

Article

GenAI and TESOL

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Abstract

This article explores the transformative impact of Generative AI (GenAI) on TESOL over the next twenty years, emphasizing both micro-level changes in teaching practices and potential macro-level shifts in motivations for learning English. It examines how GenAI could reshape employment-driven motivations for language learning, particularly in industries vulnerable to automation, such as customer service and tourism. At the micro level, the study analyses the implications of GenAI on equity of access and personalisation in TESOL, highlighting opportunities and challenges related to digital divides, cultural bias, and teacher competency. The article also addresses ethical concerns, pedagogical shifts, and the future role of teachers in an increasingly AI-integrated educational landscape. The paper concludes by proposing a research agenda to guide future investigations into the efficacy, risks, and ethical considerations of GenAI in English language teaching.

Keywords

Generative AI (GenAI), TESOL, Language Learning Motivation, Equity of Access, Personalisation in Education

1 Introduction

The impact of Generative AI (GenAI) on TESOL over the next 5–20 years will be transformative, although the timeline may not be as immediate as current hype suggests. Our view is that change will occur at both the micro level—affecting the practices of teaching and learning English—and at a macro level, influencing motivation to learn English. This opinion article will touch briefly on the latter before going into more depth on the former.

Firstly, a note on the definition of “AI.” AI has a history, and the term is often used to refer to completely different systems that bear little similarity in terms of purpose and architecture (Edmett et al., 2023). For this article, when we use the term “AI” we are referring to Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) and what has been made possible with the advent of Large Language Models (LLMs). We also use it to refer to what comes next with the evolution of these models—that is, an intentionally loose definition in terms of future AI technologies.

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For clarity, “GenAI” refers to a subset of artificial intelligence that creates text, speech, images, and more using advanced machine learning algorithms. In TESOL, GenAI has multiple use cases; for example, it can streamline lesson planning and assessment for teachers and provide interactive practice environments with immediate, personalized corrections to learners.

2 Macro Level: Motivation

Learners pursue English for a variety of reasons—ranging from employment and academic study to immigration and social integration. While many require English as a practical tool for communication in their daily lives, this section focuses primarily on work-related motivations.

English has long been the lingua franca of global trade. Many international businesses rely on English as their official language, and proficiency in English can significantly boost employability as well as social and international mobility. In today’s globalized world, English is not only essential for professionals in high-level positions but also increasingly required in low-skilled jobs in sectors such as retail, travel, and tourism. Consequently, employer requirements are shaping English language syllabuses, emphasizing the importance of practical communication skills—particularly speaking and listening—alongside traditional grammar and vocabulary instruction (Patel et al., 2023:16).

The impact of AI on all industries is likely to be widespread and, in some cases, could fundamentally alter the size, shape and organisation of the labour force. Our focus here is on how these changes in employment will drive the motivation to learn English, even as the actual need to use English in specific contexts evolves. It is important to note that there are two aspects to this: the “need to use English” (as a functional tool in the workplace) and the “motivation to learn English” (the drive to secure employment that requires the language). Our focus here is on the impact that AI will have on the job market rather than changes in skills required within employment, but the following two examples illustrate how both will be impacted.

Firstly, AI-powered chatbots are set to disrupt the customer service sector, particularly the global call centre market, which was valued at approximately 340 billion USD in 2020 ([Statista.com](#)). Gartner (2022) predicted that by 2027 at least 25% of organisations would adopt chatbot technology as their primary customer service channel. Following the launch of ChatGPT, projections accelerated, with estimates suggesting that 20–30% of customer service agents could be replaced by 2025. Furthermore, up to 80% of customer service and support organizations are expected to implement GenAI to enhance agent productivity and improve customer experience. Some of this disruption will be most acute in countries where batch processing offices (i.e., call centres) are significant employers—such as India, Bangladesh, and the Philippines. Studies (e.g. see [CMSWire, 2023](#)) have noted dissatisfaction with the service provided by human operators. Given the pace of current AI development, chatbots will soon outperform humans, and they will do so at a fraction of the cost. Job losses would seem inevitable.

Taking the tourism sector as another area for speculation. Simultaneous translation and the cost, speed, accuracy and invisibility with which this is possible will likely remove the need for a second language in most transactional exchanges. We might conclude that for an individual the decision to invest the considerable time and money into learning a language to interact with tourists may be influenced. A recent OECD report (2024) noted AI’s ability to ‘automate internal processes and basic customer services’ (pg.15), though the report focussed more on changes to jobs and the skills required rather than actual displacement.

