

# The Role Transformation and Transition Paths of University Foreign Language Teachers in the Era of Artificial Intelligence

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**Abstract:** Artificial intelligence (AI) technologies are increasingly permeating foreign language education in higher education institutions, driving the transformation of teaching environments toward intelligence and ubiquity, and promoting the evolution of the entire teaching process toward personalization and data-driven approaches. These shifts present systemic challenges to the traditional role of university foreign language teachers. This paper is based on the new characteristics of foreign language teaching in the AI era and utilizes the role theory to systematically analyze the triple role transformation of university foreign language teachers: from one-way knowledge transmitters to personalized learning facilitators, from classroom managers to collaborative knowledge co-constructors, and from independent practitioners to agents of human-AI collaborative education. Furthermore, it proposes systematic pathways for this transformation across three dimensions: individual literacy, human-AI synergy and multi-party collaboration. The findings indicate that the core value of university foreign language teachers is shifting from “teaching” to “educating”. As a result, it is critical that the professional vitality of these educators should be revitalized by maintaining leadership within the new human-AI collaborative ecosystem.

**Keywords:** Artificial Intelligence; University Foreign Language Teachers; Role Transformation; Transition Paths

## 1. Introduction

The concept of Artificial Intelligence (AI) was first formally defined at the Dartmouth academic conference in 1956<sup>[1]</sup>. Over nearly seven decades of technological iteration and industrial application, AI has evolved from a frontier theoretical exploration into a core technological

engine that reshapes global industrial structures and reconstructs societal operational logic. Within the overall layout of China's digital educational transformation, the *Action Plan for Artificial Intelligence Innovation in Higher Education Institutions*, issued by the Ministry of Education in 2018, clarified the core direction for AI-enabled higher education reform from a top-level design perspective. It established a core guideline for universities to adapt to intelligent educational transitions and advance faculty development<sup>[2]</sup>. Driven by both technological development and policy guidance, AI-relying on core technologies such as natural language processing, multimodal human-computer interaction, and learning data mining-has demonstrated profound situational adaptability with university foreign language education. It has catalyzed a comprehensive paradigm shift in foreign language teaching from its philosophical core to its practical forms<sup>[3]</sup>.

Simultaneously, the substitution effect of AI on traditional pedagogical functions has become increasingly prominent. Consequently, the long-standing traditional roles of university foreign language teachers are facing unprecedented pressure for transformation and restructuring<sup>[4]</sup>. Based on this, this paper focuses on the characteristics of foreign language instruction in the AI context, systematically examines the role transitions required of university foreign language teachers, and explores feasible practical paths for this transformation, aiming to provide reference value for relevant research.

## 2. Characteristics of Foreign Language Teaching in the AI Era

The role of teachers has never existed in isolation; it is deeply dependent on the specific teaching environment and processes. Therefore, before discussing the role transformation of university foreign language teachers, it is necessary to clarify the fundamental changes that AI technology has triggered within the field

and flow of foreign language teaching. China's informatization of foreign language education has undergone several decades of development, completing three core transitions: from audiovisual instruction and computer-assisted instruction to the deep integration of intelligent technology and education<sup>[5]</sup>. The comprehensive infiltration of AI technology has driven a fundamental shift in foreign language teaching from formal innovation to core restructuring, thereby establishing characteristics that are markedly different from those of traditional classrooms. Specifically, foreign language teaching in the AI era presents the following two characteristics:

### **2.1 Intelligent and Ubiquitous Teaching Environments**

AI technology has transformed the spatial form of foreign language teaching, shifting the environment from fixed physical classrooms to ubiquitous, intelligent learning spaces. Unlike traditional instruction, which is heavily constrained by location and time, current foreign language teaching leverages diverse platforms to establish a teaching ecosystem that spans both physical and virtual contexts. This enables seamless integration of formal and informal learning, as well as in-class and out-of-class experiences, thereby creating a truly "anytime, anywhere" language learning ecology<sup>[2]</sup>. Furthermore, supported by big data and data mining technologies, massive multimodal foreign language teaching resources can be co-constructed, shared, and precisely distributed. Teachers can hierarchically integrate resources based on pedagogical goals and student proficiency, fundamentally overcoming the limitations of singular and rigid resource supply in traditional teaching.

