

Exam readiness and academic integrity in the age of generative AI: Efl teachers' perspectives on adapting assessment practices

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Abstract

The growing reliance of students on Generative AI (GenAI) raises critical concerns about exam readiness and academic integrity, underscoring the need to rethink traditional exam-related tasks. The study at hand explores these issues, employing reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) of three focus group discussions (FGDs), with three EFL teachers per FGD. Using NVivo 14 software, the results obtained revealed serious issues regarding the impact of EFL students' use and dependence on GenAI on their cognitive, affective, and academic skills, which are essential for successful exam preparedness. Due to these assertions, students' growing reliance on GenAI poses notable challenges to preserving exam integrity, limits the effectiveness of traditional written examinations, and leaves teachers struggling to design alternative tasks to ensure fair grading and quality responses in response to the evolving nature of GenAI tools. Given this, the participants' level of familiarity with GenAI appears to be a key factor in determining whether adaptive exam tasks are reconsidered for GenAI integration or embraced with GenAI-driven approaches. To conclude, the present study emphasizes the need for professional development programs to equip teachers with approaches to balance the integration of GenAI with the integrity of assessment practices.

Keywords: GenAI tools, exam readiness, integrity, resistance, hybrid assessment.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Generative AI-powered writing tools, while serving as valuable aids for educational purposes, have raised concerns about their potential misuse, particularly in assessment practices (Ogunsakin, 2024; Dulundu, 2024). Students' overreliance on these tools, portrayed in scenarios where a student can generate well-crafted responses to complex questions in seconds, has raised pressing concerns about effective readiness for exams and academic integrity (Cotton et al., 2023; Dergaa et al., 2023; Gruenhagen et al., 2024), prompting educators to rethink their assessment approaches in order to reflect students' intellectual effort rather than the capabilities of a machine (Shishavan, 2024).

Although limited in its actionable insights, existing research emphasizes the potential threat of Generative AI's numerous applications to academic dishonesty (Holmes et al., 2022), raising alarm about plagiarism and cheating as two key frequent issues undermining academic integrity, and contributing to a perceived crisis if not effectively addressed (Moorhouse, 2023; Cingillioglu, 2023). On reflection, traditional written assessment formats, which usually test factual recall or basic comprehension, such as defining a concept or describing a process, are no longer sufficient to evaluate a student's abilities in today's AI-driven environment. According to Ifelebuegu (2023), assignments and exams, such as writing essays, are particularly vulnerable to AI-generated content, which in turn calls for a reevaluation of their effectiveness and rigor. In response, though under-researched and contentious, questions about AI-resistant assessment practices focusing on higher-order cognitive skills, critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving in real-world scenarios, and deeper analysis are gaining attention (Sweeney, 2023; Kadel et al., 2024). Against this backdrop and by shedding light on these perspectives, the current study offers a unique contribution to understanding the evolving relationship among students' dependency on GenAI, exam preparedness, and academic integrity, which appears increasingly at risk, thereby prompting a reconsideration of traditional exam-related tasks in the EFL context. Specifically, it addresses the following two research questions:

1. In what ways can EFL students' overreliance on GenAI tools influence their readiness for exams and assessment integrity?
2. What adaptive exam-related tasks can be designed to enhance assessment effectiveness while critically reflecting on GenAI potential?

Academic integrity, as a cornerstone of education, reflects a commitment to values embodying honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility in academic endeavors (Werner, 2022). While fostering an environment of trust and moral conduct among students, instructors, and institutions, it ensures that academic work is credible and reliable (Shynkaruk, 2024). Put simply, promoting academic integrity involves fostering an academic culture that addresses multiple facets, including ethical conduct, teaching practices, and institutional policies. Violations of academic integrity, such as plagiarism, data falsification, and exam cheating, pose challenges to the educational process and undermine the ethical foundation of academia (Kalke et al., 2022). Thus, academic integrity, lacking a single, fixed definition, is not merely a set of norms but a mandatory guiding principle that promotes the sustainable advancement of knowledge and upholds the reputation and honor of educational institutions (Bretag, 2016).

