

ILL - INNOVATION IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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AI and Social Agency in Language Teaching



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A Brief Outline

- AI and the teaching environment
- What the CEFR expects of teachers
- What we can do in the AI landscape
- Threats of AI and the task of teachers
- Towards a theory and strategies for linguistically-skilled Social Agents
- Resilience and democratic action

Living with AI in the post-digital age

Some features of our current environment as language teachers:

- ☐ *almost all human interaction heavily mediated by digital devices*
- ☐ *education is expected to cater to the post-digital*
- ☐ *fundamental aims and norms of education need to be reviewed*
- ☐ *clear promises made about educational opportunity*
- ☐ *language is a fundamental and intrinsic part of the AI revolution*

What the CEFR expects of teachers

- ❖ language teaching should be **systematic, transparent and effective**
- ❖ extra competences: **mediation, online interaction, plurilingual skills and sign language**
- ❖ **social, action-oriented** approach (student autonomy, teamwork and personal reflection)
- ❖ promote **plurilingualism in class**
- ❖ exemplify **life-long learning** and **social skills**

And all this while the social context has been transformed

The arrival of AI

We are all familiar with the advent of AI, but its brief history is remarkable:

- **autumn 2022: ChatGPT bursts onto the scene:** in Italy, 750,00 users in 2023, 2,000,000 in 2024, and 9,000,000 this year
- **various AI tools are available**, but all offer a shortcut for producing text, pictures etc. and an easy answer to most questions
- for language teachers the **change is enormous**: exams are produced and corrected by AI, our students experience AI every day, written homework risks becoming irrelevant, translation has become an automatic function
- the **surrender value** of English language learning is in question – will language learning become **unnecessary**? What **motivation** is there to study languages? Can't we **just leave it all** to *DeepL*?

Working with AI in class

There are some great suggestions for activities we can use in class – a few examples: *(see Levy and Albertos 2024)*

- ✓ ***feedback on your own work*** – this is one of the great advantages of AI – fast, individualised responses
- ✓ ***AI as a mini-tutor*** – students should be encouraged to use AI to explore a new topic
- ✓ ***AI to generate arguments:*** the pros and cons of an issue
- ✓ ***AI is ideal for repeated, focused practice*** (e.g. of a particular structure, vocabulary in a semantic field, appropriate phraseology)
- ✓ ***working with pictures*** – prompts need to be precise
- ✓ ***AI for contrasting text types and pragmatics***
- ✓ ***producing synopses*** – of books, articles etc.

AI for teachers

Teachers can really get help from AI: here are a few suggestions:

- ∞ **AI as researcher:** AI can find resources and suitable texts fast
- ∞ **AI to generate questions** – either on a particular topic or on a text
- ∞ **AI to generate grammatical explanations:** these can be clear and effective – and AI can give us countless examples
- ∞ **AI as artist** – even an unskilled teacher can prepare visual or tabular representations of work done in class
- ∞ **help in creating assessment tools** – AI remembers better than us!

But we can see immediately how all of these imply a **skilled, socially aware approach**, not just a quick use of a tech-sexy tool

The social implications of AI

As teachers we have to go beyond simple applications of AI when it seems to be useful, because it has huge social implications

- **little theoretical work** has been done on this
- life is more and more **digitally mediated** today (especially for our ss.)
- education has to **cater for the nature of post-digital society**
- this does not mean merely using a few gadgets, but reviewing many of our **fundamental educational precepts**
- universal free education is being **renegotiated *de facto*** by the **AI landscape** (paywalls, multi-tiered offers with different affordances)
- **language is at the heart of this:** it is a part of education, but also the ***beating heart* of AI**. Our students should **know how AI works**

Social and educational dangers of AI

The immediate challenges posed by AI in school are all too familiar – using Chatbots to write essays or produce answers with little learning involved, uncritical acceptance of instantly produced information etc.

But the social dangers are much more serious:

- ***bias, manipulation, excessive monitoring*** and ***control*** – these are all parts of the “**original sin**” of AI: a system with inadequate guardrails and a propensity to accelerate production
- linked with this is the potential **doom-loop** of restricted linguistic resources (the **data pool** may be large, but is **poor** in **breadth** and **quality**)
- we should be aware that AI will be **trained on AI-generated text** to an ever-increasing degree
- we as language teachers have a pivotal part to play - we can understand/explain

Educating Students – not just *with* AI but *about* AI

If we use any form of AI in our classes (or if our students are using it) then we have to equip them to deal with its inherent threats.

This means:

- **informing** – showing how *jailbroken chatbots* are trained to churn out illegal or dangerous information, circumventing safety controls
- **awareness** – of dark LLMs: designed without guardrails as a *USP*
- **accepting some responsibility** – state authorities are notoriously unable to limit social media and AI (lacking nimbleness or power) so teachers should fill the gap, raising awareness of risks
- **inadequate protections** and **little real enforcement** are the history of data and media, and so
- students need ***social media-*** and ***AI-awareness***

AI isn't hallucinating anymore!