### **2.2 Personalized and Data-Driven Instructional Processes**

The discipline of foreign languages centers on the transmission, interaction, and application of linguistic symbols. This disciplinary essence aligns naturally with AI technologies focused on natural language processing<sup>[6]</sup>. The traditional teacher-centered, unified classroom model struggles to accommodate varying linguistic foundations and learning rhythms, creating realistic bottlenecks for personalized instruction. It is also limited by a singular evaluation system centered on summative assessments, which

suffers from inherent limitations such as one-sided evaluation and delayed feedback<sup>[7]</sup>. AI technology achieves a dual reform of teaching supply and evaluation through the comprehensive collection and deep analysis of student learning behavior data. On one hand, it precisely delineates students' exclusive learner profiles, thereby matching personalized learning content and training paths. On the other hand, it enables real-time, precise evaluation of language skills and multidimensional formative assessment, providing scientific data support for teachers to adjust their instructional strategies<sup>[8]</sup>.

## **3. The Role Transformation of University Foreign Language Teachers in the AI Era**

Facing this deep pedagogical restructuring, university foreign language teachers must step outside traditional role frameworks and re-examine their core professional positioning. From the perspective of role theory in social psychology, individual roles evolve dynamically through interaction with the sociocultural and educational environment. Teacher role theory originated from the social role theory proposed by American social psychologist George Herbert Mead in the 1920s, which is primarily used to explain how social relationships within educational settings influence teachers' professional behavior and positioning<sup>[8]</sup>. Under the deep integration of AI and university foreign language education, the traditional modes, environments, and teacher-student relationships of foreign language teaching have undergone a fundamental reconstruction, exposing university foreign language teachers' conventional roles to comprehensive disruption<sup>[9]</sup>. Leveraging technologies such as big data and natural language processing, virtual teachers and intelligent systems can independently complete basic teaching tasks including resource distribution, explanation of knowledge points, assignment grading, and speech correction. This directly challenges the traditional monopoly of teachers over knowledge and the inherent roles of one-way knowledge transmission, classroom management, and academic evaluation<sup>[10]</sup>.

### **3.1 From One-way Knowledge Transmitters to Personalized Learning Facilitators**

In traditional university foreign language teaching, teachers serve as the central transmitters and authoritative interpreters of linguistic knowledge. Classroom instruction is

primarily organized around the delivery of standardized knowledge points, and it is difficult to achieve truly individualized, learner-centered teaching. In the era of artificial intelligence, students can instantly access vast language learning resources through diverse channels such as language learning applications. AI tools are also capable of efficiently handling foundational explanations of linguistic knowledge and basic skill training, thereby fundamentally undermining the teacher's monopoly over knowledge transmission and significantly weakening the value of the traditional one-way knowledge-delivery role<sup>[6]</sup>.

In response to this shift, university foreign language teachers need to undergo a core transformation toward becoming personalized learning facilitators. On one hand, they should utilize AI learning analytics and digital profiling technologies to precisely identify students' linguistic gaps, learning preferences, and cognitive traits. This enables scientific academic diagnosis and the customization of differentiated language learning paths for students. On the other hand, they must shift the instructional focus from knowledge repetition to the cultivation of students' core competencies. Teachers should guide students to effectively utilize AI learning resources, foster autonomous learning capabilities and critical thinking.

