



Between Scepticism and Adoption: A Phenomenological Study of Indonesian EFL Teachers' Lived Experiences Integrating Generative AI into Writing Instruction

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Abstract: While survey research has mapped the contours of EFL teacher attitudes towards generative AI, the lived, day-to-day experience of teachers who are actively attempting to integrate these tools into writing instruction remains underexplored. This study uses interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to examine how nine Indonesian EFL lecturers experienced the process of integrating generative AI tools into their academic writing courses over one academic semester. Data were collected through three rounds of in-depth interviews and reflective teaching journals kept throughout the integration period. Findings reveal a phenomenological landscape characterised by productive tension: teachers navigated ongoing oscillation between intellectual curiosity and pedagogical anxiety, between the sense of professional obligation to engage with new tools and the felt inadequacy of their preparation to do so responsibly, and between their desire to help students use AI well and their uncertainty about what using AI well actually looks like in a writing classroom. Four experiential themes organise the findings: the vertigo of not knowing enough, the loneliness of navigating without a map, the satisfaction of unexpected pedagogical discovery, and the moral weight of institutional silence. The study draws on Merleau-Ponty's (1962) phenomenology of embodied experience and van Manen's (2016) hermeneutic phenomenology to argue that teacher AI integration is not primarily a knowledge problem or a skills problem but an experiential one and that addressing it requires professional support structures that attend to the phenomenological dimensions of teachers' encounters with AI in their specific professional contexts.

Keywords: Generative AI, EFL writing instruction, teacher experience, interpretive phenomenological analysis, professional development, teacher identity.

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INTRODUCTION

The question of how teachers experience the integration of new technologies is not a new one, but the speed and comprehensiveness of generative artificial intelligence's (GenAI) arrival in educational settings has given it renewed urgency. Teachers in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing classrooms are encountering a technology that can do a plausible imitation of the writing they are trying to teach and that their students are

already using, have already integrated into their practice, and will continue to use regardless of what the curriculum formally permits. The question of how to respond is one teachers are working out, in most cases, by themselves, in real time, without the institutional support or professional community that would make the working-out less lonely. Research on teacher responses to AI in education has grown rapidly since 2022, but it has been dominated by survey designs that capture attitudes, self-reported competencies, and behavioural intentions at a single point in time. These studies are valuable because they map the landscape efficiently and generate findings that are generalisable. However, they cannot capture the texture of what it is actually like to be an EFL writing teacher navigating AI integration in a specific institutional context, with specific students, over time. They cannot show us the moment when a carefully planned lesson falls apart because half the class has produced AI-generated drafts that are, in a purely surface sense, better than anything they could have written themselves, leaving the teacher standing at the front of the room, uncertain what to do with that. Furthermore, quantitative approaches cannot show us the quiet satisfaction of designing a task that genuinely makes students think harder because of the AI, rather than in spite of it, nor can they reveal what it feels like to carry, largely alone, the professional responsibility for figuring out something that one's institution has not yet figured out either.

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is the method this study uses precisely because it can show us these things. IPA is concerned with how people make sense of their lived experience—how they interpret events, construct meaning, and navigate uncertainty in the specific contexts of their working lives (Smith et al., 2022). For a study of teacher AI integration, this orientation is not just methodologically appropriate, but it is the only approach that can access the kind of knowledge this study is trying to produce, namely knowledge about the experiential reality of professional transition rather than just its measurable outcomes. To fully ground this experiential inquiry, it is essential to connect it to the broader history of technology integration, which shows that this transition is experienced by teachers not primarily as a skills acquisition challenge but as an identity challenge. It raises critical questions about what kind of teacher one is, what one values in teaching, and whether one's existing professional identity is compatible with the practices the new technology seems to require (Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2010; Mishra & Koehler, 2006). Teachers who perceive a new technology as threatening their core pedagogical values such as their investment in student writing as a process of genuine meaning-making are more likely to resist it even when they possess the technical skills to use it (Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2010; Prestridge, 2022). Beyond identity, research consistently identifies professional isolation as one of the most significant barriers to successful technology integration. Teachers who have colleagues to share experiences with, who can debrief difficult integration moments, and build on each other's discoveries, show more sustained and more sophisticated integration practice than those working in isolation (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Prestridge, 2022). In higher education contexts specifically, where collegial collaboration on teaching is less institutionally supported than in K-12 settings, this isolation is a particular concern and one that AI integration seems to be intensifying, given the novelty and the pace of change.