Integrity, as a key aspect of the teaching/learning process, is a prerequisite to success (Baker-Gardner & Eaton, 2024). Yet relatedly, integrating artificial intelligence, particularly generative models like ChatGPT, into higher education has precipitated a crisis, as institutions grapple with the challenges posed by AI-assisted authorship and the potential for academic misconduct. The growing reliance on

generative AI (GenAI) tools in academia has blurred the lines between authentic student work and AI-generated content, complicating traditional plagiarism-detection methods, leading to increased instances of cheating (Rane et al., 2024), and therefore casting doubt on the meaning of academic success. Song (2024) argues that research on best practices for addressing these issues in academic settings remains scarce. Notwithstanding, the current evidence supports the view that institutions must develop formal ethical policies, implement AI literacy programs, and incorporate advanced detection methods to preserve trust in academic outputs (Chen et al., 2024), without overlooking AI as a legitimate tool for students (Moya et al., 2024).

Driven by recent advancements in GenAI technologies, assessment practices in higher education have sparked critical discussions about the opportunities and challenges they present (Khlaif, 2024; Qureshi, 2024). The findings of a pilot study at British University Vietnam, which explored a structured, flexible AI Assessment Scale (AIAS), indicate that academic misconduct was significantly reduced and student involvement and creativity increased (Furze et al., 2024). GenAI tools such as ChatGPT, when integrated into psychological assessment, prove effective by supporting student performance and competencies in psychological and AI literacies (Richmond & Nicholls, 2024). Page et al. (2024) argue that integrating GenAI into both formative and summative assessments across Bloom's Taxonomy helps keep assessment practices aligned with future technological needs. Supporting these views, a systematic review by Ogunsakin (2024) critically examines the role of AI technologies—including Automated Essay Scoring (AES), adaptive learning systems, and learning analytics—in creating personalized learning and real-time feedback. This review highlights opportunities for AI to automate scoring and provide adaptive feedback while discussing ethical challenges: algorithmic bias, data privacy, and the need for transparency. Together, these perspectives show that assessment approaches should be reexamined, calling for careful integration of generative AI to ensure relevance and effectiveness in education's rapidly evolving landscape.

Banning or ignoring GenAI tools shows their ineffectiveness (Furze et al., 2024). Institutions must adopt flexible ethical frameworks that leverage GenAI's strengths while addressing its limitations, and prioritize extensive educator training (Nadeem et al., 2024; Lodge et al., 2023). Ongoing research and collaboration between institutions are key to developing and sharing AI-integrated curricula (Southworth et al., 2023).

2. METHOD AND MATERIALS

This qualitative study uses focus groups to examine how EFL students' overuse of GenAI tools affects exam readiness and exam integrity. This prompts the need to design adaptive exam tasks. Focus groups provide essential insights into complex experiences and interactions (Mortelmans, 2025) and encourage dynamic discussions about shared phenomena (Robert K. Merton, 1990). Using NVivo14, the study analyzes group dynamics and individual responses to inform the use of collective insights in designing adaptive assessment activities that help preserve academic integrity.