### **3.2 From Classroom Managers to Collaborative Knowledge Co-constructors**

In traditional foreign language classrooms, teachers function as the primary controllers of teaching progress and classroom order. Teaching activities are predominantly teacher-centered, while students remain in a passive receptive position. Language practice is largely confined to standardized drills, and teacher-student interaction is characterized by a one-way control structure<sup>[4]</sup>. Artificial intelligence technologies have disrupted the spatial and temporal boundaries of conventional classrooms. Online collaborative platforms and intelligent interaction systems have facilitated the transition of foreign language teaching toward ubiquity, with collaborative knowledge construction centered on deep learning emerging as a central developmental orientation in foreign language education<sup>[9]</sup>.

In this context, university foreign language teachers are required to move beyond the traditional role of classroom controllers and

reposition themselves as collaborators in students' knowledge construction. Teachers can design inquiry-based and project-based authentic language application scenarios, guiding students to complete language practice tasks through group collaboration. By jointly exploring language application contexts with students, teachers facilitate the deep internalization of linguistic knowledge. Furthermore, teachers can leverage AI tools to build language knowledge graphs, guiding students to expand their linguistic frameworks collaboratively. Simultaneously, by establishing normalized online interaction channels, teachers can provide precise guidance as equal partners, fostering a novel, student-centered pedagogical ecosystem<sup>[7]</sup>.

### **3.3 From Independent Practitioners to Practitioners of Human-AI Collaborative Education**

In traditional foreign language teaching, teachers typically completed the entire teaching process as independent individuals, resulting in a highly individualized and closed teaching model. In the AI era, higher education is ushering in a new paradigm of "human-AI co-teaching." AI technology can deeply integrate into the entire teaching process, forming a complementary teaching community with educators and fundamentally altering the traditional independent working model<sup>[11]</sup>.

In response, university foreign language teachers must transition into practitioners of human-AI collaborative education, returning to the true essence of holistic education through synergy with AI. In teaching practice, they can leverage AI to optimize the entire teaching process. AI can handle routine and mechanical grading tasks, allowing teachers to focus their efforts on individualized guidance and formative evaluation<sup>[12]</sup>. More importantly, teachers must maintain their central role in education as value guides and emotional supporters. Functions such as emotional care, value shaping, and personality development cannot be achieved by AI systems, representing the irreplaceable core value of human teachers.

## **4. Transition Paths for University Foreign Language Teachers in the AI Era**

The triple role reconstruction from knowledge transmitter and classroom controller to collaborative educator has been clarified, so how

should university foreign language teachers translate these conceptual shifts into concrete actions? The proactive role transformation and capability upgrading of university foreign language teachers not only constitute an inevitable response to the wave of educational digitalization, but also represent the essential pathway for preserving the humanistic core of foreign language education, maintaining leadership in student development, and fulfilling the fundamental educational mission of fostering moral and holistic development.

#### **4.1 Anchoring the Core of Transformation: Strengthening Individual AI Literacy and Autonomous Development**

Teachers themselves constitute the ultimate foundation of role transformation. The core objective lies in actively embracing technological change while remaining committed to the educational mission, thereby achieving endogenous growth in terms of awareness, knowledge, and competence. University foreign language teachers must cultivate an awareness of continuous autonomous learning, break down traditional disciplinary barriers, and systematically study the foundational theories of AI and the underlying logic of intelligent teaching tools. They must construct a composite professional framework that integrates language acquisition principles, pedagogical knowledge, and intelligent technologies, thereby consolidating the theoretical foundation for integrating technology and teaching. Simultaneously, by leveraging various digital learning platforms to expand their knowledge boundaries, they can achieve a smooth transition from a traditional educator to the dual identity of “educator + learner”<sup>[11]</sup>.

During this process, teachers must also cultivate critical AI literacy. While recognizing the empowering potential of technology for education, they should remain rationally aware of risks such as algorithmic bias and AI hallucinations, clearly defining the auxiliary role of technology and firmly safeguarding the humanistic essence and educational leadership of teaching. Furthermore, teachers should adopt reflective teaching practices by maintaining teaching journals, analyzing instructional behavior data, and participating in collaborative pedagogical exchanges, thereby forming a continuous “practice–reflection–iteration” cycle

that supports ongoing professional advancement.

