AI in language learning: lessons for school leaders

BRITISH COUNCIL

Executive summary

There's scarcely a field that Artificial Intelligence (AI), specifically in the form of large language models (LLMs), hasn't impacted. That includes language education, which has been fundamentally reshaped since ChatGPT's public launch in 2022. Those changes have come with immediate challenges, threats and opportunities. In fact, a 2025 British Council survey revealed nearly eight in ten teachers (79 per cent) report they have already had to rethink how they set assignments in response to AI either to prevent misuse or to intentionally build it into the curriculum[1]. But the same is also true in the longer term.

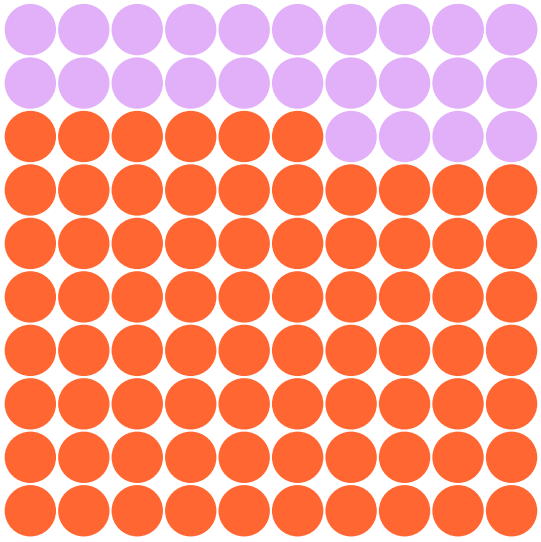
While we might not know exactly what those longer-term outcomes are, the evolution of LLMs and their role in language learning to date gives us a sense of how to approach it going forward. Namely, school leaders embracing both the challenges and opportunities AI presents.

When it comes to opportunities, school leaders can focus on things like personalisation and assessment innovation. Addressing challenges, meanwhile, means addressing issues like ethics, equity and teacher readiness. The last of those is particularly important, with our 2024 paper *Artificial intelligence and English language teaching: Preparing for the future* showing that 76 per cent of teachers use AI tools, yet only 20 per cent feel sufficiently trained[2].

Our Human Centred Framework provides a guide for addressing these challenges. The framework sets out ten principles for the responsible, fair and inclusive application of AI within English language teaching, learning and assessment (TLA).

The core principle is to prioritise the needs and well-being of the learner above all else. Under the framework, technology is viewed as a supportive tool to enhance human capabilities, not replace them.

This guide offers school leaders practical recommendations for implementing that framework, as well as for ethical leadership in the age of AI.



76%

of teachers use AI tools, yet only **20%** feel sufficiently trained.

A turning point for language education

Since 2022, the use of AI tools in schools has accelerated dramatically. It's revealing, for example, that a global survey conducted by the British Council found that 76 per cent of language teachers[3] were already using AI-powered tools for a range of tasks. That's an incredible adoption rate for a new technology.

In this context, it is understandable that English Language Teaching (ELT) and assessment are early adopters of AI. In a highly globalised world, a common language offers clear advantages for individuals, organisations and societies. Reflecting this demand, the global ELT sector is forecast to reach $107.93 billion by 2028[4].

Demand for English language learning remains exceptionally high. Being able to speak English proficiently in a professional setting opens up opportunities in business, diplomacy and education. This kind of demand means teachers are happy to embrace cost-effective methods that make both teaching and assessment more efficient.

Working in such a high-demand context means that the stakes are incredibly high for teachers and school leaders alike. Use AI tools incorrectly and students can end up demotivated, disengaged and not get the education they need to thrive.

Instead, a balanced, human-centred vision is necessary to turn technological capability into pedagogical excellence.

The new landscape: AI in language learning and assessment

In order to effectively adopt this approach, it's important to fully understand both the challenges and opportunities presented by AI learning and assessment tools.

On one hand, AI promises to significantly enhance the human element of education by delivering deeply personalised learning pathways through adaptive diagnostic assessment, fostering self-regulation for lifelong learning and providing timely, focused feedback in high-value areas like speaking and writing. Its capability for assessment innovation can also streamline processes while pushing for more authentic evaluation tasks.