This sense of isolation and pressure is clearly reflected in the emerging literature on teacher perspectives on GenAI in education, which has produced a consistent early picture indicating that most teachers are cautious rather than dismissive, are worried primarily about academic integrity, feel inadequately prepared for integration, and express a desire for professional support that they are not currently receiving (Becker, 2023; Southworth et al., 2023; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). Qualitative studies provide a richer picture of the specific tensions teachers navigate. Becker (2023) found that EFL teachers in higher education described GenAI integration as involving simultaneous professional obligations that could not all be met at once, including the obligation to maintain assessment integrity, the obligation to prepare students for a professional world in which AI tools would be available and expected, and the obligation to ensure that students were developing

genuine writing competency rather than AI-dependent simulation of it. This dilemma directly triggers what might be called the design problem of AI integration in writing courses, which manifests as the difficulty of designing tasks and assessments that are both authentically valuable and resistant to AI substitution or, alternatively, that are genuinely enhanced rather than bypassed by AI use (Flowerdew & Costley, 2017; Ouyang et al., 2023). Teachers in these studies describe spending significant time and cognitive effort redesigning assessment, often without institutional support, and frequently reaching solutions they are uncertain about and unable to share with colleagues who are facing the same challenges.

To deeply understand these complex dynamics, this study draws upon the phenomenology of teacher professional experience. Merleau-Ponty's (1962) phenomenology of embodied experience, and van Manen's (2016) application of hermeneutic phenomenology to lived experience in educational contexts, provide the philosophical foundations for this study's approach to teacher experience. Merleau-Ponty's insistence that experience is always embodied that knowing and doing are not separable from the bodily, affective, and situational conditions in which they occur directs attention to the ways in which teachers' experiences of AI integration are not just cognitive events but felt ones, shaped by anxiety, excitement, disorientation, and the specific physical and social contexts of their working lives. Van Manen's (2016) hermeneutic phenomenology extends this by developing an approach to educational research that seeks to understand lived experience in its particularity and complexity rather than reduce it to categories and variables. Applied to teacher AI integration, this approach asks not just what teachers think about AI but what it is like to teach with and around AI, focusing on the specific moments and textures of classroom and professional life where thinking happens through doing, where understanding develops in relation to the particular students and tasks in front of them, and where professional identity is continuously negotiated in encounter with unexpected challenges.

Guided by this philosophical and methodological framework, the present study followed nine Indonesian EFL lecturers through one academic semester as they actively integrated GenAI tools into their writing courses. To systematically explore their lived experiences, this inquiry was shaped by four interconnected research questions. First, the study investigates how Indonesian EFL teachers describe their experience of integrating GenAI tools into academic writing instruction. Second, it examines the specific sources of meaning, anxiety, and professional identity tension that this integration experience involves. Third, it seeks to identify the institutional and professional structures that teachers perceive as most helpful or, conversely, as most conspicuously absent during this transition. Finally, the study addresses what this phenomenological account of teacher AI integration suggests for the future design of professional support systems tailored to AI integration in higher education.

METHODS

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

IPA (Smith et al., 2022) was selected as the methodological approach because of its specific orientation towards how individuals make sense of significant experiences in their lives an orientation directly suited to the study of how teachers navigate the professionally significant experience of AI integration. IPA uses small, purposive samples and conducts rich, longitudinal engagement with participants to produce detailed accounts of experiential meaning rather than broad generalisations. The approach is explicitly interpretive: the researcher's own subjectivity is acknowledged and managed rather than bracketed, and analysis involves a double hermeneutic the researcher making sense of participants making sense of their experience.

Participants

Nine EFL lecturers were recruited through purposive sampling at two public Islamic universities in Aceh and one private university in Banda Aceh. Selection criteria were: active integration of at least one GenAI tool in at least one writing course during the semester of data collection; willingness to keep a reflective teaching journal; and availability for three rounds of interviews across the semester. Participants ranged in teaching experience from four to nineteen years ($M = 9.7$); six were female and three were male; all held master's or doctoral degrees in English language education or applied linguistics. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

Data Collection

Data were collected through three methods across one academic semester. Round-one interviews (60–75 minutes each) were conducted at the start of the semester, focusing on participants' teaching backgrounds, prior experiences with technology integration, initial expectations and anxieties about AI integration, and the specific design decisions they had made in their courses. Round-two interviews (50–65 minutes each) were conducted at mid-semester, focusing on specific incidents and experiences that had stood out moments of surprise, difficulty, or satisfaction and on how their thinking and practice had shifted. Round-three interviews (55–70 minutes each) were conducted at semester's end, focusing on how participants were now understanding the experience as a whole, what they felt they had learned, and what they wished they had had access to. Reflective teaching journals were kept by all participants throughout the semester, with a minimum requirement of two entries per week and no maximum. Journal prompts were deliberately open-ended: What happened today that made you think about AI? How did it feel? What do you think it means?

