How does generative AI promote autonomy and inclusivity in language teaching?

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In recent years, artificial intelligence (AI) has increasingly made advances across various fields, including ELT. In this article we embrace an egalitarian dialogue framework to explore and understand the role of AI in language education. This format provides a useful backdrop for navigating the dual responses—enthusiasm and scepticism—by which AI's influence in education has often been characterized. We critically assess both the advantages and limitations of AI in ELT, highlighting and praising how AI-powered tools can assist educators in differentiating instruction, promoting learner autonomy, and creating personalized and inclusive learning environments, thus making education more accessible to students with diverse and individual needs. However, the article also addresses the challenges posed by the digital divide, particularly the inequities in access to (AI) technologies in low-socioeconomic-status regions. We also reflect upon how AI can become an obstacle in developing learner autonomy due to the risks associated with overdependence on such technologies and the lack of critical skills. The article concludes that although AI presents exciting opportunities for advancing and facilitating language learning, its integration must be approached with a rational mindset to ensure that it serves to bridge educational gaps rather than intensify them.

Key words: GenAI, autonomy, inclusivity, digital divide

Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) has emerged as a ubiquitous concept across the globe, impacting diverse fields from data science and programming to the creation of news stories, images, and music, as well as influencing financial and military decisions. AI has its origins in 1950, when Alan Turing introduced his eponymous test. However, widespread public

awareness of AI's existence has only developed in recent years. Even today, most people tend to primarily associate AI with ChatGPT, the freely accessible generative AI chatbot developed by OpenAI, despite the existence of thousands of other websites and well-known apps utilizing AI technology.

The world of ELT has also been adapting to these developments, following the stages outlined by the often-cited Gartner hype cycle. AI's integration into ELT has shown signs of the five phases of the hype cycle: technology trigger, peak of inflated expectations, trough of disillusionment, slope of enlightenment, and plateau of productivity (Dedehayir and Steinert 2016). Whether ELT is already plateauing seems to be an exciting question; however, it must be acknowledged that this progression underscores the inevitable integration of technology into education. While scholarly publications that include the keywords 'AI' and 'ELT' have seen a modest increase of 0.5 percent when comparing the periods 2019–2021 (15,900 articles) and 2022–present (16,700 articles), the number of general search results has surged dramatically, by over 250 percent (from 137,000 to 368,000) (Crompton *et al.* 2024).

Given the expansive impact of AI and the argumentative nature of this article, it is important to focus on specific aspects that are particularly relevant to ELT. This paper will explore how AI can assist teachers and material developers in promoting a more personalized/adaptive and inclusive learning environment for students. AI has the potential to be an impactful tool that can make learning truly accessible for all despite its ongoing development and inherent limitations.

The paper's dialogic format also enables the argumentation that AI is not as reliable as it is often portrayed, and furthermore, introduces controversies and doubts, particularly by creating regional divides and issues of accessibility. AI is often overtrusted, overpraised, and embraced as *the* solution for numerous problems; however, with sufficient scrutiny of its long-term consequences, its benefits and undeniable impact can emerge.

Background

The three major focus points of this paper are: AI/generative AI (GenAI), inclusivity, and personalized learning/learner's autonomy. There is a wide array of definitions for AI because the term has become overgeneralized, much like the brand name 'Xerox' in the 1980s, when all copy machines were colloquially referred to as 'xeroxes' and the verb 'to xerox' entered common usage. This phenomenon is now occurring in AI: is it the sophisticated technology behind powerful tools and resources, or are we inadequately using the term AI to describe various different/distinct tools? If we seemingly struggle to provide a simple definition of AI, how can we grasp its underlying mechanisms and accurately assess its impact on our professional lives, whether positive or negative?

The most urgent clarification calls for establishing the difference between AI and GenAI. AI in ELT is often referred to as AI techniques, AI tools, and AI applications, thus becoming a general umbrella term for techniques prompted by AI (Jeon *et al.* 2023), whereas GenAI is a deep learning model

that can generate entirely new text, images, and other content based on the data it was trained on. When teachers, particularly language teachers, use AI in everyday discourse, they mostly mean GenAI because such GenAI platforms are used to create long strings of human-sounding and credible-looking texts, including lesson plans, multiple-choice questions, gap-filling activities, grading rubrics, reading materials, dialogues for role plays, presentation outlines, etc. A large language model (LLM) such as ChatGPT is a very smart and capable tool for decoding and encoding natural human language, and uses algorithmic thinking to predict, combine, deduce, compare, and invent ideas.

