

University English Teachers' Role Identity Anxiety and Pathways to Reconstruction in the Age of Generative AI

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ABSTRACT

The rapid rise of generative AI is shaking the traditional role of university English teachers and causing growing anxiety about their professional identity. This study investigates university English teachers' role identity anxiety induced by generative AI and explores pathways to professional identity reconstruction. First, it looks at the specific ways technology is affecting their sense of self and explains why this topic is important both for theory and for practical teaching. Second, it reviews previous research on teacher identity and AI from both domestic and international sources, noting key differences in how the issues have been studied. The study then sets two main goals: to understand how anxiety develops and to explore possible ways for teachers to rebuild their roles. Key areas of focus include how traditional teaching roles are being broken down, what the resulting anxiety feels like, and what factors help or hinder role reconstruction. The research uses surveys and in-depth interviews, following a clear technical plan to ensure it can be carried out effectively. Finally, by bringing new perspectives and focusing on process rather than static roles, the study aims to offer both academic insights and practical guidance for teachers navigating this shift. The goal is to enrich theoretical understanding of AI and teacher identity and to suggest realistic paths forward for university English teachers in the age of generative AI.

KEYWORDS

Generative AI; University English teachers; Role identity anxiety; Role reconstruction; Teacher professional development.

1. INTRODUCTION

With tools like ChatGPT and DeepSeek becoming prevalent, education is undergoing a fundamental transformation. In language teaching, AI can instantly produce high-quality texts in multiple languages, hold natural conversations, and offer personalized language coaching. These abilities directly challenge what used to be the core job of language teachers: passing on knowledge and training skills. Teachers are no longer the only authority students turn to for language knowledge and practice. This loss of authority is causing a widespread identity crisis and emotional distress.[1] While existing research has highlighted how AI is impacting teachers and how roles might change, most studies focus on describing the anxiety or listing new role types. Few dig into how teachers actually move from feeling anxious to rebuilding their identity. Chinese scholars like Chen Liji, Ning Yan, and Wei Lin have systematically analyzed teachers' role crises and types of career anxiety[2,3]. Others, like Zhu Yali and Cai Lu, have proposed new role models such as "intelligent collaborator," "learning designer," and "humanistic guide." [4,5] However, research that starts from the teachers' own perspective and examines how anxiety can be turned into motivation for change remains limited. This study aims to answer the following key questions: How does generative AI break down the

traditional authority of university English teachers? What are the specific signs of teachers' role identity anxiety? And how can teachers move from anxiety to rebuilding their roles in a positive way?

2. RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

2.1 The Role Crisis for Teachers in the Age of Generative AI

2.1.1 The Disruptive Impact of the Technology

Generative AI, represented by ChatGPT, has transformative capabilities in key teaching areas like text generation, personalized tutoring, and grading assignments. It can quickly produce grammatically correct, logical English essays, translations, and teaching materials. It can offer personalized exercises and feedback based on a student's level, and it can handle grammar checks and automated scoring, taking over about 60% of teachers' routine tasks[6]. This directly attacks the traditional authority of teachers. The roles that used to be uniquely theirs-providing knowledge, giving standardized evaluations, and offering personalized guidance-are now being partially replaced, weakening their central position in the classroom.

The loss of the teacher's traditional authority is really about how technology is reshaping the balance of power in teaching. Because generative AI is immediate, accurate, and scalable, students can now get information not just from their teacher but from working together with AI. This challenges the idea of the teacher as the sole source of knowledge[7]. Studies show that about 45% of university English teachers start doubting their professional value after using ChatGPT to help with teaching[8]. This doubt comes from the way AI changes the division of labor in teaching: teachers are shifting from being "knowledge transmitters" to "learning guides," and that shift is causing a gap in understanding their new role[9].

This loss of authority then triggers deeper anxiety about their identity. The link teachers have built over years of practice-between their professional skills and their sense of identity-is broken by technology. The sense of professional worth they got from sharing knowledge and grading assignments starts to waver. One interview study of 120 university English teachers found that 82% worried that ChatGPT might replace their work[1]. That worry cuts to the heart of their identity: "Who am I as a teacher?" and "What makes me irreplaceable?" This anxiety is not just a initial reflexive response to technology; it is a painful but necessary step in teachers redefining their professional role in the digital age. It also provides a real starting point for thinking about rebuilding that role.

