

AI and English Language Teaching: A New Rise of Critical Pedagogy

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Abstract

With the rise of using artificial intelligence in the field of English language teaching, people on the side of applied linguistics and education have experienced a double-edged sword of joy and concern. AI's complex interaction with English language teaching is analyzed, and it is questioned if AI can actually improve learning outcomes, or does it merely reinscribe inequalities framed in a technological gloss. The contribution reflects the current research in computer assisted language learning (CALL), second language acquisition (SLA), and critical pedagogy, and presents an argument that there is little doubt that AI can have measurable impact on a range of linguistics aspects of L2 learning, including feedback to the learner, vocabulary, or individual learning autonomy, but it may de-skill teachers and be homogenising the norms of the English language, and not allowing access to learners without digital access. It advocates for a teacher-driven and learner-informed perspective toward AI that avoids techno-solutionism and embraces real AI pedagogical opportunities.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, English language teaching, computer-assisted language learning, second language acquisition, critical pedagogy, learner autonomy

Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has had a tremendous impact on English language teaching (ELT). So, AI tools were introduced into language classes before researchers properly analyzed their effectiveness and gained a good understanding of theories behind the use of AI. The tools include automated writing-feedback systems, large language models,

and conversational robots. The enthusiasm for the prospect of artificial intelligence in ELT is understandable. As teachers of language for over 4 decades, we are all interested in ways of giving individual feedback, authentic communication and motivating learning materials. AI seems like it can generate the three simultaneously in the beginning.

For years various technologies have been developed to improve language learning but not through to real and sustained significant gains. Criticism of AI should not only be targeted at the potential risks it poses but also because of the idyllic notion that technology is the universal solution to all educational challenges.

The role of English in global education needs to be taken into account. English can be a means to education, jobs and inter-communication. Meanwhile, it can maintain cultural and linguistic inequality if the native-speaker mode of English is regarded as the only correct form. AI systems are usually trained with English created by the majority of the native speaker population. Hence one should not think of them as neutral educational resources in assessing or correcting the millions of multilingual users of English around the world. As they use these, it draws attention to issues of control of linguistics and language identity, standards of acceptability, access and the possible marginalization of certain learners in ELT.

The article critically addresses some possible issues with the implementation of AI in language classrooms such as linguistic bias, the loss of teachers' professional skills, and commercialization of language education. It offers a critical and comprehensive account of the use of AI in ELT. In this perspective, teachers are not merely masters of their students' intellectual and professional development and students' linguistic and cultural diversity is acknowledged and respected.

AI in English Language Teaching

It is crucial to explore the results of research before talking about the role of AI in the field of English language teaching (ELT). The use of AI in language learning has many facets. So, the use of AI must not be blindly accepted or opposed. The adoption of AI should not be taken for granted or declined without taking into account its educational implications. The research has already brought some advantages for writing skills, conversational practice, learner vocabularies and self-study.

Automated writing evaluation (AWE) systems have become a part of writing skills for over 20 years. Proprietary tools, like AWE and Grammarly, can now provide instant commenting on grammar, word and structure. These systems also may enable students to make more frequent changes and edits to work. But a potential benefit is that their criticism might be limited to identifying, catching and pointing out only oral language errors, and not as attuned to assessing meaning and argument (Warschauer & Grimes, 2008). Thus, at the

end of the day, while AI feedback can be helpful, it serves best as a complement to not a replacement for teacher feedback. As an AI can detect common errors made by learners in the specific language, teachers can focus on argumentation and rhetorical effectiveness and the needs of the individual L2 learner (Stevenson & Phakiti, 2014).

The advent of massive language models (LLMs), like GPT-4, has likewise provided new chances for language training. Unlike the rule-based Chatbots, the LLM-based Chatbots can hold a meaningful and contextual conversation on multiple topics. Conversations with these chatbots can be longer and more contextually relevant, as opposed to the earlier rule-based conversation systems, which engaged in shorter dialogues. They can support the students in learning the language in an informal atmosphere by repeating the language (Kohnke et al., 2023). This may be especially useful for students who are foreign-language anxious, which may affect their involvement in the classroom and/or their learning of a foreign language (Horwitz et al., 1986). There may be students who are freer to develop new skills in English with a non-judgemental, non-impatient AI. However, with the aid of AI, it should not replace but add to the communication with the teacher and with other learners.