Data Analysis

Data were analysed following IPA procedures (Smith et al., 2022). Each participant's data three interview transcripts and the full semester of journal entries were analysed as an individual case before cross-case analysis was undertaken. Initial analysis involved close, annotated reading of transcripts and journals, attending to participants' specific language choices, emotional resonances, and interpretive moves. Experiential themes were developed for each case through a process of clustering and abstraction, with attention to convergent and divergent patterns. Cross-case analysis identified themes that recurred across participants with sufficient consistency and depth to warrant presentation as shared experiential features of the AI integration experience. The analysis aimed for what van Manen (2016) calls phenomenological plausibility not representativeness in a statistical sense but fidelity to the texture and complexity of lived experience.

RESULTS

Four experiential themes emerged from the cross-case analysis, each capturing a dimension of the shared phenomenological landscape of AI integration as experienced by these nine teachers. Within each theme, individual voices are presented to preserve the specificity and texture of particular experiences.

The Vertigo of Not Knowing Enough

The most pervasive experiential theme across all nine participants was a persistent sense of cognitive and professional vertigo a feeling of trying to navigate terrain that kept shifting underfoot, without adequate knowledge of either the terrain itself or where it was heading. This was not simply a report of insufficient knowledge; it was an experience of disorientation in which not knowing enough had affective and professional dimensions that straightforward knowledge acquisition could not resolve.

Bu Rahimah described an early-semester experience that crystallised this theme for her: *"My student submitted a beautiful introduction. Really beautiful—fluent, well-structured, good ideas. I knew it was ChatGPT. But here is the thing: I couldn't say with certainty that I could tell the difference between that and something a very good student might write. And I thought: if I can't tell, how am I supposed to teach students to use it well? How do I know what 'well' looks like?"* The vertigo here was not just practical—not knowing how to detect AI use—but epistemological: not knowing what the standard of good AI-integrated writing instruction was supposed to be.

Pak Syahril described a related form of vertigo: the feeling of being professionally accountable for outcomes he did not yet know how to produce. *"I told my students we would use AI as a learning tool, not a replacement for thinking. But when I said that, I did not really know what the difference looked like in practice. I was promising something I had not yet figured out."* The gap between professional commitment and professional understanding created what Pak Syahril described as a feeling of *gelisah*—the Indonesian word for a state of restless, nagging anxiety—that was present throughout the semester.

Across journals and interviews, this theme appeared in descriptions of specific moments: the pause before returning a piece of AI-assisted work, unsure how to respond to it; the realisation, mid-lesson, that a planned activity had not accounted for what students had done with AI before they arrived; the late-night uncertainty about whether an assessment design decision was right. What the theme captures is not just knowledge deficit but the affective texture of professional inadequacy—an experience that knowledge acquisition alone cannot address, because it is as much about emotional security as it is about information.

The Loneliness of Navigating Without a Map

Every participant described, with varying degrees of explicitness, a profound professional loneliness in their AI integration experience. They were making pedagogical decisions—about course design, assessment, how to respond to AI-assisted student work, how to talk to students about AI—that had significant consequences and that nobody in their institutional environment had already figured out. The decisions were being made in isolation, without established best practice to draw on, without colleagues who had been through the same thing, and without institutional guidance that went beyond generic academic integrity reminders.

Bu Nurhayati's journal entry from week six was representative of many: *"Today I changed the assessment task again. Third time. I keep thinking I've found a way to make students actually write, and then I realise ChatGPT can do it too. I feel like I'm running from something faster than me. I wish I could talk to someone who has actually solved this. Not a YouTube video. A real person who teaches writing like I do."* The longing for collegial dialogue—for someone to share the navigation with—was present in almost every interview and in numerous journal entries. It was described not as a preference but as a felt absence, something missing from the professional experience of doing something genuinely difficult.

Several participants described attempts to seek collegial support that had not been productive: colleagues who were either avoiding AI integration entirely or who had adopted it wholesale without the pedagogical reflection that might have made the conversation useful. Pak Firdaus noted: *"I tried to talk to a colleague about this. He said, 'Just ban it.' Another colleague said, 'Just let them use it, it's inevitable.' Neither of those helped me. I wanted someone to say, 'Yes, this is complicated, here is what I tried, here is what I learned.' Nobody has that yet."*

The institutional dimension of this loneliness was significant. Several participants described a specific kind of frustration with institutional silence: not malice or indifference from administrators, but an absence of framework, policy, or even acknowledgement that made individual teachers feel they were carrying a professional responsibility that should have been shared. Bu Laila put it plainly: *"The university has not said anything about AI."*

Nothing official. So every decision is mine. If something goes wrong—if a student complains, if an assessment is challenged—I have no institutional backing. I am alone in this."