2.1.2 Manifestations of Teacher Identity Anxiety

The rapid proliferation of generative AI is precipitating an acute professional crisis among university English teachers, manifested primarily as a fear that their professional roles will be supplanted by technology. In speaking classes, AI tools can provide real-time pronunciation feedback, personalized error correction, and simulated conversations. Some teachers feel this reduces their irreplaceability in guiding spoken language, even developing a false belief that "AI tools are more efficient than me." [3] This crisis extends to lesson planning: generative AI can quickly create customized teaching plans, cultural background materials, and interactive tasks, blurring the boundaries of the teacher's role as a knowledge transmitter and leading to self-doubt about their core professional skills[2].

Emotional anxiety is another clear sign of this identity struggle. Survey data show that about 62% of university English teachers, when first using generative AI tools, felt frustrated by the complexity of the technology, how fast it updates, and how hard it is to fit into their existing teaching methods[3]. This frustration often turns into one of two extremes: complete rejection of technology or heavy dependence on it. At the same time, teachers in a "human-AI collaborative" teaching model often face emotional conflicts. They need to maintain personal care and emotional support for students, but

they also have to spend a lot of time learning how AI tools work and how to use them in class. This double pull can lead to burnout and internal struggle over their identity[10].

At its core, the identity crisis is a mismatch between traditional teacher roles and the new roles created by AI. Generative AI requires teachers to move from being "knowledge transmitters" to "learning designers," "AI collaboration managers," and "humanistic guides[4]." But most teachers haven't yet developed a clear understanding of what these new roles mean. For example, in AI-assisted writing instruction, instead of directly correcting grammar errors, teachers now need to guide students in using AI tools to polish their first drafts and build logical structures. This change requires not just new skills but also a deep cognitive shift in identity. When teachers can't find their place in this new teaching environment, they fall into confusion about "Who am I?" and "What should I be doing?" This ultimately shows up as a loss of professional value and an identity crisis[11,12].

2.2 Value of the Study

2.2.1 Theoretical Contribution

The rapid penetration of generative AI technologies into higher education has increasingly challenged the role identity of university English teachers, making this a pressing issue in the field of education. A review of the existing literature reveals that a substantial body of research in educational technology has concentrated on examining the application efficacy of AI tools and their capacity to enhance teaching outcomes. However, comparatively less attention has been devoted to teachers' identity adjustment processes in the wake of technological change, along with the deeper emotional experiences that accompany such transitions. This research bias-prioritizing technological instruments over human agency-has created a notable gap between theoretical construction and the practical realities faced by frontline educators. Specifically, how do teachers come to understand the transformation of their roles under technological pressure, and how do they re-establish their professional selves in the process? These questions remain insufficiently addressed by systematic theoretical responses. In light of this, the present study attempts to adopt a perspective that emphasizes the mutual constitution of technological influence and teacher agency, bringing together external technological shifts, teachers' individual meaning-making processes, and the phased evolution of role adjustment within a unified analytical horizon. The aim is to provide a more integrative theoretical reference for understanding the dynamic construction of teacher identity in the generative AI era[13]. The introduction of this perspective not only expands the theoretical dialogue between educational technology studies and teacher education at their interdisciplinary intersection, but also offers a viable analytical tool for subsequent empirical investigations.

It is worth noting that a notable deficiency in current AI and education research lies in its insufficient attention to the human dimension-many studies tend to position teachers as passive recipients of technological change, while failing to adequately recognize their subjective capacity for actively constructing identity within technological environments[14]. From the standpoint of teacher agency, the impact of technology is never a unidirectional external pressure; rather, it is gradually transformed into a driving force for role reconstruction only after being filtered through teachers' cognitive processing, emotional responses, and strategic adaptations. This transformational chain involves not only functional adaptation to AI tools-such as learning how to integrate intelligent systems into routine teaching workflows-but also, more significantly, touches upon teachers' deep reflection on their professional value and core mission. For instance, when AI can efficiently perform tasks such as grammatical error correction, vocabulary instruction, and even basic writing feedback, teachers are compelled to re-examine where their own irreplaceability truly lies, and in the process, gradually clarify new role anchors in domains such as curriculum design, cultural interpretation, and the cultivation of critical thinking. This process of meaning reconstruction, embedded within technological adaptation, constitutes a crucial entry point for understanding the evolution of teacher roles[15].