However, the use of AI in education introduces serious risks that must be managed to keep the focus on students and teachers. These include the use of AI by students making it difficult to accurately assess what they know, algorithmic bias excluding or disadvantaging students who use non-standard English varieties, data privacy and surveillance, and worsening digital inequality. To properly integrate AI into education, we must look at both its benefits (like conversational AI) and its drawbacks (like over-reliance and cheating).

By weighing these two sides, we can create a fair and responsible way to use AI in the learning environment.

Opportunities

Personalisation: Adaptive pathways tailored to individual student needs.

Assessment innovation: Streamlined processes and more authentic evaluation tasks.

Self regulation: Fostering lifelong learning habits and student autonomy.

Challenges

Standardisation & bias: Algorithmic bias that may disadvantage non-standard English speakers.

Data privacy: Concerns regarding surveillance and the security of student information.

Digital inequality: The potential for AI to widen the gap between "have" and "have not" students.

Opportunities: enhancing the human element

When it comes to understanding where the opportunities lie, a good place to start is with the personalised learning pathways that AI learning tools can facilitate. AI tools can be used for adaptive learning through diagnostic assessment, as well as for providing lectures, explanations and practice tests tailored to the learner's level.

Another opportunity lies in the rise of self-regulation and moving towards lifelong learning. This shift isn't about AI replacing the teacher. Instead, it's about equipping learners to study autonomously and to make that a long-term habit.

Separate 2023 studies, for example, found that learners using a gamified AI system were better at self-regulation[5] and achieved higher vocabulary[6] learning than those who didn't. The study also found that students using AI would pay more attention to the learning strategies they employed and develop better goal-setting and decision-making skills.

The most exciting benefits of AI for language learning is how it can improve your practice and feedback.

Specifically, AI can serve as a conversational partner - enabling learners to practice just as they would with a real person - and as a language coach.

AI can also offer instant feedback on your language use (grammar, pronunciation, etc.). Importantly, it can do so in a way that makes a learner feel less pressure or anxiety than they might when practising with someone who's better versed in the language than they are. If the AI system is well designed, it can further increase confidence by improving pronunciation through automatic speech recognition.

AI-powered writing aids are also becoming increasingly common across the full spectrum of language learning. Tools like Grammarly, for instance, help reduce grammatical errors and increase lexical variation for everyone, from people setting out on their language learning to even the most advanced writers. Machine translation, meanwhile, can serve as a reference tool for early-stage learners.

When it comes to assessment, AI offers automated grading and adaptive test questions and fast, personalised feedback. Of course, every opportunity comes with its own challenges. One major concern is learners using AI tools to cheat, which may require different forms of assessment tasks. Recent data shows this shift is already underway: of the teachers rethinking their assignments, 38 per cent now design tasks specifically to avoid AI use, while 59 per cent are creating assignments that aim to incorporate it appropriately[7]. For example, a live discussion that the learner is asked to summarise and then extend with their own views.

Ultimately, the goal is to gain an accurate understanding of a learner's progress, not how well they can use AI. That means finding forms of assessment that cannot easily be answered by AI prompts.

Challenges: navigating risk

While the opportunities AI brings are becoming clearer, so are the challenges. Broadly speaking, those challenges can be categorised into standardisation and bias, data privacy and surveillance and digital inequality.

When it comes to **standardisation**, AI models risk reinforcing standardised language use, potentially excluding specific varieties or dialects of English, leading to a 'negotiation of what counts as a language.[8]' LLMs offer a good example of this issue. Most of the big LLMs produce outputs in American English. If you want an answer in a specific form of English, you have to prompt it to answer in those dialects.

That's a form of bias in and of itself, but other biases exist, too. AI detection tools, for instance, have become increasingly common across a broad spectrum of educational contexts. These tools are usually implemented with the best of intentions: to protect academic integrity and maintain trust in assessment results.

But those tools can contain built-in biases that disadvantage English language learners.[9] Many AI-detection tools are built on vast collections of first-language English writing. While that serves many users, such systems may fail to recognise legitimate variations in language use. Alternatively, a model may be tuned to expect certain sentence structures or vocabulary choices. That makes them more likely to misinterpret a piece of writing by a second-language speaker as machine-generated.

