

English Language Learning Magazine

CONTACT

March 2025

The Conference Issue

Is AI the language of education? PLUS From traditional to transformative: The evolution of HyFlex at Caledon Community Services AND MORE...

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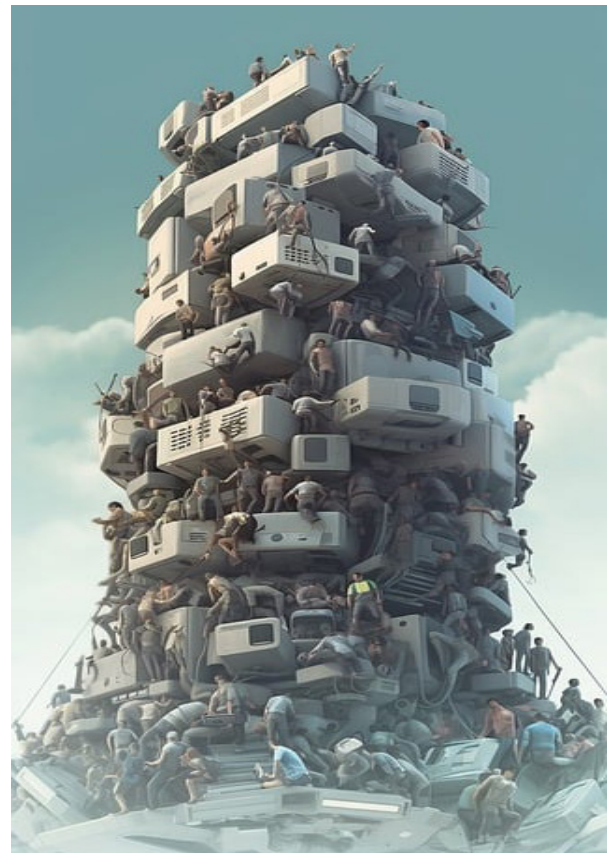


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Koch, Alexandra. [Image]. AI generated mountain computer. Retrieved from <https://pixabay.com/photos/ai-generated-mountain-computer-8015452/>

Calendar of Events

April	May	June
April 2—4 — 11th IATBLT Conference	May 8—10 — CCERBAL 2025 CONFERENCE	June 4—8 — LTRC 2025
April 3—5 — Languages Without Borders 2025	May 10—11 — KOTESOL 2025 Annual Conference	June 7 — TOSCON 2025
April 8—11 — 58th IATEFL International Conference & Exhibition	May 16—17 — 23rd ELTA Serbia Conference	June 10—13 — 2025 STLHE Annual Conference
April 27 — From Burnout to Balance	May 25 — Student and Generative AI Curated Assessments	June 13—14 — World CLIL 2025
	May 30—June 6 — Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences	June 22—27 — International Pragmatics Association (IPrA) Conference
		June 25—28 — FLEAT 8



Editor's Note

Hello all. Currently here in Shanghai on business. As my regular work sees me travel internationally a few times a year, it's fascinating to see how English language education unfolds around the world—the mental, emotional, and even physical investment it takes on individuals. And that's not meant to sound negative. While I typically meet with younger learners in high school, in my mind it's the pre-cursor to what they are about to experience in college or university in places like Canada, the UK, or Australia. Their inhibitions, their fears, their desires, and their hopes. It's a wild ride.

Well, welcome to Volume 51. We start the spring off with some articles from the 2024 TESL Ontario conference—with more to come in our summer issue. But first, an interview with Kurt Strachan. Kurt is an Adult ESL Program Officer in the Continuing Education Department of the Toronto District School Board. In conjunction with his love of teaching, Kurt has a passion for public policy. His Spotlight is an example of how two worlds collide and work together.

We start this issue's articles off with Ken Beatty and his overview of AI in language education—an informative read with a turn of events at the end, I would say. Next, Art Rekhtin, Suma Balagopal, and Gurimandeep Kaur explore the evolution of HyFlex, an in-person, virtual, synchronous, and asynchronous learning framework. Hala Bastawros, through a case study, shows how applying multimedia theories in online courses can improve vocabulary acquisition, retention, and production among adult learners. Kanae Bessho and Brian Strong discuss the ever-popular topic of online versus in-person learning and the strengths

and weaknesses found. Mercedes Veselka explores how multiliteracies theory opens up new avenues for working with adult literacy learners. Finally, Joseph Ng focuses on insights for the future of essay grading in the context of AI technology. A big thank you to all the contributors this time around!

Thank you for reading. Take care.



-Nicola Carozza
editor@teslontario.org



CONTACT

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Personnel

Editor	Nicola Carozza
EAB members	Hedy McGarrell Hanna Cabaj
Webmaster	Kevin O'Brien
Design	Nicola Carozza

Legal

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Contact TESL Ontario

TESL Ontario #405 - 27 Carlton St.
Toronto, ON M5B 1L2
Phone: 416-593-4243 or 1-800-327-4827
Fax: 416-593-0164
<http://www.teslontario.org>

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Spotlight — Kurt Strachan



Kurt Strachan is an Adult ESL Program Officer, in the Continuing Education Department of the Toronto District School Board. His extensive experience as an ELT instructor provides Kurt a deep understanding of the lived experiences of internationally educated professionals, and issues faced by unionized, frontline adult educators and administrative staff in government funded programs. Kurt has a Master of Education from York University, a graduate diploma in Postsecondary Education in Policy, Community and Culture and is currently completing a Master degree in Public Policy, Administration and Law (MPPAL). He recently joined The Institute of Public Administration of Canada (IPAC) Toronto Region, as one of its Board of Directors.

Kurt, thank you for taking the time to tell us more about the multi-faceted work you do. But to start, who would you say Kurt Strachan is?

Well first, I want to thank you again Nicola for reaching out and inviting me to join you in this discussion. I really appreciate this opportunity to share a bit of my journey and hope that its helpful to others.

Who is Kurt Strachan? I'd say I'm someone who thinks of others, enjoys finding solutions or at least providing options that help. Being a Program Officer for the last two years has been a good fit for me because it has allowed me to collaborate, contribute to, problem solve, and lead my staff through the daily highs and lows of frontline service to adult ESL learners who are Canadian citizens, refugees, and permanent residents. I'm happy to be part of a very supportive management team with the Toronto District School Board's (TDSB) Adult ESL program. It's been great working with amazing colleagues to support clerical staff, ESL instructors and their learners in multiple locations around the city. As an adult educator for well over a decade in federally-funded ELT and OSLT courses, time and time again I've been energized by my students' successes—whether it was finding a job after providing a supportive reference, communicating comfortably with their child's teacher at school after several months in language classes, or even personal discoveries about themselves and their own courage as they navigate what it means to be relatively new to Toronto. From the words of staff and students, I'm grateful to have been described as a positive, kind, embracing, pragmatic, and intellectually engaging supervisor and instructor.