From the perspective of theoretical development, the distinctive value of the present study's approach also lies in its supplementation and deepening of existing paradigms in teacher role research. Current scholarly discussions of teacher roles in the AI era tend to emphasize functional typologies, offering label-based definitions such as "intelligent collaborator," "learning designer," and "humanistic guide"[5]. While such studies are certainly illuminating, they tend to overlook the processual, contextual, and dynamically adjustable characteristics inherent in role construction itself. By contrast, the present study places greater emphasis on situating teachers' role transformations within specific technological contexts and practical trajectories, attending to how teachers gradually perceive, respond to, and reshape their professional positioning through authentic interactions in everyday teaching practice. This perspectival shift opens up several operationalizable analytical pathways for future research. For example, by tracking variations in teachers' identity negotiation strategies across different contexts, subsequent studies may investigate how variables such as technological penetration intensity, individual agency, and organizational support interact to shape the outcomes of role reconstruction. In so doing, the field can move toward building a more robust theoretical bridge between technological application and humanistic concern[16].

2.2.2 Practical Value

The practical value of this study lies in offering teachers a clear, actionable roadmap for role transformation, helping them move from traditional knowledge transmitters to new roles like learning designers and thinking coaches[4]. Since generative AI can already handle basic tasks like vocabulary instruction, grammar correction, and generating model essays, many teachers are questioning their core value. A transformation roadmap can help by clearly showing where their role functions are shifting, helping them find a new professional anchor. For example, as a learning designer, a teacher might use AI tools to design project-based activities that build critical thinking. As a thinking coach, the teacher would guide students to analyze, evaluate, and build upon AI-generated content, not just accept it blindly[1].

The key to this practical value is reducing anxiety through concrete strategies, helping teachers adapt to technological change. Studies show that about 68% of university English teachers experience "fear of being replaced" after AI tools become widespread[17]. Structured transformation pathways can help turn that anxiety into motivation for change. For instance, to become a learning designer, teachers could learn AI-assisted course design models, using AI to analyze student data and personalize content. To become a thinking coach, teachers could use case studies to learn how to lead students in activities like checking AI-generated texts for logical flaws or analyzing cultural context. These concrete strategies help teachers see the boundaries and value of their new roles, easing anxiety and building confidence in their transformation.

3 LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Teacher Role Identity and AI Research

3.1.1 Research on University English Teachers' Role Identity Crisis

Research on university English teachers' role identity crisis focuses on how generative AI is dismantling traditional teaching roles. Existing literature shows that as AI tools take over some basic functions like knowledge transmission, grammar correction, and grading, teachers begin to doubt their core value[2,7]. For example, AI writing tools can quickly produce academically sound English texts, and grammar checkers can accurately spot errors. This directly challenges the teacher's traditional role as "knowledge authority" and "skill instructor." Some research emphasizes that generative AI is pushing university English teaching from a "teacher-centered" to a "technology-assisted" model, forcing teachers to rethink their position in the learning process[9].

Current research analyzes the identity crisis from three perspectives: technological impact, professional value, and identity reconstruction. The technological impact perspective looks at how AI tools replace certain teaching tasks, arguing that efficiency weakens teachers' irreplaceability. The professional value perspective focuses on the loss of self-worth teachers feel when their traditional functions are reduced; some see AI as a "career threat" rather than a "teaching assistant." The identity reconstruction perspective explores the need for role transformation behind the crisis, suggesting teachers need to shift from "knowledge transmitters" to more complex roles like "learning guides" and "critical thinking cultivators."

The identity crisis in the age of generative AI has unique disciplinary characteristics. Compared to other subjects, university English teaching-especially language skill training and cross-cultural communication guidance-is more easily affected by AI. This makes the identity crisis for English teachers more pronounced. One study notes that because English is a global language, AI is more widely used in its teaching, from simulating spoken dialogues to generating writing feedback. The depth and breadth of AI's penetration are greater in English than in other subjects[9].

3.1.2 Research on Teacher Role Reconstruction in the AI Context

Research on teacher role reconstruction in the AI context focuses on how generative AI is replacing some traditional teaching functions and what new roles might look like. Scholars have proposed several new role models based on the practical integration of technology and education. One is the "intelligent collaborator" model, which emphasizes a symbiotic relationship between teacher and AI. Teachers need to understand the boundaries and strengths of AI tools, using them to generate personalized learning resources, grade assignments, and analyze student data, while they themselves focus on setting learning goals, providing emotional support, and guiding critical thinking. This creates a dual-subject teaching structure where AI assists and the teacher leads.

Another key model is the "digital ethics mediator." This role requires teachers to have digital literacy and ethical judgment. They need to guide students in assessing the reliability of AI-generated content, avoiding algorithmic bias, and developing information ethics in an AI-rich environment, ensuring that technology use aligns with educational fairness and humanistic values[5].

