What is the impact of artificial intelligence on English language teaching?

This is the transcript for Series 3, episode 4 of the TeachingEnglish podcast. You can find out more about the words highlighted in the transcript in the show notes for this episode.

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

AI, learners, teacher, generative, students, writing, question, tool, process, class, work, schools, technology, assessment, tools, students, language, writing, platforms, teachers, text, education, learning, question, teaching, app

Welcome to Series 3 of Teaching English with the British Council: the podcast for English language teachers around the world.

In each episode we look at a critical contemporary issue in the world of ELT.

Teaching English with the British Council

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Teaching English with the British Council

This is episode 4: What is the impact of artificial intelligence on English language teaching?

We'am: Welcome to this episode of Teaching English with the British Council, and in episode 4 today we will talk about AI, or artificial intelligence, in English language teaching.

Chris: I've been very busy this week, We'am, so I'm very sad, I know I'm supposed to prepare the introduction, but I haven't been able to. But it's OK, 'cause I asked ChatGPT to write that introduction for me.

We'am: That's what people have been doing, just asking AI to do their job!

Chris: Here it is.

AI Chris: Hey, everyone. I'm Chris Sowton, not AI, just a regular guy here. How's it going?
AI We'am: Hello, awesome chicks. My name is We'am Hamdan and I'm definitely not a robot. I'm 100 per cent woman.

AI Chris: Welcome to episode 4 of Teaching English with the British Council. This episode is all about AI and the impact it has on English language teaching.

AI We'am: AI! What does that even mean, guys? Does it stand for artifical intelligence?

AI Chris: What did you say, We'am Hamdan?

AI We'am: Sorry, I meant artificial intelligence. My bad, sozzle. We all make mistakes. I'm only human.

AI Chris: Hot diggity dog! No, really, I can't wait. Let's get this party started.

Teaching English with the British Council

Chris: In our first interview this episode, we'll be speaking to Svetlana Kandybovich, an AI educator and expert from Montenegro.

Chris: Hi, Svetlana.

Svetlana: Hello, Chris.

We'am: Good to see you! So some of our listeners will know what AI is, others won't. Can you paint a picture of what it is, what it's capable of and the impact of having, it's having on education and the world more generally.

Svetlana: Yeah, well, I have to say that currently we have more questions than answers when it comes to the impact and use of AI, especially generative AI. Opinions on the AI differ in the education community. Some are sceptical and worry about AI's risks and call for caution, while, you know, others are optimistic, hoping that it will revolutionise education. But AI isn't a simple choice between fear and optimism. As such, the technology will facilitate any system we have in place. It can support personalised and adaptive learning. Paraphrasing the Bananarama song, it ain't what you use, it's the way that you use it, and that's what gets results. It's us educators who play a vital role in shaping its future in education. Now, what exactly is AI, or generative AI in particular? It's a branch of artificial intelligence that uses a tonne of data and super-smart computer programs to make all sorts of stuff like writing, sound, code, pictures and even videos. First, there is text-to-text, which involves large language models like ChatGPT. These models can understand and generate text, making them great for writing assistants, chatbots and more. Next, there's text-to-image software, where AI can turn written descriptions or prompts into pictures, helping with creative design and visual content creation. Have you actually played with text-to-image software? Have you tried it?

Chris: I've tried it, yeah. It's, er, I've used it in classes, but I've also used it sort of just with, with friends or to make funny pictures and so on, but it's very powerful.

Svetlana: Oh, it is. It's, it's like magic. Magic coming true, right? You just give a prompt and then you get a wonderful picture. Well, the next type is text-to-voice software, which converts written words into spoken audio, and it's handy for virtual assistants and accessibility tools. And lastly, there's text-to-video software, which transforms text into video content, simplifying video production and storytelling. And these days, there's a trend of blending them all together and creating new models that can interact with users to text, sound, images and videos. And it's pretty fascinating to see how everything comes together. AI can potentially help innovate education, or as some say revolutionise education, offering a range of benefits. First, it can help learners in remote and underserved areas, where access to traditional teaching resources may be limited. It may enable greater personalisation of learning experiences, tailoring content to individual students' needs and interests. Teachers can benefit from AI too. So it can reduce their workload through

automated grading and administrative tasks, giving them more time for meaningful one-on-one interactions with students.

Chris: I particularly enjoyed your reference of Bananarama as a, as an academic source.

Svetlana: Just to clarify that, we do not use tools because they are available. We use tools for a particular purpose, and tools as such are just tools, right? And they become meaningful and useful only in the right hands.

Chris: Do you think there's a perception within the education and ELT community at the moment that AI is the end product rather than a mechanism?