Collaboration is a huge part of who I am. In my experience, it's how the best ways forward reveal themselves—by thinking together. And extending from that, I'd say volunteering is another major part of who I am. Several years ago, I was asked by a union VP to consider becoming a CUPE4400 Union Steward because she appreciated the way I advocated for my colleagues, while also building

collaborative opportunities for employer and union members to work through labour relation issues. I served in this capacity for a little over two years. Serving on TDSB's Community Services Equity Committee for a couple of years also expanded my perspective on the opportunities and challenges of guiding public sector workplaces to more fully reflect equitable principles and practices. Most recently, as in just a few days ago, I was thrilled to join The Institute of Public Administration of Canada (IPAC)–Toronto Region as a new member of the Board of Directors. I look forward to serving IPAC Toronto members of the public service, who directly work for the municipal, provincial, and federal government or who work in public sector programs, agencies, commissions, and tribunals that are fully or partially funded by the government.

You're currently a Master of Public Policy, Administration and Law (MPPAL) candidate, what made you interested in this field?

It's funny how one thing leads to another, but that's precisely how I would describe becoming interested in this field of study. With my intrinsic motivations toward service and seeking public good alongside likeminded colleagues, it seems inevitable to me now that I'd find my way here.

In the summer months of 2022, I was nearing the finish line of my Master of Education degree that I was taking at York University. Learning multiple theoretical and pedagogical approaches to learning, different modalities of teaching, various research methods, and innovative ways to incorporate digital technologies into education are some of the things that stand out. And here I was nearing the end of the summer, and I needed to pick a course to fill an elective gap I had in the fall term. I was on target to graduate in April 2023. After looking through my options and finding nothing

in the fall offerings that struck me, I decided to look outside of the faculty of education, and I stumbled across a course called *Program Evaluation and Public Policy Analysis*. My immediate curiosity and excitement drew me in, and I signed up for it right away.

Have you ever had a representative of the government visit your class to observe how federal or provincial funds are being used, implemented, and to get feedback from you and your learners? I had experienced this multiple times, almost annually, and I often wondered how program evaluation worked. So, I couldn't wait to finally understand this. The course far exceeded my expectations. Guided by the excellent Professor Alena Kimakova, an economist and the 2023 Graduate Program Director for the School of Public Policy Administration and Law at York University, I gained an in-depth understanding of different types of program evaluation, objectives, and tools. I became versed in articulating policy research, program evaluation questions, literature reviews, and identifying potential data sources. I had to design and present the implementation a program evaluation process, be aware of ethical issues and the limitations of program evaluation in terms of its design, methodology, practical feasibility, and interpreted findings. And I loved every minute of it!

I graduated with a Master of Education degree in the spring of April 2023 and continued in a Master of Public Policy, Administration and Law (MPPAL) in the fall term of September 2023. I wanted to acquire more of the managerial and executive level skillsets that I had gained in the program evaluation course. MPPAL is a professional designation rather than a theoretically based graduate degree, and so I've learned how policy and executive decision-making integrates Constitutional Law, Public Finance and



Accounting in the Public Sector, Leadership and Human Resources Management, Equity, Policy, Law and Planning for the Public Sector, Court Organization and Management, Research Methods and Information Systems, Administrative Law and Ethics. My final course in May/June 2025 will be Public Management.

I know those courses all might sound incredibly boring, but honestly, finding problems, digging into where these problems come from, learning contextual information, exploring strategic options to solve the problems, honing in on recommended policy adjustments or a strategic approach, and describing next steps can be absolutely exhilarating. I highly recommend the MPPAL program at YorkU. The networking among MPPAL alumni, current grad students, industry, and governmental actors has been spectacular. So many chances to meet, have a drink and eat together, receive mentorship, and connect with high profile public servants. Finding ways to really help the public, specific communities or even individuals in need of support are what motivates me as I near the finish line of this second master's degree. I want to keep growing and increasing my usefulness.

I'm sure you've heard it said to *follow your bliss*, and I couldn't agree more.

You have been a long-time Occupation Specific Language (OSLT) instructor. I would consider this a very niche area of language teaching. Did you specifically pursue this, or did it just somehow happen naturally?

I'd say this was a combination of my intellectual curiosity and things happening naturally. After teaching ESL to business professionals and kids in South Korea for 3 1/2 years and teaching English for Specific Purposes to welders in Portugal for a few months, when I returned to Canada

and settled in Toronto, a friend of mine put my résumé on the desk of a newly forming, federal funded TDSB language program, called the Enhanced Language Training Program. After a couple of years working with internationally educated professionals there, I cold-called a George Brown College (GBC) department to see if I could arrange an informational interview. It didn't really work. But I was received warmly over the phone and eventually after circulating about 4 copies of my résumé to various people in the department, the manager at the time, Pam Glaser-French invited me for an interview. I was hired into an OSLT construction course that was already going on because the instructor had to prematurely end her contract for personal reasons. It's been almost fifteen years now that I've done contract work with GBC.

Employment-focused ESL lessons, navigating workplace environments, managing interaction, sociocultural awareness building of communication styles, and culturally-responsive engagement with people around us at work—these themes and many other topics are what English language learners need for better success in the marketplace. The TDSB Adult ESL program has been mandated by the province to incorporate these themes and topics through all levels of ESL learning at our multiple sites across the GTA. I'm glad that my pedagogical background and experience have prepared me to be an instructional leader as well as a managerial support for the times ahead.

Over the years in education, what has been your greatest pleasure?

Definitely it's been my greatest pleasure to meet, work with, and know my teams, as well as internationally educated professionals, construction and trades people, and ESL



learners in general. I have so many memories filled with laughter, celebrated achievements, and struggles that my students and staff have overcome.

Many people agree our world is divided right now, and Canadian politics is no different when we consider international students and newcomers and courses available to them. How do you think English language education will change in the coming years? What do you hope to see?

There's a Kenyan quote that I often reference: "When elephants fight, it's the grass that suffers". It reminds me that our individual proximity to larger societal forces, policies, rules, institutions, and levels of government impact our lives. When these dominant entities are in conflict or disarray, we suffer.

I think current geopolitical tensions, generative AI, and governmental shifts in immigration policy regarding international students and newcomers demand change. These changes can be small daily tweaks or fairly big shifts in how we do things. I hope to see increased government support, with integrated funding models breaking down accreditation barriers and interprovincial barriers to enable faster pathways to employment. Canada needs internationally educated physicians, nurses, and trained construction and trades people to fill our huge gaps. Additional, TESL educators and administration need to create more up-to-date, personal, interactive, engaging English language education through in-person classes and virtual sessions to look to the future and build on what has worked in the past. There will a lot of upskilling in every sector as AI transform the way the public approaches work environments.