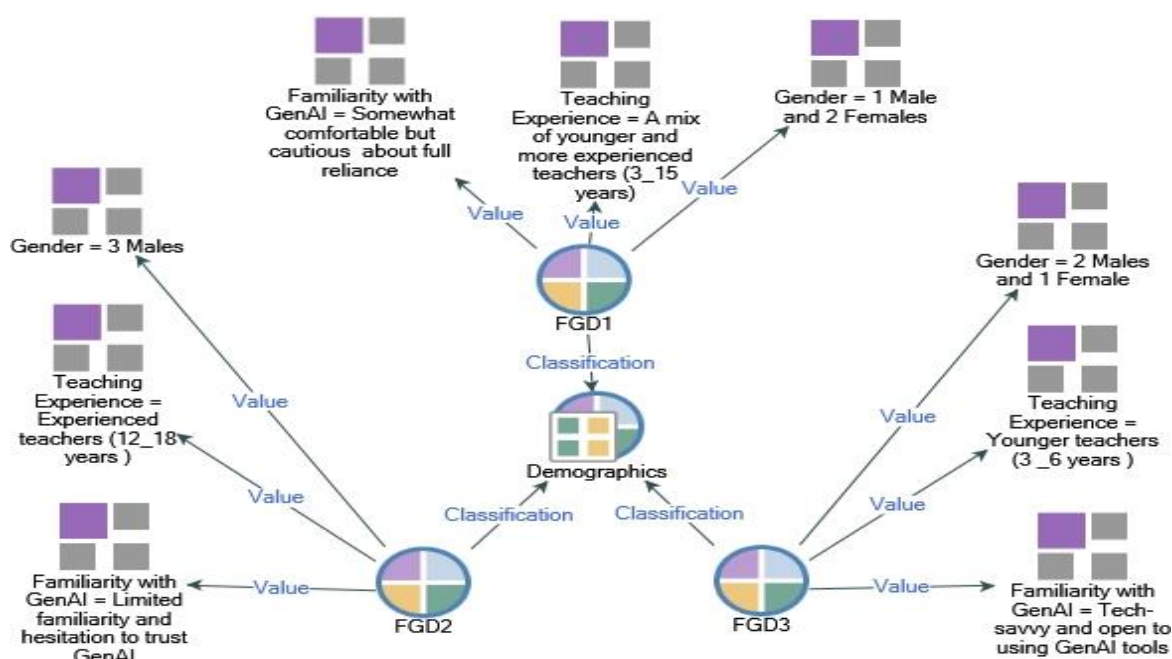
2.1. Sampling

In the first months of 2024, three online focus groups were conducted involving EFL instructors from different Algerian Universities. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling. They were kindly invited to take part in the focus group sessions in recognition of their active involvement and valuable participation in a study day on AI integration in education held at the Department of English at Ibn Khaldoun University, Tiaret, Algeria. Although the sample size of nine participants, with

three per group, may not be statistically representative _noting that it was challenging to coordinate the logistics for all participants_ its value lies in the shared characteristics relevant to the present study and the diversity it brings across the groups, helping capture a broad range of perspectives and experiences (Rabiee, 2004). As shown by the map generated using NVivo, for the sake of diversity, focus groups' participants vary to a limited extent in gender distribution and teaching experience, however they share essential traits, more precisely in terms of their professional background as university EFL teachers, and familiarity with GenAI, making it possible to express their individuality while still leaving room for cross-group comparisons.

Figure 1.

Focus groups demographics



2.2. Focus group discussions (FGDs): Process and reflexive thematic analysis (RTA)

The process of conducting and recording the group interactions was carefully monitored, with a focus on the flow of responses, the intensity of opinions, and shifts in viewpoints, involving overlapping speech and non-verbal cues. This indicates the vital role the moderator plays in facilitating discussions, ensuring balanced participation, maintaining neutrality, and acknowledging views that can shape others' beliefs. Starting with the participants' demographic details, the questions were designed using a semi-structured approach, emphasizing open-ended questions about the impact of EFL students' increasing dependence on GenAI on the skills required for exam preparation and on the integrity of this mode of assessment. Prompted by these questions, the urgent need to rethink EFL exam tasks in response to the rapid development of GenAI tools is addressed, enabling the moderator to adapt based on provided responses and identify unanticipated areas of interest. As each focus group typically lasted one hour, the discussions were audio-recorded to facilitate note-taking. Central to this process were ethical considerations, including informed consent and confidentiality.

The reflexive thematic analysis adheres to an inductive approach 'data-driven', following Braun and Clarke's (2020) six phases as outlined by Bryne (2022), mainly consisting of: (1) familiarization with data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) generating themes, (4) reviewing potential themes, (5) defining themes and (6) producing a report. Using NVivo software to run queries on the gathered data and code and to identify key themes is a key process for sharing the findings of the current study.

3. RESULTS

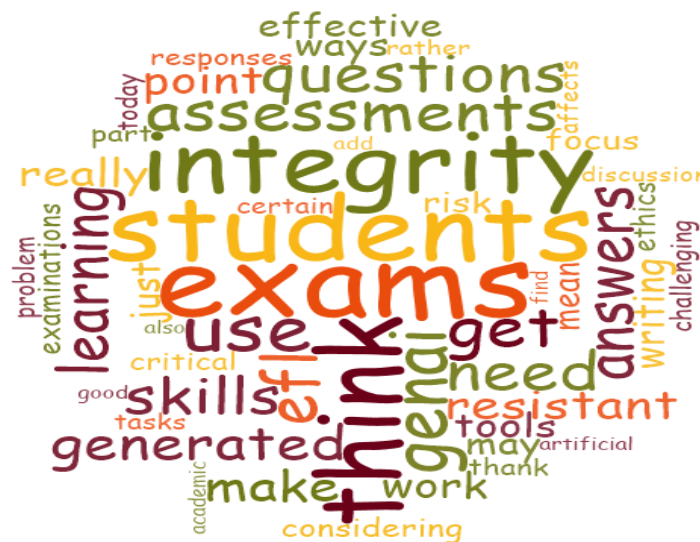
Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), as a flexible and interpretive qualitative method, focuses on identifying and analyzing recurring themes that emerge during the analysis rather than being predefined. Braun and Clarke (2020) underscore the researchers' role in data interpretation, acknowledging their reflexive engagement with the data, and prioritizing their unique perspectives, theoretical assumptions, and expertise to reach different conclusions. In this regard, RTA does not subscribe to positive views, as it promotes diverse and rich interpretations of data by encouraging subjectivity, creativity, and reflexivity in knowledge production (Byrne, 2022).