One creative solution to how AI could support vocabulary learning is the introduction of spaced repetition to vocabulary learning apps such as Anki or Duolingo. Such systems automatically generate spaced reviews according to student success and provide over time and repetition. Multiple exposures are necessary when wanting to remember a vocabulary term for long-term learning (Nation, 2001). AI can also be provided with the learner's language level and recommendations are made for difficult texts that suit that level. It can therefore help teachers and learners select inspiration to them that is both comprehensible within the easy and difficult range (Krashen, 1982).

AI can help empower learners. The autonomous learner is more responsible in evaluating his learning, finding what is needed to be improved, and selecting learning materials (Benson, 2011). With correct set-up, the AI tools can provide tailored feedback, further learning activities, and allow for learners to complete more learning activities beyond class time. Such help may be of great value, especially if those with professional expertise in English teaching and/or English learning are limited. However, AI should not replace teachers, but rather the teaching staff all needs to be mentored by a wise person who has undertaken specific education and training to learn from AI.

The Contested Ground: What AI Cannot and Should Not Replace

But not taking this for granted is not an endorsement of the path towards the “AI-mediate” or “AI-managed” language learning that some technology investors and, more recently, some policy makers seem to endorse. However, while the potential of AI to

transform ELT is huge, the problems are equally regular and strikingly complex, involving all three dimensions of technology, pedagogy, and ideology.

The basic technical problem with existing AI applications in ELT is that they are not in tune with linguistic differences and diversity. The largest and most complex of the AI language models used for the best models of AI language models is trained mainly on corpora of text that are over-representative of some types of English (specifically American and British ones) and under-representative of the Global Englishes largely spoken by the world. In fact, the latter, as Kachru (1992) has argued, has its own system of rules, norms for communication, and cultural acceptance rules which non-native speakers of English also follow when they use English in their non-native contexts. An AI that detects the structures of Indian English's "erroneous" structure as errors, or whatever interaction it has with an individual or a group of South Asian English speakers to edit their lexicon towards the norms of American English isn't playing a neutral pedagogical role. It is imposing a language hierarchy, which favours the speakers of some languages in detriment of others. Canagarajah (2013) maintained that language education should shift to a translanguaging stance where the entire spectrum of linguistic resources that multilingual individuals bring to the communicative context of L2 English is valued, not viewed as flawed in relation to a standard L1 (monolingual, native speaker) standard. Of course, the current generation of AI systems, excluding almost anything else, cannot do that kind of cross-lingual orientation, as they are, by design, normalizing machines.

This is exacerbated by the embedded bias that science on the algorithmic fairness problem has determined exists in AI systems. What is comprehensively shown by Noble (2018) is that algorithmic systems reproduce, and often magnify, the biases in their training set. This is because the feedback given by learning tools built with AI is expected to be less accurate and less helpful for learners whose ELT indicates that there is an influence of Arabic, Mandarin, Hindi or Swahili norms than for learners who show more influence of English norms on their ELT. These consequences are not experienced equally with respect to learners: they most often negatively impact those who are the most marginalised by prevailing educational inequalities, learners in the Global South, learners coming from the lowest socio-economic status and learners whose first languages are furthest removed from the Indo-European linguistic family. This guarantee of "whitelisting" access to quality English language instruction consequently needs to be assessed extremely rigorously relative to the findings that AI systems can be systematically less useful or even actively harmful for the learners who most need aid.

Technological barriers aside, there's also a deeper pedagogical question behind students' fears of losing out on human input in English Language programs. The focus of this concern is the inestimable value of human contact in language learning. The sociocultural theory of learning by Vygotsky (1978) suggests that for cognition, with language development in particular, to develop, students are required to engage in interaction with more capable others, within zones of proximal development. Scaffolding is not what one could call 'corrective feedback and explanations of grammatical rules; it is such a nuanced skill that must involve the sensitive reading of a learner's affective state, the calibration of challenge to learner readiness, the recognition of cultural presuppositions in a learner's language usage, and the nurturing of a classroom community where learners are at ease with risk-taking. But in this respect, they are capacities that no AI system has, and there are clear reasons why any AI system is unlikely to have in the foreseeable future in any meaningful pedagogical sense.