Being curious and interested, following your passions even as they shift over time, continuing to learn and develop

yourself in ways that energize you, and extending yourself and your abilities to be useful in the world—those are my tips to share. These are the things that have worked for me so far. I'm confident that your preparedness, luck, and connection to good people will always open doors of unexpected opportunities for you.

Your LinkedIn *About* section is honestly one of the most gripping introductions I have read on the site. It's personal and informative, and it gives people an idea of what you would like to achieve or what you bring to the table.

When you say, "I want to be involved in thinking together about public service, and how to make sustainable changes for the betterment of society, while supporting relationships that increase collaboration, mutual transformation and actions to produce, at times even unexpected, ways forward." What does that look like in your field?

Also, would you do that cycling trip again?!

I'll answer your last question with a definite yes! I would love to do another cycling trip across Canada. If time and resources align, I'd jump at the chance. It was an incredible experience.

What does my *About* section look like in my field?

It influences the way I collaborate with my staff, how I strategize and plan as a member on my management team, it expands my vision of what professional development should include and keeps me centred on balancing Ministry mandates with the needs of the eclectic adult learners I serve.

My *About* section also moves beyond the expected activities in my field and has led me to:

- Becoming a volunteer IPAC intern (note taker) in May 2024, with the national Mentorship Partnership Program for executive leadership in the public sector



- The 2024 International Policy Idea Challenge/
Competition (GAC & SSHRC) – I co-authored one of six
winning research proposals – titled, Reputational Risk:
Canada’s Triple Threat (Aug. 2024)
 - The 2024 National Student Paper Competition (IPAC &
GAGS) – My co-authored paper was selected as one of
top five research papers – titled, Canada’s Immigration
Policy: The intersection of Public Perception and
Canada’s Future (Jun. 2024)
 - The 2024 National Case Study Competition
Representative (CAPP & IPAC)
 - Selected to represent York University in this
national competition after intensive training in
compiling facts, developing resolution-focused
action plans, writing briefing notes, reports, and
high-level senior executive presentations on
topics such as Housing, Ageing Population, Trans
Mountain Pipeline, Federal Procurement;
 - Considerable experience using PESTEL, Resource
analysis, and SWOT analysis to produce case
decks/presentations, jurisdictional/environmental
scans, feasibility and financial analytics, and
reports on various national concerns that demand
multi-level governance and cross-jurisdictional
partnerships.
 - Lastly, becoming one of the Board of Directors with
IPAC Toronto Region (the local chapter of IPAC
national)
-

Thank you once again for your contribution, Kurt!

If you would like to know more, please visit [Kurt’s LinkedIn](#).



Is AI the future of language Education?

By Ken Beatty, Canada

Introduction

The role of artificial intelligence (AI) in education is rapidly evolving, positioning itself as a transformative force with immense potential to shape teaching and learning practices. Just as calculators and computers revolutionized mathematics and science, generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools are poised to become integral to writing and other aspects of education (Meakin, 2024).

The rise of artificial intelligence

The past few years have witnessed explosive growth in AI tools across various domains, including language teaching and learning. These tools leverage advanced algorithms to assist with tasks ranging from content generation to personalized learning experiences. According to Fisher (2023), large language models (LLMs) are trained on extensive datasets of text and code, enabling them to understand and generate human-like text, translate languages, and create various types of content. While AI may appear intelligent by sorting, organizing, and presenting ideas rapidly, Luckin (2023) emphasizes that these tools lack true understanding or knowledge; they merely generate outputs based on statistical probabilities.

Adapting to change: Implications for teachers and learners

AI's capabilities compel educators to rethink traditional teaching approaches. If students turn to AI for quick answers, it signals a need to design lessons that foster critical thinking and problem-solving (Marche, 2022; Ross, 2023).

Teachers can choose to engage with AI to varying degrees, incorporating it as a learning tool or exploring its deeper applications (Nehme & Crabtree, 2023). For example, platforms like [Eduaide.ai](#) and [ClickUp.ai](#) offer innovative solutions for lesson planning, saving educators significant time.

However, AI does not render traditional resources obsolete. Teacher books with well-established lesson plans remain valuable, especially when adapted to include AI-based enhancements. Additionally, educators

can leverage AI to tailor learning experiences, using tools to simplify complex texts or provide examples catering to diverse learning styles (St. George & Svrluga, 2023).

Rethinking English language education

English language learners benefit uniquely from AI tools. AI can generate vocabulary lists, practice tests, and custom resources for various career paths, with apps like Career Copilot and LinkedIn AI Career Coach providing targeted guidance (Rozal, 2023). By integrating AI into the classroom, learners can create personalized materials and reflect on their use of technology in the learning process. For instance, reflective assignments requiring students to document their interactions with AI encourage accountability and critical evaluation (St. George & Svrluga, 2023).

Addressing challenges and ethical concerns

There are many concerns about the use of programs like ChatGPT to cheat or plagiarize (Chen, 2023; Shiffmann, 2023, Vaidhyanathan, 2023). Flipping the paradigm, the author's graduate and doctoral students in a 2024 Discourse Analysis course were encouraged to use ChatGPT with the proviso that they document its successes and failures. One non-native speaker of English instructed ChatGPT to academicize the paper she had written and, in doing so, she received insights into how she could improve her academic style by, for example, making more use of the passive voice.

However, despite its advantages, AI presents challenges. Hallucinations—instances where AI generates false or misleading information—are a significant concern, particularly in academic settings (Fisher, 2023). As an example in the same class mentioned above, another student used ChatGPT to include citations and references but found what turned out to be a hallucination. It was a current quote from an article by the author from the journal *System*, and was properly formatted in the references. However, both the citation and the reference were false—hallucinations created by ChatGPT which can, at times, seem like an eager-to-please child.

Educators must teach students to critically assess AI-generated content to prevent the spread of misinformation. Moreover, AI's perceived authority can lead to uncritical acceptance of incorrect answers, highlighting the need for human oversight (St. George & Svrluga, 2023).

The role of human intelligence

AI's rise underscores the importance of recognizing uniquely human capabilities. Schools must emphasize high-level thinking, critical assessment, and creativity while integrating AI literacy into curricula (Luckin, 2023). Tools like ChatGPT can assist in creating engaging language activities, from summarizing current



events to generating creative writing prompts. Yet, as Millard (2023) notes, no AI can replicate the personal connections and emotional support that teachers provide.

Practical applications in language learning

AI-powered platforms such as Mondly by Pearson offer adaptive learning experiences, fostering engagement and reducing anxiety. These tools use AI to understand learners' intent and context, providing personalized feedback. Flashcards, whether AI-generated or learner-created, remain an effective tool for vocabulary acquisition. Additionally, tools like QuillBot and Twee enable learners to paraphrase, simplify, and analyze complex texts, supporting deeper comprehension.

