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Teachers Talking Back to AI: A Literature Review of Indonesian Vocational ESP Teachers' Voices on ChatGPT in Published Articles

Rizky Sulvika Puspa Rinda[1], Dwi Santoso[2], Suminto[3]
[1,3]Politeknik Negeri Samarinda, Kalimantan Timur, Indonesia
[2]Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

English teachers in Indonesian vocational high schools are expected to teach English for Specific Purposes (ESP) with little field knowledge, material or curriculum guidance, and generative AI such as ChatGPT is quickly filling this gap. Existing studies report vocational teachers' AI perceptions one site at a time, mostly through acceptance surveys, and none has synthesised what these teachers actually say. This literature review applied Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis to six freely accessible empirical articles (2024–2026) reporting the views of up to 88 in-service and pre-service SMK English teachers. Four themes were constructed: AI as a stand-in for the subject specialist; AI kept behind the classroom door, used mainly for preparation under constraints of paid features, devices and school rules; checking AI output against vocational reality, sometimes through students' workshop knowledge; and guarding creativity, integrity and moral guidance as human work. The review shows that AI currently absorbs a structural ESP problem at the level of the individual teacher. It contributes a cross-study reading of vocational teachers' voices, identifies a verification paradox in AI-assisted ESP, and informs ESP-oriented AI literacy, collaboration with vocational-subject teachers, and institutional guidance.

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Corresponding Author:

Rizky Sulvika Puspa Rinda
Politeknik Negeri Samarinda, Kalimantan Timur, Indonesia
Email: rinda.rizky@polnes.ac.id

1. INTRODUCTION

English in Indonesian vocational high schools (*Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan*, SMK) is meant to serve students' future workplaces. In principle this makes it a case of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), or more precisely English for Vocational Purposes. In practice, the conditions for ESP are weak. A multiple-case study of SMK business and management programmes described the current arrangement as "ESP-permissive" rather than "ESP-driven": curriculum regulation allows contextualised English, but does not require occupational genres, needs analysis or performance-based assessment, and classroom teaching stays close to General English [1]. Earlier work found that SMK English teachers felt they lacked the basic knowledge to teach English tied to students' majors, relied on general textbooks in the absence of ESP curriculum guidance, and faced heavy workloads [2].

Generative AI arrived into this gap. Reviews describe ChatGPT as able to generate texts, dialogues and tasks on demand, while warning about inaccuracy and integrity risks [3]. A seven-month case study of one EFL teacher found that ChatGPT supported planning, classroom implementation and writing assessment, but only when the teacher could craft prompts and recognise inaccurate output [4]. In Indonesia, in-service teachers reported using ChatGPT for lesson preparation with both excitement and concern, and adapting its output before use [5]. Teachers generally do not expect AI to replace them: a 2026 reflexive thematic analysis of 27 English teachers in Lima found that most grounded their value in human connection and AI's pedagogical limits, and located vulnerability in other, less competent colleagues rather than in themselves [6]. For an English teacher asked to prepare materials on agribusiness tools, pharmacy or electrical engineering, a tool that produces field-specific English in seconds is an obvious attraction.

Since 2024, a small body of Indonesian studies has reported how vocational English teachers perceive and use generative AI [7], [8], [9], [10], [11], [12]. Most are single-site surveys or case studies, framed by technology acceptance or TPACK, and they tend to report favourable attitudes alongside lists of challenges. Read one at a time, they suggest broad enthusiasm. Read together, and read for what teachers actually say, they may reveal a more critical and situated picture: teachers questioning AI output, setting limits on its use, and working around structural constraints. This is what the title phrase "talking back" refers to.

The review draws on the ecological view of teacher agency, in which agency is not a capacity teachers possess but something they achieve through the interplay of their beliefs and experience with present structural and cultural conditions [13]. This lens directs attention to how teachers accept, adapt, check or limit AI, and to the conditions (curriculum, resources, rules, colleagues) that enable or constrain those moves.

