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Artificial Intelligence as a Tool for Personalizing English as a Second Language Learning: A Systematic Literature Review

La inteligencia artificial como herramienta para personalizar el aprendizaje del inglés como segunda lengua: una revisión sistemática de la literatura

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Abstract

The teaching of English as a Second Language (ESL) has traditionally relied on standardized pedagogical approaches that often fail to address learners' diverse proficiency levels, learning paces, and communicative needs. This limitation has highlighted the need for personalized learning, particularly given the non linear and heterogeneous nature of language acquisition. However, conventional instructional models have shown constraints in providing individualized support and continuous feedback, especially in large or resource limited educational settings.

In this context, artificial intelligence has evolved from a supplementary tool into a pedagogical infrastructure capable of supporting personalized learning processes. This study conducted a systematic literature review following the PRISMA protocol, analyzing peer reviewed publications from 2020 to 2025 to examine how AI technologies are being used to adapt learning trajectories, automate formative assessment, and enhance learner autonomy in ESL contexts.

The findings were organized into three main categories: adaptive learning systems, generative AI for text production and language interaction, and automated assessment tools with immediate feedback. The results showed that AI supported environments facilitate the development of Adaptive Learning Paths, individualized practice, and scalable feedback mechanisms. These effects were particularly evident in writing, vocabulary acquisition, and grammatical accuracy, with emerging contributions to communicative competence through AI mediated interaction.

The study concludes that the educational value of artificial intelligence in ESL depends not solely on its technological capabilities, but on its integration with pedagogical design, teacher mediation, and ethical implementation. Under this perspective, AI should be understood as a complementary resource that enhances, rather than replaces, the educational process.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence, Second language learning, English language, Educational technology, Computer assisted instruction, Individualized instruction

Resumen

La enseñanza del inglés como segunda lengua (ESL) se ha basado tradicionalmente en enfoques pedagógicos estandarizados que, a menudo, no tienen en cuenta los diversos niveles de competencia, los ritmos de aprendizaje y las necesidades comunicativas de los alumnos. Esta limitación ha puesto de relieve la necesidad de un aprendizaje personalizado, sobre todo dada la naturaleza no lineal y heterogénea de la adquisición del lenguaje. Sin embargo, los modelos de enseñanza convencionales han mostrado limitaciones a la hora de proporcionar apoyo individualizado y retroalimentación continua, especialmente en entornos educativos de gran tamaño o con recursos limitados.

En este contexto, la inteligencia artificial ha pasado de ser una herramienta complementaria a convertirse en una infraestructura pedagógica capaz de respaldar los procesos de aprendizaje personalizado. Este estudio llevó a cabo una revisión sistemática de la literatura siguiendo el protocolo PRISMA, analizando publicaciones revisadas por pares entre 2020 y 2025 para examinar cómo se están utilizando las tecnologías de IA para adaptar las trayectorias de aprendizaje, automatizar la evaluación formativa y potenciar la autonomía de los alumnos en contextos de ESL.

Los resultados se clasificaron en tres categorías principales: sistemas de aprendizaje adaptativo, IA generativa para la producción de textos y la interacción lingüística, y herramientas de evaluación automatizada con retroalimentación inmediata. Los resultados mostraron que los entornos basados en la IA facilitan el desarrollo de itinerarios de aprendizaje adaptativos, la práctica individualizada y los mecanismos de retroalimentación escalables. Estos efectos fueron especialmente evidentes en la expresión escrita, la adquisición de vocabulario y la precisión gramatical, con contribuciones emergentes a la competencia comunicativa a través de la interacción mediada por la IA.

