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Research Article

Keywords: GenAI, EFL learning, learner identity, emotional well-being

Posted Date: November 23rd, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-11595968/v1

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Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

"AI Knows English Better Than Me": Multilingual EFL Learners' Identity Negotiation and Emotional Well-being in the GenAI Era

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Abstract

This inquiry examined how multilingual EFL learners in Tanzanian education negotiate language learner identities and emotional experiences when using GenAI tools for English learning. Data were gathered through focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews with 24 students from two public universities in Tanzania. Thematic analysis revealed three patterns of use. First, participants experienced heightened identity dissonance when comparing their English to GenAI-generated output, feeling inadequate due to postcolonial language hierarchies. Second, students practiced strategic identity protection by limiting GenAI use to low-stakes tasks and avoiding identity-significant writing. Third, emotional well-being was ambivalent: while GenAI reduced anxiety about grammar and vocabulary, it increased imposter feelings and shame, especially among students who saw GenAI reliance as betraying family sacrifices and personal effort. The findings challenge technosolutionist narratives portraying GenAI as neutral where English signifies colonial prestige and mobility, and Gen AI risks reinforcing linguistic hierarchies.

Keywords: GenAI, EFL learning, learner identity, emotional well-being

Main text Introduction

The swift expansion of Generative Artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools, including ChatGPT, DeepSeek, Gemini, and other Large language Models (LLM), has significantly transformed the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education globally (Cong-Lem et al., 2025; Ghimire et al., 2024; Law, 2024). GenAI tools provide unique opportunities for EFL including tailored practice, immediate feedback, and genuine language exposure (García Peñalvo & Vázquez Ingelmo, 2023; Giannakos et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2025). These technologies are seen as democratizing agents that reduce obstacles to English language production and understanding (Kizi, 2025). Nevertheless, the narratives surrounding GenAI may overlook the intricate ways these technologies interact with existing linguistic hierarchies, colonial histories, and local language environments (García Peñalvo & Vázquez Ingelmo, 2023; Hu, 2026; Jeon et al., 2025), especially in the Global South (GS) regions where English already holds considerable symbolic importance as a language of prestige, mobility, and opportunity (Bolton et al., 2008; Kamwangamalu, 2003; Sefa Dei & Asgharzadeh, 2003). Yet, GenAI tools also introduce profound challenges to established pedagogical practices, assessment systems, and perhaps most fundamentally, to learners' sense of themselves as language users and language learners (Lee et al., 2025; Lin et al., 2025; Renfeng et al., 2025).

Tanzania offers a particularly insightful context for exploring these dynamics. Although Kiswahili is the national language spoken by the majority of the learners, English, a remnant of its colonial past under British rule, is used as the language of instruction in secondary and higher education (Li & Mao, 2024; Little & Rubagumya, 1991; Shank Lauwo, 2020). English is spoken by only approximately 5% of the population, primarily those from higher social classes, making it a minority language (Abdala, 2024). This situation forces university students, many of whom have Kiswahili or other ethnolinguistic backgrounds, such as Chagga or Sukuma, to engage with academic life in a language that is neither their native nor national language (Abdala, 2025). This often leads to profound linguistic insecurity and feelings of inadequacy (Abdala, 2025; 2024). The introduction of GenAI tools adds another dimension to this already intricate linguistic environment. For a Tanzanian EFL student, comparing their English writing to the seemingly

perfect text produced by GenAI is not just an educational experience; it is deeply personal, intertwined with issues of identity, self-worth, and belonging.

Although there has been increasing academic interest in the role of GenAI in language education, there is a notable lack of research exploring the experiences and interpretations of EFL learners in postcolonial, multilingual settings when they interact with GenAI. The majority of existing studies (e.g Andreou & Christani, 2025; Jeon et al., 2025; Lee et al., 2025 etc.) have concentrated on technologically advanced environments, primarily characterized by either by English dominance or WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) societies. The perspectives of learners in the Global South, where English proficiency is often crucial and linguistic insecurity is pronounced, are largely overlooked. This study addresses this gap by asking: How do multilingual EFL students in Tanzanian higher education negotiate their language-learner identities and emotional well-being when using GenAI tools for English learning?**.**