However, all GenAI-generated content necessitates thorough review and critical evaluation prior to implementation because GenAI tools also have a tendency to provide incorrect information or, in other words, hallucinate. Hallucination was actually the *Cambridge Dictionary*'s word of the year in 2023. It means that GenAI produces false information and presents it convincingly as the answer to our query. It illustrates to both students and teachers how fragile our belief in truth and credibility is, thus underscoring the importance of instruction in critical thinking, digital literacy, and AI literacy. Educators must teach learners to recognize the manipulation and influence exerted by various algorithms. The process of decision-making, and the right to it, is thus severely compromised. This concern leads us to one of the main and best-advocated benefits of GenAI tools: the promotion of personalized learning and learner autonomy.

Personalized learning is building on constructivist approaches in that it promotes students being the centre of knowledge acquisition by catering to their needs and interests (differentiation), tailoring instruction to their individual preferences (individualization), incorporating their previous experiences and knowledge, and letting them guide the course of learning with inquiries (inquiry-based learning) (Szabó and Csépes 2023). There are several learning theories around the world, and the extent to which learners are expected to be autonomous differs greatly according to sociocultural factors (Benson 2016). The Socratic method, which puts critical inquiry at the heart of teaching while the teacher takes a facilitator role, is quite well known. However, in many contexts, the teacher is still the sole safe-keeper and source of all knowledge.

The best-known definition of learner autonomy is that of Holec (1981: 3): 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning'. In other words, this means that the students are independent enough to manage their own time and resources to facilitate learning; they are also aware of which learning strategy best fits them and their particular learning situation; they are also resourceful and critical at the same time, i.e. they know where to look for information and they can also judge if the information source is credible or not (Benson, 2016)—crucially important when it comes to GenAI-related course materials or assignments. In Bartle's framework (Bartle 2015) personalized learning entails learner-centredness, i.e. placing emphasis on the learner as a person with individual interests, needs, and motivation, implying higher learner autonomy, more self-regulated learning, and higher student

engagement. Both personalized and inclusive learning share the common aspect of adaptive methodology that is particularly promoted by AI algorithms.

Inclusivity has various other aspects to take into consideration. Accessibility of resources and services, as well as equal access to GenAI tools, have become the core issue of debates and critical views on inclusive learning. The mission of inclusivity is to ensure that all people have equal access to education regardless of potential barriers to access, such as disability, gender or gender identity expression, and migration or displacement status (United Nations 2016). Inclusive learning also implies equal access to digital resources and can play a crucial role in addressing the digital divide. It is a highly self-centered, Western perspective to assume that GenAI is universally accessible. However, in many parts of the Global South and even North there is a lack of the most basic access to technology or GenAI tools, and learners have different educational experiences.

Inclusivity with the help of GenAI

Inclusivity is a very divisive issue when it comes to GenAI. How can GenAI be used then to promote it?

There are a number of ways AI technologies can already make learning more inclusive, while supporting various learning difficulties. For example:

1. Learners with visual impairments, motor issues, or other disabilities have been aided by dictation services which have been available on computers and phones for years. Speech-to-text GenAI tools transcribe and continuously revise speech, mimicking how we understand language. These also transcribe and summarize thoughts into coherent text, helping those who struggle with typing or focusing. Meanwhile, text-to-speech and read-aloud services can be used by learners with visual impairments or dyslexia.
2. Dyslexic learners can benefit from accessibility tools that combine a read-aloud function, dyslexia-friendly text adaptation (changing the font size, font type, and line spacing), the option to change the colour of the background, and the ability to highlight one line at a time by blurring out the rest of the text (e.g. Microsoft's Immersive Reader). Tools such as these offer students the chance to follow at their own pace and pronunciation, and enable teachers to spot early their students' potential difficulties with reading. Various voice-related applications are aimed at moving users away from text-based interactions to sound-based ones. They use decoding and encoding to understand what is being said and to generate a response, as the ultimate point is to have a real-time speaking partner.
3. Chatbots and GenAI tools developed in English-speaking countries generally perform better in English and rely on Western databases, which can affect their responses. To address this, other countries are developing their own language models. Hungarian scientists, for example, trained a GPT-3 model containing 6.7 billion parameters and named it PULI. Russia has trained its own chatbot, Sberbank RuGPT-3, on 760 million parameters, while in China more than

100 language models are being developed. These models not only improve access to GenAI for non-English speakers but also aid in language preservation. India, for instance, is working to tokenize 121 languages.

