

Article

Constructing TESOL's Future: The Implications of Automation and Political Correctness

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Abstract

This paper highlights two interesting challenges that TESOL faces, the increasing use of automation in communication and the effect of political correctness. With many organizations already embracing the use of AI, TESOL professionals need to prepare their learners for a world where there are also AI detection tools that aim to discern human-created texts from machine-generated ones. In the case of political correctness, greater awareness of discrimination and injustice have repercussions on norms of usage, and this is something that learners cannot afford to be ignorant of. The paper explains how the pedagogical challenges for TESOL that are posed by automation are quite different than those posed by political correctness.

Keywords

Artificial intelligence, ChatGPT, native speaker, political correctness, R-word

1 Introduction

As a profession, TESOL faces a number of interesting challenges. Some of these may be historical in nature but their effects can still be felt, such as the continued influence of native speakerism. "Native-speakerism is a pervasive ideology within ELT, characterized by the belief that 'native-speaker' teachers represent a 'Western culture' from which spring the ideals both of the English language and of English language teaching methodology" (Holliday, 2006, p. 385). Native-speakerism persists despite attempts at debunking the notion that ethnic identity automatically determines linguistic competence (Rampton, 1990). Thus, Ubaidillah (2018, no page numbers), speaking about the Indonesian context, points out:

Often, schools hire native speakers of English to teach in classes without even checking their education background, qualifications and experience. Often native teachers are employed by schools simply because they are native to an English-speaking country. Sometimes they are not teachers at all and do not even hold any teacher qualifications. This leads to great resentment

among native Indonesian teachers who have had to undergo a period of teacher training and who are expected to produce good results in spite of their shortcomings in English.

Another long-time challenge is the tendency for educators – perhaps language teachers even more so than others – to be marginalized when it comes to providing inputs into discussions about actual policy formulation. Thus, the TESOL International Association (Action Agenda for the Future of the TESOL Profession, TESOL International Association 2018) notes that:

Despite the skyrocketing demand for experienced and knowledgeable English language educators, many TESOL professionals are not invited to participate in the decision-making that drives policy, high-stakes assessments, materials development, research, and practice—all of which directly affect their learners.

Both these challenges remain as important matters that the profession cannot afford to ignore. At the same time, however, there are significant technological and socio-cultural developments of a relatively more recent nature that also demand the attention of TESOL professionals. In this contribution, I highlight two such developments: (i) the widespread use of automation in communication, particularly the increasing use of Artificial Intelligence, and (ii) the influence of political correctness. While my goal is to focus on these two developments and their implications for TESOL, I will, towards the close of my paper, explain how these are also related to the issues of native-speakerism and the exclusion from policy work.

2 Automation in Communication

Wee (2025: 1) makes the following observation:

It is an undeniable fact that various technological advancements ranging from relatively simple computer programs to highly developed artificial intelligence (AI) are coming to be more and more involved in our communicative activities ...

Machines are indeed talking, and in many cases, the talk is not merely ancillary to the communications between humans. Oftentimes, humans and machines work in concert to produce a message that is to be conveyed. In yet other cases, humans are communicating with and even getting advice and comfort from machines.

Here are some simple examples. The first has to do with the ubiquitous presence of chatbots in various social transactions, which requires the user to navigate an automated menu. Importantly, even though a human customer service personnel can be ultimately made available, the menu is often designed to make this availability a matter of last resort. Companies that introduce chatbots are, not surprisingly, keen to reduce the reliance on human employees. The example below is of a chatbot from the Development Bank of Singapore (DBS) (Wee, 2025, p. 11).

The bank's website has a picture of a computer screen with smiling features and the speech bubble 'Do you need any help?' ... A click on the speech bubble brings up the following introduction:

Hi, I'm DBS digibot! You can ask me questions about DBS products and services, or get help with your accounts and cards.

What can I help you with?

Can you tell me what is preferred payment plan Fee waiver for my Card / Cashline

How to apply for Personal Loan?

My card is damaged, I need a replacement

View your deals and offers

Or just type your question in the chat

The key thing to appreciate here is this. The organization in question, in this case, DBS Bank, is trying to shift the responsibility for handling call centre duties, particularly those that are relatively routine in nature, to the automated program. The human service officer enters the picture only when the automated program is unable to handle the needs of the caller. And even then, this may not actually happen. For example, when there is a high volume of calls, the caller does not even have the option of holding and waiting for a human operator to be available. The menu suggests to the caller that they may want to ‘chat with our digibot’ or visit the bank’s website – and then proceeds to end the call (Wee, 2025, p. 43).