Yet this body of work remains thin: within the databases searched, the authors found only a handful of such articles, all set in SMKs, and none concerning English lecturers in polytechnics or other vocational higher education institutions. To the authors' knowledge, no study has yet brought these vocational ESP studies together and interpreted the teacher voices they contain. This article does so as a literature review, applying reflexive thematic analysis to published empirical articles as its data source. It addresses three questions:

1. How do Indonesian vocational ESP teachers, as represented in published articles, construct ChatGPT and generative AI in relation to ESP teaching?
2. How do they position themselves in relation to AI output, their students and their institutions?
3. What do these constructions reveal about the conditions of ESP teaching in Indonesian vocational education?

2. METHOD

This article is a qualitative literature review that uses reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) as developed by Braun and Clarke [14], [15], [16]. RTA is a "Big Q" approach in which themes are patterns of shared meaning actively constructed by the researcher, not objects that emerge from data. It can be applied to many kinds of textual data, provided that design choices (data type, orientation, theoretical position) are explicit and coherent [17]. Here the data source is published research articles. The review takes a constructionist position: each article is treated as a representation of teacher voices filtered through researchers' questions, instruments and framings, not as a transparent window onto teachers' beliefs.

Two layers of each article were read. First-order data were teachers' own words (interview or reflection extracts) and close reports of what teachers said. Second-order data were the article authors' interpretations, theme labels and survey summaries. The analysis focused on first-order data and treated second-order material as context; the difference between the two layers became analytically useful (Section 3.5).

Search and selection

Articles were located through Google Scholar, Garuda (Kemdiktisaintek), DOAJ and ERIC, using English and Indonesian terms that combined an AI term (*ChatGPT, generative AI, Gen-AI, AI chatbot, kecerdasan buatan*) with a context term (*vocational high school, SMK, polytechnic, politeknik, ESP, English for Specific Purposes, guru bahasa Inggris SMK*). Reference lists of included articles were scanned. The search was iterative and purposive, consistent with RTA's interest in meaning rather than exhaustive coverage. Articles were included when they (a) were empirical and published in a journal between 2023 and 2026; (b) were set in an Indonesian vocational institution; (c) reported the views or experiences of English teachers or pre-service English teachers about ChatGPT or generative AI; and (d) were freely accessible in full text online, so that readers can check every interpretation. Articles were excluded when they reported only students' views, pooled English teachers with teachers of other subjects, or were conceptual. No article on polytechnic English lecturers' views met the criteria.

Data source

Six published articles met the criteria (Table 1). Together they report the views of up to 88 teachers. Two articles by the same lead author were conducted with English teachers in the same district (East Jakarta) within a year, so their samples may overlap.

Table 1. Published articles analysed as the data source

Code	Article	Setting and participants	Design and data
S1	Purba et al. (2024) [7]	SMK Negeri 1 Singaraja, Bali; 4 English teachers, 129 hospitality students	Explanatory sequential mixed methods; questionnaire, interviews
S2	Apoko (2025) [8]	30 SMKs, East Jakarta; 37 EFL teachers (6 interviewed)	Sequential explanatory mixed methods; TAM-based survey, interviews
S3	Apoko et al. (2025) [9]	SMK teachers' training, East Jakarta; 35 EFL teachers	Training evaluation; questionnaire, written reflections
S4	Ihsanurrahmah et al. (2025) [10]	SMKs in Malang; 4 pre-service teachers (fashion design, electrical engineering, nursing, agriculture)	Exploratory case study; focus group
S5	Septiani et al. (2025) [11]	One SMK, Karawang; 4 English teachers	Qualitative case study; open questionnaire, interviews (TPACK lens)
S6	Pratama et al. (2026) [12]	SMK Methodist 2 Palembang; 4 English teachers, 100 students	Qualitative case study; interviews, questionnaire, classroom observation

Analytic procedure

Analysis followed the six recursive phases of RTA [14], [15], as illustrated in practice by Byrne [18]: (1) familiarisation, reading each article in full with notes on its framing, instruments and teacher voices; (2) line-by-line coding of findings sections, teacher extracts and summary tables for semantic and latent meaning (e.g., *AI as field expert*, *checking terminology*, *premium version barrier*, *AI kept out of class*, *fear of laziness*); (3) generating initial themes around central organising concepts across articles; (4) reviewing themes against coded extracts and each full article, so that no theme rested on a single article; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) writing up with brief, attributed extracts. Consistent with RTA, no inter-rater reliability statistic was calculated and no claim of data saturation is made [19]. Quality was supported by a reflexive journal, an audit trail of codes and theme versions, and Braun and Clarke's guidance on quality practice [16].