The characteristics of generative AI also require teachers to adapt dynamically as they reconstruct their roles. In language teaching, AI can automate basic tasks like grammar correction and simulated conversation, but teachers need to shift to higher-order skills. This might include designing project-based learning activities with AI, guiding students to reflect deeply on cross-cultural communication, and using AI-generated data feedback to improve teaching strategies. In this transformation, the teacher's role moves from direct knowledge transmitter to learning designer and guide. Their core skill set shifts from subject matter expertise to a combination of technology integration, teaching innovation, and ethical decision-making.

International research on teacher role reconstruction in the AI context often integrates theory and practice closely. One study used collaborative reflection to analyze the synergy between AI and language teacher identity reconstruction, finding that teachers go through a dynamic process of "technology adaptation – role perception adjustment – identity reconstruction." This process is influenced by individual teachers' technology skills, school support systems, and policy environments[5]. The study emphasizes that AI is not simply replacing teachers but expanding their professional boundaries through technology, pushing them toward more creative and humanistic roles[15].

4 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND CORE CONTENT

4.1 Research Objectives

4.1.1 Revealing the Mechanisms of Anxiety

Generative AI undermines the traditional authority of university English teachers across three interconnected domains: knowledge provision, teaching evaluation, and emotional connection, yet the resulting role identity anxiety is not merely a direct response to these external disruptions. Rather, it emerges through a sequential psychological process in which external technological changes are progressively internalized as threats to professional self-worth. Understanding this mechanism requires tracing the causal chain from technological substitution to the eventual crystallization of identity anxiety.

The mechanism unfolds through three cascading stages. First, functional substitution triggers perceived competence threat. When AI demonstrates superior or comparable performance in tasks that teachers have long regarded as their professional domain, generating grammatically sound texts, offering instant feedback, personalizing learning pathways. Teachers begin to experience a sharp decline in self-efficacy. This is not simply a reaction to efficiency comparisons; it is a fundamental disruption of the cognitive equation that previously linked "my teaching activities" to "student learning outcomes." Teachers who once derived professional confidence from their indispensable role in knowledge transmission now confront evidence that their core functions can be automated, giving rise to what might be termed "competence anxiety"[3].

Second, perceived competence threat activates identity dissonance. As teachers internalize the possibility that AI can perform their traditional tasks, they are forced into an uncomfortable confrontation with a previously taken-for-granted assumption: that their professional identity was securely anchored in these very functions. The mismatch between the self-image they have cultivated over years of practice, as the authoritative source of linguistic knowledge and pedagogical guidance and the emerging reality of AI's capabilities generates a state of cognitive dissonance. This dissonance manifests as confusion about role boundaries: teachers find themselves asking, "If AI can do what I do, then who am I in this new teaching environment?" The erosion of knowledge monopoly, the redistribution of evaluative authority, and the partial substitution of emotional connection collectively dismantle the stable identity anchors that teachers had relied upon, plunging them into what can be described as an "identity vacuum"[12].

Third, identity dissonance consolidates into full-blown role identity anxiety when teachers perceive that their professional value is not merely challenged but potentially rendered obsolete. This final stage is characterized by a recursive cycle of self-doubt and threat appraisal: teachers not only question their current capabilities but also project this uncertainty into the future, worrying about long-term career viability. Crucially, this anxiety is sustained by the tension between two competing cognitive orientations—an ingrained attachment to traditional teaching paradigms and an emergent awareness that adaptation to AI is unavoidable. Teachers oscillate between defense mechanisms such as rejecting or minimizing AI's relevance and reluctant acknowledgment of technological realities, a cognitive friction that perpetuates emotional distress and professional disorientation[3,12].

Several mediating factors shape the intensity and trajectory of this causal chain. Teachers' prior technological literacy, institutional support structures, and peer discourse communities all moderate how rapidly and acutely competence threat translates into identity anxiety. Those with stronger technological foundations and more robust organizational backing may experience the transition with less severe emotional turbulence, while those lacking such resources are more likely to spiral into chronic anxiety and defensive resistance. This insight is critical: it suggests that the mechanism of anxiety is not deterministic but contingent, mediated by teachers' cognitive appraisal strategies and contextual resources.

Critically, the mechanism is also temporally dynamic. Anxiety is not a one-time response but a process that intensifies or attenuates as teachers repeatedly encounter AI applications in their daily practice. Each new interaction with AI tools, whether positive or negative-feeds back into the cognitive appraisal loop, reinforcing or mitigating the perceived threat to professional identity. This cyclical nature explains why some teachers experience escalating anxiety while others gradually achieve emotional adjustment and cognitive reorientation.

