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AI and Social Agency in Language Teaching

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Abstract

Language teachers are now expected to teach more than simply language. The Companion Volume to the CEFR (2020) [1] clearly outlines one of the roles of teachers as encouraging and nurturing social awareness and skills, both in the language classroom and beyond. The author agrees that language teaching lends itself naturally to this laudable aim but recognizes its inherent difficulty. The challenge has become even more complex with the advent of AI – chatbots are a potential gamechanger in education, but pose enormous questions as regards learning strategies, the tasks we set our students, the kinds of testing we employ. Although practical activities exploiting AI have already been suggested in literature (e.g. Levy and Albertos, 2024 [2]), we suggest that little theoretical work has been done to establish just how it can transform language learning and assessment. Whether it comes to homework and essays being produced by bots rather than the human hand, or real-world uses of language which are greatly changed from ten years ago, there is an urgent need to adapt our language teaching theory to underpin our learning objectives, and all this while bearing in mind that what we do in the classroom will contribute significantly to the future lives and opportunities of our learners. The paper offers some suggestions as to areas where language and social skills intersect, in particular in helping students navigate an increasingly complex digital environment. Where technology can encourage passivity, a plurilingual, lexically and pragmatically aware approach may enrich students' opportunities to learn. The assumption is that AI will predominate in many transactional and professional situations, but that an ability to monitor, understand and control semi-automated communication will be indispensable. Advanced linguistic skills such as subtle pragmatic awareness and nuanced comprehension will be more significant than traditional productive activities but will also be harder to assess fairly. The paper concludes that AI poses no real existential threat to the teaching profession, but presents us with an obligation to transform our subject and approach.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence; social agents; pragmatics*

1. Introduction

The *Companion Volume* to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2020) [1], is not only a stimulating and cogent document in the history of language teaching in Europe; it is also a highly demanding description of what we teachers should be trying to achieve in our classrooms. Published just before the advent of AI, or at least before AI became the obsession of politicians, employers and students (and the bugbear of teachers), it lays down significant objectives for language instructors. On a theoretical level, the CEFR aims to ensure that language teaching is "systematic, transparent and effective" [3] – all laudable aims that we would hardly disagree with, but, in reality, quite demanding in themselves. The *Companion Volume* also broadens our responsibilities, with the extended CEFR descriptors now including assessments of mediation, online interaction, plurilingual/pluricultural and sign language competences [1]. At the same time, the CEFR recommends a social, action-oriented approach that encourages pupil autonomy, working towards creating a balance between collaborative activity and personal reflective work. Teachers are expected to know the CEFR intimately, so that they can plan lessons which have a good 'fit' with can-do statements and, additionally, promote plurilingualism by enabling diversified language choices in class. Lastly, they should encourage and exemplify lifelong learning so that their students become linguistically skilled social agents with the capabilities to tackle professional and personal challenges with confidence. All of these will sound familiar, and, indeed, quite valid to most practising language teachers in Europe, but they will also be recognised as an ideal to be attained only in part, perhaps, and certainly not every day, in every class. And while language teachers attempt to use the descriptors to inform their teaching decisions and communicate their objectives to students, as well as fostering a well-monitored and motivating context in which to learn, they now find themselves faced with a significantly changed environment. AI and related technology promises (or threatens) to change every aspect of teaching and especially of language teaching.

2. AI as a Complicating Factor

The story of the arrival of AI in everyday life is well known: Chat GPT burst into public consciousness in autumn 2022 and grew exponentially from then on. In Italy users of ChatGPT rose from 750,000 in 2023 to 2,400,000 in 2024 and reached 9,000,000 this year [4]. Since 2022, numerous versions of AI chatbots have become available, some free of charge, some with paywalls for certain functionalities, but all offering the user a shortcut for the production of accurate text, pictures and even songs, along with a sense of omniscience perhaps, and a quick synopsis or explanation of any topic of interest. As language teachers we have experienced the onset of AI more intensely than most, as the traditional written homework assignment has become virtually pointless – not only because a student can easily produce the work with the help of AI in seconds but also because the task itself seems of little use: who needs to learn to write an email or a report in a foreign language when a computer will do it faster and invariably better in no time? Even translation has been transformed by AI – *Google Translate* is ever-present, *DeepL* generally provides remarkably accurate translations for any text (if the language pair is one of the commonest) and videos on platforms such as YouTube offer translations into many languages. Even teachers of English, who could once upon a time assume their subject's high surrender value, find themselves vulnerable to accusations of irrelevance or faced with students with little motivation.