Researcher reflexivity

We are English lecturers at Politeknik Negeri Samarinda, a state polytechnic in East Kalimantan, teaching ESP to students of vocational study programmes. We began exploring generative AI in our own classes with ChatGPT and have since moved to Gemini as well, following our students' changing preferences. Before reading the articles, we expected to find that ChatGPT

was partly helpful and partly harmful for ESP teaching. Our position as vocational ESP practitioners made us attentive to field-specific content and to the distance between AI output and workplace reality, and may have drawn us towards themes of verification and limits.

Ethical considerations

The review analysed published, freely accessible articles and involved no human participants directly. Teacher extracts are reproduced only as they appear in the published sources, briefly and with attribution.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Four themes were constructed from the six published articles. Together they show teachers using generative AI to cover a gap in ESP knowledge and materials, keeping it mostly in the preparation stage, checking its output against vocational reality, and defending the parts of teaching they consider human (Table 2).

Before the themes, the profile of the data source is itself a finding. Within the databases searched, only six articles met the inclusion criteria, all published between 2024 and 2026. All six are set in SMKs; none concerns English lecturers in polytechnics or vocational higher education. The studies are small: four reports on four teachers each, and the two larger ones share a lead author and district. Geographically they cluster in Java and Bali, with one in Sumatra and none from Kalimantan or eastern Indonesia. Two are mixed-method surveys (S1, S2), one is a training evaluation (S3), and three are qualitative case studies (S4–S6); only one used classroom observation (S6), and none followed teachers over time. In short, generative AI has entered vocational ESP faster than research on vocational teachers' experience of it.

Table 2. Themes, central organising concepts and contributing articles

Theme	Central organising concept	Articles
1. A stand-in for the subject specialist	AI supplies field-specific English the teacher and the system cannot	S1, S2, S3, S4
2. AI behind the classroom door	AI is used backstage for preparation and administration; classroom use is limited by conditions and rules	S1–S6
3. Checking the machine against the workshop	Teachers correct AI output, with vocational reality as the reference point	S1, S4, S6
4. Guarding what AI cannot do	Teachers redraw their professional boundary around creativity, integrity and moral guidance	S1, S2, S4, S5, S6

3.1. A Stand-In for the Subject Specialist

The most consistent reason teachers gave for valuing generative AI was not general efficiency but access to field-specific English they could not otherwise produce. In S2 [8], one interviewed teacher described Gen-AI as "providing valuable support for teachers who may not have expertise in specialized fields", naming technology, pharmacy and graphic design, and said it helped align exercises and lesson plans with industry vocabulary. Another explained that teaching several majors required many kinds of texts, which AI could now supply.

The pre-service teachers in S4 [10] made the gap explicit. Teaching agriculture, electrical engineering, fashion design and nursing classes, they reported limited knowledge of the majors and their technical vocabulary, and found that neither textbooks nor web searches, nor even journal articles, yielded suitable material. ChatGPT, prompted with the students' major and level, became their source of texts, dialogues, fill-in tasks and scoring rubrics. In S1 [7] and S3 [9], teachers likewise described AI as a way to adapt English to vocational needs, and most S3 participants agreed that the tools introduced were relevant to the vocational curriculum.

This theme captures a substitution. The knowledge that an ESP curriculum, specialised textbooks or a vocational-subject colleague might provide is instead requested from a chatbot, one prompt at a time. Teachers present this as resourcefulness, and it is; but a structural absence is being

absorbed at the level of the individual teacher. Notably, S5 [11] reported AI use for lesson plans and materials without reference to students' majors, which suggests that AI's ESP potential is not realised automatically.