Does AI help bridge the digital divide, or is inclusivity an illusion?

Many GenAI tools help promote inclusivity by addressing specific needs and individual differences. Although GenAI has demonstrated significant potential to improve learners' experiences, its implementation presupposes widespread and equitable access to reliable technology and digital literacy. The term inclusivity can be understood though the concept of the digital divide, a symbolic and somewhat invisible wall. By definition, the digital divide is a gap between those who have ready access to computers and the internet and those who do not (Dakakni and Safa 2023); however, another discrepancy has to be considered in this dialogic argumentation: the digital divide regarding digital literacy. The primary disadvantage of GenAI-driven educational tools is that students without reliable access to technology or the internet cannot benefit from them, thereby creating a major abyss between learning opportunities (Hockley, 2014).

GenAI in the foreign language classroom typically involves the use of advanced, interactive platforms and various online resources that necessitate consistent and high-speed internet access. In many parts of the world, this requirement is simply unrealistic. A significant portion of students from low-income families and low-socioeconomic-status backgrounds are denied such access, further widening the educational gap.

It has been reported that 15 percent of US households with school-age children do not have a high-speed internet connection at home (Anderson and Perrin 2018). Several regions in Central Europe also reveal disparities of digital access: extensive research by Lucendo-Mondero *et al*. has concluded that major inequalities exist in East and Southeast Europe, e.g. eastern Poland, central and southern Italy, Hungary, Croatia, Greece, Macedonia, Romania, Bulgaria, Cyprus, and Turkey (Lucendo-Monedero *et al*. 2019).

What kind of data awaits us in less-developed parts of the world, e.g. the Global South, if highly developed regions such as the United States and Central Europe can demonstrate statistics that prove that the digital divide is present? The gap is even more pronounced in certain countries such as India: as Ashrani points out, India now accounts for the second largest pool of wireless communications subscribers and internet users, in absolute terms, worldwide (Ashrani 2021: 1). There are significant disparities in the adoption and usage of information and communication technologies within the country. It is quite shocking to discover that while 88 percent of the urban population uses the internet, yet only about 22 percent of the rural population has access. These disparities in the adoption of information and communication technologies are even more diverse when it comes to regional differences.

This aspect of the digital divide concerning access perpetuates further inequity concerning learning because students lacking access are relegated

to a more conventional type of language learning. The short-term consequences may result in a performance gap, an immediate impact on educational outcomes, and lower levels of proficiency. The long-term effects sustain a digital divide in society, and will reduce the number of opportunities for higher education; students with a lack of access to GenAI tools may find themselves at a significant disadvantage in future educational and career opportunities, thereby perpetuating cycles of poverty and limiting social mobility.

Addressing the digital divide requires systemic efforts at governmental and institutional level to ensure equitable access to technology and the internet for all students. Without these measures, the use of GenAI in language classrooms will continue to deepen existing inequities, rather than bridging educational gaps and fostering inclusive learning environments.

Open-access platforms and chatbots to support personalized learning

GenAI has also been found to improve language learning by providing personalized, engaging, and interactive content that adapts to individual learning styles and progress. GenAI tools can make on-demand, individualized, and personalized learning available. For instance, most open-access MOOC (massive open online course) learning platforms, such as Coursera and Udemy, can provide personalized recommendations based on previous searches, enrolments, and course completions, thus influencing and impacting learners' choices and their motivation. This feature allows learners to find subject fields they are interested in and specialize in areas they might not have even known existed.

Another area in which GenAI solutions can make learning tailored, inquiry-based, and continuously available is specially designed chatbots, such as Khan Academy's chatbot Khanmigo, which is known to focus primarily on STEM topics. It is different from ChatGPT in that it uses scaffolding and guided discovery techniques to help students find the answer themselves instead of giving them the solution straight away, and it also keeps students on a protected platform.

Alternatively, we can help our students use chatbots, such as ChatGPT, Gemini, or Claude, for the following functions that foster learner autonomy. The following two subcompetencies (see below 4 and 5) all come from the 'Learning to Learn' competence within the Cambridge Life Competencies Framework:

4. Setting goals and planning for learning

This component of the learning to learn competence involves, for instance, identifying the learning objectives of a task, creating short- or long-term revision and study plans, and setting achievable language learning goals (Cambridge Life Competencies Framework: Learning to Learn, 2020, pp. 8–11). An example prompt for this could be the following:

PROMPT: "Create a 6-week study plan for me based on these observations [insert teacher feedback]? I would like to study for half an hour every 2 days."