2.1 Suggestions for Exploiting AI are not Enough

A plethora of publications has quickly become available for teachers who feel obliged to 'keep up' with the demands of a new, technologically transformed world. Valid suggestions for activities, games and learning strategies that make use of AI are helpful to teachers in the early stages of what may be a social revolution (see Levy and Albertos [2] for many convincing ideas). Some examples of possible (legitimate) student use of AI might be: 1) obtaining instant, individualised feedback on their own work; 2) using AI as a mini-private tutor to learn all about a new topic; 3) reflecting on what students know, or rewriting and developing their knowledge; 4) using generative AI to explore the pros and cons of a particular issue; 5) repeated, focused practice – of a specific structure, of vocabulary in a specific semantic field, of suitable phrases to be used in a typical social situation etc.; 6) working with pictures – seeing how prompts need to be very precise to ensure good outcomes, to list just some examples. AI chatbots offer a tireless 'imaginary friend' for grammar or conversation practice, instant and plentiful text creation (potentially at just the right level, on just the right topic, and with just the right register), highly refined linguistic explanations (e.g. for a classic grammar point, or for semantic contrasts), plentiful information as to pragmatic choices, and, perhaps most of all, potentially endlessly personalised learning.

There are also insightful suggestions as to how teachers can make use of AI effectively in their work. Besides the (rather unhelpful and unconvincing) idea of saving time by using a Chatbot to write a lesson plan, there are many significantly beneficial proposals for teachers: using AI to search for and suggest resources (this can be a game-changer in a world that offers an overwhelming array of materials to the language teacher); generating questions for a topic; making visual or tabular representations of subjects presented in class; helping in the creation of assessment tools and tests; actually teaching and training your classes how to use a chatbot effectively.

But we need to go beyond the somewhat simple applications of AI and the various 'good ideas' on offer, however attractive they may be. As Narayanan and Kapoor tell us, "It takes effort and practice to use chatbots while avoiding their ever-present pitfalls" [5]. AI has huge social implications, and little theoretical work has been done on this. Life is more and more digitally mediated today than it has ever been before, and education should cater for the nature of post-digital society. This actually implies a review of many of our fundamental educational precepts. Axioms such as universal free education until the age of eighteen, which are virtually automatic assumptions in many European countries, are about to be renegotiated *de facto* by an AI landscape made up of paywalls and multi-tiered offers of creative educational assistance and training with vastly varying affordances. And, all the time, language is in the unique position of being a part of the educational landscape and, simultaneously, the essential component of the inner workings of the very AI systems transforming that landscape. As language teachers we need to train our learners to be able to use AI effectively and with confidence, but we should also be helping them to be deeply aware of just how these chatbots work.

2.2 There are Dangers in the AI Landscape

Some of the immediate difficulties we face with the onset of AI in education are all too familiar. Rather than using AI for structured inquiry, students tend to simply ask it to write essays or provide model answers and, while this is understandable on a certain level, it is clearly not conducive to learning. Audio chatbots have also had less of an impact than expected a year or so ago – AI seems to be happy to remain as a text-based medium, or to be keen to switch to graphics and video. But the social dangers are potentially much more serious. Bias, manipulation, excessive monitoring and control are all parts of what we might term 'the original sin' of AI – a system with few and inadequate guardrails and a propensity to always accelerate production, perhaps at the expense of precision or valued understanding. Indeed, AI risks falling into a doom-loop of restricted linguistic resources, essentially reutilising the same, or virtually the same linguistic data over and over again, creating an infinite regression, in the worst possible scenario, or merely using data of poor quality and breadth in a more optimistic view. Certainly, AI will be trained on AI-generated linguistic data to a significant extent, as these will be readily available for collection. The long-term effects on language itself are not obvious, but when we are aware that around half of all websites will soon be generated by AI without human intervention then the implications cry out to be examined. Bearing in mind that AI is already used to generate examination questions and for test scoring, the need for educationalists to take a proactive stance is clear, and we as *language* teachers are perhaps slightly more qualified to do so.

Educating our students, not just *with* AI, but also *about* AI means equipping them to deal with current threats: they should be informed about jailbroken chatbots that are trained to churn out illegal or dangerous information by the circumvention of safety controls. Dark LLMs, i.e. generative AI tools that are intentionally designed without guardrails (indeed this is their unique selling point) should be monitored by state or teaching authorities, but young users of AI already need to be aware of the risks, just as they should be when on social media. We should remember that the history of data and media reveals inadequate protections and little real enforcement, meaning that it comes down to us, first of all, to help our students have 'social media awareness' and AI awareness in this new datascape.