GenAI in language learning

The advent of GenAI has significantly transformed language learning by introducing dynamic, personalized, and interactive educational experiences (Lee et al., 2025; Q. Luo & Chen, 2025). GenAI-powered tools can generate tailored language exercises, provide instant feedback, and simulate realistic conversational scenarios, thereby enhancing learner engagement and accelerating proficiency development (Lee et al., 2025; V G & N S, 2025). These technologies facilitate adaptive learning paths that respond to individual strengths and weaknesses, offering customized vocabulary, grammar practice, and pronunciation guidance (Aravind et al., 2025). Moreover, GenAI enables immersive language environments through chatbots and virtual tutors, allowing learners to practice in low-pressure, context-rich settings (Lee et al., 2025). This integration of GenAI into language education not only supports self-paced learning but also broadens access to quality language instruction across diverse contexts and learner populations (Alshraah et al., 2024).

Despite the promising advances of GenAI in language learning, some concerns highlight potential limitations and challenges (Giannakos et al., 2024). Critics argue that an overreliance on GenAI tools may reduce learners' opportunities for authentic human interaction, which is

crucial for developing cultural nuances and pragmatic language skills (Lee et al., 2025; F. Wang et al., 2025). Additionally, the quality of AI-generated content can vary, sometimes producing errors or unnatural language that may mislead learners (Y. Wang et al., 2025). There is also the issue of digital divide, where unequal access to advanced technologies could exacerbate educational inequalities rather than alleviate them (Mirazchiyski, 2024). Furthermore, the lack of emotional intelligence in AI tutors limits their ability to provide empathetic support or motivation, which is an important factor in sustained language acquisition (Qiu, 2025; Shahini, 2025). These contrasting perspectives suggest that while GenAI offers valuable resources, it should complement rather than replace traditional, human-centered language learning approaches.

Identity in language learning

The concept of identity in language learning has emerged as a pivotal framework for understanding how learners negotiate their sense of self within social and linguistic contexts (Norton & De Costa, 2017; Piasecka, 2019). Over the past three decades, identity has been recognized not merely as a fixed attribute but as a dynamic, fluid construct shaped by interactions, power relations, and cultural affiliations (Abdelal et al., 2006). This perspective highlights how language learners continuously construct and reconstruct their identities through language use, which in turn influences their motivation, engagement, and success in acquiring new languages (Al-Hoorie et al., 2020; Jiang, 2013; Teng, 2018; Ushioda, 2011). In postcolonial contexts, these identity dynamics are further complicated by historical hierarchies of language prestige. The colonial legacy positions English as the language of power, knowledge, and social mobility, while local languages are often implicitly or explicitly devalued in academic spheres (Eoyang, 2003; Phillipson & Rose, 2025). This creates what scholars have described as a "double bind" for learners: they must master the colonial language to succeed, yet doing so may feel like a betrayal of local identity and cultural belonging (Gurney & Demuro, 2022; Meighan, 2022).

In the era of GenAI, the exploration of identity in language learning takes on new dimensions, as learners increasingly engage with AI-driven tools that mediate linguistic interactions and knowledge construction (Lee et al., 2025; Lin et al., 2025). GenAI technologies can both

challenge and expand traditional notions of identity by offering novel opportunities for self-expression, collaboration, and personalized learning experiences (García Peñalvo & Vázquez Ingelmo, 2023). As learners interact with AI-generated content and feedback, they negotiate not only their linguistic competencies but also their digital personas and authorial voices, which may blend human and machine influences (Xing et al., 2026). This evolving landscape prompts a reexamination of learner agency, as the boundaries between individual creativity and AI assistance become more fluid, raising questions about authenticity and ownership in language production(Bhatti, 2025; Feng et al., 2025). Consequently, the integration of GenAI in language learning contexts reinforces the dynamic and socially situated nature of identity, emphasizing the complex interplay between technology, culture, and selfhood in contemporary applied linguistics (Zou et al., 2025).