Svetlana: It's important to make sure that the human behind the technology – the human who develops this technology, the human who develops the app – has expertise in teaching and knows which buttons to press to hit the right buttons.

Chris: Maybe one of the challenges of that is because it's drawing on human-written text, it's going to have human biases.

Svetlana: Yeah. And that's one of the risks associated with that. Nowadays you don't need to be a coder, you don't need any special knowledge. You just need to connect your app to the large model. There are lots of platforms offering such services. So anyone – with or without teaching expertise – can build an app, and later on educators may start using this app, right? But, again, it's important to bear in mind that we don't know who behind this technology is, what kind of expertise that person has, right? What kind of guardrails that person implements to ensure that our students are safe, to ensure that privacy risks are dealt with. That is one more thing that I will probably mention – I think that expertise is the key.

Chris: You've spoken about the importance of the human interface within using AI in teaching. What is the point of learning languages in a future world? The emerging software which can translate in real time me speaking English into Russian, Belarusian, what is the value of learning languages in that kind of world?

Svetlana: Again, we're getting back to this, to the level of accuracy and to the expertise and to this nuanced understanding of the language itself. In addition to the structure is so much in the language, and the language gives you so much information that I'm not sure that any AI will ever be able to give such input to learners or to users of foreign languages.

Chris: So much English language teaching around the world nowadays, it doesn't look at those things. So it doesn't look at the cultural aspects. It just looks at English as an output. So going forwards, it seems that, in many places, why then would they learn English in those situations?

Svetlana: What I'm thinking about is the more nuanced understanding. That's important for me, that's what I try to convey to my students, because just being able to ask where something is, right, I mean, at a primitive level, it's all right. But sooner or later, we're humans, right? We would like to discuss our emotions, our attitudes, our perceptions. Which I don't think can be replaced by AI.

We'am: Many of the concerns that teachers or educators have around AI is using it responsibly. What is the future of language assessment in an age of AI?

Svetlana: So first, Gen AI can do a lot of what we currently assess, if not everything, right? And this creates an opportunity for cheating and compromises the integrity of assessments. So I would say, hmm, the initial step in the inventory process that I recommend is to run your assessments with ChatGPT and observe how it performs for them. Though the outcome is pretty obvious – we don't need a crystal ball to say that it will not have any trouble with standardised tests given its capabilities. Well, if we think about all the methods to safeguard the integrity of assessments and restrict cheating, such methods do not work any more. Any home-based or computer-based assessment is now vulnerable. For instance, measures like disabling copy–paste functionality and imposing time restrictions to prevent the use of search engines for finding correct answers are no longer effective. Second, there are no detection tools that do their job accurately. There are many issues with AI detection by AI. Humans also struggle to spot AI-generated content. Recent studies show that on average respondents are able to identify the AI-generated content only about 55 per cent of the time. We cannot out-design or outrun AI. It's not possible to create a fully AI-proof assessment. Thus, we cannot entirely prevent the use of AI. So, in general I would say if I were to draw the future of assessments in the era of AI, I would say that most likely assessment systems will need to change because we will not be able to out-design or outshine AI.

Chris: I mean, it seems strange if one of the main purposes of education is to prepare students for their working lives, for their lives outside of school, it seems strange to deny them a tool which they're going to use in their everyday lives. We need to find ways to integrate it responsibly, like you're saying, rather than burying our heads in the sand and pretending it's not there.

Svetlana: Well, we remember that initially they tried to do that, right? When ChatGPT appeared, the first reaction was to ban, to ban this horrible tool for cheating. And at the moment I would say there are many Facebook groups, right, where educators keep discussing this issue of cheating and how to prevent cheating. Though, personally, I believe that our main focus should be on how to make assessment meaningful, relevant and authentic, rather than how to prevent AI.

We'am: Last question. Do you think people rushed in using AI or governments are rushing into integrating it?

Svetlana: I know that educators in general are curious people, right? We love everything new. Technology itself offers lots of benefits for us. I mean, in terms of our personal time, we can save time, but at the same time, we are able to do something we were not able to do before without this tool. I can make my own listening comprehension activities easily. I can produce multimodal materials, getting together video and voice and images, and it does not take really much time. But at the same time, we should remember one thing and that's about rushing. We are being pushed into that. It's an extremely expensive technology. In general, if we think about it, it's the most expensive technology that we've ever had. Right? At the same time, we are given it for free, but this technology is business. Business wants to scale up. It needs to cover and to target as many people and institutions and areas as possible. We've already got lots of platforms, technological platforms, that are designed for all teachers. Bearing in mind that, again, we all operate in various contexts, right, and we all have various needs to cover. So, again, we need to have this modification tools, and we need probably to have more control. So there shouldn't be somebody sitting in Silicon Valley deciding about which pedagogy we will put into the platform.

