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Digital Tools and English Language Learning in the Age of AI: Rethinking Language Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

Digital technology has changed the way people access information, communicate and learn languages. English language learners today have access to online dictionaries, language-learning applications, video platforms, speech-recognition software and, more recently, artificial intelligence (AI) tools. These developments have created opportunities for learners to practise English beyond the classroom, receive immediate feedback and access learning materials suited to their individual needs. The emergence of generative AI has further expanded these possibilities by enabling learners to interact with chatbots, improve their writing and practise conversations. However, the increasing use of technology also raises concerns about overdependence, the reliability of AI-generated information, academic integrity and unequal access to digital resources. This article examines the changing role of digital tools in English language learning, with particular attention to the opportunities and challenges associated with AI. It argues that technology can support language development, but effective learning still depends on purposeful practice, critical thinking, human interaction and appropriate teacher guidance.

Keywords: Digital tools, artificial intelligence, English language learning, generative AI, language teaching, digital literacy.

1. Introduction

The ways in which people learn English have changed considerably over the years. Traditionally, language learning largely depended on textbooks, classroom instruction, dictionaries and direct interaction with teachers. Students generally had to wait for classroom activities or teacher feedback to clarify their doubts and improve their language skills. Today, the situation is different. A learner with a smartphone and an internet connection can access English learning materials, listen to native and proficient speakers, practise pronunciation, improve vocabulary and communicate with people across the world.

Digital technology has gradually become part of language education. Online dictionaries, educational websites, podcasts, YouTube videos, language-learning applications and virtual classrooms have created additional opportunities for students to learn English. These resources allow learners to practise at their own pace and access materials beyond the limitations of a traditional classroom.

The emergence of generative artificial intelligence has brought another significant change. Tools such as ChatGPT can explain grammatical concepts, suggest vocabulary, correct sentences, generate reading passages and simulate conversations. Learners can ask questions in their own words and receive responses almost immediately. They can also seek feedback on written assignments and practise expressing ideas without the hesitation they may experience in a classroom.

These developments raise important questions for English language teaching. What happens when students can access explanations, examples and feedback without waiting for a teacher? Does the availability of AI make language learning easier, or does it encourage learners to depend on technology? More importantly, how should teachers adapt their teaching practices to these changes?

This article examines the role of digital tools in English language learning, with particular attention to the opportunities and challenges presented by artificial intelligence. It argues that technology should be treated as a learning resource rather than a substitute for teachers or independent language practice.

2. Digital Transformation of English Language Learning

Digital tools have made English learning more accessible and flexible. Students are no longer restricted to the materials prescribed in their textbooks or the limited hours available in a classroom. They can listen to English podcasts, watch educational videos, read online articles and use digital dictionaries to understand unfamiliar words. These resources provide exposure to different accents, speaking styles, vocabulary and real-life communication.

For example, a student who wants to improve listening skills can watch English interviews, news reports or lectures. A learner who finds it difficult to understand pronunciation can listen to words repeatedly through online dictionaries and pronunciation applications. Similarly, students can use grammar websites and interactive exercises to identify and correct common errors.

Digital tools are particularly useful for developing the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Video and audio resources provide opportunities for listening practice, while online discussion platforms and voice-based applications can encourage speaking. Digital reading materials expose learners to different genres, and word-processing applications make writing and editing easier.

Another advantage is flexibility. Students can access learning materials whenever they have time. They can repeat an exercise, listen to a difficult passage again or revise a grammar point without depending entirely on classroom instruction. This is useful for learners who require additional practice or who are hesitant to ask questions in front of others.

However, access to digital resources does not automatically lead to language development. Watching English videos, downloading applications or spending time on educational websites may create exposure, but learners still need to engage actively with the language. They must listen carefully, speak regularly, read with understanding and write independently. Technology can provide opportunities for practice, but the learner has to make meaningful use of them.