3.2. AI Behind the Classroom Door

Across all six articles, teachers used AI mainly *before* class: planning lessons, generating materials and assessments, producing videos and slides, and handling administrative tasks such as grading feedback. Inside the classroom, AI was far less visible. In S4 [10], pre-service teachers could not use ChatGPT directly with students because of school regulations. In S6 [12], classroom observation found that students used chatbots mainly to complete reading and writing tasks, while teachers rarely modelled AI use; the authors characterised integration as operational rather than pedagogically transformative. In S5 [11], some teachers reported never having used AI in their teaching at all.

Teachers tied this backstage pattern to material conditions. Paid premium features were a recurring obstacle (S1, S2), as were low-specification laptops and unclear instructions (S2). In S5, teachers described unreliable school Wi-Fi and classrooms without projectors or screens. The contrast with S6, where the school network was described as robust and AI use was observed across classes, supports this reading. Teachers also described how they learned: S3 participants valued hands-on practice with guidance, while S5 teachers said online workshops had not translated into classroom use and that peer discussion helped more. Agency over AI was achieved where conditions and colleagues made it possible, and mostly in the part of the job teachers control alone.

3.3. Checking the Machine Against the Workshop

Teachers did not simply accept AI output. The richest evidence comes from S4 [10], where pre-service teachers described three kinds of correction: AI-generated technical terms that did not match what students learned in their majors; language that felt rigid and machine-like even after more specific prompting; and comprehension questions that were too easy, which a supervising teacher pointed out. The most telling case came from an electrical engineering class, where the tool named in the AI-generated material was not the one student used: "this multimeter is different from what the multimeter they know" (S4). Students' confusion, not the teacher's own knowledge, exposed the error.

This points to a paradox at the heart of AI-assisted ESP. Teachers turn to AI because they lack field knowledge (Section 3.1), yet checking AI's field content requires exactly that knowledge. In S4, the check came from students' vocational experience and from a supervisor. Elsewhere, checking was less visible: S1 raised limits around access and local languages, S6 observed little explicit evaluation of AI output during lessons, and the S2 survey, framed by technology acceptance, contained no teacher comment on accuracy. Talking back to the machine was real but uneven, and happened mostly in private preparation rather than as modelled practice.

3.4. Guarding What AI Cannot Do

While welcoming efficiency, teachers repeatedly marked out what AI should not take over. Some concern was directed at students: copying, plagiarism, dependence and weaker critical thinking (S5, S6). Strikingly, the concern was also directed at teachers themselves. In S5 [11], teachers acknowledged that AI made lesson planning easier but warned that "teachers become lazy to create their own ideas". Teachers also redrew the boundary of their role. In S1 [7], teachers accepted that AI might reduce their role in transferring knowledge but insisted that their influence on students' attitudes and ethics could not be replaced. S5 teachers said AI cannot give moral advice as teachers do, and S6 teachers framed AI as a digital assistant while taking responsibility for setting ethical boundaries. Across these accounts, teachers concede the informational part of teaching to AI and claim the creative, relational and moral parts for themselves.

3.5. Discussion

The central argument of this review is that AI currently absorbs a structural ESP problem at the level of the individual teacher. It supplies the field-specific content that the curriculum and

textbooks do not, while the work of checking that content remains with teachers who often lack the field knowledge to do so.

Theme 1 connects directly to the ESP-permissive arrangement of Indonesian vocational English [1] and to teachers' sense of being unprepared for major-specific English [2]. From the ecological view of agency [13], teachers here achieve agency by working around structural absence rather than changing it. The risk is that AI makes the gap less visible, weakening pressure to build ESP curricula and materials. The prompts teachers write, specifying a major, a workplace task and a level, could instead serve as the starting point for a shared, school-level needs analysis.

Theme 3 extends a point made in general ELT: ChatGPT helps only when teachers can recognise inaccurate output [4], and teachers need recommendations and competencies for critical use [3]. In vocational ESP, the knowledge needed to check AI output is disciplinary as well as linguistic, and it is precisely what English teachers report lacking. The multimeter case shows where that knowledge sits: with students who use the equipment, and potentially with vocational-subject teachers and industry partners. This supports the call for closer coordination between English and vocational-subject teachers [1].