In addition to social transactions, the use of generative AI such as ChatGPT is becoming increasingly common in the workplace. It is not uncommon for lawyers to use generative AI to search past cases or as aids to the drafting of legal documents, administrative personnel use it to compose emails or even letters of recommendation, and jobseekers use it to help craft their CVs. And, of course, AI is also becoming an unavoidable aspect of the learning process. In this regard, Chan (2024) reports on the introduction of AI tools by the Ministry of Education in Singapore:

The three learning feedback assistants, launched in 2023, are for mathematics, English language and for short answers. These marking systems provide students with instant feedback on their assignments ...

The English language version corrects grammar, spelling and sentence structure, while the short answer assistant corrects answers across subjects such as geography and science, freeing up teachers to assist with more challenging content.

These tools were created primarily to create a personalised learning experience for each student, said Mr Gerald Ajam, lead specialist at the technologies for learning branch at MOE’s educational technology division.

“We customise the platforms, and enable teachers to be able to customise their instructions so that it is differentiated,” he said. “The way we use technology is always to complement the professionalism of the teacher.

Some points that should be noted include the following. Participation in social life – bank transactions, online shopping, fast food kiosks – will find it increasingly difficult to avoid interactions that involve automated communication of varying degrees of sophistication. And unfortunately, this means that individuals can be very vulnerable to scams, especially since it has been found that AI is also widely used to make scams even more convincing as ‘Around 13 per cent of scams analysed by the Cyber Security Agency of Singapore (CSA) in 2023 were likely generated by artificial intelligence (AI) – indicating that scams are getting more convincing even as overall cyber threat numbers fell or remained constant, compared with 2022 figures’ (Chia, 2024, no page numbers).

Activities in the workplace, too, increasingly require familiarity with communications that involve automation. Finally, TESOL educators will likely be encountering learners who are already accessing automation, especially generative AI, as part of their other learning activities. The most well-known example is the use of ChatGPT. For example, in Singapore, in the English lesson for Secondary 2 students at Manjusri Secondary School, students were told to ask ChatGPT for feedback on a paragraph that they had each written (Ang, 2024).

Before starting the exercise, (human) English teacher Erica Reyes Rodriguez took them through the lesson objectives and asked: “Why do we ask ChatGPT to give us feedback through questions instead of asking it to edit our work for us?”

A few students already knew the answer: “So that we can learn how to improve on our own.”

Institutions of higher learning, too, have had to develop policies to advise students on the appropriate use of AI for their work (<https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/students-at-s-pore-universities-allowed-to-use-ai-tools-for-assignments-but-must-stick-to-rules>; accessed 14 July 2024):

Since 2023, students enrolled in Singapore universities have been allowed to use artificial intelligence (AI) tools to complete their assignments, but they cannot flout rules on things like academic honesty and plagiarism ...

Associate Professor Karin Avnit, who is deputy director at the SIT (Singapore Institute of Technology) Teaching and Learning Academy, said the university's approach is to take advantage of AI tools when they contribute to the learning process and experience.

She said: "We adopted this approach early last year when it became clear that generative AI has a great potential to enhance teaching and learning practices, as well as the potential to change industry practices."

The other five public autonomous universities – the National University of Singapore (NUS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore Management University (SMU), Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS), and Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD) – all adopt a similar position on the use of AI by students.

For instance, NUS, on its website, said students have to acknowledge the use of AI-generated content through a note or via the methods section at the end of an assignment, and explain "which AI tools were used, in which parts of the process they were used, what were the prompts used to generate results, and what did one do with the outputs to add value".

Thus, the TESOL professional may well have no choice but to take into consideration the fact that many learners will have had, to varying degrees, some familiarity with the use of generative AI as a learning tool, which may in turn lead these learners to have certain expectations. At the very least, TESOL educators should consider including examples of interactions with automation in their lessons. In addition, learners may come with the expectation that the use of AI will mean a greater personalisation of lessons, customised for each individual learner, as indicated in the article by Chan (2024) above. Regardless of the level of customisation, the use of AI by the TESOL professional has to be balanced against the possibility (a possibility which is by no means negligible) that AI may not always provide accurate assessments of a learner's responses. It can in fact make errors that might require the TESOL professional to intervene.