El estudio concluye que el valor educativo de la inteligencia artificial en la enseñanza del inglés como segunda lengua (ESL) no depende únicamente de sus capacidades tecnológicas, sino de su integración con el diseño pedagógico, la mediación del profesor y la implementación ética. Desde esta perspectiva, la IA debe entenderse como un recurso complementario que mejora, en lugar de sustituir, el proceso educativo

Palabras clave: Inteligencia artificial, Aprendizaje de una segunda lengua, Lengua inglesa, Tecnología educativa, Enseñanza asistida por ordenador, Enseñanza individualizada

Introduction

The teaching of English as a Second Language (ESL) has evolved from standardized instructional models toward approaches that recognize learners' diverse paces, proficiency levels, cognitive styles, and communicative needs. Within this context, personalized learning has gained increasing relevance as a pedagogical principle aimed at adapting content, sequencing, activities, and feedback to individual learner characteristics (Andreou & Christani, 2025). In ESL settings, this approach is particularly significant, as the development of language skills such as writing, speaking, listening, and reading does not occur in a linear or uniform manner. While some learners require support in grammatical accuracy, others benefit from intensified practice in oral fluency, vocabulary expansion, or contextualized listening comprehension (Li et al., 2026). This heterogeneity has exposed the limitations of traditional models centered on standardized instruction, in which personalization depends largely on the teacher's capacity to address multiple learning trajectories within a single classroom. Additionally, high teaching workloads and large class sizes further constrain the possibility of providing individualized support without technological assistance. Under these conditions, artificial intelligence is increasingly positioned as a viable means to enhance pedagogical responsiveness in face to face, hybrid, and online learning environments.

The disruptive potential of artificial intelligence in language education lies not merely in task automation, but in its capacity to intervene in core processes of pedagogical mediation (Xu & Xiong, 2026). Tools such as conversational chatbots, systems based on Natural Language Processing, speech recognition engines, Automated Writing Evaluation platforms, and Intelligent Tutoring Systems have begun to transform how learners interact with the target language, receive feedback, and progress through differentiated learning pathways. More recently, the emergence of Large Language Models has expanded the range of pedagogical applications by enabling text generation, dialogue simulation, response reformulation, contextual correction, and support in both written and oral production tasks (Phuengrod et al., 2026). Rather than merely providing corrective responses, these systems can sustain dynamic interactions, adjust task complexity, and deliver immediate support based on learner performance.

From an ESL perspective, this shift represents a transition from personalization as a methodological aspiration to personalization as an operational reality supported by increasingly accessible technological infrastructures (Mansoor et al., 2026). In particular,

cloud based platforms and mobile learning applications have enabled continuous access to adaptive resources, extending personalized learning processes beyond traditional classroom boundaries and into ubiquitous learning environments. This transformation has accelerated significantly with the expansion of generative models and AI based educational applications in recent years.

The preliminary analysis of the Scopus derived corpus used in this study reveals a sustained increase in recent publications, particularly since 2023, with a notable concentration on AI assisted writing, adaptive feedback systems, conversational agents, vocabulary development, and self regulated learning supported by intelligent platforms. This growth indicates that the discussion has moved beyond the technical feasibility of AI in English language teaching toward more complex questions concerning its pedagogical effectiveness, implementation conditions, and impact on the learning experience (Tien & Haji-Othman, 2025). Furthermore, the rapid integration of generative tools in both formal and informal learning contexts has reshaped practices related to writing, linguistic revision, oral interaction, and access to personalized learning materials. Consequently, the field requires systematic reviews that not only describe emerging technologies but also critically examine the types of personalization they offer, the learning dimensions they affect, and the outcomes reported in recent research.

Despite the increasing volume of studies, the current body of literature remains thematically and methodologically fragmented. Some studies focus on adaptive systems that adjust learning pace, difficulty, and sequencing; others examine the use of Generative AI for text production, role play, and conversational practice; while a third group addresses automated assessment tools that provide immediate feedback on grammar, pronunciation, coherence, and lexical accuracy (Nazaretsky et al., 2026). However, these contributions are often developed in isolation, with emphasis on specific applications, populations, or individual language skills. Moreover, there is not always a clear distinction between automation, digital support, and genuine pedagogical personalization, which complicates the comparison of findings and the development of an integrated understanding of the phenomenon. Additional concerns include algorithmic bias, technological dependency, data privacy risks, variability in feedback quality, and persistent inequalities in access to digital resources. Therefore, a critical and systematic synthesis is necessary to organize the field, identify robust trends, and avoid oversimplified interpretations that present artificial intelligence as a universal solution to

fundamentally pedagogical challenges (Uğraş et al., 2025). Such simplified perspectives tend to reduce AI to a purely instrumental tool, overlooking the pedagogical, contextual, and ethical conditions required for its effective implementation, while also generating inflated expectations that hinder critical evaluation of its educational impact.