Emotional well-being and language learning

Affective dimensions of language learning have gained attention in applied linguistics due to their impact on learner outcomes. Research documents the prevalence of foreign language anxiety, a complex emotional response hindering effective communication (H. Luo, 2013; Macintyre & Gardner, 1991). This anxiety manifests as fear of mistakes, apprehension regarding negative evaluation, and discomfort in speaking, creating barriers to practice (Hook et al., 2012; Wahl & Walker, 2022). Beyond anxiety, learners experience imposter feelings, doubting their abilities and fearing exposure as inadequate despite evidence of competence (Ménard & Chittle, 2023). Such feelings cause shame, diminishing motivation and willingness to engage with challenging tasks. These affective challenges are pronounced where the target language carries social and economic weight, linked to academic success, career advancement, and mobility. Pressure in these environments exacerbates stress; making learning emotionally taxing (Ross & Stracke, 2016; Solhi, 2025; Teimouri, 2018) consequently diminished self-efficacy emerges, undermining persistence.

The introduction of Generative AI (GenAI) tools in language learning brings complex affective dynamics that significantly impact learners' experiences (Yin et al., 2025; Zhang & Liu, 2025). On one hand, these tools offer immediate, personalized assistance with grammar correction, vocabulary enhancement, and text comprehension, which can alleviate common sources of

anxiety among EFL learners (Ma et al., 2022). By providing real-time feedback and support, GenAI tools help learners build confidence in their writing abilities, reduce frustration, and encourage more frequent practice, which are essential for language acquisition (Lee et al., 2025; Lu & Zeng, 2025; Yang et al., 2025). However, this positive effect is counterbalanced by the potential for these tools to intensify feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. Because GenAI often generates text that reflects an idealized, native-like standard of English proficiency, learners may perceive their own skills as insufficient or inferior (Lee et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2025; Zheng & Wang, 2026). This perception is rooted in the reinforcement of native-speakerist ideologies, which prioritize native English norms as the benchmark for success and marginalize the diverse linguistic identities of non-native speakers (Birkeland et al., 2024; Bylin & Tingsell, 2021; Christiansen, 2022). Consequently, learners may experience heightened pressure to conform to these unrealistic standards, which can undermine motivation and exacerbate affective barriers such as anxiety and low self-esteem (Järvenoja et al., 2013; Lo, 2024).

Moreover, the widespread use of GenAI tools risks perpetuating existing sociolinguistic hierarchies by implicitly valuing native-like fluency over communicative effectiveness or cultural diversity (Jeon et al., 2025; Lee et al., 2025; Tran & Stell, 2024). This dynamic poses significant challenges for EFL educators, who must balance the benefits of integrating GenAI for practical language support with the need to foster inclusive, equitable learning environments that recognize and validate learners' varied linguistic backgrounds (Cong-Lem et al., 2025; Jeon et al., 2025). Ultimately, while GenAI tools represent a powerful resource for enhancing language learning, their affective implications call for critical reflection and pedagogical strategies that mitigate negative emotional impacts and promote learner agency.

Theoretical Perspectives

Newton's (2013) investment model

Norton's (2013) investment model centers on the notion that language learners invest in learning because they anticipate a return in the form of increased cultural capital, identity recognition, or access to symbolic and material resources. In the context of multilingual EFL students using GenAI tools for English learning, this model helps to illuminate how learners' engagement with GenAI-mediated language practices reflects their shifting investments in language learning.

These students negotiate their identities by aligning their use of GenAI tools with their aspirations for proficiency and belonging in English speaking communities. The investment model foregrounds the dynamic and socially situated nature of language learning, emphasizing that learners' emotional well-being is intertwined with their perceived gains and losses in identity and social positioning when interacting with AI tools (Norton, 2016; 2013). Thus, through Norton's investment lens, the research uncovered how investment in language learning via GenAI tools is not only cognitive but deeply emotional and identity-driven, shaping both learner engagement and well-being.