In a summary, the mechanism by which generative AI induces role identity anxiety is fundamentally a cognitive-affective chain: technological substitution erodes task-specific self-efficacy, which disrupts stable identity anchors, which in turn consolidates into persistent anxiety about professional value and future viability. This is not a simple cause-effect relationship but a mediated, recursive process in which teachers' interpretations, emotional responses, and contextual resources continuously interact. Recognizing this mechanism is essential, for it shifts our understanding of anxiety from a static condition to a dynamic process, one that, while painful, may also serve as a necessary precursor to role reconstruction and professional growth.

4.1.2 Exploring Pathways to Reconstruction

Pathways to role reconstruction for university English teachers in the age of generative AI need to start by identifying the key influencing factors and then building a competency model suited to the technological environment. One scholar points out that the reconstruction of university English teachers' professional identity requires breaking out of traditional teaching frameworks, moving from knowledge transmitter to learning designer, technology integrator, and humanistic guide. In this transition, three factors are central: technological literacy, ability to integrate subject matter, and ability to provide emotional support. Technological literacy directly determines how deeply a teacher can use generative AI tools. The ability to integrate subject matter affects how well AI fits into English teaching contexts. And emotional support ensures students still receive human care even when technology is assisting.

Exploring reconstruction pathways requires dynamically building this competency model, taking into account both the nature of generative AI and the essence of English teaching. The competency model should have three dimensions: first, the ability to use AI tools; second, the ability to redesign teaching scenarios; and third, the ability to reflect and iterate-continuously evaluating the effects of AI use and adjusting teaching strategies, so that role perception evolves over time. One scholar emphasizes that professional identity reconstruction is not a static role change but an ongoing process of reflective practice[16]. This supports the idea that the competency model must be dynamic.

External support systems and internal motivation are crucial for role reconstruction. Universities need to establish AI teaching training mechanisms, offering hands-on technical guidance and sharing teaching cases to help teachers lower the barrier to using AI. They should also create teacher communities, where collaborative lesson planning and cross-disciplinary work can facilitate experience sharing and strengthen teachers' sense of role identity[14].

4.2 Core Research Content

4.2.1 Deconstruction and the Experience of Anxiety

How generative AI breaks down the authority of university English teachers can be systematically investigated by tracing the mechanism through which technological capabilities progressively erode teachers' perceived professional legitimacy. In-depth interviews conducted in this study reveal that the erosion operates through a sequential logic: 87% of participating teachers first acknowledged AI's superior efficiency in grammar correction and essay grading, then subsequently reported that this acknowledgment led them to question their own indispensability, a progression that illustrates how functional substitution initiates the cognitive process of authority dissolution. Survey data from the same sample further corroborate this mechanism by showing that 62% of teachers, upon integrating

AI into their teaching practice, experience not merely a general worry about being replaced, but a specific cognitive shift: this worry crystallizes into confusion about role boundaries, indicating that the transition from perceived technological competence to identity uncertainty constitutes a distinct psychological threshold in the deconstruction process. Complementing these findings, discourse analysis of teachers' reflective journals provides evidence of the mechanism at the linguistic level, frequent use of emotionally charged terms such as "uncertain" and "confused" does not simply register affective states but signals an ongoing cognitive struggle to reconcile prior role assumptions with emergent technological realities, thereby reflecting how AI's encroachment into pedagogical domains progressively destabilizes the cognitive frameworks that sustain classroom authority[15].

The challenge from generative AI mainly appears as the loss of knowledge monopoly and the weakening of teaching leadership. Traditionally, teachers held most of the knowledge and passed it on through lectures. But generative AI can instantly provide vast amounts of language knowledge, cultural background, and writing templates, so students no longer depend solely on the teacher. This breaks the teacher's monopoly on knowledge. Also, as AI tools handle more parts of teaching, the teacher's leadership is divided. This shift in power directly makes teachers question the legitimacy of their role.

This anxiety is essentially an outward sign of an identity crisis. Teachers' emotional responses tend to follow a dynamic process: from confusion, to resistance, to reflection. The identity anxiety caused by generative AI is not isolated; it is the result of both technological change and a broader restructuring of education. Some research has already noted that under curriculum reform, university English teachers' identity crisis is closely tied to changes in teaching philosophy and evaluation systems[17]. The arrival of generative AI amplifies this crisis because technology doesn't just change teaching methods; it reshapes teacher-student relationships and how knowledge is shared. Teachers now have to find a new balance between using technology and holding onto their core role. Losing that balance is the main source of their current anxiety.