Within this framework, the present study aims to analyze artificial intelligence as a tool for personalizing English as a Second Language learning through a systematic literature review following the PRISMA protocol. The study focuses on peer reviewed publications from 2019 to 2025 and integrates evidence from major academic databases relevant to the field (Kiński et al., 2025). Its primary objective is to examine how recent research describes the use of adaptive learning systems, generative AI applications for text production, and automated assessment tools with immediate feedback. Additionally, the study seeks to identify the main contributions of these technologies in terms of Adaptive Learning Paths, learner autonomy, feedback scalability, and the development of language competencies. It also considers the ethical and structural challenges that influence the adoption of these technologies in real educational contexts (Tasdelen & Bodemer, 2025). From this perspective, the study is grounded in a central premise: the educational value of artificial intelligence in ESL depends not solely on its technological sophistication, but on its alignment with pedagogical principles, teacher mediation, and equitable conditions of access.

Materials and Methods

Study Design

This study was conducted as a systematic literature review, following the guidelines of the PRISMA 2020 protocol (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta Analyses) in order to ensure a transparent, replicable, and methodologically rigorous process for the identification, selection, and analysis of relevant scientific studies (Valle et al., 2026).

Systematic reviews enable the synthesis of existing empirical evidence through structured procedures for literature search, selection, and analysis. In this study, this approach was used to examine how artificial intelligence has been applied to personalize English as a

Second Language (ESL) learning, particularly in relation to adaptive systems, generative artificial intelligence tools, and automated language assessment mechanisms.

Data Sources

The literature search was conducted in three major academic databases with broad coverage in educational technology, applied linguistics, and computer science:

- Scopus
- ERIC
- IEEE Xplore

These databases were selected due to their relevance in indexing research on artificial intelligence in education, language learning, and digital learning technologies.

The time frame was limited to the most recent five years (2020–2025) to capture the latest developments in artificial intelligence applied to language education, particularly following the rapid expansion of Generative Artificial Intelligence and Large Language Models.

Search Strategy

The search strategy was developed using combinations of keywords related to artificial intelligence, English language learning, and personalized learning. To refine the results, Boolean operators (AND/OR) were applied, allowing for the logical combination of search terms and improving the precision of retrieved records.

The general search equation was as follows:

("artificial intelligence" OR "generative AI" OR "chatbot"
OR "intelligent tutoring systems" OR "natural language processing"
OR "speech recognition")
AND
("English as a Second Language" OR "ESL" OR "EFL")
AND
("personalized learning" OR "adaptive learning"
OR "automated feedback" OR "writing assessment")

This strategy enabled the identification of studies addressing artificial intelligence applications in ESL learning contexts, including writing support tools, adaptive learning platforms, automated assessment systems, and AI mediated learning environments.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The studies were selected based on the following criteria:

Inclusion criteria:

- Peer reviewed journal articles
- Publications between 2020 and 2025
- Studies addressing artificial intelligence in English language learning
- Research focused on personalized learning, adaptive systems, or automated feedback
- Full text availability

Exclusion criteria:

- Duplicate records across databases
- Non peer reviewed documents (e.g., editorials, technical notes, conference abstracts)
- Studies not directly related to ESL
- Research focused exclusively on technical development without educational application