3. Artificial Intelligence and Emerging Opportunities

Artificial intelligence has expanded the possibilities of technology-assisted language learning. Earlier digital tools generally provided prepared lessons, exercises and explanations. Generative AI tools, on the other hand, can respond to individual questions, generate new learning materials and interact with learners through natural language.

One important application is personalised learning. Students in the same classroom may have different levels of English proficiency. Some may struggle with basic grammar, while others may need help with academic writing, vocabulary or spoken communication. AI tools can provide explanations and exercises based on the questions learners ask. Students can request a simpler explanation, ask for additional examples or practise a particular language skill repeatedly.

AI can also support writing development. Students can use it to identify grammatical errors, improve sentence construction, examine paragraph organisation and receive suggestions on vocabulary. Mahapatra (2024), in an intervention study involving undergraduate ESL students at an Indian university, examined the use of ChatGPT as a formative feedback tool. The findings indicated a significant improvement in students' academic writing performance. The study suggests that, with appropriate training, ChatGPT can be useful in providing writing feedback, particularly in large classes where individual attention from teachers may be difficult. However, the findings should be understood in relation to the particular participants and intervention used in the study.

Speaking is another area in which AI can be useful. Many learners hesitate to speak English because they fear making mistakes or being judged by others. AI-powered conversational tools can provide opportunities to practise dialogues, respond to questions and participate in simulated conversations. Learners can practise situations such as introducing themselves, attending an interview, asking for directions or participating in a discussion. A systematic review by Du and Daniel (2024), which examined 24 empirical studies on AI-powered chatbots for English speaking practice, identified potential benefits relating to speaking confidence, fluency, pronunciation practice and learner engagement.

AI can also assist with reading and vocabulary development. Students can ask for explanations of unfamiliar expressions, meanings of words in context, summaries of difficult passages and comprehension questions. Teachers can use these tools to prepare reading materials at different levels of difficulty and design exercises according to students' learning needs.

The growing academic interest in this area is reflected in recent research. Lee et al. (2025), in a systematic review of 49 empirical studies published between 2023 and 2024, identified several roles played by generative AI in language classrooms, including feedback provider, learning tutor, conversation partner and interaction facilitator. Another systematic review by Li et al. (2025), examining 144 peer-reviewed studies, found that research had expanded across areas such as writing, feedback, language skills development and teaching strategies. However, writing received considerably more attention than listening, speaking and reading. These findings suggest that AI-assisted language learning is developing rapidly, although evidence across all language skills remains uneven.

4. Changing Roles of Teachers and Learners

The availability of digital tools and AI requires teachers to rethink some traditional classroom practices. Earlier, teachers were often the primary source of explanations, examples and learning materials. Students depended largely on classroom instruction to understand

concepts and clarify doubts. Today, learners can access multiple explanations and resources independently.

This does not make teachers less important. Rather, their responsibilities are changing. Teachers need to help students identify useful resources, evaluate the information they receive and use technology in ways that support learning. They also need to design classroom activities that require students to think, communicate and apply what they have learnt.

For instance, instead of asking students simply to write an essay using AI, a teacher can ask them to prepare an initial draft independently, obtain AI feedback and then revise their work. Students can compare the original and revised versions, identify the changes and explain which suggestions they accepted or rejected. Such activities encourage learners to engage with feedback rather than copy the final output.

The same approach can be applied to speaking activities. Students may use an AI chatbot to practise a conversation before performing a similar task with a classmate. They can then discuss the difficulties they experienced and identify areas that need improvement. In this way, technology becomes a preparation tool for meaningful human interaction.

Learners also need to take greater responsibility for their progress. Having access to numerous applications does not mean that students will automatically improve their English. They need to set learning goals, practise regularly and evaluate their progress. They should also develop the ability to question AI-generated responses instead of accepting every answer as correct.

5. Challenges and Limitations

Despite its advantages, the use of digital technology in English language learning raises several concerns. One of the major challenges is overdependence. Students may begin to rely on AI for writing assignments, answering questions and completing classroom tasks. If they regularly submit AI-generated content without examining or revising it, they may complete assignments without developing the language skills those assignments are intended to assess.