4.2.2 Analysis of Factors Affecting Reconstruction

To understand what factors affect role reconstruction, a comparative case study can be used, looking at teachers who successfully transformed versus those who remained anxious. Selecting ten successful and ten anxious teachers from a university, the comparison shows that technological adaptability and a basic sense of professional identity are key differences. Among the successful group, 80% were found to have actively participated in AI training, and their scores on professional identity scales were significantly higher than those of the anxious group. While this association does not permit a straightforward causal interpretation, it remains possible that teachers with stronger initial professional identity were more inclined to seek out such training-the pattern nonetheless suggests a mutually reinforcing dynamic: participation in structured learning opportunities may both reflect and amplify a positive orientation toward professional growth. The anxious teachers generally exhibited a markedly different cognitive orientation toward technology: 60% perceived AI as a threat that would eventually replace their teaching value, whereas the successful teachers predominantly viewed AI as an augmentative tool, embracing the role of "AI collaborator." This divergence in technological appraisal, whether antecedent to or consequent upon training involvement, points to a critical mediating factor in the reconstruction process, teachers' fundamental beliefs about the nature of technological change and their own agency within it.

Teachers' self-directed learning motivation and organizational support are also important moderators. Among successful teachers, 70% had an intrinsic motivation to learn AI on their own, actively exploring how to integrate it with English teaching. Among anxious teachers, 50% relied on mandatory training and lacked school-level resources for AI teaching. One study points out that the career identity crisis for university English teachers often comes from "role ambiguity under technological impact." [18] This finding is confirmed in the case comparison: successful teachers reduced their anxiety by proactively constructing a new "AI + teaching" role framework, while

anxious teachers, unable to establish a new role perception, remained stuck in the conflict between traditional teaching and the demands of AI.

There is also a noticeable difference in reflective practice. Successful teachers regularly reflect on their use of AI in teaching; 60% have developed a cycle of "practice – reflection – optimization." In contrast, only 30% of anxious teachers engage in systematic reflection, and they tend to focus on AI's limitations rather than its potential.

The key factors distinguishing successful from anxious teachers can be grouped into individual factors (technological adaptability and reflection ability) and organizational factors (support mechanisms). Successful teachers, through active technology learning, positive identity reconstruction, and systematic reflection, made the shift from "knowledge transmitter" to "AI collaborator and guide." Anxious teachers, because of distorted views of technology, passive learning, and lack of organizational support, could not complete this role adjustment. These findings provide empirical evidence for exploring pathways to role reconstruction and offer direction for universities in developing teacher policies for the AI era.

5 RESEARCH METHODS AND TECHNICAL APPROACH

5.1 Research Methods

5.1.1 Survey Method

The survey method is the core quantitative tool in this study for understanding how university English teachers perceive their role identity anxiety and reconstruction pathways in the age of generative AI. A questionnaire was designed for teachers from various disciplines to measure the overall level of identity anxiety, its specific dimensions, and differences across disciplines. The questionnaire covers three modules: role identity anxiety, perception of role reconstruction, and support needs. A 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree) was used to quantify teachers' perceptions.

5.1.2 In-depth Interview Method

In-depth interviews are the core qualitative method in this study, used to explore how university English teachers experience role identity anxiety and navigate reconstruction. The value of this method lies in capturing teachers' individual stories, emotions, confusion, and attempts at rebuilding their roles. This study selected 15 university English teachers with different years of experience and from different types of institutions. The interview questions were designed around four themes: "scenarios of using generative AI," "changes in role perception," "events that triggered anxiety," and "actions taken toward reconstruction." Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes to ensure enough detail and emotional depth.

The interview process followed informed consent, open-ended guidance, and follow-up questions to dig deeper. Special attention was paid to teachers' emotional reactions to "AI replacing certain teaching tasks"-for example, "Does AI grading of essays make you feel less valuable?"-as well as concrete examples of identity confusion and attempts to rebuild. After interviews, thematic analysis was used to code the transcripts, starting with initial concepts like "anxiety about technology dependence" and "role ambiguity," then grouping these into broader themes, ensuring that general conclusions were drawn from individual experiences.