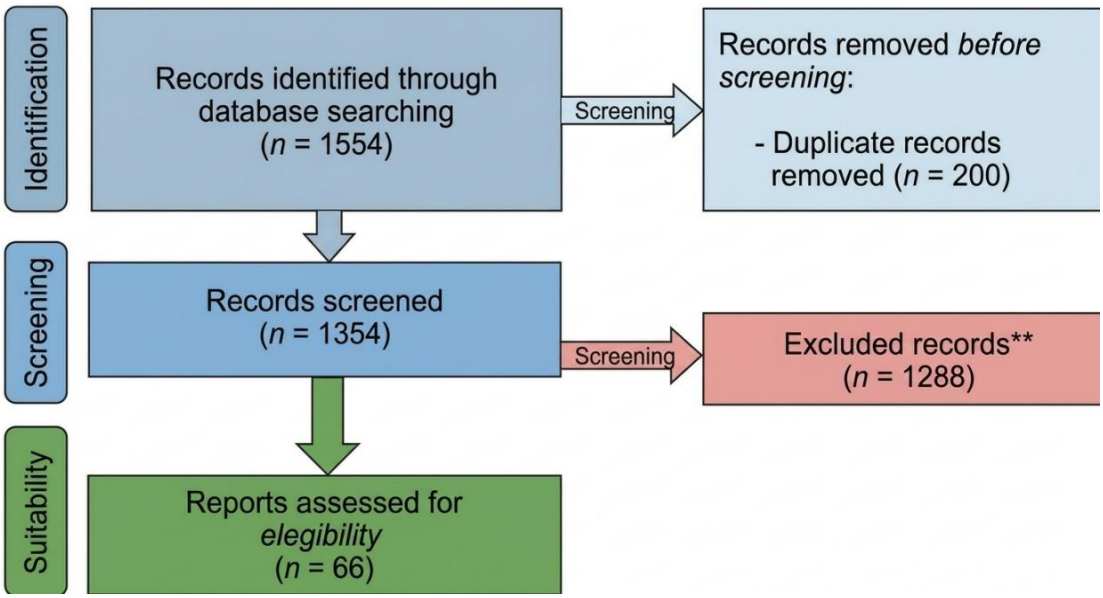
Selection Process

The selection process followed the stages of identification, screening, title and abstract review, full text assessment, and final inclusion.

Subsequently, the selected studies were organized into a data extraction matrix to analyze authorship, research context, technological tool employed, linguistic skill addressed, main findings, and reported limitations. The final synthesis was structured into three analytical categories: adaptive learning systems, generative AI for text production, and automated assessment tools providing immediate feedback.

Figure 1

PRISMA Flow Diagram of the Study Selection Process



The study selection process is detailed in Figure 1 (PRISMA Flow Diagram of the Study Selection Process). The initial identification phase across the bibliographic databases yielded a total of 1,554 records. Following the technical cleaning stage, 200 duplicate records were removed, resulting in a corpus of 1,354 potential sources for primary screening.

During the screening stage (title and abstract evaluation), the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied, leading to the exclusion of 1,288 records that did not align with the objectives or methodological scope of the study.

Finally, 66 articles were retrieved and assessed in full text to determine their eligibility. From this subset, after a comprehensive analysis of their methodological validity and thematic relevance, the studies that constitute the final synthesis of this review were selected (Chifla Villón, 2024).