3 Political Correctness and Norms of Usage

While the issue of English language teaching has tended to focus on questions about which variety of standard English should be the reference model, on ensuring that pronunciation is intelligible, and on imparting acceptable grammar, less attention has been given to the impact of political correctness. In this regard, recall that even the Ministry of Education's introduction of AI (see above) uses it mainly to correct grammar, spelling and sentence structure. But as Wee and Samosir (2023, p. 264) point out, 'The impact of political correctness presents an interesting turn because it is motivated by impetuses that mainly originate from outside Southeast Asia where concerns about gender equality, racial discrimination, and social injustice, mainly emanating from Western societies, have led to specific kinds of linguistic remedies'. Wee and Samosir (2023, p. 363) explain:

For example, considering the changing perception of gendered identities has led not only to the use of gender- neutral terms such as chairperson (as opposed to chairman), but also more recently to a widespread usage of singular they to address nonbinary individuals, that is, individuals who do not identify themselves according to the traditional gender dichotomy (e.g. "Jess is a great painter. They have an exhibition coming up."). This usage of they has become institutionalized and introducing one's preferred pronouns has become in many cases part of individuals' official signatures.

In one interaction that the present author happened to observe, a Tamil father, in his mid-60s, was rebuked very seriously and quite angrily by his daughter (in her early 20s) for using the term ‘dyke’ when discussing someone’s sexuality. He quite sincerely asked her ‘What term should I be using in that case?’ Her response was ‘Just say that she’s quite masculine.’

For now, let us look at an example that does not involve gender or sexuality. Consider the global momentum of the R-word campaign (Wee, 2015), which attempts to eradicate the use of the word ‘retarded’. The campaign started in 2004 in the domain of sports when the Special Olympics proposed to replace the phrase ‘mental retardation’ with ‘intellectual disabilities’. The R-word campaign has since expanded its scope to include public discourse, political documents, and celebrity chat shows. Proponents of the campaign (Wee, 2015, p. 189) argue that the R-word offensive, derogatory and commonly used as an insult ‘But, even when the r-word is not said to harm someone with a disability, it is hurtful’.

Not unexpectedly, there has been opposition to the campaign (Wee, 2015, p. 196-7). One such view states ‘I fear the r-word movement discourages serious debate on the topic of mental disabilities. How many people avoid the discussion because they don’t know the ‘proper’ terminology or fear retribution from r-word apologists?’

While there is no overt sign that the R- word campaign has been gaining traction in Southeast Asia, as a global organization, the Special Olympics is represented in Asia, including Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia. Moreover, the websites of the Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia bodies all state that “Special Olympics is a global organization that serves athletes with intellectual disabilities”. Their choice of wording suggests that the SEA bodies of the Special Olympics are actively avoiding the use of the word ‘retarded’ (Wee and Samosir, 2023, p. 365).

As we can see, concerns about English language usage arising from political correctness are not trivial but, at the same time, they are by no means uncontested or uncontroversial. We can therefore also expect there to be significant differences of opinion amongst learners and educators, too, as to what terms should be considered offensive and even how to understand those terms that are agreed to be offensive. This concern with language as a reflection of changing values – such as values pertaining to gender, identity, and inclusivity – cannot simply be dismissed as a Western phenomenon that has no relevance to TESOL learners. As a result of globalization, TESOL professionals need to prepare their learners for a world where developments in communication technologies mean the greater mobility of people as well as patterns of language use. An important part of this pedagogical responsibility requires recognising that a number of learners may well be very much in favour of modifying language usage to reflect such changing values while a fair number may object to such modifications – either on the grounds that grammar is sacrosanct or because they feel unsympathetic to the issues relating to gender identity. This is something that needs to be taken into account by the TESOL professional and below, I explain how this might be done.

4 Discussion

If the goal of TESOL is to prepare learners to use English effectively, then developments such as the presence of automation and the influence of political correctness have to be taken into account in the curricula and pedagogies of TESOL professionals. Here, we need to be mindful of the possibility that even amongst the many individuals who make up the community of TESOL professionals, there may be those who are not comfortable with making changes to the content and style of teaching because of these developments.

For example, some educators may complain that generative AI such as ChatGPT should be banned completely from the classroom and students prohibited from using these tools in writing essays. Their rationale is that students could simply pass off a work generated entirely by AI and they (the educators) would have no way of knowing. This kind of argument is, of course, at odds with the education policies

already put in place in the schools and universities mentioned above. And these policies are, in my view, reasonable because students need to be prepared for a world where, as noted above, automation is an unavoidable aspect of their social and professional lives. This kind of preparation is not a responsibility that TESOL can or should abdicate. Other educators may not be willing to address proposed changes to language usage that are motivated by political correctness. This could be either because they are unsympathetic to socio-political ideologies behind these proposed changes or even if they are sympathetic, they are grammatically conservative and are not comfortable with, for example, treating ‘they’ as singular.

