

Artificial Intelligence as a Resource in the English Classroom: From Creative Collaboration to “Vibe Coding”

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Since ChatGPT was first released in November 2022, artificial intelligence (AI) appears to have infiltrated classrooms and has been met with a variety of responses, ranging from panic to enthusiastic acceptance. Almost every English teacher has experienced the frustration of having to read the soulless prose of AI-generated essays and has had to plough through generic literary critiques plagiarised from AI and parroted by learners. The loss of authenticity and voice as well as the absence of human flaws, evident in minor grammar errors and spelling mistakes, has given rise to a heuristic of suspicion – a default assumption that every learner is using AI. It is therefore unsurprising that many language teachers have become twenty-first century Luddites who repudiate this technology and spend many hours dedicated to detecting and penalising learners for the heresy of using AI. This approach, however, is not helpful as our learners need to be taught how to use AI responsibly and harness its potential while not surrendering their own creativity and critical insights. In this article, I will share some experiences that my colleagues and I have had in the use of AI, not to serve as an exemplar but to add to the conversation regarding the use of this technology in the classroom.

Creative Collaboration

It is a misnomer to describe large language models (LLMs) as “creative”. Yes, they can combine existing ideas in novel ways, generate patterns based on a user’s prompts and replicate human feeling. As a result, the output may appear original and can even elicit an emotional resonance in the reader, but this combinatorial creativity is distinctly different from writing that comes from deep authentic human experience and inspiration. Where AI is most effective is as a collaborator in the creative process. For example, learners can use it for brainstorming ideas or carrying out research.

Over the last three years, my colleagues and I have used AI in various ways when teaching film study, particularly as part of the fourth genre component of the IEB school-based assessment portfolio. When teaching the fantasy and science fiction genres, learners are tasked with using AI for purposes of world-building or developing a fantasy hero or villain. What the teachers are assessing through this activity is not AI’s output but rather the skill with which the learners craft their prompts. For example, in developing a fantasy hero we evaluate the extent to which they successfully sketched out their character and supplied information regarding personality traits, appearance, powers and character arc. An effective prompt for this task is multi-dimensional, including elements of genre, reference to archetypal fantasy tropes, character strengths and flaws and a broadly delineated backstory.

Critical Reflection

The pervasive use of AI makes it imperative that learners develop and exercise their skills of critical reflection. The illusion of AI's infallibility and effortless mastery is dangerous because learners are tempted to surrender their creativity and become passive consumers. Vygotskian theory clearly demonstrates that cognitive struggle plays a central role in learning. The copy-and-paste approach to AI usage short circuits the learning process. However, when learners are directed to critically engage with the process and the output, they become active, discerning users of the technology.

A crucial part of the fourth genre assessment, described above, is that our learners are instructed to reflect on the effectiveness of their prompts and consider how these could be refined to attain a better output from AI. They are directed to critique the clarity and specificity of their prompts and the alignment with elements of genre. The degree to which AI has generated an original character is also significant since LLMs often generate a statistical average of human thought and creativity and thus tend towards homogeneity, cultural biases and stereotypes. By directing learners to engage both with their input and AI's output we hope to encourage learners to become intentional and discriminating in their use of AI.

Writing Coach

In large classroom settings, it is often difficult to give one-on-one feedback to learners, and although my colleagues provide extensive formative feedback in written comments, learners often feel that they have been subjected to trial by red ink. AI, used ethically by learners, can provide important formative feedback, depending on the way that it is prompted. Learners are often tempted to ask AI to edit or, worse still, write their essays. Nothing is learned under these conditions. However, when AI is asked to explain how an essay can be improved, the user remains in creative control and can choose where edits should be made. For example, a learner might use the following prompt: "Read my introductory paragraph below. Do not rewrite it. Instead, give me three bullet points on how I can make my thesis statement stronger." In this way, AI becomes a writing coach.

LLMs also excel in literary essay writing, particularly when given specific prompts. Formulaic essays written rigidly in a P.E.E.L. format do not attest to great literary skill. However, in the intermediate phase, when learners are introduced to writing literary essays, AI-generated examples often model a good basic structure and style, and demonstrate how evidence and quotes can be seamlessly incorporated as evidence.

Teachers can use these essays as a resource by drawing learners' attention to structural and stylistic features.

Building Twenty-First Century Skills

Before the arrival of AI, coding was strictly limited to the subject of Information Technology (IT). In order to create apps and software, one needed to start with languages like Python. Today, it is possible for almost anyone to create software and programmes through vibe coding. Learners are able to prompt LLMs in natural language which is translated into computer code by AI. Thus, anyone with no technical expertise, but possessing solid language skills, can create software either for their own personal use or to share or even potentially sell to other users.

Since natural language is used in vibe coding, a good command of functional English is essential to our learners. My colleagues and I have developed several activities to integrate simple vibe coding into our teaching. An example of this is in the teaching of Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Klara and the Sun*, in which the central protagonist is an AF (artificial friend). In order to anchor the text in the lived experience of our learners, and equip them with useful prompt-writing skills, they were challenged to vibe code their own AFs into existence, using Google's Gemini. This activity required them to describe in detail and visualise the perfect companion, whereafter, using a basic prompt Gemini was used to create an AI friend with whom they could converse at any time. The fundamental scaffolding provided to the learners for this exercise was structured as follows:

"You are to act as an Artificial Friend (AF) inspired by Kazuo Ishiguro's 'Klara and the Sun'. Based on the following parameters, adopt this persona completely: [Insert detailed description of appearance, core personality traits, specific emotional strengths, and limitations]. Respond to my messages from this perspective, maintaining an empathetic but distinctively non-human tone. Do not break character."

In addition to creating their AI companions, learners were also required to collaboratively design their own community guidelines and guardrails to ensure ethical use of the technology. Although this is a simple, low-tech activity, it introduced learners to the manifold possibilities that AI presents.

AI has opened a Pandora's box of vices for our learners: sloth, deceit and wasted human potential. However, if we slam the lid shut now, we are at risk of losing the hope that it contains. As language teachers we are well-placed to guide our learners in the

responsible use of AI so that they are well-prepared for higher education and the challenges of the twenty-first century.