In this regard, there is a high risk of teacher losing their skills. The potential is for the professional vision and expertise of teachers to be increasingly undermined as AI performs more of the mundane tasks of language learning, such as providing corrective feedback, testing on vocabulary, creating reading texts, creating drill and practice. It is not just an issue of teacher employment although that is a valid concern. It is the concern about the gradual 'deprivation' of pedagogy's relationship. Against the growing trend of translating education into learning and the view that knowledge and skills are the only aspects of learning that matter, Biesta (2013) strongly rejected this narrow teaching-learning definition, and urged us to think in terms of subjectification, that is, the creation of critically reflective, autonomous persons. AI systems that focus less on learner to human interaction mediated by a teacher and more on transaction between the learner and a machine could risk to engage with language learning instruction as narrowly defined as the acquisition of linguistic form and neglect the humanistic purpose that always provided ELT with ethics.

The use of AI to profitably educate the language should be addressed. Marketed by the major AI-language-learning services (Duolingo, Babbel, enterprise AI tools targeting schools), all of them are commercial businesses that have a duty to their shareholders, not to their clientele of learners. The pedagogical design preferences imbedded in these platforms are not made by language teachers or applied linguists for optimal learning outcomes, but rather by the product managers and engineers for metrics of engagement and subscriber retention for their platform/service. The tech industry has colonized education discourse, posited its own definition of learning and shaped organizational policies for learning, thus moving what counts as learning and where learning happens from educators and

communities to corporations, argued Selwyn (2019). It is a concern amplified in the realm of ELT because English language education is already a multimillion-dollar commercial enterprise, where the world-wide ELT market is estimated to be worth tens of billions of dollars a year, resulting in strong commercial motives behind propping up AI solutions (even if those solutions lack real pedagogical value).

The Question of Motivation, Identity, and the Affective Dimension of Language Learning

Language learning is an affective discipline, where learners' identities, attitudes, and concepts of the self are deeply involved. In this regard, one of the most under-researched aspects of the question of AI and ELT addresses the affective and identity aspects of language acquisition. The learning of a foreign language is not just a cognitive challenge of mastering grammar and words, it is a process of changing one's identity or of becoming another kind of speaker, of living in a different voice. Norton (2013) built on this notion of investment in language learning, as a means of describing the multifaceted links between learners' motivations and their identities, their imagined communities and their envisaged future self. A learner who is motivated through his or her imagination that he or she might be able to achieve professional success in an international context will be motivated differently than a learner who feels compelled to learn English in order to be able to advance in school; both are motivated differently than a learner holding English in place of cultural colonialism that endangers his or her own heritage language.

AI systems are virtually unaware of these elements of learner identity and motivation. They could not motivate vocabulary learning, or offer instant feedback on grammatically correct English, but they could not explore the issue of why a particular learner wants or needs to learn English, what makes it great or terrible for them to speak English, or how their use of English is related to their larger sense of self. Such considerations are not incidental and peripheral issues in language pedagogy but ones that are viewed as key factors influencing learning outcomes in the second language domain based on the research on motivation and second language acquisition. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) asserted that a fundamental view of motivation in language learning is the one that centers on learner's identity, i.e., they believe that students go out of their way to learn a language because they see their approach to the target language as the way to becoming the ideal version of themselves. It comes from the idea of an AI that doesn't consider this aspect of language acquisition, and if that's the case it is pedagogically incomplete, it is working with a model of the learner that is too poor to be educated.

This critique raises the broader question about the purpose of English language teaching. When ELT is seen mainly as a form of skill transmission involving the reading and writing or oral production of pre-set linguistic tasks, then the use of AI seems well adapted to much of what ELT entails. However, if ELT is seen as education, not in any of the narrower senses listed above, but in the much broader sense of fostering critical awareness, intercultural competence and the ability to engage meaningfully in meaningful communication with those they do not know, the use of AI needs to be more constrained and limited to well defined areas. Freire's (1970) critique of the "banking" model of education as a place that learners are passive objects for the knowledge to be deposited applies here: AI-enabled language learning can be an exceptionally effective tool for replicating the banking of languages, putting language content into the learner's "bank" (mind) without involving the learner's mind as an active participation in its development.