AI also enhances creativity in the classroom. For example, students can analyze AI-generated poetry or critique essays to refine their understanding of style and argumentation (Waxman, 2023). Visual tools like DALL-E inspire imaginative storytelling, encouraging learners to connect visual and verbal narratives.

Unlocking new opportunities

AI tools facilitate the development of customized assessments and interactive learning materials (Stošić & Malyuga, 2024). Apps such as Filmora provide co-pilots to assist in video creation, while Character.ai allows learners to engage in simulated conversations, enhancing their speaking and listening skills. However, these tools should be used cautiously, particularly with younger learners, to ensure responsible and ethical engagement. In one case, the app prompted a teenage boy to commit suicide (Al-Sibai, 2024).

Conclusion: Balancing innovation and tradition

AI is a powerful tool that, when used effectively, can enhance both teaching and learning. However, its limitations and potential risks necessitate careful integration into education. Educators must strike a balance between leveraging AI's capabilities and preserving the human touch that fosters meaningful relationships and deep learning. By teaching students to explore and critique AI tools, we can empower them to become independent, critical thinkers prepared for the future.

Full disclosure: This paper is based on the author's 2024 TESL Ontario presentation, *Rambling with AI: 17 points of interest along the road*. The presentation, with its 19 academic references and 17 app references was traditionally researched and constructed over several months but, for the purposes of this paper, and in keeping with the theme of the paper, ChatGPT was given the PowerPoint text and the instruction: *As an expert in teaching English as a second language, turn the following notes into an academic article*. The paper was then reviewed by the author and minor changes made and all references re-checked.



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Author Bio



Dr. Ken Beatty, writer and Anaheim University TESOL professor, has a PhD in computer-assisted language learning. He's worked in Asia, the Middle East, and North and South America, lecturing on language teaching and learning from the primary through university levels. Author/co-author of 149 readers and textbooks, he's given 500+ teacher-training sessions and 100+ conference presentations in 35 countries His research focus is on critical and creative thinking.



From traditional to transformative: The evolution of HyFlex at Caledon Community Services

By Art Rekhtin, Suma Balagopal, & Gurimandeep Kaur, Canada

In the spring of 2020, as the world reeled from the rapid shift to online learning, Caledon Community Services (CCS) embarked on a journey to redefine its approach to language education for newcomers. What began as an urgent response to a global crisis evolved into the HyFlex model—a sustainable, flexible, and inclusive learning framework. This paper outlines CCS’s transition from traditional in-person instruction to HyFlex, exploring its challenges, successes, and best practices while offering insights into its transformative impact on accessible education.

The sudden disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic forced educators worldwide to rethink traditional teaching methodologies. For CCS, the shift was not only about adopting new tools but also about reimagining education to better serve its diverse newcomer community. By 2021, CCS implemented the first iteration of the HyFlex model, combining in-person, virtual, synchronous, and asynchronous learning. Today, HyFlex is a cornerstone of CCS’s commitment to accessibility and flexibility in language education.

To understand the transformative journey of CCS, it is essential to define key terms how they are used in this paper:

- **In-Person Learning:** Traditional, classroom-based instruction using physical resources like textbooks and whiteboards
- **Virtual Learning:** Fully online with no in-person interaction, primarily utilizing tools like Zoom and Google Classroom
- **Hybrid Learning:** A mix of in-person and virtual instruction, where learners participate in pre-determined, fixed schedules or formats without flexibility; commonly used by colleges and universities for lecture style instruction



- **Blended Learning:** A structured combination of in-person and online sessions, with no flexibility in participation mode; this format is commonly used by provincially funded ESL programs, where certain days are assigned for 100% virtual or 100% in-person learning
- **HyFlex Learning:** A hybrid and flexible model allowing learners to choose between in-person and virtual participation on a class-by-class basis; this model integrates synchronous and asynchronous activities, fostering adaptability and inclusivity.

As conceptualized by Dr. Brian Beatty (2019), HyFlex is more than a delivery method—it is a philosophy of accessibility, enabling learners to participate in ways that align with their unique circumstances.

Before the pandemic, CCS LINC classrooms were wholly in-person. Face-to-face engagement and physical resources like textbooks, whiteboards, and CALL labs were central to instruction. However, accessibility challenges persisted, particularly for students in rural areas with limited or non-existent public transit. For instance, a newcomer father often stayed after class to catch up on lessons due to commuting difficulties. These logistical barriers, once seen as unavoidable, became a catalyst for transformation.

In March 2020, CCS instructors faced an abrupt transition to online platforms with limited tools such as Skype and WhatsApp. Digital literacy and technology access posed significant challenges for students. Yet, these initial struggles highlighted the resilience of both students and staff.

“I recall spending 30 minutes troubleshooting audio issues with one student over the phone. That small victory wasn’t just about solving a technical problem—it was a connection that built trust,” shared Suma Balagopal, a Lead PBLA Instructor at CCS. These moments of perseverance laid the foundation for innovation.

Over time, CCS moved beyond stopgap solutions, investing in platforms like Zoom, Google Classroom, ELLII, and Kahoot!. These tools transformed classes into interactive, structured learning environments. Training for both students and staff became integral, ensuring inclusivity in virtual classrooms. For example, a quiet student blossomed during a Kahoot! session, showcasing how technology could unlock hidden potential.

These experiences underscored an important realization: The future of education is not about replacing traditional methods but enhancing them to better serve diverse learners.

By 2021, CCS introduced the HyFlex model, which fundamentally changed the learning experience. For students balancing jobs or caregiving responsibilities, HyFlex offered unprecedented flexibility.



One newcomer single mother described it as “a lifeline” that allowed her to remain engaged without compromising her family’s needs. By blending in-person, virtual, synchronous, and asynchronous learning, HyFlex empowered students to tailor their learning journeys.

A pivotal factor in the successful implementation of HyFlex at CCS was the introduction of the Digital Navigator role. This position, created to address the digital divide, played a crucial role in ensuring both students and staff could effectively engage with HyFlex technology and methodologies. The Digital Navigator was responsible for:

- **Digital Onboarding:** Conducting needs assessments and introducing learners to the HyFlex model, ensuring they understood the available tools and participation options
- **Technical Setup and Support:** Assisting students with device setup, software installation, and troubleshooting; this included personalized one-on-one sessions and group training to build digital literacy.
- **Real-Time Assistance:** Providing immediate technical support during classes to address connectivity issues, software glitches, or user challenges
- **Ongoing Technology Training:** Supporting instructors and clients in mastering HyFlex tools such as the Meeting Owl camera and Smartboard, while also guiding them in integrating digital platforms like Zoom and Google Classroom into their teaching

By bridging the gap between technology and education, the Digital Navigator empowered learners to overcome initial barriers, enabling them to focus on their studies rather than technical challenges. This role also ensured instructors could confidently manage the complexities of HyFlex delivery.

