language with it, and first-year students are at precisely the stage of building their own linguistic foundation.

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What the institution wanted, on her account, was students' own language ability rather than their skill at operating AI.

The other teachers show the same correspondence in more compressed form, and their cases are summarized in Table 2. Participants are ordered descriptively according to the reported extent of formal institutional AI involvement, including policy, platform integration, training, and infrastructure. Across cases, the specific shape of each teacher's agency corresponded to the way her institution's AI arrangement landed in the classroom. This shaping ran in more than one direction. It could work through active promotion, as at Sharon's institution, which embedded AI in the learning platform and in teacher evaluation, or at Celia's, which wove AI into instructional activities. It could equally work through explicit non-promotion, as at Daisy's, which discouraged AI grading and provided no unified teaching platform. Whether an institution promoted or restricted AI, in other words, the same institutional layer was doing the work. The correspondences for the remaining teachers appear in Table 2. This correspondence rests on a small cross-sectional sample and is not advanced as a causal claim. Variations in teacher agency were already associated with differences in institutional conditions, as manifested in concrete classroom contexts, from the early stage of GenAI integration.

TABLE 2

Institutional AI Arrangements, Classroom Manifestations, and Teacher Agency Responses

Pseudonym	Exosystem: Reported institutional AI arrangement	Microsystem: form in classroom	Teacher agency response
Sharon	AI written into evaluation and program applications; Doubao, DeepSeek embedded in learning platform; thesis AI-use capped at 30%	Built-in AI on teaching platform; roll call, quick-answer and accuracy tracking; student–AI debate; after-class oral practice	Heavy use, sustained vigilance
Celia	Sponsor repeatedly invests in training; caps set on student AI use	Mandatory workshops; a required student AI-use competition to organize	Expansive use; role reorganization
Joy	Equipment budget unrenewed for years	Frequently crashing, disconnecting lab terminals	Critical; infrastructure-driven skepticism
Leo	Regular AI lectures (incl. responsible use)	Optional lectures, not mandatory	Exploratory; learning through tool comparison
Daisy	Department head encourages AI use but discourages AI grading; no LMS; manual review required	AI cannot be embedded in the grading workflow; grading remains manual	Heavy use in prep; deliberate exclusion from grading
Lucy	No AI policy; high research pressure	No formal institutional AI arrangement reported in the classroom	Tool-integrative; verifies AI output
Helen	No notable institutional AI arrangement reported	No formal institutional AI arrangement reported in the classroom	Self-bounded, subordinate use
April	No explicit AI policy; brief training when DeepSeek launched	One-off, limited training	Pragmatic; multi-tool use

DISCUSSION

This study examined how Chinese university English teachers adopt GenAI and how their agency varies with institutional context. Three findings merit discussion.

Accessibility Before Capability: The Primary Logic of Tool Adoption

The most basic finding is that, for this group of teachers, local accessibility rather than comparative tool capability was the

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primary determinant of which tool they adopted. The point seems simple, but it raises a question the GenAI literature in language education cannot easily set aside. As shown in the review of the learner- and tool-centered literature above, empirical research in this field concentrates heavily on international tools such as ChatGPT (Law, 2024; Lee et al., 2026). This study shows that, for university English teachers in mainland China without stable VPN access, these heavily studied international tools are the ones they use least in daily teaching. What actually forms their baseline is domestic models such as Doubao and DeepSeek.

This points to a possible gap between a literature that defaults to ChatGPT and the actual tool choices of Chinese university English teachers. The gap matters because international and domestic tools operate under different regulatory regimes (Cyberspace Administration of China, 2023) and are trained on different language corpora (Du et al., 2024), and they differ accordingly in accessibility, interface language, and content fit. Whether findings based on international tools transfer directly to a context that defaults to domestic ones therefore remains an open question.

The logic of accessibility shaping use is not unique to this study. Several quantitative studies of Chinese EFL learners have found that GenAI adoption tracks closely with learners' actual exposure to domestic tools, with respondents reporting models such as Doubao and DeepSeek as their tools of choice (Hu & Gong, 2025; Q. Wang et al., 2025). This study extends the same logic from learners to teachers, offering evidence grounded in teachers' own accounts. It suggests that teachers' GenAI adoption cannot be understood apart from the tool ecosystem they actually inhabit. That ecosystem has been discussed in the Chinese-language literature (J. Li, 2025; B. Wang & Nie, 2025) but rarely appears in English-language research aimed at an international readership—the arena that currently shapes the field's broader understanding. By reporting teachers' practices within this ecosystem in English, this study adds the perspective of Chinese university English teachers to that international conversation.