Let us be clear that the kind of pedagogical challenges posed by automation and generative AI, in particular, is quite different than that posed by political correctness. In the case of the former, the issue is that as AI becomes ever more sophisticated, it becomes harder to distinguish an automated entity’s communication from that of a human being. In the case of the latter, it is about getting learners to be aware of the cultural and political interpretations attached to specific components of lexicogrammar. The communicative goal in the case of the former is for the TESOL learner to be able to distinguish themselves from an automated entity, especially highly sophisticated generative AI programs. The communicative goal in the case of the latter is for the TESOL learner to not be caught off-guard by potentially offensive or controversial lexicogrammatical choices and to make their communicative choices with as much awareness of their implications as is possible.

As far automation is concerned, from a posthumanist perspective, the boundaries that separate the automated entity and the human being are not always clear (Wee, 2021), especially when automated takes the form of apps that are effectively extensions of the human individual’s communicative activities. That having been said, the pedagogical responsibilities of the TESOL professional have less to do with the ontological complexities posed by the use of automation and more to do with preparing learners to interact effectively. Here, a key issue for users of English is to authenticate themselves as actual human beings. That is, there is a need to assure those with whom the learners are interacting that they are dealing with a person rather than a machine. This is no trivial matter because with evermore sophisticated AI, it will become harder to make this distinction. For example, recent advances have introduced an ‘advanced voice mode’ for ChatGPT, allowing it to giggle when a user makes a joke (Duffy, 2024). As Duffy (no page numbers) explains:

But the rollout of a more advanced voice mode could mark a major turning point for OpenAI, transforming what was already a significant AI chatbot into something more akin to a virtual, personal assistant that users can engage in natural, spoken conversations in much the same way that they would chat to a friend. The ease of conversing with ChatGPT’s advanced voice mode could encourage users to engage with the tool more often, and pose a challenge to virtual assistant incumbents like Apple and Amazon.

And being able to make this distinction can be highly consequential because communication that is construed as having been AI-generated may risk being dismissed as lacking in sincerity or even basic linguistic competence, with concomitant adverse professional or social consequences. This desire to ensure that one is communicating with an actual human being as opposed to a machine has resulted in the proliferating use of AI-detection tools (see below).

What, then, should TESOL professionals do? The most important thing to note is that this is a highly dynamic situation. As generative AI and AI detectors evolve, all users of English, ‘native speakers’ or otherwise, will have to keep adapting their own styles of communication, mainly because of the ongoing need to convince their readership that they are interacting with an actual person. Because this is a matter of communicative style, TESOL learners cannot be given rules of grammar that they need to follow. Instead, they need to be given an awareness that while communication oftentimes follows specific genre constraints, there will be occasions when a more personal (and human) touch needs to be deliberately inserted. And the motivation here is not the usual rationale where there is a need for phatic communion.

Instead, it concerns the more unusual and relatively recent need to distinguish one's communiques from those produced by generative AI. Simple exercises might involve getting learners to make use of generative AI and then modifying the resulting texts in ways that they feel serve to assure readers that they are communicating with a human. There is, of course, no objective way of deciding if a text contains sufficient linguistic markers of 'humanism'. Because of this, the TESOL professional might want to treat this exercise as a classroom communal activity. Other students weigh in on a particular text and make judgements about its provenance. These judgements can form the bases for the kinds of revisions that author of the text might want to consider, with suitable input from the TESOL professional, of course.

Coming now to the issue of political correctness, the issue, in contrast to that arising from automation, is less broadly stylistic because there are specific lexicogrammatical items that can be identified and their usage taken note of. Regardless, it is important that TESOL learners are made aware of the effects of political correctness on English, and given the tools needed to deal with them. As Tsehelska (2006, p. 20-22) notes:

Students who study English as a foreign language today should be aware of the importance of efforts towards inclusiveness and acceptance of diverse lifestyles and ethnicities in English speaking cultures. This issue is important for those who want to be able to function in English-speaking academic and business settings. Teaching politically correct language in the English classroom not only provides important information for learners but also gives them an opportunity to become aware of important cultural issues ...

The movement for political correctness has both supporters and critics. This makes it a good topic for discussions, debates, and other exercises in critical thinking skills.

Tsehelska (2006) provides useful suggestions on the kinds of pedagogical activities that learners can undertake such as rewriting sentences in ways that reflect political correctness and discussion topics for a more in-depth exploration of the ideological assumptions behind particular examples and issues. These include the following (2006, p. 21ff):

The following phrases use sexist language.

Rewrite them to make them inclusive.