For labour-intensive tasks, chatbots and robots are likely to take over cleaning, room service, maintenance, luggage and carrying, basic information or intermediary management tasks at some point. Meanwhile, workers will be called to more complex social interactions, such as

hyper-personalised attendance, complaint or crisis management, just-in-time decision taking, which will require critical thinking, empathy and psychology, creativity, and a deep knowledge of destinations and tourist profiles. (OECD 2024, pg. 20)

There seems to be an assumption that the workers involved in ‘basic’ tourism roles will be upskilled to provide this ‘hyper personalised attendance’ rather than the other possibility that they are simply made redundant. Bodies such as the World Economic Forum (2025) generally paint a positive picture of jobs gained versus jobs lost, and historically, technological change has often followed this pattern. However, this does not guarantee that disruption to the job market caused by AI will follow suit.

These two examples demonstrate that potential shifts in the motivations for learning English are emerging. However, these patterns of change will not be uniform. Some sectors will be impacted far less than others. Where the future is still unclear, we feel that *not* learning English would be too high a risk for most individuals who are acquiring English for economic reasons. Furthermore, some areas of life will be far more resistant to change. For example, individuals looking to emigrate will still need to learn a language and to then be tested on that skill. It is unlikely that in the next twenty years nation states will allow AI enabled translation over innate linguistic ability. This is particularly relevant given the sensitivity surrounding the integration of migrant groups within existing communities. Similarly, academic study in a second language will require proficiency in the language of instruction. If you want a degree from the University of Oxford, you will need to speak English.

So, in summary, ‘AI’ over a period of time, *may* start to impact an individual’s motivation to learn English. Industries such as the call centre sector may be fundamentally altered, perhaps akin to the impact that digital had on the printing industry in the 1990s. However, it is impossible to say that this will mean less learning of English as a Second or other Language. What we can say is that the *absolute need* to learn English to communicate with another individual will reduce significantly in some areas of life. It probably already has. This section raises many questions:

1. How does the adoption of AI-powered chatbots in services such as customer service affect the perceived economic value of learning English among non-native speakers?
2. In what ways will AI-driven changes in the call centre and tourism sectors influence individual decisions to invest in English language learning for employment?
3. How might the increasing accuracy and invisibility of simultaneous translation technologies impact the necessity and motivation to learn English in transactional settings?
4. To what extent will AI-induced job displacement in low-skilled sectors be offset by upskilling requirements that still demand strong English proficiency?
5. How do regions with significant TESOL populations (e.g., India, Bangladesh, Philippines) perceive the changing role of English due to AI integration in the workforce?
6. How do the motivations for learning English differ between sectors that are highly susceptible to AI disruption and those that remain resistant (e.g., immigration, higher education)?
7. What changes should be made to TESOL curricula to address the evolving role of English in a labour market increasingly influenced by AI?
8. How might the reduction in the absolute need for English in certain areas of life, due to AI advances, affect long-term trends in language learning motivation and proficiency?

3 Micro Level: Teaching and Learning Practices

While the impact on motivation is a key consideration, equally important is how GenAI might alter the very nature of English language teaching. In examining current TESOL practices, we focus on two key areas: equity of access and personalization.

3.1 Equity of access

Ed Tech evangelists claim that AI will be able to address and perhaps even solve inequity in terms of provision of quality education. As of 2023 up to an estimated third of the world's population did not have regular access to the internet ([World Education Blog, 2024](#)). The answer to the question of how AI will impact the learning of English for this group is quite simple, it won't. Devices which have integrated AI that do not require connectivity (i.e. offline GenAI) will not be ubiquitous in the short term. However, as internet access increased from an estimated 6% of the world's population in 2005 to 66% in 2022, it is not unrealistic to claim that we will be closer to universal access in twenty years from now.

Unfortunately, there are other aspects of the digital divide that extend beyond connectivity. Estimates vary but for the year 2024 the Ed Tech industry was valued at between 140 to 250 billion USD. Open-source AI (i.e. free or low cost) will continue to be an option but at the time of writing if you want the best technology, you need to pay for it. The premium/freemium model has been quickly adopted by US tech giants such as OpenAI and there is a significant difference between paid for and free versions. The business model is based on a clear and inequitable division. In an ideal world, governments might require GenAI developers to provide full access to all users at no cost. However, in the US regulation such as this would be seen as anti-innovation, and it is unlikely we would see this type of intervention. A more realistic hope is that the truly open LLM providers are able to keep pace with the big players and the recent emergence of DeepSeek has made this a far more likely outcome. Also, it should be noted that despite remaining infrastructural challenges, the free versions of GenAI are available at no cost to a large proportion of the world's population. Arguably, a level of accessibility far greater than that provided by previous innovations.

There is also a subtler divide related to cultural representation. The innate bias of GenAI has been widely reported and commented on. Attempts to solve the problem have had mixed results and it is unlikely to be remedied in the near future. As per Edmett et al. ([2023](#)) there are national and regional LLM developers who provide an alternative to the US tech dominance. For instance, Lelapa AI aim to include marginalized African languages to increase cultural representation. However, the resources available to such start-ups are vastly outmatched by those of major tech companies. Users may face a choice of using a capable smaller language model that represents their culture, versus a more advanced LLM that exhibits bias.