In this case, Google Gemini's response proved to be one of the best, since it provided a rough plan in a table format with a detailed breakdown of the suggested activities.

The Plan

Week	Focus Areas	Activities
1-2	Introductions, Thesis Statements, & Idea Development	* Thesis Practice: Find prompts, write thesis statements. (1 session) * Mind maps: Practice brainstorming. (1 session) * Outline existing essays: Analyze thesis and development in examples. (1-2 sessions)
3-4	Vocabulary & Collocation	* Vocabulary notebook: Keep new word lists, focus on 5-10 words per session. * Collocation practice: Look up common pairings. (1-2 sessions) * Read for Pleasure: Choose interesting topics. (as often as possible)
5-6	Grammar & Punctuation	* Focused Review: Choose 1-2 trouble areas (verbs, commas, etc.). Do short lessons/exercises. (2-3 sessions) * Proofreading practice: Revise old essays for specific errors. (1-2 sessions)

Export to Sheets

Activity Breakdown (adjust times to suit your 30-minute sessions):

- **Thesis Practice:** 10 minutes finding prompts online, 20 minutes writing statements.
- **Mind maps:** 15 minutes free brainstorm around a topic, 15 minutes organizing the map
- **Outline Existing Essays:** 20 minutes reading and highlighting, 10 minutes rough outlining

5. Using feedback to improve learning

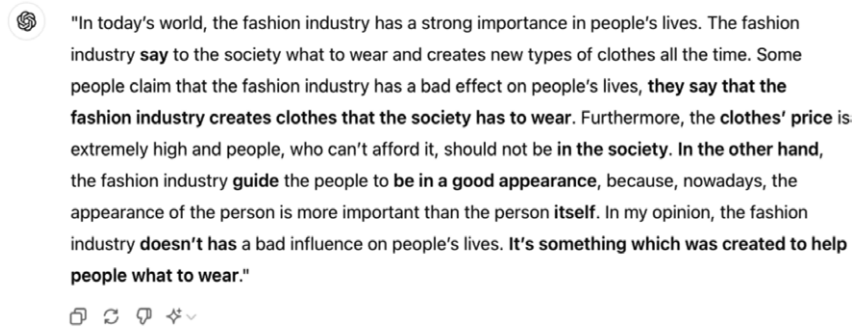
This next chain of prompts involves the components of this competence with which the learner can autonomously use GenAI-generated feedback to understand their own mistakes and get closer to the correct solutions in a step-by-step process.

PROMPTS:

1st prompt: "Here's a text I wrote. Do not correct the grammar or vocabulary mistakes but underline them".

2nd prompt: "Here's my corrected version. Is it any better? Again, underline my mistakes."

3rd prompt: "Explain to me what was wrong with the mistakes that I couldn't correct."


"In today's world, the fashion industry has a strong importance in people's lives. The fashion industry **say** to the society what to wear and creates new types of clothes all the time. Some people claim that the fashion industry has a bad effect on people's lives, **they say that the fashion industry creates clothes that the society has to wear**. Furthermore, the **clothes' price** is extremely high and people, who can't afford it, should not be **in the society**. **In the other hand**, the fashion industry **guide** the people to **be in a good appearance**, because, nowadays, the appearance of the person is more important than the person **itself**. In my opinion, the fashion industry **doesn't has** a bad influence on people's lives. **It's something which was created to help people what to wear**."

GenAI chatbots can also be used in ELT for lesson planning and task design. According to a 2023 British Council report on AI and ELT, which involved 1348 participants worldwide, 57 percent of teachers use GenAI for creating materials and 43 percent for writing lesson plans (Edmett *et al.* 2023).

Apart from offering a wealth of ideas to teachers who need to get started with their lesson preparation, these tools can reduce teacher workload even further by offering a variety of differentiation options and ways for personalized learning.

Is this really learner autonomy?

Holec's (1981: 3) definition claims that students achieve independent learning through effective time management and accessing resources to facilitate their educational goals, a definition which was coined well ahead of the widespread use of GenAI tools. Educators and ELT professionals often assume that students possess the skills to locate and access information independently, and critically evaluate its credibility. There is a prevalent belief that GenAI tools represent an ideal means to foster learner autonomy by enabling personalized and individualized learning experiences. This viewpoint is challenged by asserting that reliance on GenAI can lead to excessive dependence. Personalized and adaptive learning paths do not automatically entail enhanced learner autonomy because human beings, particularly younger generations, tend to be less effective self-regulators, a characteristic that is essential to becoming an autonomous learner.