3.1. Familiarizing with data

The process of familiarizing oneself with the collected data involved verifying the accuracy of the discussions, removing unnecessary details, and recalling gestures and nonverbal cues. The data obtained was also checked by generating a word cloud to verify word frequency and emphasis, confirming that the discussions aligned with the scope of the research questions.

Figure 2.

The alignment of word frequency and emphasis with the research questions



The research questions shaping the focus group discussions are supported by the generated cloud, containing only fifty (50) words. Due to their prominence, words like 'exams', EFL (English as a foreign language), students' 'integrity', GenAI, 'thinking', 'resistant', 'assessments', 'writing', 'other skills', and 'ways', are emphasized, reflecting their alignment with the study's focus. In addition, based on the

visualized word cloud, infrequent words such as 'critical', 'challenging', 'risk, problem', and 'preparation', though present, lack emphasis, yet still capture the core themes being analyzed.

3.2. Generating codes and defining themes

Three overarching themes emerged from an in-depth NVivo analysis of the focus group discussions: first, the negative effects on EFL students' exam readiness resulting from their overreliance on GenAI; second, challenges to exam integrity; and third, adaptive strategies that emphasize rethinking integrity and designing adaptive exam questions.

Table 1.

References on students' overreliance on GenAI and skills for exam readiness

Impact of students' overreliance on GenAI on exam readiness	References
Impact on students' cognitive development skills	
Hindering independent and critical thinking ability	1
Negative impact on long-term memory and learning retention	2
Reading problem-solving skills	2
Impact on students' effective and behavioral skills	
The danger of complacency/ lack of emotional involvement in exam preparation	3
Decreased intrinsic motivation to study and prepare for exams	2
Diminished perceptions of students' abilities and self-esteem in learning	3
Impact on students' academic skill authenticity	
Decreased originality, mere copy-pasting of AI outputs without understanding	4
Misusing GenAI as a creative shortcut for all academic tasks.	2
Undermining the whole preparation process, shifting focus away from true educational purposes	3

The analysis of the themes generated from the focus group discussions highlights three main areas for exam readiness impacted by students' overreliance on GenAI: (1) cognitive development skills, (2) affective and behavioral skills, and (3) academic skill authenticity. The most frequently referenced concern is academic authenticity, with nine (9) aggregate mentions, highlighting issues including decreased originality (with 4 references), the misuse of GenAI as a shortcut for academic tasks (with 2 references), and undermining the entire preparation process (with 3 references). Affective and behavioral effects are also prominent, with eight (8) aggregate mentions discussing the dangers of complacency (with 3 references), reduced intrinsic motivation (with 2 references), and diminished self-esteem (with 3 references). Cognitive development receives fewer citations, addressing hindrances and difficulties in critical thinking (1 reference), learning retention (2 references), and problem-solving abilities (2 references).

Table 2.

References on Challenges to EFL Exam Integrity in the GenAI Era

Challenges to the integrity of EFL traditional exams in the GenAI era	References
Challenges and time consumption in designing AI-resistant exam questions.	7
Focus on cheating, prioritizing strategies to use AI for cheating rather than leveraging it for learning.	3
Unfair grading	2
Difficulty in assessment due to challenges in detecting AI-assisted work.	3
Erosion of trust in exam quality and damage to reputation due to AI involvement.	8
Limitations of traditional questions, such as definitions or process descriptions	8

Out of the thirty-one (31) references generated during the analysis of the three FGDs, six key themes are emphasized regarding the challenges to the integrity of EFL traditional exams in the GenAI era. Among the most frequently cited challenges are the erosion of trust in exam quality and damage to its reputation (with 8 references), as well as the limitations of traditional question types, consisting of concept definitions or process descriptions (with 8 references). Designing AI-resistant exam questions is another critical issue, with 7 references noting the time and effort required to create assessment practices that minimize AI-assisted cheating. Furthermore, three (3) references are provided to address concerns such as the difficulty in identifying GenAI-assisted work and the emphasis on cheating tactics rather than learning, explicitly indicating how GenAI reshapes the exam process. Another pressing issue, titled 'unfair grading', is noted and backed up by (2) references.