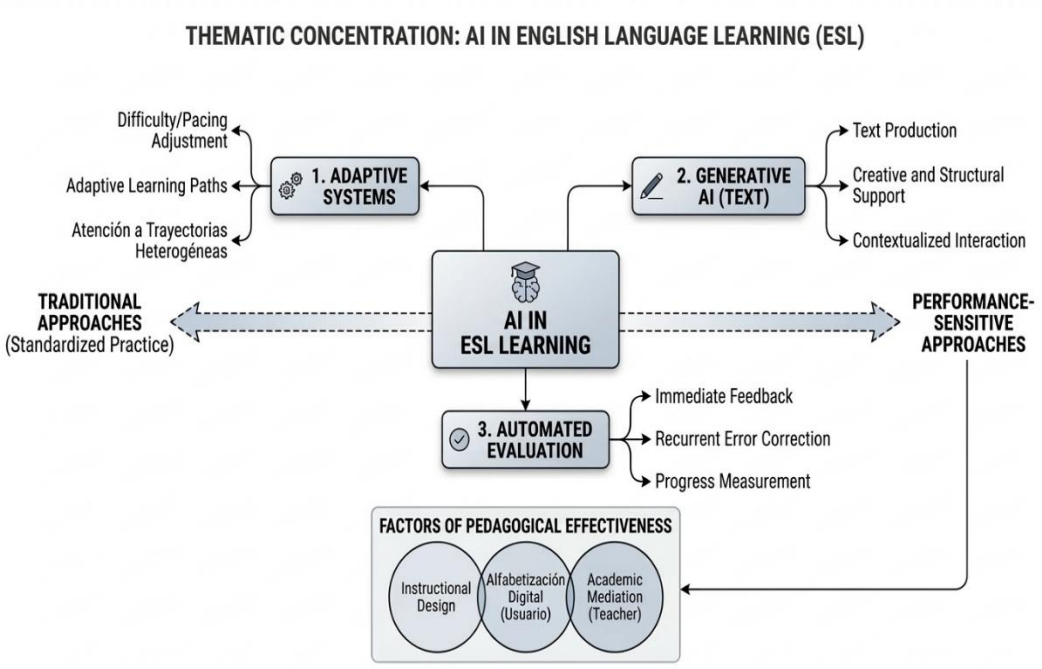
Results

The analysis of the selected corpus revealed a clear thematic concentration around three main applications of artificial intelligence in English as a Second Language (ESL) learning: Adaptive Learning Systems, Generative AI for text production, and automated assessment tools with immediate feedback (Preciado & Vallejo, 2024). Although the reviewed studies varied in context, population, methodological design, and educational level, a significant convergence was observed in the notion that AI was being incorporated not only as a technological support but also as a mechanism for adapting instruction to individual learning needs.

Overall, recent literature described a shift from standardized digital practice platforms toward learning environments that were more responsive to student performance, recurring errors, learning pace, and contextualized interaction. The reviewed studies indicated that personalization in ESL was increasingly supported by systems capable of providing adaptive responses in real time. However, the findings also showed that the pedagogical effectiveness of these tools depended on factors such as instructional design quality, users digital literacy, and the academic mediation accompanying their implementation (Quan et al., 2025).

Figure 2

Three Core Areas of Artificial Intelligence Applications in ESL Learning



Within the first category, Adaptive Learning Systems emerged as one of the most consistent approaches for implementing personalization in ESL. The included studies described platforms and environments that adjusted content, sequencing, difficulty levels, and pacing based on learners performance, prior responses, and interaction patterns. This type of architecture supported the development of Adaptive Learning Paths, particularly in areas such as vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, grammar, and autonomous practice (Kakumanu, 2025).

A key advantage identified in the literature was the ability to address heterogeneous learning trajectories without requiring constant teacher intervention in every instructional decision. In this way, the system reinforced weaker areas, revisited problematic content, and progressively increased task complexity according to learner performance (Baimukhambetova et al., 2025). In ESL contexts, this approach proved particularly relevant, as language development does not follow a linear progression and requires differentiated feedback, spaced practice, and continuous monitoring.

Nevertheless, the discussion on adaptive systems also revealed limitations that must be considered with caution (Lim et al., 2026). Although these environments enhanced individual progression and improved the perception of personalized support, several studies emphasized that algorithmic adaptation did not equate to full pedagogical personalization (Briones, 2023). In many cases, systems adjusted task difficulty or sequence but failed to capture more complex aspects of language learning, such as communicative intent, language anxiety, meaning construction, and sociocultural factors. When adaptation relied on limited metrics, there was a risk of reducing performance to quantifiable indicators while overlooking essential qualitative dimensions of language acquisition. Consequently, the literature consistently suggested that these systems were most effective when used as complements to informed pedagogical planning rather than as substitutes for teacher judgment (Han, 2025).