The Satisfaction of Unexpected Pedagogical Discovery

Alongside the vertigo and loneliness, all nine participants described moments of genuine pedagogical discovery—instances where something about AI integration had produced unexpected and valuable learning, in their students or in themselves, that could not have been anticipated from the anxious starting position they had occupied at the beginning of the semester. These moments were not the dominant tone of the experience, but they were real, significant, and—in several cases—had shifted participants' overall orientation towards AI integration in ways that surprised them.

Bu Rahimah, whose early experience of vertigo was described above, described a mid-semester discovery that had changed her understanding of what AI integration could do: *"I gave students an AI-generated paragraph on the topic they were writing about and asked them to find three things it got wrong or oversimplified. They found six. More importantly, they had to know enough to find the errors, so they read more carefully than they ever had before. The AI made them into better readers because they had to be sceptical of it."* This activity—using AI-generated text as a critical reading exercise—had emerged from a frustrated attempt to redesign an assignment that students were bypassing, and it had produced engagement and critical thinking that Bu Rahimah described as among the best she had seen in her writing classes.

Pak Zufadli described a different kind of discovery: an unplanned classroom moment in which a student's question about why ChatGPT had given different feedback to two students had opened into a discussion about how LLMs work that he described as among the most intellectually alive moments of his teaching year. *"A student asked: 'Why does ChatGPT tell me something different than it told my friend about the same paragraph?' And I had to be honest—I didn't fully know. But we explored it together. We compared the outputs, we tried different prompts, we talked about what it meant that the same tool could say opposite things. That hour was better than any grammar lesson I have ever taught."* These moments of unexpected discovery were not just pleasant—they served a specific phenomenological function in participants' experience. They were evidence, arrived at through practice rather than theory, that AI integration could be something other than a defensive response to a threat. They gave participants an experiential basis for the possibility that AI integration could be genuinely generative—pedagogically productive rather than merely damage-limiting—that no amount of professional development guidance could have provided in the abstract.

The Moral Weight of Institutional Silence

The fourth theme was the most distinctly ethical in character, and in some ways the most distressing. It concerned the moral experience of making consequential pedagogical decisions—decisions about what students were being taught, what skills they were developing, and what relationship they were forming with AI tools—in the absence of institutional guidance that acknowledged the weight of those decisions.

Bu Laila's account of an end-of-semester assessment dilemma captured this most clearly. She had designed what she believed was a fair and pedagogically sound assessment—a multi-stage writing process with documented revision decisions, intended to make AI substitution difficult and to foreground student thinking. Two students had challenged her assessment grade on the grounds that they had used AI assistance throughout, which they had understood to be permitted. *"I had not said it was not permitted. I had not said it was permitted either. I had said nothing explicit. And there was nothing in the course guide that said anything. So two students, who had worked differently to the others, felt I had treated them unfairly. And I couldn't say they were completely wrong."* The distress in Bu Laila's account was not about the assessment itself but about the condition it revealed: that she had been making ethical decisions—about what counted

as legitimate student work, about what AI use implied for academic credit, about what the course was for in an institutional vacuum that had not recognised those decisions as ethical ones worth supporting.

This theme was not about teacher failure or institutional bad faith. Several participants were careful to note that their institutions were doing their best with a genuinely novel and rapidly evolving situation. What they were describing was the moral phenomenology of professional transition: the experience of being an ethical agent—someone whose decisions affect other people's learning and life chances—without the institutional frameworks that would make that agency supported rather than isolated. The weight of that condition was felt not just cognitively but physically: in the tension that accompanied assessment decisions, in the rehearsal of justifications before parent conversations, in the sense that something important could go wrong at any moment without adequate backup.

DISCUSSION

AI Integration as an Experiential Challenge

The central argument of this study is that teacher AI integration is not primarily a knowledge problem or a skills problem, though it has dimensions of both. It is, at its root, an experiential challenge: one that involves affective disorientation, professional identity negotiation, and moral weight that straightforward information and training cannot adequately address. The vertigo of not knowing enough is not resolved by being given more information; it requires the kind of supported, situated experimentation that allows teachers to build knowledge through their own practice rather than simply receiving it from outside. The loneliness of navigating without a map is not resolved by professional development workshops; it requires sustained collegial community in which the navigation is genuinely shared. The moral weight of institutional silence is not resolved by generic institutional policies; it requires specific, contextualised guidance that acknowledges the ethical dimensions of the decisions teachers are actually making.