Table 3.

References on rethinking integrity and alternative adaptive exam strategies

Rethinking integrity and Alternative exam strategies in the GenAI era	References
Concerns and resistance	
A Need for Rethinking Exam Integrity	
Emphasizing the teacher-centered role in designing exams, while equipping teachers with the necessary requirements and training for GenAI integration in assessment practices.	4
Promoting ethical use in academic assessment practices	6
Highlighting innovative exam formats, including hybrid assessment models, focusing on the whole learning process adjustment	7
Redefining academic integrity of exams, transitioning from traditional plagiarism to new challenges presented by GenAI.	6
Rethinking exam content, revisiting writing skills due to AI's capabilities, and shifting to other productive & receptive skills assessments.	6
Designing action-based, resistant assessment practices	
Core Concept Testing	1
Real-World Applications	7
Role-Playing Activities	7
Opportunity and embrace	
GenAI as an opportunity for innovation without compromising integrity	8

Designing Exam questions integrating GenAI	
Critical Evaluation of AI Outputs	4
hybrid assessment exams (listening and writing)	5

As shown by Table 3, a diverse set of themes represents two opposing perspectives: resistance to GenAI and opportunity to embrace it. The most frequently mentioned major theme, concerns, and resistance receive forty-four (44) references, demonstrating strong recognition of the need to reconsider exam integrity (29 references) and indicating the significance of rethinking traditional examination methods and adapting to maintain academic standards in the GenAI era. The design of action-based resistant assessment practices garners significant attention with fifteen (15) mentions, involving examples of real-world and role-playing activities. Areas of particular emphasis also include redefining academic integrity (with 6 references), revealing a rising interest in tackling the specific challenges posed by GenAI rather than focusing on worries about plagiarism. Moreover, regarding the reevaluation of exam content, specifically writing skills, and the transition to evaluating other productive and receptive abilities, six (6) references are coded. In line with this, four (4) references stress the importance of highly skilled teachers' roles in successfully incorporating GenAI into exam tasks.

In a similar vein, there is growing interest in promoting integrity while embracing the potential benefits of AI, as evidenced by the theme of ethical use in academic assessments (6 references). Aligned with embracing opportunities, GenAI is viewed as a potential opportunity (8 references), with a focus on its use and incorporation to create adaptive hybrid exam questions (5 mentions) and on encouraging critical evaluation of AI outputs (4 references).

Table 4.

Pearson correlation analysis of codes and references across the three FGDs

Source A	Source B	Pearson correlation coefficient
Internals\FGD2	Internals\FGD1	0,236316
Internals\FGD3	Internals\FGD2	-0,086066
Internals\FGD3	Internals\FGD1	-0,269191

Pearson correlation analysis reveals varying relationships between the number of codes and references across sources (FGD). For FGD2 and FGD1, the correlation coefficient is 0.2363, indicating a weak positive relationship with somewhat similar patterns of code generation and reference. A very weak negative relationship is indicated by the correlation coefficients (-0.2692) between FGD3 and FGD1 and -0.0861 between FGD3 and FGD2. This suggests noticeable variability in the themes and coding references across FGD3 and other sources, particularly FGD2, reflecting differing areas of focus during the discussions. To address the observed variability, we focused on the shared characteristics used to classify each source, specifically familiarity with Generative AI in education.

Table3.

References distribution across FGDs on concerns and opportunities in the GenAI era

Sources	FGD2	FGD3	FGD3
Classification case	Value attribute 3		
	Somewhat comfortable but cautious about full reliance	Limited familiarity and hesitation to trust GenAI	Tech-savvy and open to using GenAI tools

Code 3			
Rethinking integrity and Alternative exam strategies in the GenAI era			
Concerns and resistance	11	15	9
Opportunity and embrace	3	1	10

The variability in the correlation coefficients can be attributed to the unequal attention directed at the themes 'concerns and resistance to GenAI and 'opportunity to embrace it' in the NVivo matrix coding query. FGD3 stands out with a significantly higher number of references to 'opportunity and embrace (with 10 references) and lower engagement with the contrasting theme 'concerns and resistance to GenAI, reflecting its divergence from the other sources (FGD1 and FGD2), particularly pertaining to the value attribute of familiarity, openness, and stronger willingness to integrate GenAI in education.