The question of equity of access must also touch upon one crucial human element: teachers. We have already seen an explosion of AI tools that promise to aid teacher productivity, freeing up time so teachers can focus more on what matters - teaching. If we examine one popular GenAI benefit, the creation of materials (e.g. worksheets, reading texts, assessment tasks) there seems to be real positive gain: it can save a teacher's time; could improve the quality of resources; and where there is scarcity could even increase the availability of materials. However, when you examine this more closely it is still skewed towards benefiting those who have resources rather than those without. What if your school does not have a printer or photocopier as is often the case in very low resource contexts? Furthermore, best practice is that a teacher needs to be part of the creation process, identifying when AI generated material or content is displaying bias or inaccuracies. An issue with GenAI is that you need to be competent in the area of output. If you are not, then you will be unable to see where it has made mistakes. With the global teacher shortage crisis (South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa in particular) there is an increased chance of AI use by less qualified teachers who are unable to critique AI generated content. So, something like material creation that appears an obvious win, might be problematic in a low-income country.

Having painted a somewhat negative picture regards equity of access, there are clear positives. Firstly, development of a learner's ability to speak English. A typical obstacle to developing this skill has been that a learner may want to practice speaking but her teacher does not speak English, nor can her peers, nor perhaps anyone in her village or town. The potential change here in terms of an entirely new opportunity for practice is, we feel, highly significant. There may even be additional benefits of a

non-human conversational partner, for example, research has described reduced levels of anxiety when learners talk to a chatbot (Çakmak, F.2022). There are also the usual digital advantages over a human in that AI is available whenever it is needed and the cost could be very low in an open-source context. And when you add the possibility of personalisation for carefully tailored input and individual feedback on oral performance then you can see how powerful a tool this will be for language learning. Perhaps in terms of TESOL methodology more communicative approaches will be able to flourish where previously they were hindered by a lack of opportunity to genuinely communicate. This new capability will have implications for assessment as well, for example, are human oral examiners soon to become a thing of the past?

Secondly, a word on TESOL and accessibility. The next few years will transform various aspects of accessibility, initially in terms of the improved ability to interact with a computer without the use of a keyboard. And not so far into the future, AI agents will be able to perform tasks that may have been either very difficult or in some cases impossible for those with a disability. There will be other new capabilities that transform accessibility that are not in view right now. This is mainly because advancements in the area of accessibility are often an incidental outcome of more general commercial technology progress i.e., they are not intentional in terms of direct funding. Again, in our ideal world where governments were willing to intervene, equity of access could be accelerated to make a real impact on inclusion.

We have looked at the impact of AI on how English is learnt/taught seen through the lens of equity of access. There are certainly new possibilities but issues with infrastructure, device availability, AI cost, teacher quality and a lack of funding that targets marginalised populations may weaken or even prevent this potential from being realised. More research is needed in the following areas:

1. How can AI enabled gains in teacher productivity be made available in low resource contexts?
2. When you remove an English teacher, what are the risks in the use of AI in TESOL?
3. How can we make the most of this new capability for speaking practice? Can we integrate all four skills into a more immersive and authentic learning experience that deploys a communicative approach?
4. How can we make sure that AI is inclusive for all learners? For example, how can GenAI aid accessibility?

3.2 Personalisation

Personalisation is often enthusiastically held up as a key advantage of AI in English Language Teaching and education more generally. The promise is that precisely tailored instruction will allow anyone to learn what they need, when they need it and delivered in a manner that best suits how they learn. At long last we can break free from the outdated one size fits all classroom model where the gifted are held back and those that need more assistance do not receive it. The potential for education is transformative, but we should bear in mind that like AI, the quest for digital personalisation has a history. For example, as far back as 2008, the Ed Tech startup Knewton raised approximately 180 million USD, driven by promises of using Big Data to personalize education. Knewton's founder Jose Ferreira claimed in 2012 that "Online education is on the cusp of massive change, and only 100 cognoscenti know about it". Predictably, the outcome did not match any of the hype (where are the 100 cognoscenti now?) and Knewton was eventually sold off to a publisher for a fraction of the money that was invested (Edsurge, 2019). So, are we merely in another hype cycle or are we genuinely at a real transformational moment in education? It is our view that GenAI (and other forms of AI) will allow for more personalisation, for example, when assessing and grading writing and providing ongoing formative feedback, or with a GenAI conversational agent that adapts level of language and topic area as per learner needs. However, many questions remain:

1. **Definition:** What do we mean when we use the term personalisation? As with AI we may be talking about different systems, is it GenAI powered or are we referring to, for example, adaptive

learning systems that predated GenAI. We need clearer, agreed definitions so we know that we are talking about the same technology.