From Whether to How: Teacher Agency in Relation to Institutional Conditions

The second finding concerns how GenAI enters teachers' work. Teachers' use was not a single yes-or-no decision but varied by task, following a clear principle: on tasks that touch professional judgment or students' language learning, teachers retained human oversight; on tasks that do not, such as administrative writing, they handed things over almost entirely.

This can be understood through Priestley et al.'s (2015) practical-evaluative dimension. In their ecological model, agency is not a fixed disposition but something achieved within the present situation; as they put it, agency arises from "the interplay of individual efforts, available resources, and contextual and structural factors" within a given moment (Priestley et al., 2015, p. 22). The practical-evaluative dimension comprises cultural (ideas, values, beliefs), structural (institutions, roles, relationships), and material (resources, physical environment) conditions (Priestley et al., 2015). This study finds teachers making task-specific judgments under exactly such conditions: the same teacher, using the same tool, directs it in lesson preparation, restricts it in grading, and hands it over in administrative writing. These differences cannot be reduced to a general attitude toward AI. They are not variation in the strength of a single disposition but separate trade-offs made task by task: for each type of task, teachers weighed the costs and benefits of AI involvement and decided how far to let it in.

Grading shows this most clearly. Facing the same task, three teachers drew the line between human and AI differently. Helen graded entirely by hand; Daisy kept the face-to-face part of supervision for herself and had AI only organize her scattered comments into coherent text; Sharon had AI review first and made the final call herself. This dividing line was not fixed in advance by technical capability or institutional rule. Each teacher drew it after judging, for herself, what could not be handed over. This is what a practical-evaluative judgment looks like in practice: agency becomes visible only when enacted, and what these teachers did was decide, selectively and within existing conditions, how to use the tool—rather than accept or reject a technology outright.

This dimension also helps explain the limits of teachers' capacity to direct AI. As Priestley et al. (2015, p. 22) argue, if agency depends on a teacher's ability to draw on the resources available in a given situation, then how far a teacher can direct AI should depend on the professional grounding they can bring to that particular task. This study's data are consistent with that expectation: April's direction over AI was firm in tasks close to her professional training, but loosened into deference in research statistics, an area where she described herself as underprepared. Although this pattern appeared in only one case here and cannot yet be treated as a general rule, it aligns with Tao and Wang's (2024) observation of Chinese university English teachers: most come from humanities backgrounds with limited training in quantitative methods, making research the area where their professional grounding is weakest and where a sufficiently capable AI model more easily comes to dominate.

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Institutional Context as a Condition for Agency

The third and most central finding is that the divergence in teacher agency corresponds systematically to institutional context. This finding speaks to three issues in turn: the direction of institutional shaping, its mechanism, and what it adds to ecological theories of agency.

First, institutional influence on agency does not run in only one direction. This study shows that institutions can shape teachers' use both through active promotion and through explicit non-promotion. Sharon's institution illustrates the former, embedding AI in the learning platform and writing it into teacher evaluation; Daisy's illustrates the latter, neither encouraging AI grading nor providing a unified teaching platform. This is worth emphasizing because it shows institutional context is not a factor only at a handful of "deeply deployed" institutions. At an institution with almost no formal AI policy, institutional conditions still delineate the boundaries of a teacher's AI use to the same extent. In other words, having no policy is itself an institutional condition, acting on teachers through concrete instructional arrangements just as "having a policy" does.

Second, institutional conditions reach teachers through different ecological levels. This study used Bronfenbrenner's (1979) level distinctions to trace the path: institutional-level decisions (exosystem) rarely act on teachers directly but convert first into concrete classroom conditions (microsystem), to which teachers then respond. Joy's case shows this most clearly. An administrative decision about equipment budgets ultimately appears before her as a terminal that will not start, and her criticism targets that terminal, not the budget decision behind it. This path matters for agency research: examining institutional influence only at the level of whether the institution has an AI policy would miss the step in which policy converts into classroom conditions—precisely the step teacher agency actually responds to. Tracing the path in this way also does something for the framework itself: Priestley et al. (2015) specify which conditions participate in the achievement of agency but say less about the routes by which those conditions reach the teacher, and the pairing with Bronfenbrenner (1979) supplies that missing link. It can therefore serve as a transferable analytical strategy for future research that uses the framework to examine institutional influence.