As illustrated in figure.3, FGD3 is optimistic and forward-thinking about the use of GenAI in academic assessments, collectively viewing it as a valuable opportunity to improve teaching approaches. With an emphasis on hybrid exam models, precisely focusing on other receptive and productive skills, participants share similar perspectives highlighting the importance of real-world activities and the need to critically evaluate GenAI outputs, while conveying a sense of urgency about the aims of exam preparation which should prioritize critical thinking development in teaching EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students, regardless of whether they use AI tools. Building on this,

FGD3_P3: (Interrupting, raising a hand slightly) ...then why not assess other skills? Right (pause), we may have students act out scenarios and get points based on their performance. ...that's something to think about. We could even consider examining their critical thinking skills in relation to GenAI outputs. Let's encourage our students to think of questioning and improving AI-generated responses.

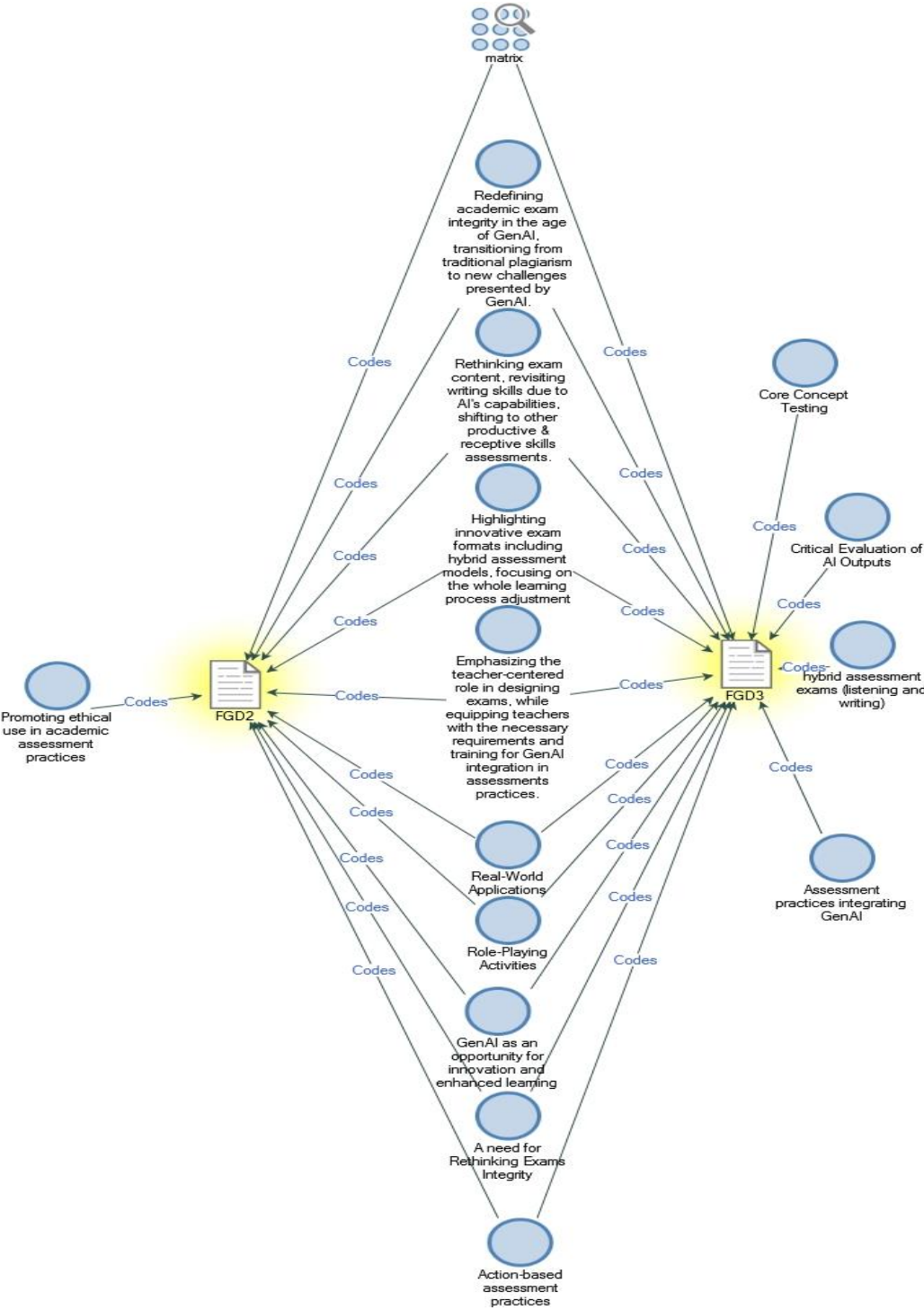
FGD3_P2: (Leans slightly, showing a sense of urgency): That's interesting... The aim is to ensure that, regardless of whether EFL students use GenAI, our students are ready to think critically. I mean, their exam preparation ought to mirror that.