2. **Impact on Learning:** How does personalization affect the overall learning process? Recent critiques suggest that overreliance on AI might impair the development of critical thinking skills (Gerlich, 2025).
3. **Teacher Involvement:** At what stage should teachers be involved in a personalized learning process, especially given GenAI's potential biases?
4. **Role of Feedback:** Given that GenAI can provide feedback at a level comparable to—or even surpassing—a teacher, is there a risk that busy teachers might entirely forgo their role in this process? Selwyn (2025) describes a teacher who, despite acknowledging the technology's capabilities, sees marking and feedback as essential for developing students' trust in his professional commitment to understanding and supporting them. This point underscores the need for best practices in managing the interplay between the human teacher, AI, and student.
5. **Privacy Concerns:** Where do we draw the line in terms of privacy and giving AI more data to make it 'better' at personalisation. For example, are we prepared to allow data on our emotional states to be analysed to enhance specifically tailored instruction. The EU has already banned this. The US has not as yet, and China is already leveraging the surveillance potential of AI (Miao, 2024).
6. **Usage Context:** Currently, most Educational Technology is deployed outside the classroom in both high- and low-income countries. Will this trend persist, and what are its implications for pedagogy?
7. **Social Learning:** Does personalization necessarily lead to isolated learning environments? How can collaborative learning be preserved even as instruction becomes more individualized? What new pedagogies in TESOL can be developed that leverage GenAI in a more collaborative manner but still benefit from the advantages of personalisation?

4 Research Agenda

Beyond the specific questions noted above, there remains a need for a broader research agenda. Unfortunately, we feel that technological change will continue to outpace research into efficacy and risks. We do not see how this situation will improve. Tech evangelists might argue that the solution will be AI agents who conduct research on our behalf, but current GenAI capability falls well short of this. What we know from AI in ELT research, primarily from a systematic review conducted by Crompton et al. (2024), is as follows:

1. Significant research gaps exist at both the population and sector levels—particularly in K–12 (primary and secondary) and adult non-higher education settings.
2. Research has focused predominantly on Asia (especially China), with insufficient studies in other geographies, including low-income regions and areas facing acute teacher shortages (e.g., Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia).
3. Until 2023, challenges in using AI in ELT were underreported; further critical analysis is needed to balance the enthusiastic claims of tech companies.
4. Several studies noted a reduction of anxiety when learners used AI as, for example, conversational partners. There were no studies that looked at longer term reduction of anxiety and more generally, dependence on AI tools i.e., what happens when AI tools are taken away from a learner? We need to know more about the longer-term impact of AI tool use and potential dependency.
5. 'Fear' was reported in terms of learner's fear of losing a 'natural' (i.e. human to human) learning environment; concerns around how data is used; and anxiety due to a lack of understanding how

AI systems work. There have already been indications of a deterioration in levels of trust in AI (e.g. see Cicek 2024). If teachers and learners are negatively pre-disposed towards this technology, then we will not be able to realise the potential gains. We need to understand more about learners and teachers' attitude towards AI on an ongoing basis.

6. Most of the research focus to date has been on productive skills, e.g. speaking and writing. AI in ELT research that focussed on the listening skill did not emerge until 2023. There are research gaps here at the overall skill but also at the sub skill level (rarely evident in any research from 2013-2023).
7. The impact of AI bias in English language teaching remains unclear, particularly regarding when teacher intervention is required.
8. AI's influence on assessment practices is expected to be profound, yet significant gaps in the literature persist.
9. Few studies have examined the motivational impact of AI on learners, even though motivation is a crucial component of learning.
10. Critiques (e.g., Hovrath, J.C., 2024) have highlighted the relatively low effect sizes of ICT in classrooms compared to the hype; it remains to be seen whether GenAI will yield different results.

5 Final thoughts

“Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.”

Arthur C Clarke

When GenAI emerged in the form of ChatGPT, it appeared as though we were witnessing something akin to magic—especially when tech leaders claimed that its inner workings were inexplicable. Some cynics argue that such claims were merely attempts to secure funding rounds estimated at over 600 billion USD in the past decade (for context, adjusted for inflation, the moon landing cost roughly one third of this amount). The research agenda now must shift our focus from being entranced by this seemingly mystical technology to developing a clear understanding of its strengths and weaknesses in an educational context. Even if AI advancements were to stall tomorrow (which is unlikely), we would still have decades of research to conduct on the impact of GenAI. As schools impose mobile phone bans and society recognises the real harms of social media, we must resist uncritically embracing another new technology—one where the potential risks are not yet fully safeguarded against.

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