Another concern is the accuracy of AI-generated information. AI tools can produce incorrect explanations, misleading examples and unnatural expressions. They may also provide grammatical corrections that do not adequately consider context, meaning or the intended style of communication. Students with limited English proficiency may find it difficult to recognise these errors. Therefore, they need to develop the habit of checking information and comparing AI-generated responses with reliable learning resources.

Academic integrity is equally important. The use of AI to improve a sentence or understand a grammatical concept is different from submitting an entirely AI-generated assignment as one's own work. Educational institutions need to establish clear expectations regarding acceptable use. Students should understand that AI can assist their learning, but it should not replace their own thinking, writing and effort.

Digital inequality is another significant issue, particularly in developing educational contexts. Not all students have access to reliable internet connections, personal computers or smartphones. Even when devices are available, differences in digital literacy may affect how effectively students use them. An approach that depends entirely on online tools may disadvantage learners who have limited access to technology.

There are also concerns relating to privacy and the sharing of personal information. Students may enter assignments, personal details or institutional information into AI platforms without understanding how such

information may be processed. Teachers and institutions need to guide students on responsible use and encourage them not to share sensitive information through digital tools.

Finally, language learning is not simply the acquisition of grammatical accuracy or vocabulary. It involves developing the ability to communicate with people, understand different perspectives, interpret meaning and respond appropriately in social situations. Excessive dependence on automated conversations may limit opportunities for spontaneous interaction and the development of interpersonal communication skills.

Liu, Sihes and Lu (2025), in their systematic review of research on generative AI and critical thinking in English language learning, highlight this dual nature of AI. Their review identifies both the potential of AI tools to support critical thinking and the risk that excessive dependence may weaken learners' independent thinking. This suggests that the benefits of AI depend considerably on how it is used and the kind of learning activities built around it.

6. Implications for English Language Teaching

The growing presence of digital tools and AI has important implications for English language teaching. First, teachers need to develop digital literacy alongside their subject knowledge. They should be familiar with the tools students use and understand their potential applications and limitations. This does not mean that every teacher must become an expert in artificial intelligence. However, teachers should be able to guide students in selecting appropriate tools and evaluating their outputs.

Second, digital tools should be integrated into language activities rather than used merely as additional resources. A speaking lesson, for example, can combine AI-assisted conversation practice with classroom interaction. A writing lesson can include independent drafting, AI-supported feedback and teacher evaluation. Such activities ensure that students continue to practise language skills while learning to use technology responsibly.

Third, institutions should provide opportunities for teachers to explore digital teaching methods through workshops and professional development programmes. Teachers need practical training in using educational applications, online resources and AI tools for lesson preparation, assessment and student support.

Finally, assessment practices may need to change. When students have access to AI-generated answers, evaluating only the final written product may not provide a complete picture of their learning. Teachers can also assess students through classroom discussions, oral presentations, drafts, reflective writing and explanations of their revision choices. These activities make it easier to understand whether students have actually developed the required skills.

7. Conclusion

Digital technology has created new opportunities for learning English beyond the traditional classroom. Online resources, language-learning applications and AI-powered tools can support listening, speaking, reading and writing by providing access to learning materials, personalised explanations and additional opportunities for practice. Generative AI has further expanded these possibilities by offering conversational practice and immediate feedback.

However, technology should not be mistaken for learning itself. A student may use an AI tool to produce a grammatically correct paragraph without developing the ability to write independently. Similarly, repeated exposure to English videos does not necessarily result in speaking proficiency unless learners actively practise the language.

The challenge for English language teachers is therefore not simply to introduce more digital tools into the classroom, but to use them meaningfully. Technology should support independent learning, encourage critical thinking and create opportunities for communication. Teachers remain essential in guiding learners, providing human interaction and helping them distinguish useful information from unreliable output.

Ultimately, the future of English language learning does not depend on choosing between teachers and technology. It depends on bringing them together in ways that make learning more effective, accessible and meaningful.

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