Merleau-Ponty's (1962) insistence that experience is always embodied and situated is the theoretical resource that makes this argument most precisely. Teachers' encounters with AI integration do not happen in the abstract space of professional decision-making; they happen in classrooms with specific students, in assessment contexts with specific consequences, in institutions with specific cultures—and the felt quality of those encounters, their affective texture and their moral weight, is shaped as much by those specific conditions as by the general features of AI technology. Professional development that ignores the situated, embodied, affective dimensions of teachers' experience is not responding to the challenge they are actually facing.

The Discovery Theme and Its Pedagogical Implications

The theme of unexpected pedagogical discovery deserves particular attention because it points towards something that anxiety-dominated accounts of teacher AI experience tend to miss: the genuine generative potential of AI integration for writing instruction, visible to teachers who have made it through the disorientation to a point of some experiential mastery. The discoveries described by Bu Rahimah and Pak Zulfadli were not planned outcomes of a carefully designed integration strategy—they were emergent from the practice of navigating AI with students in real time. They required the teacher to be present in the uncertainty rather than protected from it, willing to learn in public rather than maintaining an expert posture.

This has implications for how professional development for AI integration is designed. If the most valuable learning in teacher AI integration comes through situated, emergent, practice-based discovery—as this data suggests—then professional development designs that focus on knowledge transmission, tool training, and policy guidance will not fully prepare teachers for the most generative possibilities of

integration. What is also needed are structures that support teachers to engage in reflective experimentation—to try things, document what happens, reflect on it with colleagues, and build cumulative practical wisdom from the aggregate of their classroom experiences. These structures—reflective professional learning communities, structured lesson study, collaborative inquiry groups—are familiar in teacher education research; what is needed is their specific application to the emerging challenge of AI integration in EFL writing contexts.

Institutional Responsibility for the Experiential Conditions of Integration

The moral weight theme points directly to institutional responsibility. The isolation, the moral weight, and the policy vacuum described by participants are not natural features of a difficult professional transition—they are the consequences of institutional responses that have not kept pace with the speed of change and have left individual teachers carrying professional and ethical responsibilities that institutions should be sharing.

This is not an argument for rigid institutional control of teacher AI practice. The diversity and novelty of AI integration challenges means that top-down policy will always lag behind classroom reality. It is an argument for a different kind of institutional engagement: one that acknowledges that teachers are doing difficult, consequential ethical work in navigating AI integration; that provides the collegial and structural support to make that work less lonely; and that develops assessment and academic integrity frameworks that give teachers clear institutional backing for the pedagogical decisions they are making. Without that engagement, professional development for AI integration will produce more-informed teachers who are still navigating alone—which is better than uninformed teachers navigating alone, but not adequate to what the transition requires.

Implications for the Indonesian EFL Context

The specific features of the Indonesian Islamic higher education context inflect the findings in ways that are worth naming. The cultural value of institutional respect and hierarchical deference—present in both Indonesian and Islamic educational traditions—may make the experience of navigating without institutional guidance particularly uncomfortable, since it requires individual teachers to act with professional authority in domains where institutional authority has not yet spoken. The experience of carrying ethical decisions without institutional backing may be more acutely felt in this context than in educational cultures where teacher autonomy is more institutionally celebrated. Professional support structures for AI integration in Indonesian Islamic universities need to be attentive to these cultural dimensions—not just providing information and skills but creating the legitimate institutional spaces in which teachers can exercise the professional agency that AI integration requires.

CONCLUSION

This study listened carefully to nine Indonesian EFL teachers across one semester as they navigated the experience of integrating GenAI into their writing courses. What it heard was not a simple story of enthusiasm or resistance, adoption or rejection—it was the more complicated story of people doing genuinely difficult professional work in conditions of inadequate support, finding moments of genuine discovery within the difficulty, and carrying moral weight that their institutions had not yet adequately shared. The vertigo of not knowing enough, the loneliness of navigating without a map, the satisfaction of unexpected pedagogical discovery, and the moral weight of institutional silence: these are not peripheral features of teacher AI integration experience. They are its centre. Professional development, institutional policy, and collegial support for AI integration in EFL writing contexts need to be designed for this centre—not for a simpler version of the challenge that is easier to address with workshops and guidelines. Teachers who are

helped to navigate the disorientation, to connect with colleagues doing the same navigation, and to experiment and discover in supported rather than isolated conditions will eventually produce the kind of experienced, reflective, pedagogically sophisticated AI integration practice that their students need. That outcome is worth investing in—and the investment needs to start with taking seriously what the experience actually involves.

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