The second category, Generative AI for text production, represented one of the fastest growing areas in recent research. The emergence of Large Language Models and Generative AI tools significantly expanded the possibilities for supporting English writing in both academic contexts and autonomous learning processes (Ratnawati, 2026). These developments enabled the integration of text generation, revision, and improvement within a single learning environment. Additionally, they facilitated more

dynamic interaction between learners and systems, promoting more active and contextualized learning processes.

The analyzed studies reported frequent applications including draft generation, sentence reformulation, lexical expansion, modeling of argumentative structures, contextual grammatical correction, textual role play, and support for planning and revision tasks. In ESL contexts, these applications were particularly valuable because they reduced initial production barriers, provided immediate examples, and enabled sustained linguistic interaction that previously depended mainly on teachers or peers (Le et al., 2025).

From this perspective, generative AI functioned as a support agent that facilitated written expression, encouraged exploration of alternative discourse structures, and provided more flexible and personalized practice opportunities. However, the findings also revealed a persistent tension between pedagogical support and technological dependency. While several studies reported improvements in fluency, confidence, textual organization, and willingness to write, they also identified risks related to over reliance, discourse homogenization, and reduced cognitive effort in writing tasks (Nasr et al., 2025).

In some cases, these tools supported writing development; in others, they promoted dependency and diminished the cognitive engagement required for composition (Briones, 2025). The effectiveness of generative AI largely depended on how it was integrated into the learning process. When used to model, guide, provide feedback, or foster metalinguistic reflection, its educational potential was significant. Conversely, when used primarily to generate ready made responses, it weakened key processes such as self regulation, decision making, and the progressive development of writing competence.

The third category, automated assessment and immediate feedback tools, included studies focused on writing correction, grammatical analysis, pronunciation assessment, speech recognition, and real time feedback systems. This line of research showed strong representation within the corpus, indicating that one of the most established applications of AI in ESL was the automation of formative feedback. This trend can be explained by the nature of language learning, which requires frequent, timely, and specific feedback something that is difficult to sustain in large classrooms (Alsaiari et al., 2026).

In this context, tools such as Automated Writing Evaluation systems, error detection platforms, and speech analysis applications provided immediate responses regarding linguistic accuracy, structure, pronunciation, and coherence.

In several studies, this type of feedback is associated with improvements in autonomous revision, increased error awareness, and expanded opportunities for practice, particularly in hybrid or virtual learning environments where teacher interaction is not always sufficient to meet individual learning demands. Although these tools are often efficient in detecting formal errors, repetitive patterns, or structural inconsistencies, they do not always accurately interpret semantic nuances, discursive intent, or pragmatic appropriateness. This limitation becomes particularly evident in complex written production and oral interaction, where errors cannot be understood solely as formal deviations but also as part of the communicative construction process. Furthermore, the quality of the feedback depends on the model employed, the quality of the data on which it was trained, and the user's level of competence in interpreting the feedback received (Zhuang et al., 2025).

Consequently, the evidence suggests that automated feedback is most useful when it serves a diagnostic, guiding, or preliminary function, while human intervention remains necessary to deepen interpretation, provide contextualization, and transform correction into meaningful learning (Aguirre et al., 2025).

Taken together, the three categories analyzed support the argument that artificial intelligence is redefining the personalization of ESL learning across at least three complementary dimensions: the adaptation of learning pathways, the expansion of support for linguistic production, and the automation of feedback. Nevertheless, the results also indicate that technological innovation does not eliminate the structural tensions inherent in the educational field.

The reviewed literature consistently emphasizes that AI mediated personalization should be understood as a conditional possibility rather than an automatic advantage. Its impact depends on the quality of instructional design, the preparation of both teachers and students, the ethical criteria guiding its use, and the actual conditions of access to these technologies (Sujannah et al., 2025).

Artificial intelligence can strengthen English language learning processes when it expands pedagogical mediation; however, it loses educational value when teaching is reduced to a sequence of decontextualized automated responses. Ultimately, the educational function continues to depend on pedagogical mediation and the instructional design that guides the use of these technologies.