These dangers are not so easy to spot or deal with as they were only a few years ago. The notorious hallucinations produced by chatbots are not really a problem anymore, and will naturally dwindle to almost nothing, merely as a result of the repeated use and development of AI. But this means that falsehoods in chatbots are getting more credible all the time, and so more difficult to identify. In the era of fake news, discerning what is legitimate and accurate will be a life skill, and one that will be hard-earned. The all-pervasiveness of AI (both in education and at work, as well as in the media) may become linguistically normative, changing our writing and speaking habits, and even what we assume to be correct, cloaking developments or reversals of language use under a drape of almost infinite proportions (i.e. the sheer quantity of language produced by chatbots). And all of this leads to the greatest threat of technology when misapplied: the development of passivity. The speed and apparent scope of chatbots make them both irresistible and overwhelming. AI also risks causing alienation, and a feeling of helplessness. It will always present itself as being all-knowing, or at least knowing far more than the individual user. Even the false-friendly (or sometimes patronising) tone adopted by chatbots in their responses can cause a feeling of dissatisfaction or emotional distance.

3. What Can We Do in the World of AI?

Rather than despair at the potential threats and undoubted complexity of this new environment, we as educators have a duty to endeavour to help our students live with, and benefit from, what AI has to offer. Before we reach a more theoretical discussion of what our aims should be, it is perhaps best to remain practically minded and suggest some down-to-earth rules of thumb for language teachers who have suddenly been faced by the social and cognitive revolution that AI seems to be. Worth bearing in mind here is the obligation that the CEFR *Companion Volume* [1] proposes for teachers to be a model of lifelong learning for students. If our employment of AI is principled and effective, this by itself will likely be a powerful teaching tool in class.

3.1 Suggestions for Teachers as to Good Practice with AI

The are simple steps we can take that will help us to use AI successfully and more securely in our teaching. Firstly, it is of fundamental importance that we always use a plethora of systems when we use AI. It is natural to have a go-to chatbot which is probably on our desktop and which we are familiar with, but when we consider how instantaneous most answers to prompts are, there is no

excuse for not habitually using three or four AI systems for any inquiry, and perhaps many more if we consider the task an important one. Showing students that it takes next to no time to repeat a search will probably be enough to inculcate good research habits. Along with this, we should encourage students to ask the same question repeatedly, varying the wording or parameters slightly – both helping them to refine their prompt engineering skills but also encouraging them to ask further questions and explore, rather than just obtain an answer. It is quite possible to envisage a future in which skilful use of chatbots will be a job requirement, much as speaking two languages often is today. Changing the chatbot you use most frequently is also a vital skill: AI is, we are constantly told, changing very fast, and so it is clear that what was the best application two months ago might have been leap-frogged by a revised issue of another tool. We can call these healthy habits of AI consultation "dynamic use" and we can see that it consists of ways of overcoming the passivity encouraged by technology that we mentioned above.

Chatbots have the benefit of being highly productive, very quickly. We can take advantage of this by exploiting this sheer quantity, sifting the most appropriate information and text from what we are offered, and insisting on clarification, changes of tone or perspective or rewrites to new criteria. This implies close observation of the text produced, and this will require significant receptive skills on the part of our language learners. We of course must continue to develop critical awareness and so the capacity for selection that social agency always implies: being able to make friends has always been a social skill, and choosing the right friends is often decisive for our students – chatbots carry this same selection ability into a new medium. And lastly, we as language teachers are perfectly placed to help our students to avoid one of the current pitfalls of chatbot use: the monolingual use of AI. If chatbots are so fast and relatively cheap, there is no reason not to make inquiries in all of the languages one knows – not only about history or current affairs; even in the sciences the results can be very interesting. The plurilingualism underlined by the CEFR means using AI with different voices.

3.2 Implications for Language Education

These proposals have significant implications for language teaching. It is not simple to guess how things will develop over time, but certain aspects of our craft will probably be very different in a few years. The ability to discern – to identify fake news or information, and, conversely, to be confident of what is reliable – will be a decisive social and professional skill, and so receptive skills will need to become much more the focus of our classroom teaching. As chatbots produce language so convincingly the productive skills will probably lose their pre-eminence – certainly writing an accurate email or a project outline will hardly be a *sine qua non* in the world of work. Negotiating linguistic understanding (e.g. grammar rules, complex lexis) and comparing and explaining descriptions and analyses will be increasingly important, hopefully leading to an exploratory attitude to language, and, indeed, to knowledge. Students will be encouraged to look for questions rather than simply finding 'the answer' and this will lead to avoiding the 'tyranny of the correct answer' – concentrating on the strategies of understanding, group discussion of outcomes and sharing information. Finally, perhaps, process will be more important than product. Of course, these considerations have enormous implications for language testing and pose significant questions for certification. Essentially, it has always been easier to assess the productive skills than to try to recognise and measure understanding. Receptive skills are fated to be tested indirectly, and thus our comprehension tests scores are likely to be highly subjective.