Another challenge that needs to be addressed is **data privacy and surveillance**. With AI tools requiring large amounts of data to function, some groups are understandably worried about that data being used for mass surveillance or for the collection of new types of personal data, such as 'emotion AI'.[10]

It's also worth pointing out that, if AI is only widely adopted in better-resourced learning ecosystems, it risks worsening the existing **digital divide**. Learners who don't benefit from equal access to AI tools and the literacy required to use them effectively will miss out on their benefits and opportunities.[11] With the digital divide already sizeable, many millions of people could get left behind.

There are several other risks associated with AI tools, too. A particular concern is **over-reliance and dependency**, which could lead to passive learners or those who become so reliant on AI that they use it to commit academic misconduct. Many institutions have already identified cheating and plagiarism as issues but are grappling with the limitations of the AI detection tools meant to address them.

The case for human-centred leadership

Taking a human-centred approach to leadership is key to both embracing the opportunities offered by AI and overcoming its challenges. But what does such an approach look like?

As our position paper, *Human-centred AI: lessons for English learning and assessment*, points out, a good approach to AI respects human agency, is fully compliant with data and privacy governance, treats all people fairly, respects individual autonomy and freedom and is transparent and fully accountable.[12]

At the heart of this approach is a view which sees AI as a collaborator or peer rather than a teacher or sole authority. The idea that AI can be a useful colleague rather than just a tool is one of the most significant points explored in our guide *From AI literacy to AI fluency: 10 shifts for educators*. By interacting with AI as a learning partner, it avoids counterproductive relationships and fosters critical engagement.

This kind of approach also better prepares school leaders to confront the inherent 'explainability problem' of generative AI. This problem can broadly be defined as AI models producing convincing outputs without offering a transparent, human-understandable account of how they arrived at them, making it difficult to verify accuracy, trace reasoning, or detect hidden errors and biases. By understanding the 'explainability problem', school leaders are better equipped to navigate the practical challenges and responsibilities across ethics and accountability, inclusion and accessibility and transparency and explainability.

The three pillars of ethical leadership

Ethics and accountability

- Leaders must establish clear lines of accountability for AI outputs that are biased, inaccurate or harmful.
- Due to the ‘explainability problem’ of generative AI, leadership must focus on explaining the outcome of AI use and ensuring its responsible application.

Transparency & explainability

- Request clarity from EdTech providers regarding the training data utilised for their generative AI models to identify and mitigate inherent biases.
- Prioritise professional development, training teachers to critically evaluate AI outputs rather than accepting them as the final result.

Inclusion and accessibility

- AI tools have significant potential to enhance learning for diverse learners (e.g., students with visual impairments or social anxiety).
- Leaders must proactively audit all EdTech tools to confirm they genuinely support diverse needs and do not inadvertently discriminate (e.g., based on language variety).
- The focus must always be on making technology accessible to all learners.

Strategic AI integration: The why, how, what model

Why | Vision

- Educational value
- Problem solving
- Student outcomes

How | Framework

- Operational policy
- Risk management
- Capability building

What | Tools

- Tactical decisions
- Curriculum integration
- Targeted investment

Ultimately, leaders need to define the 'why' and 'how' of AI adoption before the 'what' (that is, the specific tools or tasks).

The ‘why’ is the educational vision and value that AI adoption is intended to achieve. That means being able to answer how AI aligns with the core mission of teaching and learning, whether it helps solve specific pedagogical challenges and what the desired student outcome is. By focusing on the ‘why’, leaders ensure that AI is not adopted merely because it is new, but because it serves a clear, justifiable educational purpose, embedding the technology within the school’s or institution’s broader strategic goals.

Once the ‘why’ is defined, leaders can establish the ‘how’. This is the operational framework, ethical guidelines and capability building necessary for successful implementation. This involves creating clear, school-wide acceptable use policies that govern data privacy, academic integrity and appropriate AI interaction. Additionally, it requires determining how the institution will manage the risks of bias, misinformation and the inherent ‘explainability problem’ previously discussed. This includes establishing accountability mechanisms.

Finally, school leaders need to define how teachers will be trained, not just on using the tools, but on critically appraising the outputs and integrating them effectively into the curriculum (the professional development previously discussed).

Once the ‘why’ (vision) and the ‘how’ (framework and policy) are firmly in place, the focus can shift to the ‘what’: the specific tools and tasks. This prevents leaders from making premature investments in tools that might not align with the institution’s values or that the staff are not prepared to use effectively. The ‘what’ then becomes a tactical decision flowing logically from the strategy.