Gee (2000) identity framework

Gee's (2000) identity framework conceptualizes identity as multiple, dynamic, and socially constructed through discourse and participation in various "Discourses" with a capital "D". This perspective is particularly relevant to exploring how multilingual EFL students construct and perform their language-learner identities when interacting with GenAI tools. The framework allows for an analysis of how learners adopt, resist, or transform identities as they engage with AI-mediated English learning practices. Gee's notion of identity as an act of positioning helps to understand how students position themselves in relation to the AI tools as novices, experts, or collaborators and how these positions influence their emotional experiences and sense of self within the language learning process (Gee, 2000; Nazari, 2025). The interaction with AI may create opportunities for learners to experiment with different identities, such as that of a confident English speaker or a struggling learner seeking support. These identity shifts are inherently tied to emotional well-being, as positive identity enactments can enhance learners' confidence and motivation, while negative or conflicting identities may evoke frustration or anxiety (Gee, 2000; Nazari, 2025).

Materials and Methods

Research approach and design

This study utilized a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore how participants interpret their interactions with GenAI in their everyday academic activities particularly in EFL learning. The phenomenological design sought to reveal the fundamental structures of experience as expressed and experienced by the participants themselves (Davidsen, 2013; Noë, 2007).

Phenomenological research highlights that these lived experiences are inherently interpreted; participants understand their experiences using the cultural, historical, and linguistic tools at their disposal (Finlay, 2014; Frechette et al., 2020; Oluka, 2025). This approach aligns with the study's emphasis on identity, which is naturally interpretive and context dependent.

Sampling and data collection methods

This study included 24 EFL university students from two public university in Tanzania, University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM) and Mzumbe University (MU). Participants were chosen through purposive sampling to ensure a range of linguistic backgrounds, gender, and self-reported GenAI usage, which varied from occasional to frequent use. All were second year EFL majors actively involved in using GenAI for their learning of English. Data collection primarily involved in-depth semi-structured interviews, each lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. Although the interviews were conducted in English, participants could switch to Kiswahili for clarification, but all 24 primarily used English, with Kiswahili used sparingly. The interview protocol aimed to gather detailed accounts of specific GenAI-use experiences, adhering to phenomenological methods. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed word for word. To maintain anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned, with participants labeled from EL1 to EL24, where EL stands for English Learner. Additionally, the findings from the interviews were supplemented by four Focus Group Discussions (FDGs), each comprising six members and lasting 60 minutes.

Data analysis

The data analysis adhered to the thematic data analysis procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), beginning with familiarization with the collected data through repeated reading and immersion to gain an in-depth understanding of the data. The systematic generation of initial codes followed this initial phase, identifying meaningful features across the data set. Subsequently, these codes were organized into potential themes, which were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and distinctiveness. The final themes were clearly defined and named, providing a structured framework for interpreting the data concerning the research objectives. This rigorous iterative process allowed for a comprehensive and nuanced analysis aligned with established qualitative research standards. Throughout the analysis, the researcher

engaged in reflexive bracketing, explicitly acknowledging and setting aside personal presuppositions about GenAI and language learning to remain open to participants' lived experiences.

Ethical approval and Informed consent

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the appropriate institutional review board: UDSM Research Directorate/University of Dar es salaam/ Ref. No: AB3/12(B). The participants provided an oral informed consent and were made aware of their right to withdraw at any point. Owing to the sensitive aspects of identity and emotional well-being, special attention was given to ensuring that participants were at ease when discussing their experiences. This report does not contain any identifying information.

Results

This study was guided by the research question: How do multilingual EFL students in Tanzanian higher education negotiate their language learner identities and emotional well-being when using GenAI tools for English learning?. The findings showed three crucial themes: intensified identity dissonance, strategic identity protection, and ambivalent emotional well-being, as presented below.

Intensified identity dissonance

Among the participants' narratives, a dominant theme was the significant dissonance they felt between their English skills and the apparent ease with which GenAI tools operated. This dissonance extended beyond cognitive aspects, affecting their identity and questioning their legitimacy as English speaker, learner and academic writers. For instance, during detailed interviews, EL14 expressed this sentiment clearly when quoted as saying:

> I am really struggling when I write something, however, I know what I want to write about, but the phrases and words do not come accurately. Then, I decide to put my idea into ChatGPT or Gemini, and the tools come out with perfect grammar, sequences, logic, and coherence. Normally gives me exactly what I think, the output should sound. At the same time, I think, why can't I write in such good English like the GenAI? It make me feel like I am not really the one specilising in English, I even question the sense of being an English language learner, expert and user.