Chris: Thank you so much for your time, Svetlana. That was absolutely brilliant.

We'am: Really brilliant. Thank you.

Svetlana: Thank you.

We'am: That was great, lots of great thoughts, but I thought that I heard the word 'banana' in there, did I? Or was I mistaken?

Chris: No, your listening skills are excellent, We'am, you did indeed hear that. That was actually Bananarama, who are a 1980s British pop group. Are they big in Ramallah?

We'am: We didn't go beyond Justin Bieber.

Chris: I think the point Svetlana was making there was about the lyrics of one of their songs, which was: it ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it. Emphasising that with AI, it's about the mechanisms, rather than the end product. That we should look at how we can use AI, rather than it being a thing in itself that we should all strive for. So I think that was one of the, certainly, the key takeaways for me was about the important ongoing role of the teacher within these processes.

We'am: That actually sums it up, because that's also the point that Svetlana was trying to make, that it is about what you do with it. So it's basically saying that those systems are, are not, you know, the solution and they will not be able to produce something as articulating as humans. So according to linguist Noam Chomsky, he says, he writes 'ChatGPT doesn't hold a candle to true intelligence'. And he also says that chatbots are marvels of machine learning, but also … the headline, actually, of the whole article that you can read is 'The False Promise of ChatGPT'. Do you think ChatGPT is giving teachers and educators false hope, Chris?

Chris: I don't know if it's giving false hope. I think part of the issue is that it's not fully understood. It's not been well researched, because it's a new idea. And people's instinctive reaction to these things is often to be sceptical or to be concerned about changes. I think there are things to be worried about with regards to ChatGPT, but I would prefer to be more optimistic and kind of look at what it can do, rather than at the problems that come with it. I think we do need to look at how we reform assessment. I think that's really important. And I think we should look at how we can use the development of AI as a prompt to do that, rather than to ignore it.

We'am: Yes, and I think for English language teaching in specific it's very doable to do things using ChatGPT, or AI in general, because when you ask ChatGPT or AI for something very clear and precise, and it's, let's say, more repetitive or monotonous, then it's very easy for it to generate those kind of things. And it's the tasks that teachers don't like to do, actually. But my worry is also that big companies, big tech companies like Google, Meta, is they're all controlling also the future of education, and what I don't like is that push maybe or speed at which things are happening. While I think that a better framework for teachers could be more trial, more research into these things and then real application into the classroom, so that would minimise their fear and gives them more confidence on how to use it.

Chris: So Chomsky says that AI will never be able to fully 100 per cent replicate the kind of language which humans can produce.

We'am: Yes, that and also he was, like, trying to spot some of the mistakes or the linguistic mistakes that AI can produce. But I think it's about trial and error in all these technologies, so maybe a version that is more enhanced can come later.

Chris: Do you not think that because the model is developing all the time, it's hungry for new text and it's always refining and improving and developing itself, that over time, it may not reach 100 per cent but it will be increasingly towards 98, 99, 99.5, 99.9 per cent. It will increasingly get closer and closer to human-type language and will be able to, it will not be possible to differentiate the two.

We'am: Maybe, but it's just the way the brain works is different than AI. The way humans use language is not the same as AI. It's not like we have these resources saved and we just use those resources. I think there's more spontaneity in the way we develop language and produce language.

Chris: But is the outcome not the same? Is the functionality not the same? If they are the same, then, essentially, there is no difference.

We'am: More research should be done on this area. We still don't know much about AI and how it's going to change our future or the future of education.

Teaching English with the British Council

Chris: In our second interview this week, we speak to Raquel Ribeiro, who's an EdTech expert, English language teacher, lecturer and writer, and she's based in São Paulo, Brazil.

Welcome, Raquel!

Raquel: Hi!

Chris: Hey, Raquel!

We'am: It's very good to see you, Raquel!

Chris: What would be an example of one AI app that you think is especially useful that you've used, you've seen your colleagues using in class?

Raquel: Nowadays, I think that Google Bard is the easiest one. There is no set-up. You just click, the app is there. And you can ask a question with your voice or typing and it replies and you can listen to everything. ChatGPT, however, was the first one I started using. One thing that was particularly helpful, it was an idea that myself and a student we just had this idea during one activity in the very beginning. They were in ChatGPT and then they typed the, the question, because that was what we could do back then, and then there was the reply, and they couldn't listen to that. They thought, well, to copy this reply and paste it in Google Translate, choosing English, so we can listen to that too. And it worked beautifully. So we could bridge the gap. And they feel super happy when they're able to contribute with cool ideas. And as a teacher, that's the whole point, because it's not only 'Oh, we have an activity; the class is about this'. I always have a few minutes to share our purpose with the activity, how we intend to use the tool for a communicative purpose in the journey of studying and learning English.