To understand AI and education we have to remember that it is changing quickly and constantly, so we should remain ***agile*** and ***informed***.

Dangers are not so easy to spot as they were:

- ∞ the **notorious hallucinations** produced by Chatbots are no longer a common problem and will naturally dwindle to virtually nothing
- ∞ this implies that **falsehoods** and **subtle distortions** are getting more **credible**, and so difficult to identify
- ∞ the **all-pervasiveness of AI** will probably become ***linguistically normative***, changing writing and speaking habits/expectations
- ∞ we might be entering a “**crisis of truth**” where AI-generated narratives can claim equal (or greater) validity (e.g. Musk's *Grokikipedia*).

The greatest threat: technology misapplied

Any new technological development carries the inherent risk of creating dependence and passivity. This is especially true of AI, due to its very nature:

- ◇ the apparent **speed and scope** of chatbots makes them **irresistible** and **overwhelming**
- ◇ AI risks provoking significant **alienation** (c.f. Hegel)
- ◇ there is a danger of '**learned helplessness**'
- ◇ the chatbot we are using seems **all-knowing**, or at least knows **far more than us** (making an unhealthy, imbalanced relationship?)
- ◇ AI has become **very good at pragmatics**, but the 'friendly' tone can cause **dissatisfaction** or **emotional disconnect**
- ◇ As language teachers it is our **duty** to understand the **pragmatics** AI is using – what **values** are being embedded in human (or semi-human) interactions?

What can we do in this world of AI?

This situation is **not** all doom and gloom! As language teachers we can use our expertise in language, and take steps to employ AI successfully and securely in our classes. A few suggestions:

- ‡ use **multiple AI tools** – when we think how fast Chatbots are, there is no excuse for not using **three** or **four** systems for every inquiry
- ‡ **ask the same question repeatedly** – to refine prompt engineering skills and to encourage further exploration, and see changes over time
- ‡ **change your go-to chatbot regularly** – AI is changing fast and what was best last week might well have been superseded
- ‡ we can refer to these **healthy habits** of AI consultation as ***dynamic use***: ways of overcoming the passivity identified earlier

What can we do? #2

Developing receptive skills

Chatbots have the advantage of being very productive, very quickly. We can take advantage of this sheer quantity by:

- ✓ learning to **sift** the most important information from texts offered
- ✓ **insisting** on **clarification**, **persisting** in our inquiries
- ✓ demanding changes in **tone** or **perspective** or rewrites to new criteria
- ✓ **comparing** and **contrasting** multiple versions (e.g. stories etc.)
- ✓ thus developing significant **receptive skills** on the part of our learners

All of these mean a **capacity for selection** that social agency has always implied – choosing the right words, friends or situations has always been a life skill – and the **act of selection** is a **part of learning** (cognitive value)

Doing AI in different voices

If we agree that discernment will be a decisive social and professional skill, then a single thing becomes apparent:

- * we should **avoid** the *monolingual use of AI*
- * if chatbots are cheap and super-fast then there is **no reason** not to ask the same question *in all the languages* we know
- * the plurilingual activities recommended by the CEFR become **more relevant than ever** as we encourage our students to take **more than one** ‘yes’ for an answer and show how **different** history (or even science) can be from an alternative linguistic and cultural **perspective**
- * bear in mind that *comparison is an art* and not easily learnt
- * all this, of course, implies a **revolution in language testing**

What this means in language classes

These ideas have clear implications for our classes:

- students should be encouraged to **interrogate** every decision to use AI
- chatbots can be a great way to **start a task** (i.e. *get the juices flowing*)
- learners should be persuaded to employ AI **at the end** of a task too – to enable comparison and **enrichment**, not just finishing a task
- exploit the **meta-functions** of chatbots: they offer powerful learning opportunities (e.g. *DeepSeek*'s commentary before giving an answer)
- use AI to generate **stories**: they are a great learning tool, and chatbots create them well, and can furnish endless **variations** on them

NB: we often seek 'the truth' from AI, but it is an **imitative system**: it is far better at **fiction** than **fact** – again, we need to aim for ***informed use***

Resilience and Democracy

Our classes exist in a social and political context that we must always be aware of as language teachers. The CEFR explicitly stresses our social role and moral responsibility. We can suggest some significant aspects of this:

- we **teachers** must have **real agency** in our choices
- our behaviour is a **model** for students' **social actions**
- we want students to **use** and **control AI** and not *follow* it
- remember when **you use** AI, it is always **using you**
- **resilience** in society derives from **diversity**, **modularity** and the **back-up strategies** it has (and AI can diminish these)
- **language** is at the **heart of resilience** – it is our **control key**
- languages are the *loci of culture*
- the CEFR **new skills** (empowerment/empathy/critical thinking) can inoculate against AI dependency – allowing **active** participation

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