The feeling of inadequacy was heightened by the perception that GenAI-generated text resembled that of native speakers. Some participants directly compared the output from Gen AI to native speaker writing, implicitly endorsing native speaker standards as the criteria for evaluating their own English proficiency. For instance, in a detailed interview with EL7, the participant stated the following:

> AI knows English better than me. It sounds like a native speaker, maybe even better than many native speakers. When I read what produced by GenAI, I see the standard I should reach. But I know that I cannot reach that level. So, I feel like I am always falling short.

This theme illustrates that Gen AI, instead of being an impartial instrument, can bolster and amplify native speakerist ideologies that have historically shaped EFL education. Rather than making English more accessible, it sets up an idealized and unreachable benchmark, causing learners to feel even more inadequate. For certain participants, this disconnect also affected their broader perceptions of academic legitimacy. For instance, in FGD 3, one participant remarked:

> Sometimes I wonder if my ideas are even worth anything if I cannot express them in good English. GenAI can express them better than I can. So, what is my contribution? What am I adding?.

By highlighting identity dissonance, this quotation illustrates how it can intensify into a core crisis concerning academic self-esteem, leading to doubts not only about language proficiency but also about one's intrinsic value as a scholar.

Strategic identity protection

Faced with identity threats from Gen AI, participants devised various methods to safeguard their self-perception as language learners. These methods served practical purposes and helped preserve their identity, enabling them to engage with GenAI while retaining a consistent understanding of themselves. Strategic protection was revealled in three sub-themes (selective deployment, Re-framing GenAI as a tool rather than a teacher, and concealment as presented below:

Selective deployment

One prevalent approach involved the targeted use of GenAI for tasks considered to be of lesser importance or not integral to the main scholarly identity, while steering clear of its use for tasks deemed crucial to academic work. For instance, in a detailed interview with EL2, the participant stated:

> I use GenAI, normally ChatGPT or DeepSeek, for checking grammar and paraphrasing when I am stuck with wording. However, I never use these tools for generating ideas or making critical analysis of the text. That has to come from me. It cannot be my work if I use ChatGPT for example to make a critical analysis of a text or discourse. I would not be a real English language expert. English is my profession, I should demonstrate explicitly.

Similarly, participants in FGD 2 brought attention to the challenge of establishing boundaries. For instance, a participant illustrated her approach to setting boundaries by stating:

> I use ChatGPT to assist me in finding sources and summarizing English books, articles, and journals. However, I always ensure that the argumentation I write is my own. I cannot delegate the argumentation part to GenAI; however, I am pretty sure that some students are doing that. My concern is that if an English learner is doing that, what is he/she doing in the English language major?.

This targeted implementation indicates an unspoken recognition that some elements of academic work are integral to one's identity; they are not merely duties to fulfill but actions that contribute to one's development and continuity as a scholar. By keeping these responsibilities for themselves, participants maintained a genuine sense of scholarly autonomy.

Re-framing GenAI as a tool rather than a teacher

Another approach involved redefining GenAI as a tool instead of a teacher. The participants who effectively preserved their identity coherence often highlighted their own control in the interaction between humans and GenAI. For instance, in detailed interviews, an EL24 mentioned that:

> I think of GenAI like a calculator. A calculator performs calculations accurately and faster than I can, but I still need to understand the calculation procedures. GenAI tools function in a similar manner, helping me writes faster with good grammar and coherence; however, I still need to know what constitutes good writing. I normally decide the quality of output being either good or not

By reframing the situation, participants could engage with Gen AI without perceiving a diminishment of their skills. Nonetheless, this viewpoint was not maintained by everyone, as the threat to their identity persisted for many people.

Concealment

Another, less obvious approach involved using GenAI discreetly so that supervisors or colleagues would not notice. Some participants admitted to employing GenAI more frequently than they would openly acknowledge, particularly when pressed for time. For instance, during detailed interviews, one EL15 mentioned:

> For those who tend to submit the work on the deadline day, like me, I might use GenAI more than I should. However, I always rewrite everything using my own words afterwards. I do not like trouble from my course instructors; I do not want them to know that I have used GenAI to generate the entire text. I do not want them to think that I am incapable in my own field.