We'am: If we are talking about more practical ways of integrating that in the classroom – let's say you want to teach learners writing – and maybe you can just with the steps on how you do that, just for teachers to follow and maybe apply in their classrooms.

Raquel: That's a great question, you know, because one of the things that has been controversial with the integration of ==generative AI== to classes is this aspect of plagiarism and copying, that not being a genuine production from the learners. So what I recommend and I'm going to share here is one of my experiences with a writing task that they had to write a letter. I guess we need to have steps. Because if we just say 'OK, here's the generative AI tool', whatever it is, and I needed to write an article, I needed to write a letter and I just assigned that task, our learners are going to find precisely that. But as a teacher, we need them to go through a cognitive process of 'OK, this is what I know, this is what I'm looking for. So some more ideas, generative AI can help with that. Then I need to fact-check.' And there needs to be a structure shared by the teacher. So the writing structure, we should, in my perspective, have the support of the coursebook and then we use the generative AI for support generating ideas.

We'am: Did they like the idea that they are using something new?

Raquel: They do, but they felt suspicious, like 'OK, is the teacher going to let us just simply copy–paste?' Because they know, 'Oh, there's something wrong with that. What's the catch?' Actually, I told them, I gave them a structure and I said 'OK, here's what you are looking for, in fact-checking, and you will develop your writing and submit it'. It's important to show that tool is one thing, it's to support human reasoning, and the process, the cognitive process they have to go through to learn a language.

We'am: Yeah, and just showing them the process gives them more confidence just followed by fact-checking, so you are automatically teaching them how to use that responsibly.

Raquel: And I totally relate when teachers feel insecure of technology because before I actually started working with technology and everything, I was very, very scared. What helps me in terms of saving time, if I'm using generative AI, I'm not preparing slides or flip charts, whatever. I can focus on the reasoning. So the teacher needs to say 'OK, which one or two questions are going to take my learners to an outcome that is productive?' The second thing, if possible that students get to write or copy–paste this information somewhere. As for the writing, the preparation needs to be done in class, because if you assign it, chances are that out of insecurity or any other motivation, the learners are going to say 'OK, this is the shortcut. It's much easier.' So you keep the process and develop one part of the writing in class, because this way you are also proving to the learners that they are actively producing the pieces in collaboration with their ideas, and with technology as something to assist. The last thing is, always remember there's the perspective of using generative AI on the backstage or class preparation assessment. There is also the front usage collaborating with the learners, and I see benefit for both possibilities here.

Chris: Just one other thing I'd like to ask you, Raquel, is on the ==social justice== perspective of AI. We're in the UK, you're in Brazil. Something both countries have got in common is, is high income inequality, different forms of education, elite independent schools and state schools, government schools, which really struggle. How do you see AI as potentially bridging some of those gaps, or do you actually see it may expand and exacerbate some of those gaps?

Raquel: Well, when I consider the apps to be used, there are two things I keep in mind. It must be mobile-friendly. And the second thing, it must be free. I have learned that it is important to look at the reality we have available and see how we can make the best out of it in collaboration with the learners. I studied in state schools in the outskirts of my city all my life, so I know what it is like, especially here in São Paulo. Find ways to insert the learners, rather than accept this as a sentence. OK, so we are not entitled to having the super-fast speed connection and devices that we really should be entitled to. But let's see what we have got. Because by teaching and guiding our learners, even with limited resources, we are giving them a

chance. That's why everything that I have talked about can be replicated in a simpler, more limited resource context. QR codes can be used without internet connection as well. You know something that can very easily replace, for instance, the slides? A dictation. It's amazing. It's listening; it's writing. You can use that for conversation. You can actually have students dictating sentences or questions to the others, and they are more actively engaged and its zero technology.

Chris: The AI can be an effective assistant but that the importance of humanistic language teaching is still very central. Thank you so much for your time today, Raquel. It was great.

We'am: Lots of great ideas from Raquel. I specifically liked how she explained to us step by step how to use that activity in the classroom. Chris, I know that you have maybe some experience in using AI maybe you can share with us.