1. A teacher should be tolerant with his students.
2. A child needs the love of his parents.

...

Many people are sensitive about their abilities, age, culture, and appearance. Make the following phrases sound inoffensive to the persons being spoken about.

1. She is looking after her insane mother.
2. The program offers long-term care for the elderly and immediate care for the mentally retarded.

...

Political correctness in languages other than English. Politically correct changes are also occurring in languages other than English as a reflection of growing tolerance, inclusion, and other changes in modern societies.

Ask your students: What examples of politically correct speech can you identify in the native languages of your classmates or community?

Have students create a list of examples.

As is clear from the extract, Tsehelska (2006) rightly encourages classroom discussions, noting that changing values across societies mean that not everyone will hold the same perspective or opinion about political correctness and how political correctness ought to be reflected in language. This means that TESOL professional has to be prepared to grapple with potentially sensitive viewpoints and discussions. Handling such controversies can be a sociolinguistic minefield and here, the TESOL professional will benefit from being some guidance, which can be in the form of seminars and workshops. However, it will be beneficial to the profession if such guidance can be formalized in a handbook since not every TESOL professional would have the opportunity or resource to participate in a workshop.

5 Conclusion

By way of closing, let me know briefly explain how the more recent developments of automation in communication and political correctness are intertwined with the challenges noted at the beginning of this paper: native-speakerism and the exclusion of TESOL professionals from policy-making.

There is evidence to suggest that the introduction of AI detection tools – to check if a piece of communication was AI-generated or human-generated – penalizes non-native writers of English. This, then, is a form of native-speakerism but one that is automated and because of this, arguably even more insidious. According to Scarfe, Watcham, Clarke and Roeschl (2024, p. 5). There is also evidence that AI detection tools can exhibit bias against non-native English writers, classifying them more frequently as AI compared to native English writers.

Liang et al. (2023, p. 1) provide further insight into this issue when they observe, in their study, that detectors:

... exhibit significant bias against non-native English authors, as demonstrated by their high misclassification of TOEFL essays written by nonnative speakers. In our study, we evaluated the performance of seven widely used GPT detectors on 91 TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) essays from a Chinese forum and 88 US eighth grade essays from the Hewlett Foundation's ASAP dataset.

While the detectors accurately classified the US student essays, they incorrectly labeled more than half of the TOEFL essays as "AI generated" (average false positive rate: 61.3%).

They go on to note (ibid.):

Our analysis further revealed a trend where more literary language was classified as more "human": enhancement of word choice in non-native English writing samples reduced misclassification, while simplifying native writing samples increased it, suggesting that GPT detectors are inadvertently penalizing individuals with limited linguistic proficiency.

The native-speakerism in AI-detection tools, together with the ready adoption of AI in schools and the workplace, needs to be addressed in policy-making. Unfortunately, at present, enthusiasm for the adoption of automation has tended to override – rather than proceed apace with – considered appreciation of some of potentially problematic consequences. There is no easy answer to this longstanding problem of TESOL professionals not being given authoritative voice when it comes to policy formulation but the widening use of automation only makes the need for them to be heard a matter of even greater urgency.

In the case of political correctness, I noted above that the TESOL professional may need to be given training and guidance on navigating the potentially sensitive nature of these discussions. Cultural clashes, generational differences, and conservative versus more progressive viewpoints – all these can easily come to the fore because the discussion about language is never just about the 'purely linguistic'. Since the target language is English, native speakerism can easily slip into the classroom in the form of cultural imperialism. This can happen if the linguistic norms being taught unquestioningly reflect what

is considered politically correct in Western societies. In such a case, norms emanating from outside the learners' own cultures are displacing local ones. At stake, then, are the personal experiences and identities of the learners as well as those of the TESOL professional themselves. In order that TESOL professionals are not put in the position of constantly having to worry if they are going to be accused of cultural insensitivity or, even worse, being deliberately offensive, the guidelines developed by TESOL as a profession need to be given institutional backing from other stakeholders as well, such as education officials. But this brings us back to the fact that policymakers tend not to give the inputs of language teachers sufficient weight.

There is obviously no easy answer to the issue of getting TESOL professionals to have a voice in policymaking. Complicating this issue is the fact that policy bodies are of course multi-levelled and having access to one level does not mean that the arguments and ideas will percolate up to more influential levels unscathed. So, it is not even enough to be heard by policy makers, it is necessary to find a way to ensure that what is said is accurately conveyed up the policy chain. And as I have argued in this contribution, the use of AI and the phenomenon of political correctness only add to the urgent need for a voice in matters of policy.

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