#### **4.2 Deepening Human-AI Synergistic Teaching: Promoting the Deep Integration of AI and Foreign Language Teaching**

The enhancement of individual intelligent literacy must ultimately be implemented within authentic teaching contexts. Therefore, deepening human–AI collaborative teaching is essential for shifting teaching priorities from the transmission of basic knowledge to the cultivation of students’ core language competencies. University foreign language teachers should scientifically integrate diverse intelligent teaching tools—such as AI-based oral assessment systems, grammar correction technologies, literature retrieval systems, and virtual simulation platforms—into different teaching scenarios, including speaking, reading, writing, and translation. Repetitive tasks such as procedural explanation of language points and mechanical assignment grading can be delegated to AI systems, allowing teachers to focus on personalized learning guidance, authentic language application scenarios, and the cultivation of students’ higher-order thinking abilities<sup>[13]</sup>.

Meanwhile, technology-supported pedagogical innovation should be promoted through the construction of immersive intercultural communication and language application environments based on virtual simulation technologies. Teachers should design project-based and inquiry-based learning tasks and employ diversified interactive functions within intelligent teaching platforms to enhance classroom engagement and effectively implement a student-centered teaching philosophy. In addition, a multidimensional evaluation system characterized by “intelligent assistance and teacher leadership” should be established. Such a system should combine learning analytics and big data-driven formative assessment with teachers’ professional judgment and front-line teaching experience to provide qualitative evaluations of students’ comprehensive competencies, thereby avoiding excessive reliance on automated evaluation and achieving deep integration between AI technologies and foreign language education<sup>[14]</sup>.

#### **4.3 Building a Multi-Party Collaborative System: Constructing a Cross-Disciplinary Innovation Ecosystem for Teaching and**

## Research

Innovations initiated by individual teachers within classroom settings are often constrained by limited resources and perspectives. Therefore, building a multi-agent collaborative system is essential for overcoming barriers to individual professional development and supporting role transformation. The core objective is to establish an interdisciplinary, multi-stakeholder, and cross-sector collaborative ecosystem. University foreign language teachers should actively develop interdisciplinary collaboration awareness and engage in in-depth cooperation with faculty members from computer science, psychology, and other professional fields. Through such collaboration, teachers can jointly develop institution-specific intelligent teaching tools and design interdisciplinary “foreign language + discipline-specific” teaching projects, thereby realizing the reciprocal empowerment of technology and pedagogy while expanding the practical application boundaries of foreign language education.

At the same time, intelligent technologies should be utilized to establish teaching and research communities that transcend course groups and institutional boundaries. Through blended online and offline activities, teaching innovation competitions, and collaborative pedagogical exchanges, teachers can share intelligent teaching experiences and high-quality educational resources, thereby fostering a sustainable pattern of collective professional advancement. Furthermore, universities should deepen school-enterprise cooperation by collaborating with technology companies and authoritative foreign language academic organizations in the co-development of customized intelligent teaching products. Such partnerships can align teaching content with evolving industry demands and provide broader platforms for instructional innovation and professional growth.

## 5. Conclusion

The deep integration of artificial intelligence and foreign language education does not represent a linear process in which machines replace teachers; rather, it constitutes a historical opportunity that compels education to return to its essential mission of human development. As intelligent technologies comprehensively deconstruct traditional teaching functions-including knowledge transmission,

classroom control, and independent instruction-the core value of university foreign language teachers is shifting from that of “skilled transmitters of knowledge” to “cultivators of human development.” Within the emerging human-AI collaborative ecosystem, teachers are no longer monopolizers and transmitters of linguistic knowledge, but instead serve as navigators of personalized learning, collaborators in knowledge construction, and guardians of value guidance and emotional support. This transformation represents not only the revitalization of teachers’ professional vitality, but also the fundamental pathway through which foreign language education in the AI era can preserve its humanistic essence and fulfill the educational mission of fostering moral integrity and holistic human development.

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