Third, this finding extends the ecological understanding of teacher agency and speaks to a known limitation of the theory. For Priestley et al. (2015), agency is achieved under cultural, structural, and material conditions; this study shows that, in the context of GenAI integration, a substantial share of these conditions are formed by the institution: teachers' practical-evaluative judgments are made on top of material and structural conditions the institution has set. This also responds to Eteläpelto et al.'s (2013) critique of the model, that it pays too little attention to direct power relations. This study shows that it is precisely the decisions institutions make at a level teachers have no part in that define the space within which teachers can negotiate their professional judgment; the exercise of agency occurs within boundaries the institution has drawn.

Beyond confirming and supplementing the framework's account of conditions, this study has one more direct contribution to make to the framework itself, and it starts from a development outside the classroom. Institution-level AI deployment is turning from the early move of a few universities into a routine feature of higher education. As noted in the review of the Chinese university EFL context above, Chinese universities have been connecting large language models to their learning platforms since 2023; by the time of writing, the trend had grown well beyond that scale, and well beyond China. In the United States, Arizona State University became the first university to partner with OpenAI in January 2024, bringing ChatGPT Enterprise into teaching, research, and administration (Arizona State University, 2024); in February 2025, the California State University system extended ChatGPT Edu to all 23 of its campuses, reaching more than 460,000 students and 63,000 faculty and staff (OpenAI, 2025). In China, at the start of the spring 2025 semester, more than a dozen universities completed local deployments of DeepSeek within a matter of weeks (China Education and Research Network, 2025). Notably, these deployments did not run on a single shared system; each university built on its own platform. Who leads the deployment, by what route the model is connected, and which campus system it is embedded in all differ from one university to the next, and this variation itself is consistent with the central claim of this study: the AI environment a teacher faces is shaped by the specific decisions of her own institution. The system-level deployment observed at Sharon's institution is thus not the idiosyncratic arrangement of one university but an institutional practice that is spreading quickly and taking a different form at each school. This is also the practical ground for the weight this study places on institutional context.

This reality also puts a concrete theoretical question to the framework: where, in its classification, does the condition teachers now work inside belong? Priestley et al. (2015) divide the conditions of the practical-evaluative dimension into cultural, structural, and material types, and an institution's AI arrangement can indeed be described in exactly these terms: structural decisions (policies, evaluation caps, approval procedures), material provisions (platforms, tools, devices), and cultural signals (what an institution's defaults communicate about acceptable AI use). What distinguishes the condition observed here from an ordinary combination of these three types is not its content but what kind of condition it is.

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In Priestley et al.'s (2015) account, the cultural, structural, and material aspects each name a mediating factor that the teacher encounters as already present in the working environment: the values, beliefs, and discourses circulating in the setting; the resources and physical conditions available to be drawn upon; and the roles, relationships, and relations of power and trust through which agency is achieved. For all their differences, the three share one property: they are background conditions that the teacher navigates, and none is itself an active participant in the work. Institutional AI deployment differs on precisely this point. It is a generative system that the institution installs into the infrastructure of teaching, and two features follow. The first concerns how it arrives: the integration is systemic and top-down, a matter of organizational decision rather than of individual tool choice. The second concerns what it is: an inert resource would simply be drawn upon, whereas this system generates the very substance of teaching, including lesson designs, feedback, and translations, and it therefore enters the practical-evaluative process as something the teacher must continuously verify, accept, or reject.

This is why none of the three original aspects can absorb it without distortion. Read as material, it becomes merely one available resource among others, which obscures the fact that its presence is institutionally installed and cannot be set aside at will: Sharon could not decline the AI built into her institution's platform in the way she might decline an optional tool. Read as structural, it is forced into a vocabulary built for human relationships, such as roles, trust, and networks, which cannot describe a non-human system embedded in the workflow. Read as cultural, it shrinks to a discourse, when it is in fact a concrete arrangement of deployed systems and policies. Sharon's case engages all three aspects at once, with AI written into teacher evaluation (structural), embedded in the learning platform (material), and carrying an institutional expectation about what current teaching should look like (cultural), yet it is named by none of them, because its defining feature is the institution-level embedding of a generative system as a condition of practice, a situation that did not exist when the framework was formulated in 2015.