This leader-driven approach ensures that technology serves the strategy, rather than dictating it, fostering truly purpose-driven and responsible innovation.

AI handling administrative/ routine tasks

Teacher focusing on emotional support, mediation, complex collaboration

Teacher perspectives: the classroom reality

Human-centred leadership extends beyond this approach. School leaders also need to understand the contexts and realities teachers face with AI in the classroom. That reality is characterised by high adoption and low training rates, a need to emphasise humans as differentiators and concerns about the future of teaching.

For instance, our research paper, *Artificial intelligence and English language teaching: Preparing for the future*, found that

76% of teachers report using **AI tools**

(e.g., language learning apps, GenAI, chatbots), primarily for creating materials (57 per cent) and lesson plans (43 per cent) and for helping learners practise.

However, only 20 per cent feel they have received enough training, highlighting a 'concerning skills gap'.[13] This gap extends to communication; six in ten teachers express concern about how AI is affecting students' broader communication skills, specifically noting a decline in writing quality (26 per cent) and increased difficulty in comprehending complex texts (26 per cent).[14]

It's also important to understand that teachers are less worried about being replaced by AI than they are about the impact it will have on their role.

51% of teachers surveyed for the paper revealed that they're not worried about AI replacing them, stressing the irreplaceability of the human element (intuition, cultural appreciation, emotional understanding) in the learning process.

However,

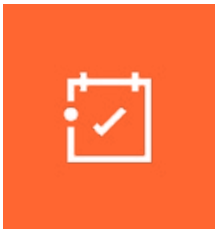
38% express worry about the **impact on their role.**

The consensus is that AI will replace certain administrative tasks, allowing teachers to focus on higher-value activities and coaching.[15]

School leaders can help their teachers come to terms with this reality by providing structured professional development focused on AI literacy, critical evaluation and ethical integration.[16]

Practical recommendations for school leaders

An important step for school leaders looking to integrate generative AI effectively is to align all initiatives with the core values of inclusion, fairness and global connectivity. Here are seven strategic recommendations for implementation:

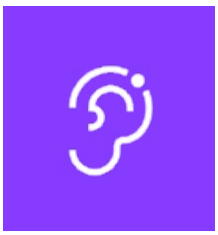


Invest in AI literacy professional development

Shift the teacher training focus from simple tool usage to critical evaluation, ethical considerations and advanced prompt design. Teachers must learn to critique, not just utilise, AI outputs.

Establish an AI ethics review panel

Create a standing internal group to vet all new EdTech tools. This panel will assess tools for bias, privacy compliance and pedagogical alignment before procurement and can formally demand transparency regarding the training data used by providers.



Redefine the teacher role

Formally acknowledge AI's capacity to automate administrative and routine tasks. Leaders can then shift the focus of teacher time towards high-value human skills, such as emotional support, mediation and collaboration with students.

Update academic integrity policies

Develop clear, school-wide policies addressing AI-generated work. The focus of these policies must be on teaching the process of critical writing and thinking, over simply assessing the final product. With 79 per cent of teachers already forced to rethink their assignment methods, school-wide policies must catch up to provide a unified framework for these classroom-level adaptations.[17]

Audit for equity and inclusion

Actively check all AI tools for their capacity to support diverse learner needs and various language varieties, ensuring the technology reduces, rather than increases, educational barriers.

Focus on collaborative pedagogy

Design curriculum elements that integrate AI for self-study and practice (e.g., generating drafts, quizzing), which are then immediately followed by a human-led, collaborative application of the learned material.

Prioritise global connectivity

Try to implement tools and projects that facilitate collaboration across geographical boundaries, using AI to bridge linguistic and cultural gaps, thereby enhancing students' global competence.

Leading change responsibly

Ultimately, there are now numerous tools that are powerful teaching and learning aids. However, it's important to remember that AI's true value is determined by human leadership.

The goal is not just to adopt AI, but to integrate it in a way that protects core educational values: inclusion, fairness and the quality of human-led teaching. It's also important that school leaders lead with curiosity to help avoid the systemic resistance of the past.

At the British Council, we're committed to being active partners in helping everyone across the language learning ecosystem, including school leaders, deal with the challenges and opportunities presented by AI. Critically, we're committed to doing so as partners on the same journey.

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