On the other hand, FGD2 shows a more cautious collective perspective, stressing the risks of GenAI use in educational settings. Concerns about exam integrity and ethical considerations are at the heart of their discussions, as they note possible challenges posed by AI's incorporation into traditional assessment practices, recognizing the significance of teachers' role in addressing these risks responsibly through the design of GenAI-resistant activities rather than relying only on innovation of GenAI-integrated assessment practices as shared by FGD3. This claim is highlighted by:

FGD2_P1: (Let out a sigh and recline) Aw, examinations...Sigh. Exams are losing their integrity because of GenAI... though GenAI makes many tasks easier, it is damaging exam reputations. As educators, we find it increasingly challenging to assess students objectively... and what else (pause)? Not only this, GenAI urges us to acquire higher skills just to preserve fairness between students... I mean, to prepare exams that are resistant to GenAI.

Figure3.

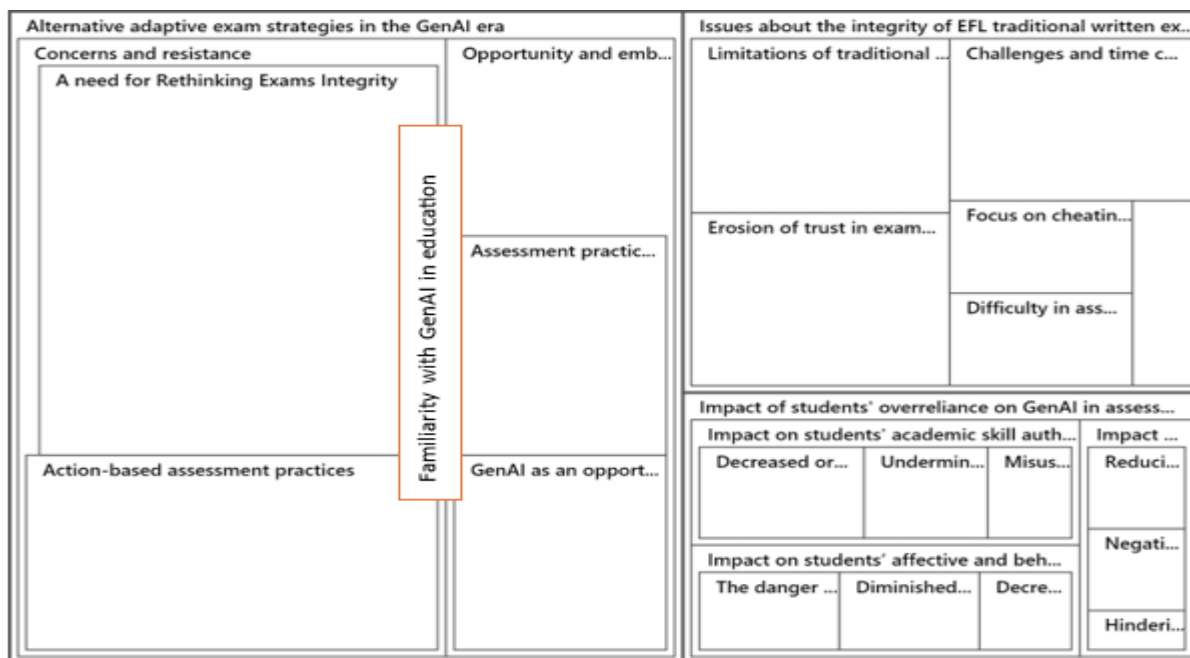
Comparison of FGD3 vs. FGD2's perceptions on embracing AI, concerns, and resistance



4. DISCUSSION

Figure 4.