The discrepancy between the official silence of institutions regarding the use of Gen AI and the actual practices of students highlights concealment, along with the embarrassment linked to the perceived reliance on Gen AI.

Ambivalent emotional well-being

The participants had mixed feelings about their emotional experiences with Gen AI. While it offered real relief from some types of anxiety, it also introduced new stressors. The decrease in anxiety was mainly noted in low-stakes routine tasks. For instance, in an interview with an EL1, the participant mentioned the following:

> Before the advent of ChatGPT, I would spend more time thinking and worrying about the choice of words and grammar in general. Now, I can write in any way without worrying and fix my work later with the assistance of ChatGPT and other AI tools. This takes so much pressure off me. I feel less anxious about my written English.

Similarly, the participants in the FGDs frequently credited Gen AI tools with alleviating foreign language anxiety. For instance, in FGD 4, one participant stated:

> GenAI tools such as DeepSeek, Gemini, ChatGPT, and others are very helpful for vocabulary learning. I usually know what to say but I cannot find the appropriate word. ChatGPT offers me with the options. This assistance reduces my stress a lot in the English learning context.

Experiencing a reduction in anxiety was seen as advantageous, as it liberated mental capacity for more complex thought processes. Nonetheless, this sense of relief frequently intensified feelings of being an imposter, especially among university students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds who felt burdened by their families' expectations. For instance, in a detailed interview, an EL11 elaborated as follows:

> For me to be here at the top university in the country, my family sacrificed many things, and almost the entire family asserted. My mother works as a cleaner in a private company with low payment. She manages to send me money at any time. And here I am, using GenAI to complete my assignments in the area of my expertise. Sometimes, I ask myself, Is this what my mother and family sacrificed for? For me to cheat via GenAI tools?. Honestly, the use of GenAI tools makes me feel ashamed.

For EL11, employing GenAI tools was not just a teaching decision but also a moral one, as it affected her connection with her family and her perception of deserving their sacrifices.

Similarly, during an in-depth interview with an EL19, the participant articulated the shame of perceived dependence by saying the following:

> I feel like I should be capable of doing every task in my field by myself. I have been studying English as a subject for many years, to be specific from my early grade of primary school up to date. The question in my mind is: why do I still need a machine to help me in learning English at this stage? It makes me feel like I have failed somehow and not competent in the area that everyone is expecting me to be good. The use of GenAI makes me feel like am not really as smart as people think I am, something that is more torturing emotionally.

Participants who had excelled in their previous academic pursuits experienced a pronounced sense of being imposters, as their interaction with Gen AI challenged their self-image as competent and autonomous scholars.

In addition, some participants experienced ambivalence as an ongoing internal struggle. This was clearly expressed by some during FGDs. For instance, in FGD 1, a participant mentioned:

> I am really confused; the sense that I have two parts; the first is that part of me is grateful for the help from GenAI tools. The second part of me is worried, I have an internal conflict regarding core questions: Am I becoming a dependent, I am losing my ability to think and write on my own?. I really don't need to be someone who can't think and write accurately without GenAI tools.

The essence of this quotation highlights a key conflict: while Gen AI provides real support, it is seen as potentially diminishing the essential skills that characterize a scholar.

Discussion

This study's results provide a valuable understanding of the experiences and interpretations of multilingual EFL students in Tanzanian higher education as they interact with GenAI tools for learning English language. Three key elements of their lived experiences were identified: heightened identity dissonance, deliberate identity safeguarding, and mixed emotional well-being. When viewed collectively, these findings illustrate a complicated scenario in which learners are not only adapting to a new educational tool but also confronting significant identity challenges within a setting already influenced by linguistic hierarchy and postcolonial issues.