This study therefore terms this condition Institutional AI Deployment (IAD) and proposes it as a fourth ecological sub-condition within the practical-evaluative dimension, alongside the cultural, the structural, and the material. Within this sample it also serves as the dimension along which the institutional contexts differ: it is most fully developed at Sharon's institution, where AI is embedded in the learning platform and written into appraisal, and appears in weaker or more nascent forms elsewhere. The proposal rests, however, on a small, single-time-point qualitative sample and is illustrated most fully through one case; it reveals an association rather than a causal relationship, and has not been tested against a larger or more varied sample, nor against the longitudinal design that would show whether the condition remains stable over time. IAD is therefore offered as a provisional fourth sub-condition, argued from the evidence available here and put forward for further testing rather than as an established finding.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING AND RESEARCH

For institutions, this study suggests that informational lectures and top-down administrative requirements alone have a limited effect on classroom practice. What matters is whether support is concrete and whether the material conditions of the classroom keep pace. An institution's role lies not only in what support it provides but also in what it chooses not to do, and both mark out the space in which teachers can use AI. Institutions hoping to cultivate informed teacher agency would therefore do better to invest in classroom infrastructure and to provide concrete support tied to teachers' actual courses, rather than relying on abstract administrative appeals. This recommendation is especially pressing for vocational colleges and other under-resourced institutions, where the gap between policy expectation and actual conditions appears widest.

For teacher educators, the task-based differences observed here point to where professional support is most needed. Research was where they were least equipped: teachers with limited methodological training tended to follow the model rather than direct it. Current professional development programs, however, focus almost exclusively on classroom applications and leave this area largely unaddressed. Teacher training should therefore extend to the responsible use of AI in research, particularly the critical evaluation of research methods suggested by AI.

For future research, this study points to three directions. First, the domestic tool ecosystem deserves examination in its own right, rather than as a deviation from international tools. Because the existing literature starts mainly from ChatGPT, it struggles to capture the actual practices of Chinese university English teachers who depend on domestic platforms. Second, the mismatch between the primary training language of compliant domestic models and the target language of English teaching remains an empirical question; this study's data highlight the tension, but how it affects the quality of the instructional materials teachers generate needs dedicated study. Third, this study's cross-institutional sampling has offered preliminary evidence of an association between institutional conditions and teacher agency; future research could build on this by more systematically incorporating a range of institution types and combining cross-institutional sampling with

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longitudinal designs, thereby moving the evidence from a preliminary observation toward firmer evidence.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

First, this study used a cross-sectional design. Although AI usage logs and teacher–AI conversation screenshots were collected for some participants to corroborate interview accounts, these data were all gathered at a single point in time and reflect teachers' state at that moment. This study therefore cannot speak to how these practices develop as tools, policies, and teacher experience change rapidly. This limitation will be addressed by this study's longitudinal component, which will establish whether the agency differences identified here remain stable or shift over time.

Second, supplementary data cover only four of the eight participants. These four are the ones followed in the longitudinal component, and supplementary data were collected only to the extent they volunteered them. Triangulation was therefore possible for these four, while analysis for the other four rests mainly on interview self-report. This means the portion of interpretation strengthened by supplementary data does not yet rest on an empirical base covering all participants. Future research could collect multi-source data for more participants to make triangulation more complete.

Third, participants were purposively recruited through a single social media platform and may be more invested in GenAI than teachers in general. This study therefore makes no claim to statistical representativeness. Even so, the agentic processes of a group this engaged offer rich analytic insight and a useful starting point for understanding GenAI adoption.

CONCLUSION

This study reports three findings. First, which tool teachers adopt is governed mainly by an accessibility logic: a Chinese-language interface and direct domestic access take precedence over technical capability. In the actual choices of Chinese university English teachers, whether a tool can be used at all may matter more than which tool is technically superior.

Second, GenAI use varies by task, and teachers' trade-offs follow a principle. On tasks touching professional judgment or student language learning (such as grading), teachers retain human oversight; on tasks that do not (such as administrative writing), they hand things over almost entirely. The practical question teachers face is less whether to use AI than where to use it, and how much.

Third, teacher agency has diverged since the earliest stage of adoption, and these differences correspond to teachers' institutional contexts. Whether an institution actively promotes AI or explicitly does not, it shapes teachers' use through the concrete conditions that reach the classroom.

Taken together, these findings extend an ecological understanding of teacher agency: teachers' professional response to GenAI is the product of an interaction between institutional condition and professional judgment, not simply a matter of individual acceptance of technology. On this basis, the study proposes Institutional AI Deployment (IAD) as a provisional concept for understanding institutional conditions of teacher agency: a bundled condition created when an institution's structural, material, and cultural decisions about AI arrive together, as a single event, rather than separately as they ordinarily do. By foregrounding the institutional and ecological conditions behind teachers' everyday AI use, this study offers a context-sensitive perspective that complements a literature still centered on ChatGPT, and lays groundwork for future longitudinal research on teacher agency in AI-mediated language education.

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