Theme 4 echoes findings that teachers ground their value in human connection [6]. The Lima teachers in that study located vulnerability in less competent colleagues; in the present corpus, some teachers turned the concern on themselves, worrying that AI could make teachers lazy. This self-directed caution may reflect the vocational context, where teachers already depend on AI for content they cannot produce.

These vocational patterns sit within a wider body of Indonesian and international teacher research. English teachers at an Islamic senior high school in Malang mainly used ChatGPT for plagiarism checking and finding references, turned to other tools such as Gemini when it lacked pedagogical features or gave unreliable information, and were confident it would not replace them [20]. Pre-service teachers in Surakarta rated ChatGPT as useful and easy to use, yet their intention to use it regularly was lower, citing concern about over-reliance and a need for training [21]. English teachers elsewhere voiced similar concerns about the authenticity of AI-generated content and its effect on learning outcomes [22], and Indonesian writing teachers weighed ChatGPT's potential impact on students' EFL writing [23]. What distinguishes the vocational corpus is the field-knowledge dimension: in general EFL, teachers can usually judge AI output on linguistic grounds, whereas vocational ESP teachers must also judge disciplinary content they may not command.

Finally, reading first-order teacher voices against second-order framings revealed a methodological gap. Articles framed by technology acceptance (S2) or summarised through survey percentages (S1, S3) foregrounded positive attitudes, while critical and situated talk surfaced mainly in qualitative extracts, focus groups and observation (S4, S5, S6). The positivity of the field may partly be a product of its instruments. Many of the articles also reported "benefits" and "challenges" as topic summaries rather than patterns of shared meaning, a common problem Braun and Clarke identify in thematic analysis reporting [24]; reading across articles allowed such summaries to be reworked into interpretive themes.

3.5. Implications

First, ESP-oriented AI literacy should go beyond prompting to routines for checking field-specific content against students' workshop knowledge, vocational textbooks and vocational-subject colleagues. Second, schools can pair English teachers with vocational-subject teachers to review AI-generated materials, turning a private verification burden into shared work. Third, equitable access to devices, connectivity and tool features, together with clear school-level guidance, would allow AI to move from preparation into transparent, modelled classroom practice. Fourth, professional learning should be hands-on and peer-supported, and include critical evaluation of AI output.

4. CONCLUSION

This literature review used reflexive thematic analysis to interpret the voices of Indonesian vocational ESP teachers about generative AI across six published articles. Teachers use AI as a stand-in for the subject specialist, mostly behind the classroom door; they check its output against

vocational reality when they can; and they guard creativity, integrity and moral guidance as the human core of their work. Taken together, these themes show that AI is helping individual teachers cope with an ESP system that does not supply what vocational English needs, rather than changing that system.

The review has limitations. The data source is small (six articles) and limited to freely accessible publications. All articles concern SMKs; no published article on polytechnic or vocational higher education English lecturers met the criteria, which is itself a gap. The analysis works with teacher voices already selected and framed by other researchers, and two articles may share participants. The scarcity of eligible articles points to a concrete research agenda. First, studies are needed of ESP lecturers in polytechnics and vocational higher education, including institutions outside Java such as those in Kalimantan. Second, classroom observation and longitudinal designs could follow AI-generated materials from prompt to correction to classroom use. Third, research could examine collaboration in which vocational-subject teachers and industry partners check the field content of AI output. Fourth, the role of students' vocational knowledge as a corrective to AI, glimpsed in the multimeter case, deserves direct study. Finally, publishing richer qualitative extracts would make future syntheses of vocational teachers' voices more robust.

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Author Contributions

The first author conducted the conceptualization, decided on the methodology and formal analysis, and wrote original draft. The second author worked with data curation, validation, wrote review and editing. The third author conducted the investigation, wrote review and editing. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest during the investigation of this study.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used a generative AI assistant to support the literature search and screening, and to check that sources were freely accessible online. All AI-assisted output was reviewed, revised and approved by the authors, who re-read the six source articles and checked quotations, interpretations and references against the original publications. The researcher reflexivity statement and the reflexive journal reflect the authors' own positions and experiences. The authors take full responsibility for the content of this publication. Generative AI is not listed as an author.

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