Implementing HyFlex was not without hurdles. Key challenges included:

- **Technology Infrastructure:** Issues such as lagging internet connections and software glitches disrupted the learning process.
- **Classroom Management:** Ensuring equitable engagement for in-person and online students required constant effort.
- **Real-Time Troubleshooting:** Addressing technical issues during class demanded robust IT support and adaptability.

Despite these challenges, CCS remained committed to creating an accessible and inclusive learning environment. With ongoing training and a focus on adaptability, these obstacles became opportunities for



growth.

CCS's HyFlex journey revealed several critical lessons:

- 1. Preparation is Key:** Testing equipment and ensuring functionality before class prevents disruptions.
- 2. Inclusivity Drives Engagement:** Planning for dual delivery from the outset creates equitable learning opportunities.
- 3. Support is Crucial:** Providing flexible technical support builds confidence among students and instructors.

The contributions of the Digital Navigator were instrumental in embedding these practices into CCS's educational framework, ensuring smooth operation and continuous improvement.

As HyFlex becomes a permanent feature at CCS, the focus remains on refining the model. Future plans include experimenting with advanced equipment and continuously adapting to student needs. HyFlex is no longer just a response to a crisis—it represents a reimagining of what's possible in language education.

The evolution of HyFlex at CCS demonstrates the power of adaptability, collaboration, and innovation. By integrating technology with a commitment to student needs, CCS has redefined accessibility and flexibility in Language Training. The pivotal role of the Digital Navigator underscores the importance of bridging technology and pedagogy, ensuring equitable access to learning for all participants.

To educators everywhere, let this journey serve as inspiration to embrace the opportunities within challenges. Together, we can continue transforming language education for the better.

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Author Bios



Art Rekhtin, a Certified Project Management Professional and Ontario Certified English Language Teacher, specializes in digital and in-person project leadership. Since joining Caledon Community Services in 2022 as Manager of Newcomer Programs, he has focused on implementing HyFlex service delivery. Art has extensive experience in English Language Training across multiple formats and has volunteered with TESL Ontario in roles including the North York and York Region affiliate executive and the board of directors.



Suma Balagopal has been a dedicated team member at Caledon Community Services since 2007, where she currently works as the Lead LINC Instructor. Her role was pivotal during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading the transition from in-person to virtual learning and eventually to the innovative Hyflex model. Suma has been actively involved with TESL Ontario in various volunteer capacities. She has served as a Facebook manager and is currently a member of the DEI committee. She was recognized in 2014 with the Sparks of Excellence award. Connect with Suma on LinkedIn to learn about her journey: www.linkedin.com/in/sumabalagopal



Gurimandeep is a dedicated professional with over 4 years of committed service in the LINC program at Caledon Community Services. She excels in language education, helping newcomers feel welcomed and prepared for life in a new country. In addition, she has over a year of experience as a Digital Navigator, guiding individuals in developing essential digital literacy skills. Her combined expertise in language instruction and digital literacy enhances her ability to empower others through education and technology.

Enhancing ESL learners' productive vocabulary through multimedia solutions

By Hala M. Bastawros, Canada

Abstract

This qualitative embedded case study aims to examine how applying multimedia theories in online courses can enhance vocabulary acquisition, retention, and production among adult English as a Second Language (ESL) learners at a non-profit organization in Ontario, Canada. Guided by Mayer's Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning (CTML), the study probes how ESL learners can transfer, retain, and produce new vocabulary more effectively. Data collection involves criterion sampling and analysis through MaxQDA, encompassing physical artifacts, personal interviews, and online questionnaires. The findings underscore integrating multimedia elements' efficacy in facilitating new vocabulary retention and production. The study underscores the pivotal link between vocabulary acquisition, communication skills, and the integration of multimedia principles in online education. Moreover, the research emphasizes the need to consider the interplay between technology, pedagogy, and learner characteristics in designing online educational interventions for adult ESL learners. Overall, the findings contribute valuable insights to language education, advocating for the integration of evidence-based multimedia principles to empower adult ESL learners in achieving their language learning goals and effective communication in diverse contexts.

Keywords: *retention, production, vocabulary, adult ESL learners, multimedia learning, course design, technology*



Introduction

This study aims to address the gap in adult learners' productive vocabulary learning in ESL by exploring effective multimedia methods (Coady, 1997; Coady & Huckin, 1997; Davis, 1989; Gass, 1987; Read, 2004; Zimmerman, 1997). While vocabulary acquisition has been extensively studied, transitioning receptive vocabulary skills to productive skills in L2 learners, particularly adults seeking employment opportunities in North America, requires further research (Heidari, 2019; Wang et al., 2022). The shift to online learning due to the pandemic has exacerbated challenges for ESL learners, including language barriers and adapting to digital tools (Heidari, 2019). Without adequate support, ESL learners may lose motivation and become isolated, leading to missed opportunities for both the learners and their communities, as well as potential linguistic prejudice.

Problem statement

The problem is the poor application of multimedia design principles in course design for L2 learners, leading to cognitive overload, distraction, and poor learning outcomes (Noetel et al., 2022). Such practice has resulted in significant implications, including high learner dropout rates, delayed progress, difficulties in finding employment (Wang et al., 2022), and low self-esteem. Additionally, there is insufficient research in several areas, such as receptive and productive vocabulary retention and production for adult ESL learners (Heidari, 2019), the impact of learning context on L2 vocabulary acquisition and listening development (Yu et al., 2021), and the effects of semantic elaboration on L2 learners' performance (Rice & Tokowicz, 2020), which has affected vocabulary retention and production studies.

When ESL learners migrate as newcomers and refugees, many lack adequate English proficiency in their new country, limiting their ability to find professional jobs, connect with the community, and network effectively, potentially leading to poverty, depression, isolation, and other personal and social problems (Wang et al., 2022). Those outcomes highlight a clear gap in the literature regarding vocabulary retention and production for these ESL learners.

Purpose statement

The purpose of this qualitative embedded case study is to identify the multimedia principles that enhance productive vocabulary skills' transfer, retention, and production in online ESL classes for adult learners. This study takes place in Ontario, Canada, at a non-profit organization pseudonymously called ABC.



Research questions

This qualitative embedded case study focuses on probing how applying multimedia-specific tools and principles can improve productive vocabulary retention and production for ESL learners. Additionally, it ascertains learners' perception of the best methods that help them acquire and retain information effectively in their online courses.

Central research question

How can ESL learners transfer, retain, and produce newly learned vocabulary effectively in online courses?

Sub-question one

What is the influence of Mayer's 12 multimedia principles in online course design on ESL learners' ability to retain and produce vocabulary?

Sub-question two

What are learners' perceptions of the effective multimedia elements that have enabled them to retain and utilize their productive vocabulary effectively in their online courses?