Toward a Critically Mediated Approach to AI in ELT

Between an uncritical use of AI and a reflexive opposition is an integrated and carefully filtered reverie that would be the most defensible compromise position in the use of AI in English language teaching. The stance is AI tools have a place to be used in ELT when teachers are well versed in theory, can be critical of the limitations and biases of the tools and are dedicated to language learning goals that are distinctly humanistic.

The first key in the critical discourse of integrating AI in language instruction is to keep teachers as language teaching experts at the center of the language learning process. The initial norm of critically mediated integration of AI is that teachers should remain at the center of the teaching and learning of languages. Not only is it the responsibility of the teacher to manage when and how some AI tools are used but it's the responsibility of the teacher to provide enough information about the operation of the AI systems so she can inform learners about their limits, or so she can drive their normalization tendencies. A pedagogically sensitive teacher could capitalize on the fact that an AI writing tool is used to produce standard American English and elicit learner reflection on why the AI does not work well for languages other than standard American English, what questions the AI answers about linguistic power and privilege, and so forth. This kind of critical metalinguistic awareness is in itself a valuable learning outcome and only achievable if the teachers would approach AI as critical critics, not enthusiastic followers. Pedagogy in educational approaches for critical literacy education has long been advocated by educators like Cope and Kalantzis (2009) as one that brings the politics of language to a learner's attention. The AI tools could be a pedagogical tool that could make the politics of language visible to a learner.\

The second principle is related to access and equity. We need significant thought to be put into how to make the benefits of AI accessible to all learners – irrespective of whether they do so from the rich contexts available to them or from a less rich culture from which an AI might provide some benefits. The quality, cultural fit or lack thereof of the instruction provided by AI to learners in (other) under-resourced contexts needs to be taken seriously, not degraded, but be of equal quality and culturally appropriate for learners in under-resourced contexts. In education, there are a variety of ways technologies have been used over the years and perhaps no one would argue that technology somehow “evened the playing field” in the classroom and with AI, that’s not going to change anytime soon. Technology has been a key factor in perpetuating and increasing inequities in learning over the last few decades, many of which were evidenced by Warschauer (2004); this is something to consider, before it is believed that AI can solve all learning equality issues. Policy efforts are needed to make space for training teachers in AI and to fund the development of AI products specifically for use by LGDs to ensure real efforts towards equity in the use of AI for ELT.

The third principle is related to how to cultivate AI-bothersome learners. The goals of teaching English have long been related with teaching critical thinking and communicative competence; in the AI age, it should be expanded to training what can be called AI literacy, which refers to competence in the way of using, evaluating and questioning AI as a communication resource. Ensure that learners have an awareness of the limitations of the authority of AI-written texts, of the definite linguistic ideology in the AI feedback, and of the blurred distinctions between human and AI communication. It is not just a side-line issue for ELT; ELT competencies for a 21st century communicative space that is populated by more and more AI-generated content is the ability to discern, assess and react judiciously to AI communication.

Conclusion

The aspect of AI and the EFL classroom is perhaps one of the most significant and under-resolved ones in the realm of applied linguistics in English language teaching today. AI’s benefits in particular aspects of language learning, such as writing feedback, vocabulary knowledge and foreign language anxiety, have been substantiated by the research literature. There are indeed benefits, which should not be ignored by the tech-suspicious folks. But they go hand in hand with others equally real dangers: the systematic neglect of non-standard varieties of English, the de-skilling of language teachers, the minimization of language education into an assemblage of skills and the reproduction of educational disparities digitally.

It's not that AI cannot and should not be used in English language teaching, as the article's argument suggests, but that using it in a way that serves its purpose ought to be guided by educators working based on research and a recognition of the language learner as a fully human person. Language learning is not a matter of maximizing input to optimize output; it is a process that has to do with identity, desire, cultural belonging, and the aspiration to speak across difference. AI can assist in this endeavor in limited and specific ways, but in no way replace the teacher who knows the learner as a human being who senses the affective aspects of learning that the machine cannot and who leaves open the learning space where language education can become at its best a way to human flourishing.

The key is to build the theory to inform the practice and to create the institutional context that will enable the English language teaching profession to do more than just embrace AI -- it has to do it on its own terms: not as a silver bullet solution to the problem of language teaching, nor as something that threatens the job of the teacher, but as one of those powerful yet profoundly ambivalent technologies that requires most of all an educated, critical, and fully alive language teacher.

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