Hierarchy chart analysis for the obtained findings



Significant insights into the evolving landscape of GenAI and EFL exam integrity can be derived from the present reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) of three focus group discussions (FGDs), which offer detailed interpretations of students' overreliance on GenAI tools, the challenges, and opportunities for examination strategies.

The data reveal a significant concern among EFL teachers about GenAI's effects on students' skills, which is essential for effective exam preparation. A decrease in their critical thinking and problem-solving abilities is among the cognitive, academic, and affective skills documented in existing research (Liu et al., 2024; Yan et al., 2024). Furthermore, while GenAI tools are useful for quickly obtaining answers, they appear to reduce students' capacity for deep processing, leading to negative effects on long-term memory and learning retention. Besides, the reduced emphasis on active engagement in learning impairs students' emotional involvement and intrinsic motivation to prepare effectively for exams, undermining their self-esteem and confidence in their talents. This unwarranted dependence on GenAI also undermines academic authenticity, leading to increased copy-pasting and misuse of GenAI as a shortcut. Considering this and drawing on insights from earlier studies (De Vries et al., 2022), a compelling argument advocates a shift in educational approaches, emphasizing teachers' role in incorporating process-over-product assessment practices to foster metacognitive skills and active learning environments.

According to EFL teachers participating in the focus group discussions, the proliferation of GenAI-assisted cheating has made it extremely challenging to maintain the integrity of traditional exam formats. Along with rising concerns about unfair grading and difficulties detecting AI-assisted work, the time required to design the so-called 'AI-resistant exam questions' was cited as a significant challenge. Additionally, it was noticeable that the use of GenAI tools has eroded trust in exam quality,

which, in turn, has damaged exams' reputations and cast doubt on their validity. Reflecting the findings of Duane's conference paper (2024), conventional exam formats, like those centered on process descriptions or definitions, have been perceived as increasingly susceptible to manipulation by AI, leading to calls for rethinking academic integrity and assessment strategies.

In response to these calls, it was recommended to create action-based tasks, such as role-playing and real-world scenarios, that are resistant to GenAI manipulation and that leverage higher-order thinking, knowledge synthesis, and evaluation. Further strategies include introducing hybrid assessment models that blend traditional tasks with critical evaluation of AI-generated content to enable students to engage with and learn about GenAI, while implementing practical strategies to reduce risks such as overconfidence in AI outputs, mistakes, and biases.

The thematic analysis of the data reveals that teachers' level of familiarity with GenAI, ranging from limited familiarity and hesitation to trust GenAI to being tech-savvy and receptive to using GenAI tools, is a significant factor determining whether they are resistant or open to their integration into their teaching practices, especially when it comes to the proposed alternative assessment strategies. To rephrase, the more tech-savvy teachers are and the more open they are to using GenAI tools, the more likely they are to view GenAI's potential as an opportunity for development rather than a threat. In view of GenAI's capabilities and the difficulties they cause, the key to bridging the gap between familiarity and resistance may lie in providing effective training and fostering a collaborative, reflective approach to assessment design.

5. CONCLUSION

The incorporation of GenAI into EFL assessment practices offers both opportunities and challenges, requiring a balanced approach. In view of this, teachers are tasked with more complex responsibilities, including developing assessment modes that uphold integrity and encourage students' successful exam preparation by cultivating the key skills needed, while mitigating potential risks, such as their overreliance on GenAI. Meanwhile, the perspective of resistance rather than embracing change, suggesting the incorporation of GenAI-resistant activities rather than hybrid assessment models, may not be effective given the evolving nature of generative AI tools. Therefore, it is essential to build flexible policies that strengthen ethical use of GenAI and provide targeted training to enhance familiarity, enabling them to effectively understand, adapt to, and leverage AI tools in teaching practices without jeopardizing academic integrity.

The study at hand had limitations, including the limited number of focus groups, conversational constraints, and the availability of participating teachers with shared characteristics. Within the scope attribute values, the key factors 'gender and years of teaching experience' were not addressed. Thus, future research may focus on clearly defining academic integrity in the GenAI era and examining other variables that shape perspectives on GenAI-integrated assessment strategies. By addressing these gaps, more inclusive and effective approaches may be developed to enhance assessment practices.

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