Theoretical framework

This embedded single case study is anchored on Mayer's Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning (CTML). It offers a proposal to improve learning in online platforms that should have a positive impact on L2 learners' knowledge retention (Michelle, 2017). Michelle (2017) explained that, according to CTML, learners can transfer knowledge better when presented with multimodal instruction rather than in one format. The purpose is to allow learners to build connections between verbal and visual representations at the same time. CTML accounts for how our memory works and bases its framework on three concepts: (1) limited capacity, (2) dual channels, and (3) active processing.

In the realm of digital media learning, Schneider et al. (2022) explained that CTML offers a framework model of the entire learning process and relies on three key assumptions: (1) Information is processed through two cognitive channels, as established by Paivio and Baddeley; (2) the capacity of the working memory system is limited, as posited by Baddeley's working memory model (Laufer, 1992); and (3) learners must actively process information to construct coherent mental representations and models, according to the constructivist theory.



Related literature

There are two main key principles that the CTML is built on. The first one is Sweller's Cognitive Load Theory (CLT) (Sweller, 2010), which explains the proper design of presentation modes and media delivery. The second one is Paivio's Dual Coding Theory (DCT) (Paivio, 2013), which contributes to the understanding of sensory modalities (Şendurur et al., 2020).

Mayer's 12 Principles of Multimedia Learning

Mayer (2014) outlines 12 principles of multimedia learning that guide the effective design of instructional materials:

1. **Coherence Principle:** People learn better when extraneous words, pictures, and sounds are excluded rather than included. This principle helps reduce cognitive overload and focuses learners on essential content.
2. **Signaling Principle:** People learn better when cues that highlight essential material are added. This principle emphasizes the importance of guiding learners' attention to critical information.
3. **Redundancy Principle:** People learn better from graphics and narration than from graphics, narration, and on-screen text. This principle suggests that too much information can overwhelm learners.
4. **Spatial Contiguity Principle:** People learn better when corresponding words and pictures are presented near rather than far from each other on the page or screen. This principle facilitates the integration of verbal and visual information.
5. **Temporal Contiguity Principle:** People learn better when corresponding words and pictures are presented simultaneously rather than consecutively. This principle enhances the connection between related information.
6. **Segmenting Principle:** People learn better from a multimedia lesson when it is presented in smaller segments rather than as a continuous unit. This approach allows for better processing of information.
7. **Pre-training Principle:** People learn better from a multimedia lesson when they know the names and characteristics of the main concepts prior to the lesson. This prior knowledge prepares learners to understand new content.



8. **Modality Principle:** People learn better from graphics and narrations than from animation and on-screen text. This principle supports the use of multiple forms of media to enhance learning.
9. **Multimedia Principle:** People learn better from words and pictures than from words alone. This principle emphasizes the effectiveness of combining verbal and visual elements.
10. **Personalization Principle:** People learn better from multimedia lessons when words are used in a conversational style rather than a formal style. This principle enhances relatability and engagement.
11. **Voice Principle:** People learn better when the narration in multimedia lessons is spoken in a friendly human voice rather than a machine voice. A human voice adds warmth and encourages engagement.
12. **Image Principle:** People do not necessarily learn better from a multimedia lesson when the speaker's image is added to the screen. This principle suggests that the presence of a speaker may not always enhance learning outcomes.

Challenges in vocabulary learning for ESL learners

Despite the potential benefits of multimedia, ESL learners face various challenges in acquiring productive vocabulary. Many adult learners struggle with language barriers, lack of motivation, and inadequate access to technological resources (Wang et al., 2022). These challenges can hinder their ability to engage with multimedia content effectively, leading to frustration and decreased learning outcomes. Therefore, it is essential to identify barriers and implement strategies to support learners in overcoming these challenges.

Methodology

Research design

This study employed a qualitative embedded case study design, focusing on adult ESL learners at a non-profit organization in Ontario, Canada.

Participants

The study involved a diverse group of adult ESL learners, including newcomers and refugees, who were enrolled in online language courses. Participants were selected through criterion sampling to ensure a range of experiences and backgrounds that reflect the population of adult ESL learners in Ontario.



Data collection

Data were collected using a combination of physical artifacts, personal interviews, and online questionnaires. The interviews focused on learners' perceptions of multimedia tools and their effectiveness in facilitating vocabulary learning. The questionnaires included measures of vocabulary retention and production.

Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using MaxQDA software, enabling the identification of themes and patterns related to the integration of multimedia in vocabulary instruction. The analysis aimed to capture learners' experiences and insights regarding the use of multimedia tools, thus providing a comprehensive understanding of their impact on vocabulary learning.

Summary of thematic findings

The study revealed critical insights aligned with Mayer's principles, emphasizing how multimedia elements can optimize vocabulary retention and productive use for adult ESL learners:

1. **Narration:** The use of narration, when paired with relevant graphics, significantly enhances learning outcomes compared to pairing graphics with additional text. This aligns with Mayer's Modality Principle, which underscores the importance of using auditory channels alongside visual materials to reduce cognitive overload. Learners reported that narrated lessons felt more dynamic and engaging, fostering a deeper understanding of vocabulary usage.
2. **Repetition:** Repetition emerged as a cornerstone for reinforcing vocabulary knowledge. Effective repetition involves presenting words in varied contexts—through activities like flashcards, sentence creation, and interactive quizzes. This strategy adheres to the Multimedia Principle, engaging both visual and verbal cognitive channels to ensure long-term retention. Participants noted that revisiting vocabulary through spaced intervals helped bridge the gap between recognition and productive use.
3. **Visuals:** Visual aids, such as infographics, diagrams, and animations, improve performance when combined with concise textual explanations. This finding supports the Spatial Contiguity Principle, which emphasizes the importance of placing corresponding visuals and text close together to enhance comprehension. Learners shared those visual representations clarified abstract concepts, making vocabulary easier to grasp and apply in real-world scenarios.
4. **Human Voice:** Engaging narration, delivered in a conversational and natural tone, makes content more relatable and accessible to learners. This aligns with the Voice Principle, which highlights the



benefits of using human voices rather than robotic or synthetic tones. Participants described feeling more connected to the material when lessons were narrated with warmth and expressiveness, fostering a sense of inclusivity and encouragement.

The statistical distribution in Figure 1 reinforces the thematic findings, emphasizing the multifaceted nature of visual engagement. The integration of narration, repetition, visuals, and human voice collectively creates a robust multimodal approach, aligning with the thematic emphasis on effective multimedia elements.