Chris: Yeah, so I've used ChatGPT quite a lot in my work. So some of the concern I've had – I've worked a lot with marginalised groups in deprived areas – and I do worry about this, this digital divide. But I've tried to use it as a way of giving those students agency. So, for example, work I've done before with refugees and asylum seekers, there's very few materials which are available for those groups. But you can use AI to create those sorts of materials. So, for example, I asked it to write a poem about an asylum seeker arriving in the UK. So it's a way that students can see something of themselves in the materials that they're using. If those are not available online or in coursebooks, you can create those for those particular groups. Also, with those sorts of groups of asylum seekers or refugees in the UK, one of the ways in which they need to use language is going to the doctor's, the dentist's, at the school gates and so on. So I created lots of scripts where they could see what those interactions look like. So you put in a prompt like 'imagine you are a low-level English speaker going to the doctor's' and you can get a script of the kind of interactions which can come out of that. So it's a way that they can then practise that language. It's a way that they can role play those ideas so that they can develop those skills before they actually use it in real life. I've also used it, for example, to develop skills like empathy. So you take something that's really well known, a really well-known story like *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, for example, and I've said just write Goldilocks from the perspective of the three bears. So you see that well-known story, but from the other side. Then the students can, for example, compare those two texts, and you can discuss those different ways that different people have seen the same set of events.

We'am: Oh, that's brilliant. And I also liked that you mentioned empathy. It's also a question that teachers have been asking a lot about from TeachingEnglish page. There's a concern in general that this replaces the creativity of individuals, sometimes that it lacks empathy. It's the opposite that it lacks empathy because it is generated by a machine and there is a worry, a general worry that by using AI we are less and less teaching things like emotional intelligence. So how do you see this balance between emotional intelligence but also artificial intelligence?

Chris: I would say it's what the teacher does with it that's the key thing. You know, you can have lots of, I've used lots of coursebooks, I'm sure many of our listeners have used lots of coursebooks before, which lack empathy, which are written by people who've got very little understanding of the end users. So I don't think that's an issue. It's what you do with it that's really, really important. You can use AI for good if you want to do that as a teacher. So I think we need to look at it as a tool, as a mechanism, rather than as some sort of end product. Look at how we can use it positively, rather than at the problems it presents.

We'am: And also one thing that could solve this sometimes with AI, it does generate a bias kind of opinion or material, but that is generated from what we have in AI itself. It learns. People also forget that it learns from what you give it.

Chris: Do you know the acronym GIGO, G-I-G-O?

We'am: I don't.

Chris: Garbage in, garbage out. All AI is doing, it's a big language model and it's looking at what exists. You know, if we think back to our first episode a few weeks ago on gender, if we're thinking about texts that it might produce, it may very well be gendered or gender-biased because it's drawing on what humans have created historically, which is gendered. So, so we need to consider that as well. But that's also something we can look at, we can lean into, we can critique it, we can reflect on that and actually analyse that. So, again, it's about what teachers do with that material which is really important, not just to accept it, whatever the algorithm spits back at us, but it's about using it as a teaching tool. It's a mechanism. It's not the end product.

We'am: Yes. And that's why fact-checking as a step, as Raquel mentioned, is very important, not just for the students when they use it but also for the teacher when they try to create or adapt material using AI. One specific function that I really like with AI, if you have material that is not graded for the level of students, if you just say 'I want this text A1 level', then it will generate a text that is A1 level, or A2 level, which would have been much more difficult if you have to do it yourself.

Chris: Absolutely. I think something which we've heard in both of our interviews today is about it can be that useful tool, but it's still the humanistic values of the teacher are still crucial in how it's implemented.

We'am: And so if you want to give, like, three prompts for teachers using AI, just to save time also, so what are your favourite three prompts to use?

Chris: That's a very, very difficult question, We'am!

We'am: I know! That's why I asked you!

Chris: So I'm going to ask ChatGPT what its answer is. Let's see if you agree with this, We'am. OK, so number one – design an interactive grammar quiz using AI-powered chatbots to provide real-time feedback and explanations tailored to each student's responses. Explore how this personalised approach enhances understanding and retention, compared to traditional worksheets.

We'am: This looks a bit complicated …

Chris: It does sound a little bit complicated, doesn't it? Maybe we need to ask it to give us that in A2 language. Hang on, let's do that again.

We'am: Chris, if you want to give us two or three prompts that you usually use when you open AI and you want to ask it for something.

Chris: So what I would do, I would create an interactive quiz about grammar using an AI chatbot. They will give you feedback instantly and explain what you need to improve. And you can see how this makes learning grammar more personal and easier than just using worksheets.

We'am: Thank you for listening to episode 4 of Teaching English with the British Council. Stay tuned for episode 5.