Although Generation Z appears comfortable with technology, they may struggle with digital literacy in an online learning environment. This generation tends to use technology for a wide range of purposes, but these uses are frequently and surprisingly simplistic and do not fully leverage the potential of digital tools for developing autonomy or critical thinking. Research findings regarding digital literacy reveal that students are not engaged while learning online, they cannot process and assess digital information adequately, they lack critical judgemental skills, or they cannot validate information, etc. (Anthonysamy *et al.* 2020).

GenAI tools can further inhibit learner autonomy by hindering critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Students often overly rely on these tools and platforms, consequently ignoring traditional learning approaches that foster constructivist knowledge acquisition and long-term memory retention. Lifelong education draws upon self-regulated learning habits that include the ability to analyse and synthesize. If students are offered

automated solutions rather than engaging material, they may well opt for GenAI-generated content and avoid creativity.

The assumption that GenAI tools inherently promote learner autonomy lacks empirical support. The influence of algorithms in creating seemingly comfortable learning environments raises fundamental questions: how can we cultivate autonomous learners with a critical mindset and analytical capabilities when the learning process itself is influenced by automated procedures? Adaptive learning represents another aspect of learner autonomy because it is a way to solidify learning outcomes in very individualized ways. Technically, it means that GenAI responds to individual needs and provides learning paths while considering various factors such as interaction patterns, duration of solving tasks, and recurring errors, which collectively generate data via its algorithm. Although adaptive learning does sound promising, its effectiveness relies heavily on the learners' skills and determination to embrace autonomous learning. In the context of ELT, success is often achieved through interactive and cooperative processes, through which both peers and teachers provide constructive feedback. This collaborative and dynamic feature is a limitation of GenAI-designed chatbots because they often lack the naturalistic quality of interaction humans can share.

Specifically, GenAI chatbots lack the nuanced and intelligent capabilities for gentle error correction, linguistic feedback, natural conversation flow, and the ability to interpret non-verbal cues such as body language, lip-reading, and gestures—elements crucial for effective language learning. Many argue against the usefulness of Voice Chat, the built-in chatbot function of ChatGPT, which is often referred to as a reliable source of communication, replacing a human partner. It does diminish the isolation of the speaker; however, artificial communication completely lacks certain linguistic elements that are of great importance, particularly for language learning. Human interaction will always remain indispensable in ELT: social skills such as meaningful interactions, active participation in speaking and listening, and negotiation of meaning are crucial components of language learning. Chatbot-led interaction, in contrast, is more limited and can risk leading teachers and learners into a false sense of accomplishment.

The main purpose of LLMs in GenAI chatbots is not to solve the world's most pressing issues or maths problems, nor is it to predict the future, to write creative literary works, or to pass exams. Since the appearance of ChatGPT on the public scene, people have been keen to highlight how it produces incorrect information and implausible solutions to problems, which in turn can affect students who might take GenAI-generated responses for granted. However, the crux of the matter is that users need to be aware of what GenAI chatbots are truly capable of and should not expect features that the tool is not supposed to demonstrate. Clearly, GenAI chatbots remain limited in their ability to fully support the development of communicative competence and underscore the irreplaceable role of human engagement in establishing comprehensive language proficiency.

Conclusion

GenAI tools can enhance personalized and inclusive learning by offering differentiated strategies and addressing the individual needs of learners. However, GenAI-driven platforms and chatbots highlight the necessity

of teaching critical thinking and GenAI literacy. Despite efforts to create balanced datasets, the process is complex and prone to errors, often referred to as 'hallucinations', in GenAI-generated outputs. Taking these responses at face value does not put GenAI at fault, but rather places the blame on those users who do not perform a critical evaluation of the responses.

Furthermore, GenAI can empower students to take greater control of their learning by facilitating self-regulated study, encouraging the development of critical skills, goal setting, and the use of various organizational tools and feedback mechanisms to enhance learning outcomes. Although the proliferation of GenAI tools, such as text-to-speech and speech-to-text applications, holds promise for making learning more accessible for students with disabilities, it is crucial to acknowledge the ambivalent issue of the digital divide that lurks behind even the best formulated definition of inclusivity: we cannot to assume that GenAI and technology are accessible to everyone in an egalitarian way; we are indeed a long way from this.

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