

Introduction to the Special Issue on the Future of TESOL

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In 1999, James Gleick in *Faster* argued that we live in an age of change and the rate of change is constantly accelerating. A quarter of a century later, Gleick's contention still holds. The COVID-19 pandemic changed the way we all live and work; neoliberalism has shifted the goals of educational institutions; and the sudden appearance of ChatGPT in 2022, after 50 years of failed promises about artificial intelligence, has rocked education and society. Is the field of TESOL set up to cope with such changes? Should we be planning and acting to ensure that the TESOL community benefits from, or at least is not harmed by, these constantly accelerating changes?

When the International Journal of TESOL Studies approached me to be guest editor of a special issue, the challenges TESOL faces were at the front of my mind. So, instead of suggesting a traditional issue collecting research articles on a specific topic, I proposed a special issue comprising more speculative articles on the future of TESOL in an age of change, and I am grateful to the editorial board for accepting this more innovative approach.

The nine articles in this special issue cover a wide range of key issues facing the TESOL community. TESOL is practiced in a socio-economic context, and several articles highlight key contextual issues impacting TESOL. While English remains the dominant language, there are shifts in the domains of use and the expected norms, possibly with the outer circle countries taking some of the roles from the traditional core (Maley, 2025). There are also pressures for more plurilingualism in TESOL and a decreasing, though still influential in some contexts, emphasis on native speakers (Copeland et al., 2025). Neoliberal ideologies have shifted priorities in education with privatisation, outsourcing and less stable employment becoming the norm (Bell, 2025), and decisions made on economic grounds rather than educational quality (Watson Todd, 2025). Generative AI has changed the ways we communicate (Wee, 2024) with potential impacts on motivations for learning English (Edmett, 2025), together with a risk of losing what makes us human such as organic creativity (Tin, 2025).

Such contextual changes are shifting the goals of TESOL. The traditional native speaker norms may be replaced by English as a lingua franca and a clearer focus on specific contexts of use (Copeland et al., 2025). More radically, TESOL may move away from teaching language to teaching key literacies, including multimodal literacy (Lim, 2024), academic literacy (Bell, 2025) and AI literacy (Watson Todd, 2025), and an awareness of political issues in language use (Wee, 2024). At the same time, there may be a greater emphasis on soft skills (Cross, 2025) or 21st century skills (Maley, 2025) which focus on the intangible internal goals of personal development (Watson Todd, 2025).

The growing role of technology, and especially generative AI, in society will lead to changes in how we teach. Much greater use of technology in education is expected (Cross, 2025) with potential benefits. Technological multimodal affordances can aid learning, especially when used as scaffolds (Lim, 2024). Generative AI can provide opportunities for interaction and personalisation (Edmett, 2025), especially

if new technology-based paradigms are developed (Watson Todd, 2025). But we need to be careful that overuse does not lead to isolation (Edmett, 2025), a lack of reflection and thinking (Tin, 2025), and difficulties in actually showing that you are human (Wee, 2024). At the extreme looms the dystopian replacement of teachers by technology (Watson Todd, 2025).

In speculating on the future of TESOL, the contributors acknowledge the uncertainty of making predictions. As Alan Maley (2025) points out, we can extrapolate from current trends, but there is always the possibility of sudden, radical and unpredictable change. Such outlier events, or black swans in Nassim Taleb's (2007) terms, could make any predictions irrelevant. However, Taleb's key argument is that we should not try to predict black swans; rather, we need to build robustness into the system to reduce negative impacts. My hope is that this special issue of IJTS on the future of TESOL is a valuable first step to building such robustness. But we need to go further; we need to start having discourses about the benefits of human teachers in education (Watson Todd, 2025), about ways of integrating technology into education for the greatest benefits (Edmett, 2025; Lim, 2024; Tin, 2025), and about the human values we should be promoting (Cross, 2025). I hope that this special issue stimulates such discussion.

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