The notable finding is that GenAI upholds rather than questions native-speakerist beliefs in EFL education. Participants evaluated English outputs against the impeccable prose produced by GenAI tools, viewing any shortcomings as failures. This issue arises because GenAI models are trained on English language datasets that reflect dominant, standardized, and often native speaker norms. When these models generate text that appears accurate, they set native speaker English as the benchmark for evaluating other forms of English (Kshetri, 2024; Tao et al., 2024). This is harmful in postcolonial Tanzania. Learners grapple with the colonial legacy that elevated English above local languages and continues to influence perceptions of linguistic legitimacy. GenAI does not disrupt this hierarchy; instead, it reinforces it by presenting an unreachable standard that makes learners feel inadequate. This aligns with Pennycook's (2017; 2014) works on the cultural politics of English, showing that the ideological aspects of English dissemination are being replicated in technologically mediated forms. The native speaker ideal, criticized in applied linguistics, is being re-integrated into AI systems and presented as a feature (Curran et al., 2025; Hua et al., 2024) hence students need to be guided on understanding how these systems are trained and whose language they prioritize.

The finding that participants engaged in strategic identity protection by selectively employing GenAI for certain tasks while keeping others for themselves highlights identity as a dynamic negotiation process rather than a static trait. Participants actively crafted strategies to safeguard their sense of self rather than passively accepting identity threats. This perspective aligns with

Norton's (2013) view of identity as an individual's understanding of their relationship with the world, a relationship that is continuously shaped and renegotiated. The GenAI tool becomes a factor in this negotiation, requiring participants to define their stance in relation to it. By retaining tasks that define their identity, such as crafting original arguments or composing analytical sections, participants preserved their scholarly autonomy while utilizing GenAI for more routine tasks. This aligns with Gee's (2000) identity framework, illustrating participants' negotiation across various identity dimensions: the institutional identity of being a legitimate university student, the discourse identity of being acknowledged as a proficient English user, and the affinity identity of being part of a scholarly community.

Participants' reports of mixed feelings experiencing both relief from some anxieties and the intensification of others indicate that GenAI introduces a nuanced emotional landscape into language learning. This landscape is neither wholly positive nor negative, but involves trade-offs that learners experience in varied ways. For university students from weak economic background, the stakes are particularly significant. The shame and feelings of being an imposter they described highlight the intersection of linguistic insecurity with social inequalities. When participants expressed concern that using GenAI might undermine their family's sacrifices, they were grappling with more than just an educational decision; it was a moral one that involved their family, identity, and sense of self-worth. This observation highlights the need to focus on the social and emotional aspects of GenAI integration, rather than just the technical and educational ones (Bearman et al., 2025; Pham et al., 2026; Saracini et al., 2025). Students engage with GenAI not merely as individuals but as people with histories, relationships, and goals that influence their experiences and interpretations of these tools (Almisad & Aleidan, 2025; Clarke, 2025). The mixed emotions reported by participants gratitude mixed with shame, relief mixed with anxiety indicate that any educational approach that overlooks the emotional aspect of GenAI use is lacking (Alessandro et al., 2024; Pham et al., 2026).

The reported findings challenge simplistic narratives of GenAI as either a threat or a savior, revealing instead a complex, often painful lived experience of continuous negotiation between productivity and integrity, assistance and dependence, relief and shame, and ultimately, between who learners are and who they aspire to become.The study contributes in extending the emerging literature on GenAI and language learning by centering a postcolonial, GS perspective; a

perspective that has been largely absent from the existing research. Despite having clear contribution, the study's sample size was 24 participants which limit the generalizability of the findings. However, phenomenological research aims for transferability, the extent to which findings may resonate with and illuminate other contexts rather than generalizability. Future research could extend this work through longitudinal studies examining how learners' relationships with GenAI evolve over time.

The first phrase in the title of this paper "AI Knows English Better than Me" captures a sentiment expressed by multiple participants. Yet it is precisely this sentiment that educators must address. The goal of EFL education in the AI era cannot be to help students compete with machines in producing native-like English. Such a goal is not only unattainable but undesirable it reinforces colonial hierarchies and diminishes the value of multilingual, locally grounded expression. Instead, the goal must be to help students develop critical awareness, strategic agency, and a robust sense of their own worth as multilingual scholars. GenAI tools are here to stay, and they offer genuine affordances for language learning and academic work. But their integration must be guided by a commitment to learner identity and well-being not as afterthoughts but as central outcomes of education transformation in the AI era.

Acknowledgements

The authors sincerely express their gratitude to all the participants who voluntarily took part in this study.

Disclosure statement

The author(s) did not report any potential conflict of interest.

Funding

This study did not receive any funds from externals

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