Discussion

The findings of this systematic review indicate that artificial intelligence is consolidating as a relevant resource for enhancing personalized learning processes in English as a Second Language (ESL). These results are consistent with previous studies that highlight the potential of AI to adapt content, learning sequences, and feedback based on student performance (Lakshmi et al., 2026). However, this study extends existing research by demonstrating that personalization is not solely a technical function but a pedagogically mediated process. From a theoretical perspective, the findings align with constructivist and sociocognitive approaches to language learning, which emphasize interaction, feedback, and mediation as essential elements for developing communicative competence beyond procedural automation.

In particular, adaptive learning systems stand out for their capacity to generate Adaptive Learning Paths, enabling the accommodation of diverse learning paces and styles in heterogeneous educational contexts. This finding supports prior research emphasizing the importance of personalization in language learning, while also reinforcing the argument that algorithmic adaptation does not replace teacher mediation. From the standpoint of communicative language teaching, this suggests that although adaptive systems can optimize individualized practice, they are limited in fostering meaningful interaction, negotiation of meaning, and contextual language use core components of ESL acquisition.

Regarding generative AI, the findings confirm its growing role as a tool for supporting written production and language interaction, in line with the work of Canan Güngören et al. (2026). Nevertheless, this study contributes a critical perspective by identifying technological dependency as an emerging pedagogical risk. Unlike previous educational technologies, generative AI not only assists but can also substitute complex cognitive processes by producing complete responses, thereby reducing the need for active learner engagement. This characteristic increases the likelihood of superficial learning, potentially affecting self regulation, critical thinking, and the autonomous construction of linguistic knowledge.

In addition, automated assessment and immediate feedback tools show strong consistency across the literature as effective mechanisms for improving language practice and correction. These findings are aligned with prior studies that underscore the importance of continuous feedback in language learning. However, from a theoretical perspective,

such systems appear to primarily reinforce formal aspects of language, such as grammatical accuracy and lexical precision, while their contribution to the development of comprehensive communicative competence remains less clearly established.

Taken together, the results not only confirm existing trends but also contribute to a more integrated understanding of the field, thereby partially addressing the knowledge gap identified in the introduction. Specifically, this review systematizes the use of artificial intelligence into three key categories and clarifies the conditions under which these technologies effectively support personalized learning in ESL. In this sense, the findings directly align with the objective of the study, demonstrating how AI is being used to adapt learning trajectories, automate assessment, and enhance learner autonomy, while remaining dependent on pedagogical, contextual, and ethical considerations.

Conclusions

This systematic review identifies key trends in the use of artificial intelligence as a tool for personalizing English as a Second Language (ESL) learning. The findings show that technologies such as Artificial Intelligence, Large Language Models, and Automated Feedback systems are transforming the design and implementation of teaching and learning processes in ESL contexts, particularly by enabling content adaptation, the development of Adaptive Learning Paths, and the provision of immediate feedback.

The evidence indicates that three main technological approaches dominate current applications: adaptive learning systems, generative AI for text production, and automated assessment tools. These technologies expand opportunities for language practice, strengthen learner autonomy, and improve the scalability of feedback in educational environments with high instructional demand. However, their effectiveness depends on their integration within well structured pedagogical frameworks, teacher mediation, and the development of digital competencies among both educators and learners.

At the same time, the review highlights critical challenges, including technological dependency, limitations in addressing pragmatic and contextual dimensions of language, data privacy concerns, and unequal access to technological resources. These findings reinforce the idea that artificial intelligence does not replace the educational process but functions as a complementary resource that requires ethical, pedagogical, and institutional alignment for effective implementation.

Ultimately, the study establishes that the educational value of artificial intelligence in ESL lies in its capacity to be meaningfully integrated into pedagogical frameworks that promote active, adaptive, and learner centered experiences. Future research should focus on longitudinal empirical studies, the development of hybrid instructional models, and the evaluation of AI's impact on communicative competence, learner autonomy, and overall learning quality.

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