	A	B	C
1		Segments	Percentage
2	TOTAL	130	100.00
3	Narration	18	13.85
4	Repetition	16	12.31
5	Visuals	14	10.77
6	Human Voice	12	9.23

Figure 1: *Top-Level Code Statistics using MAXQDA*

Overcoming common challenges in online ESL vocabulary learning

Online ESL learners often face challenges such as cognitive overload, disengagement, and difficulties adapting to digital tools. The following strategies can help educators mitigate these challenges:

- **Simplify Content:** Clear and concise visuals, paired with focused text or narration, are crucial for minimizing cognitive load. Lessons should avoid unnecessary elements and prioritize key vocabulary to ensure learners can concentrate on the most relevant information. Scaffolding, where complex content is broken into smaller, manageable units, further aids comprehension and retention.
- **Gamify Learning:** Gamification involves adding game-like elements—such as quizzes, leaderboards, or digital badges—to motivate learners and make vocabulary practice more enjoyable. Tools like Kahoot! and Quizlet Live allow learners to compete or collaborate in real time, adding an element of fun while reinforcing vocabulary knowledge. This approach enhances engagement and encourages consistent participation.
- **Interactive Lessons:** Utilizing video tools like Edpuzzle or PlayPosit, educators can embed questions, feedback, and prompts into video lessons. This interactivity keeps learners engaged and offers real-time reinforcement, ensuring they remain active participants in the learning process. Such tools

align with the Segmenting Principle, allowing learners to digest information in small chunks.

- **Personalized Learning:** AI-driven platforms, such as Duolingo or WordUp, can tailor exercises to meet individual learner needs. These tools adapt to a learner's progress, offering targeted practice based on performance. By personalizing content, educators can address diverse learning preferences and skill levels, ensuring every learner has an opportunity to succeed.

Key takeaways

To optimize vocabulary acquisition and usage in online ESL courses, educators should focus on these key strategies:

1. **Leverage Multimedia Tools:** Combining visuals, narration, and AI-driven personalization creates a holistic learning experience. Multimedia tools engage multiple senses, fostering deeper connections to the material and improving retention.
2. **Avoid Cognitive Overload:** Simplifying visuals and scaffolding content ensures learners can process information without feeling overwhelmed. Chunking lessons into smaller, digestible sections aligns with Mayer's principles and accommodates varying learner capacities.
3. **Engage Through Gamification:** Interactive, game-like elements make vocabulary practice enjoyable and rewarding. Platforms like Kahoot! not only encourage active participation but also provide instant feedback, helping learners track their progress.
4. **Incorporate Interactive Videos:** Embedding questions, quizzes, and reflective prompts into video lessons promotes active engagement. This approach enhances comprehension and enables learners to apply vocabulary in context.

Conclusion

The integration of multimedia design principles in online ESL courses is not merely a supplementary strategy, it is essential for fostering effective vocabulary acquisition and usage. Mayer's principles provide a valuable framework for designing learner-centered, engaging content that addresses the unique needs of adult ESL learners. By simplifying content, incorporating gamified activities, and leveraging interactive tools, educators can overcome common challenges and create dynamic, supportive learning environments. These strategies not only improve vocabulary retention but also empower learners to achieve their linguistic and professional goals, ultimately enhancing their confidence and success in real-world communication.



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Author Bio



Hala M. Bastawros, PhD, is a seasoned eLearning Manager and instructional design expert with over 20 years of experience in TESL methodology and enhanced technology learning. Passionate about transforming adult ESL education, she leverages innovative, evidence-based strategies to bridge learning gaps and enhance language acquisition. Her work empowers both learners and educators to thrive in digital and multicultural environments, equipping them with the skills to navigate the evolving landscape of education and technology with confidence.

Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of online and in-person ESL/EFL classes

By Kanae Bessho & Brian Strong, Canada

Introduction

With the rise of digital communication and remote learning, online classes for English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) have become more popular for accessibility and flexibility. Since 2016, the online English learning market has tripled in size, with an estimate of 17.87% growth between 2023 and 2028 (Technavio, n.d.). The COVID-19 pandemic impacting in-person education has certainly pushed the implementation of online learning worldwide, including ESL/EFL classes. As a result, demand for online English instructors has increased.

Over the past three years, I have been an online EFL instructor myself, and I have seen this trend in an increasing number of online ESL/EFL learning platforms over the years. Initially, there were only a few notable platforms, whereas now, they are abundant. Online classes offer flexibility, allowing busy students to fit lessons into their schedules with less commitment compared to in-person classes with rigid schedules (Lo, 2023).

However, many students still prefer in-person learning for several reasons. One reason is that in-person classes are often conducted in a group, offering more peer interactions, whereas such interactions may be limited in online classes with individual students (Lo, 2023). Ellis (2012) argues that not only do social interactions promote language acquisition within learners who participate, and other scholars argue that they also contribute to self-regulated learning, which in turn results in academic success (Bai & Wang, 2023). It is also suggested that that peer-to-peer interactions promote the learning of students resulting in higher test scores (Watanabe & Swain, 2007). Therefore, in-person classes conducted with a group of students may be better at promoting the learning of the students than online classes which often involve one instructor and one student.

Another reason may be that in-person classes often have a structured schedule for classes and offer a large amount of learning resources and materials, providing an appropriate environment to facilitate the learning of the students (Hashim & Yunus, 2018). Because many in-person classes are run regularly, it helps create



learning routines for the students, which helps students become used to using English as part of their everyday lives. Having such routines can help students feel more confident in acquiring and using English, thereby promoting their learning (Hashim & Yunus, 2018).

Finally, because online classes are mediated by technology, both students and teachers may shy away from them if they are not tech-savvy. Some students, especially those in the older generations, may have trouble with online learning because of their internet literacy levels, and they may feel more comfortable with in-person learning. Furthermore, online classes often come with technological limitations, hindering class conduct. Some teachers report that online classes can be quite disruptive when there is an issue with the technology, causing the computer to freeze, or the internet to disconnect (Lo, 2023).

While online ESL/EFL classes are in increasing demand, in-person ESL/EFL classes still hold value. To address the different needs and profiles of ESL/EFL learners, instructors should be able to accommodate different class delivery methods. With my experience, I feel more comfortable teaching online, but I believe that being an ESL/EFL teacher today unfolds much more than being able to teach online. I am currently in a program to become certified in teaching ESL with a practicum component. For the practicum component, I am asked to observe and teach local in-person ESL classes as a student teacher. While there are many similarities between online classes and in-person classes, I also have noticed some notable differences between online and in-person classes during my practicum placement.

In the discussion below, based on my experience as an online EFL instructor and a student teacher in an in-person ESL class, I will discuss some of the primary differences that I have noticed between online and in-person classes from three different aspects: class size, lesson material, and assessment. Then, I will discuss how these differences could affect pedagogy, teaching effectiveness, and student learning outcomes along with personal real-life examples. Finally, a conclusion will be offered to discuss some of the implications of these differences, emphasizing the need for adaptable teaching approaches that cater to diverse learner needs.

Discussion

Although some differences between online classes and in-person classes were mentioned already, the implications of the class features depending on the methods of delivery were not discussed. Below, I will provide other differences that I noticed based on my experience as an online EFL instructor and a student teacher in an in-person ESL class and discuss how such differences could have an impact on teaching and learning.



