International Journal of TESOL Studies (2025)
Vol. 7 (2) 3-4 https://doi.org/10.58304/ijts.250502

Editorial

Response to Introduction to the Special Issue on The Future of TESOL

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We contributors to this collection have quite rightly concentrated attention on the future of English and how it is taught. What we have not done is situate this in the wider context of forces shaping the future of humanity. There would seem to be at least four major developments worth considering.

The first two concern issues of control. In 1932 Aldous Huxley published Brave New World (2007) and in 1948 George Orwell published 1984 (2021). Huxley wrote of a society willingly compliant with an authority which made life feel mindlessly contented, partly through the use of the drug, Soma. By contrast, Orwell wrote of coercive control through total surveillance and brutal repression.

Both these scenarios are ominously present in our world today. Following Huxley, compliant control is being exercised via social media by rendering large swathes of the population, especially younger age-groups, incapable of concentrated thought by reason of massive, addictive distraction. Jonathan Haidt's recent The Anxious Generation (2024) offers a chilling and compelling analysis of this phenomenon, as well as some possible solutions in Chapters 10-12 (What Governments and Technology Companies Can Do Now, What Schools Can Do Now and What Parents Can Do Now). These focus chiefly on ways of restricting the use of smartphones until age 16 and restoring a culture of free-play among children.

Following Orwell, on the one hand, the tech giants are harvesting massive quantities of personal data and using it unscrupulously in the unregulated pursuit of profit. (See Wynn-Williams' (2024) disturbing insider account of working for Facebook.) On the other, nation states are doing the same thing with a view to influencing political outcomes, through the spreading of fake news and coercive surveillance and social control.

The third issue concerns AI. Wee (2024), Tin (2025), Edmett (2025), Watson Todd (2025), and Cross (2025) have all explored various factors impacting on the possible future effects of AI on language education, including what Watson Todd (2025) has termed "disruptive innovation". What we have not done is to consider the potential existential threat which AI poses. Harari's recent book, Nexus (2024) is required reading in this connection. He contends that Intelligence, previously always found in conjunction with human Consciousness, is now becoming decoupled from consciousness. In a world run by a non-conscious super-intelligence, conscious human beings, with their inferior intelligence, would be redundant. It is noteworthy that organisations at all levels, from the BBC (2025), the British Council (2023) and the UK Cyber Security Council (2025), to international associations such as TIRF (n.d.), to individual schools and universities, such as Monash University (2025), are all introducing guidelines and codes of practice to regulate the use of AI (Carrier, 2025).

Finally, there has been very little discussion about the environmental impact of AI, which consumes phenomenal quantities of water and energy – and produces massive amounts of waste. Vicky Saumell's plenary talk at the IATEFL conference (Saumell, 2024) is revealing in this regard. A headlong rush to AI will further accelerate the impending, catastrophic, global environmental collapse. We are sitting on

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a fragile branch. Are we about to take the chainsaw of AI to it along with all the other environmental threats? Ideally, curricula should be adapting to these changes with a greater emphasis on critical thinking, 21st century skills, and Eco-awareness and action. In this connection, there has been a welcome recent surge of useful publications and materials (Graham, 2022; Maley, 2022; Waters, 2024).

I realise these are uncomfortable issues. But our teaching of English in this wider context is contingent on having students to teach, and students – and teachers - who are still capable of rational and critical thinking. How much longer will this be the case, if we do not act now?

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