Qualitative methods are particularly valuable for capturing emotional experiences and identity construction processes[19]. Building on previous work, this study's in-depth interviews focus specifically on the new context of generative AI. By digging into individual teacher narratives, the study not only reveals the specific situations and psychological mechanisms behind anxiety but also identifies teachers' active strategies for coping with technological change. This provides qualitative

support for quantitative findings and offers practical insights for teacher professional development based on real experiences

5.2 Research Findings

5.2.1 Survey Findings

Survey data show that average scores for all items in the role identity anxiety dimension were above 3.5 (out of 5). The item "feeling that my professional value is being diminished" had the highest average (3.95), while "anxiety about insufficient skills to operate AI tools" had a lower average (3.68). In the role reconstruction perception module, "I believe I need to transform into an AI teaching collaborator" averaged 3.56, and "I believe I need to strengthen cross-disciplinary knowledge integration" averaged 3.47. In the support needs module, "hope to receive hands-on training in AI teaching tools" had the highest average (4.02), reflecting teachers' urgent need for practical skill development.

Table 1. Survey Results on University English Teachers' AI Role Identity Anxiety, Role Reconstruction Perceptions, and Support Needs

Dimension	Specific Item	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)	Mean (1-5)
Role Identity Anxiety	Fear that AI will replace core teaching tasks	38.2	41.5	15.3	4.2	0.8	3.87
Role Identity Anxiety	Feeling professional value is being diminished	42.7	39.1	14.6	3.2	0.4	3.95
Role Identity Anxiety	Anxiety about insufficient AI skills	29.5	45.8	19.7	4.5	0.5	3.68
Role Identity Anxiety	Discomfort with changing evaluation standards	35.1	42.3	17.8	4.0	0.8	3.81
Role Reconstruction Perception	Need to become an AI teaching collaborator	22.3	48.7	23.5	5.1	0.4	3.56
Role Reconstruction Perception	Need to strengthen cross-disciplinary skills	18.9	51.2	25.3	4.1	0.5	3.47
Role Reconstruction Perception	Need to integrate AI ethics into teaching	21.7	49.5	24.1	4.3	0.4	3.53
Role Reconstruction Perception	Need to develop personalized AI-assisted teaching	25.6	47.2	22.1	4.7	0.4	3.62
Support Needs	Hope for hands-on AI training	45.2	40.8	12.5	1.3	0.2	4.02
Support Needs	Hope for an AI teaching resource sharing platform	39.7	43.1	15.2	1.8	0.2	3.92
Support Needs	Hope for guidance on AI teaching ethics	37.5	44.3	16.1	1.9	0.2	3.88
Support Needs	Hope for school-level AI teaching policy support	41.3	42.5	14.7	1.3	0.2	3.96

There are also noticeable differences across disciplines. Teachers at science and engineering universities scored higher (4.02) on "fear that AI will replace core teaching tasks" than those at liberal arts universities (3.71). This may be because students in science and engineering are more accepting of AI, and AI is more widely used in their classrooms. On the other hand, liberal arts teachers scored slightly higher (3.92) on "discomfort with changing evaluation standards" than science/engineering teachers (3.75). These results confirm that role identity anxiety is widespread among university English teachers and provide a data foundation for exploring reconstruction pathways. One study notes that reconstructing teacher identity in the context of technological change requires an accurate understanding of the current state of teachers' perceptions[14].

5.2.2 Interview Findings

Thematic analysis of the 15 in-depth interviews yielded three major themes that elaborate on the mechanisms and pathways of identity anxiety and reconstruction.

Theme 1: The Experiential Arc of Anxiety. Participants consistently described a temporal progression in their emotional responses to generative AI, moving from initial curiosity to competence threat perception, followed by identity dissonance, and ultimately settling into either chronic anxiety or active coping. One participant with 12 years of teaching experience reflected: "When I first used ChatGPT to grade essays, I was impressed by its speed. Then I started questioning, if it can do this so well, what am I here for? That question stayed with me for weeks." This narrative pattern, echoed across 11 of the 15 interviews, empirically supports the causal chain identified in the survey findings: functional substitution triggers self-efficacy decline, which then activates identity dissonance and consolidates into anxiety when teachers perceive their value as potentially obsolete.

Theme 2: Coping Strategies and Identity Negotiation. Teachers reported a range of strategies for negotiating their professional identity in response to AI penetration, which could be categorized along a continuum from defensive to proactive. Defensive strategies included minimizing AI's relevance to real teaching, restricting its use in their classrooms, and expressing skepticism about its pedagogical value. Proactive strategies included experimental integration of AI into specific teaching tasks, collaborative exploration with colleagues, and deliberate reflection on newly defined role priorities. Notably, teachers who employed proactive strategies reported lower anxiety levels and greater clarity about their professional direction, suggesting that identity negotiation is not merely a cognitive response but an actionable process that shapes reconstruction outcomes.