Students should be encouraged to interrogate every decision to use AI tools, leading to better choices and results that more closely match the original information requirement. AI will be an ideal starting point for creative work, overcoming the 'blank-page syndrome' (helping us to get started on a task), and our learners can also be persuaded to apply AI tools at the *end* of a task for comparison and enrichment, rather than being satisfied with an assignment merely because it is finished. The meta functions of current chatbots also offer powerful learning opportunities, with *DeepSeek* offering a commentary before presenting the answer to a prompt, allowing us an insight into how it is answering the question and the limitations or considerations it is working with. This can both exemplify good, reasoned practice and allow us to observe and critique the chatbot's product. It is worth mentioning at this juncture that we tend instinctively to seek the truth from AI, even if we know it is an imitative system, when its greatest strength probably lies in creative applications. We should use AI to generate stories for and during class, stories being a fundamental learning tool (perhaps the most powerful, cognitively speaking) and chatbots offer us endless possible variations. Perhaps we can postulate that imitation leads to better fictional rather than factual texts. We can also lead our learners to a more critical perspective on AI performance. AI generated songs, for example, are plentiful and often extremely poor, while pictures invariably contain errors which can be noticed by students and accounted for by (re-)examining the prompt used.

3.3 A Sidenote on Resilience

There is quite widespread concern that democratic institutions and practices are under threat at present, and AI, with its vulnerabilities (racial and sexist bias, poor regulation etc.), is often seen as a part of this. Language education has an important part to play in nurturing and protecting these values by increasing awareness of what LLMs really are, how they can be used well or manipulated to bad ends, and helping to try to lay down a path to the beneficial use of chatbots in future society. Perhaps most of all, language education can contribute to resilience in our communities. A system becomes fragile (i.e. loses resilience) when five factors come into play. When a decrease in diversity is accompanied by a loss of redundancy, along with a reduction in the modularity of society and its systems of supply, and a by-passing of the circuit-breakers the society originally possessed, accompanied by a lack of back-up strategies within that society, then its resilience will be weak, and a shock might be enough to provoke collapse. It is not difficult to see how this could apply to our present state. AI risks reducing diversity (especially in terms of the origins of knowledge) and the modular nature of professional behaviour (i.e. different experts doing different jobs). Again, passive dependence on chatbots will undermine society, eliminating knowledge of back-up strategies, and so our work in developing social agency becomes vital. We as teachers must have agency in the choices we make (e.g. as to the technology we use, as well as to the emphasis we place on elements of language), and our students must gain agency in how they go about acquiring understanding. All of our thirty students using ChatGPT to write their homework is not just a question of cheating: it is a question of a lack of diversity of thought, and of the sources of knowledge. Students should be *consciously using* AI, *controlling* it rather than *following* it.

4. Concluding Remarks

The Council of Europe's ideas as to social agency fit closely with Dewey's theories [6] on education: he considered it as key for developing democratic behaviour and expected it to continue throughout the life of a citizen. All of Dewey's suggestions depended upon active participation in the classroom to prepare students to be active in society after school. It is clear that language always had a significant part to play in this process, but now, as we have seen, language has become pivotal, intrinsically within LLMs and extrinsically in how we make use of them. AI can give us endless material for group work, discussion and debate, or for stimulating emotional responses, but we must equip learners to be able to harness it. Language is our control key, and we need subtle awareness and refined resources to use it effectively and with social benefit.

Elements of linguistic competence that are coming to the fore are *discernment*, *selectivity* and *awareness*, and these fit closely with some of the 'new' skills evaluated in the CEFR: empowerment and initiative, empathetic skills and critical thinking. These are at once considered important socially in Europe, and, at the same time, represent a type of inoculation against AI dependency. Plurilinguistic values and behaviour, a renewed focus on translation, a sharing of creativity (which is no longer the 'magic' resource capitalism in the twentieth century considered it to be) and lessons in which activities are chosen for social reasons will all help to reduce monolingual outlooks (a risk with AI) and reaffirm languages as the *loci* of culture. It is a difficult, challenging time to be a language teacher, to be sure, but it also an exciting time that offers us the opportunity to take up the mantle of social responsibility that has always been implied by the privileged position of being a language teacher.

We are not alone in this endeavour. The Manifesto for Generative AI in Schools (*MIAS – Manifesto dell'Intelligenza Artificiale Generativa a Scuola*) [7] offers ten clear 'rules' to help students and teachers make intelligent use of artificial intelligence. They are an example of a principled basis for working with AI rather than turning a blind eye to our changing educational context. Soon it will be of little use (and virtually impossible) to 'catch out' cheats who use AI to complete assignments, but this is of no concern if we have changed the social aims of our language teaching to move closer to the urgent needs of the post-digital world. If our students are to be really effective social agents, then they will require language and pragmatic skills fit for an environment informed by social media and AI.

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