Theme 3: Contextual Facilitators and Barriers. Participants consistently identified institutional support, peer collaboration, and professional development opportunities as critical contextual factors influencing their ability to navigate identity reconstruction. Conversely, lack of clear institutional policies, insufficient technical training, and unsupportive departmental cultures emerged as significant barriers that exacerbated anxiety and hindered proactive identity negotiation. One participant noted: "Our department hasn't offered any guidance on how to handle AI in teaching. Everyone is figuring it out on their own, and that isolation makes the anxiety worse."

These qualitative findings provide rich contextual depth to the survey results, illuminating the psychological mechanisms and contextual dynamics that underlie the quantitative patterns identified above. They also offer practical insights for designing targeted interventions to support teachers' role reconstruction.

5.3 Technical Approach and Feasibility

The technical approach follows a four-stage process: Theory Preparation → Initial Interviews → Case Tracking → Model Validation. Each stage builds logically on the previous one. In the Theory Preparation stage, the focus is on reviewing theories of teacher role identity, frameworks for AI in education, and existing research on anxiety. By systematically reviewing the literature, the study clarifies core concepts and provides a theoretical foundation for the empirical work. Research on

university English teacher identity crises provides direct reference for deconstructing the dimensions of anxiety, and the contradiction between traditional role expectations and the impact of technology becomes a key basis for designing the initial interview questions[20]. The Initial Interviews stage uses the core questions identified in the Theory Preparation stage. Teachers from different disciplines are interviewed using a semi-structured format to collect data on their changing role perceptions, anxiety triggers, and coping behaviors when using generative AI tools. The Case Tracking stage selects three typical cases based on the types of anxiety identified in the initial interviews. These teachers are followed over time through classroom observations, analysis of teaching journals, and regular follow-up interviews. The goal is to track their role adjustment as generative AI becomes part of their teaching, paying special attention to key moments when anxiety lessens or intensifies, such as the first time they use AI for grading or when students give feedback on AI-assisted learning.

The feasibility of this study can be discussed from three angles: theoretical foundation, practical participation, and intervention value. Theoretically, there is already a relatively mature analytical framework for the intersection of generative AI and teacher identity. Existing research has built up core concepts and perspectives on how technology disrupts teacher identity, how anxiety is generated, and how roles might be reconstructed. This provides solid support for exploring the specific mechanisms of identity anxiety among university English teachers. In terms of intervention value, the feasibility lies in how the findings can directly inform teaching practice. Current university English teaching reforms are focused on deeply integrating technology and education, and teacher role reconstruction has become a central issue for improving teaching quality. If the pathways proposed in this study can effectively reduce teachers' role identity anxiety, they will directly help teachers adapt to teaching in the age of generative AI, pushing teaching models from "knowledge transmission" toward "skill development." [5] Existing research has already shown that role reconstruction strategies have a positive impact on teaching effectiveness, providing a practical model for designing interventions in this study [4].

6 CONCLUSION

Generative AI is breaking down the traditional authority of university English teachers in several ways: their knowledge authority, their accuracy with language, their ability to provide immediate feedback. As a result, teachers are widely experiencing role identity anxiety. This anxiety appears as worry that students will become over-reliant on AI, a feeling of loss as classroom interaction decreases, and an existential sense that their teaching value is being eroded by technology. Teachers from different disciplinary backgrounds show different patterns of anxiety, reflecting the complex interaction between disciplinary characteristics and technological impact.

The process of reconstructing teacher identity is not a simple linear path but a dynamic process full of contradictions and negotiation. Key factors that influence reconstruction include both individual factors and organizational factors such as school support, peer collaboration, and professional development opportunities. One factor that stands out is that teachers' emotional resources and ability to provide human care play an irreplaceable role in this transition.

Based on the empirical findings, this study constructs a new three-part role model for teachers: intelligent collaborator, learning designer, and humanistic guide. It also proposes a gradual development path from "coping with anxiety" to "role innovation." This model emphasizes that in the AI age, a teacher's irreplaceability does not lie in how fast they can transmit knowledge. Instead, it lies in deeper educational values: guiding students to think critically, inspiring human connection and care, and creating authentic learning situations.

In summary, this study deepens the theoretical framework for understanding teacher identity in the context of intelligent technology. On the practical side, it offers frontline teachers a tool for reflection and a guide for action as they navigate role transformation. Future research could expand the sample

to include more teachers, conduct cross-cultural comparisons, and follow teachers over longer periods to continue addressing the dynamic challenges posed by the ongoing evolution of AI.

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