Class size

First, the primary difference between an online class and an in-person class that I noticed is the size of the class. I have only taught one student at a time on the online platform, but at my practicum placement, the number of students can vary from 20 to 30 depending on the day. This is important to consider because the bigger the class size is, the more diverse students are, and this may lead to varied learning outcomes for different students (Xiao & Hu, 2019). Because each student brings their own unique learner profile to the class, there will be many individual differences in a large classroom. These differences can have an impact on effective pedagogy and the overall quality of instruction as they are often linked to successful language learning outcomes (Dornyei, 2005). Therefore, as a language instructor, it would be ideal to create a lesson that addresses the individual differences of the students to better assist their learning.

Many aspects of individual differences are positively correlated to higher language proficiency (Dornyei, 2005; Lightbown & Spada, 2021). Some of the individual differences that contribute to better learning outcomes are language learning aptitude, motivation and interests, personality, and learning style (Dornyei, 2015; Griffiths & Soruç, 2021; Lightbown & Spada, 2021). On top of these individual differences, instructors should also be aware of students' varying proficiency levels. In group language classes, there are often students with varying proficiency levels in different areas of skills (i.e., reading, listening, writing, and speaking). Therefore, it would be important to consider the differences in language levels along with other individual differences among students when creating an effective lesson plan.

In a group lesson, where there are different levels of motivation, aptitude, personality traits, and proficiency among students, it can be difficult to find a middle ground of what teaching approach works best to accommodate everyone. Because I am used to teaching individual EFL lessons online, I was able to create a lesson plan that addressed everyone's needs and characteristics. For example, if the student's motivation to learn the language were to travel abroad and use the local language, the focus of the lesson would be on the skills needed when traveling such as knowing how to interact with clerks when shopping or asking for directions. In individual lessons, I would be also mindful of the types of material presented to the students depending on their learning style, although the research related to learning styles remains inconclusive on this matter (Lightbown & Spada, 2021). If the student is a visual learner, I may present more images and graphs to aid their learning, and if they are an auditory learner, I may introduce more dialogues or speeches in audio clips.

However, when it comes to group language lessons, an instructor should employ a teaching approach that addresses the diversity that exists within a class. To ensure the effective learning of the students in a group



setting as opposed to individual ESL lessons, there are some strategies that can be employed to address individual differences of the students. This is important for me to consider as I am new to group ESL classes as an instructor, and I believe that using appropriate strategies for group classes would help students learn better.

In a group lesson, many students come to class with different intentions and interests. Some students may take a course to find employment, or to pursue higher education. Students often have different reasons to learn English and they may also have varying levels of motivation. Because there is a strong correlation between motivation and language acquisition (Saville-Troike & Barto, 2017), the classes should be designed to promote the motivation of the students.

One way to promote the motivation of students as an instructor is by building teacher-student rapport (Meng, 2021). Instructors can build rapport by allowing free expression, giving appropriate feedback, using humor, and being delicate and enthusiastic, which would result in the enhancement of students' motivation and engagement (Meng, 2021). Furthermore, instructors can also try to increase the motivation of the students by fulfilling some of the needs in the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Meng, 2021) argues that when the three needs (i.e., autonomy, competence, and relatedness) of the SDT are fulfilled, it leads to the motivation of the students. Instructors can try to promote autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs by creating a supportive and safe environment for the students and encouraging students' autonomy and agency over their learning (Meng, 2021). For example, to fulfill students' relatedness needs, instructors may try to have as many teacher-student interactions as possible with respect and empathy (Aiusheeva, 2019). To fulfill autonomy needs, instructors may give students the option to choose the class content (Aiusheeva, 2019) rather than prescribing predetermined topics and material.

In my practicum placement, these factors of motivation are reflected in my host teacher's classes. I see that she builds teacher-student rapport effectively by using appropriate feedback, incorporating humor into the lesson, and allowing students to make comments and/or questions freely. There are many teacher-learner interactions, showing students empathy and respect, accounting for the relatedness needs of the SDT (Aiusheeva, 2019). Moreover, she conducts needs analysis and distributes a questionnaire of student interests to reflect in her classes. This way, the students feel that their learning is rather self-directed, and that their purpose in learning English and their interests are reflected in the classes. According to the SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2008), fulfilling autonomy needs this way helps students be more motivated and engaged (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Lesson Material

Another difference between online classes and in-person classes is the learning materials students interact with. After several hours of observation at my practicum placement, I have realized that not only the format



of teaching materials were different (i.e., digital vs. physical), but also there seems to be more materials at students' disposal in in-person classes. For example, there are many educational/informational posters in the classroom at my practicum school that students can use as their language resources. I think that having a physical classroom with rich language resources accounts for the exposure to more language input that online students may not otherwise be exposed to, and having such language input can promote student learning (Lightbown & Spada, 2021). Therefore, students in in-person classes may have more benefits.

In terms of the medium of materials, it is difficult to say which is better than the other because there seems to be a lack of research articles comparing the use of digital and physical materials in the context of ESL education. However, in physical classrooms, instructors can use real-life materials and that may improve the learning of the students (Brown & Lee, 2015). The use of realia, or real-life objects can help students connect language to the real world, and is said to be effective, particularly for beginner learners (Brown & Lee, 2015). My practicum host teacher often uses realia in her lessons, and it seems to be effective in filling the gap in students' language knowledge.

On top of the differences in the medium of learning materials, there are also differences in the content of the material. When I was teaching online, I noticed that there was a lack of material with authentic and meaningful use of language on the online teaching platform. Scholars argue that using authentic material for language teaching is important (Brown & Lee, 2015; Rogers & Medley, 1988) as it allows for the input of the real use of language in a meaningful way and allows students to learn the functional use of language. Authentic materials include videotaped materials audiotaped materials and print media materials (Rogers & Medley, 1988). Most of the learning material I have used did not include authentic use of language and there was a lot of emphasis on the form of the language. My students did not have many opportunities to be exposed to authentic and meaningful language use, and that may not have been as beneficial to them. In my practicum placement, I noticed that there is a lot of authentic use of the language, especially for reading materials. Students are often asked to read materials such as brochures to be exposed to the real use of everyday languages. Such use of authentic materials should help students learn functional and meaningful use of the language (Rogers & Medley, 1988).

Assessment

Finally, the last difference I have noticed is the presence of assessment components. At my practicum placement, the students are given weekly tests, whereas, on the online teaching platform, students were never given a test. This is important to note because language assessment such as an achievement test can have an impact on language acquisition through washbacks whether positive or negative (Brown & Lee, 2015). Washbacks are described as the influence of testing on teaching and learning. They can manifest

in changes in students' motivation, autonomy, self-confidence, identity, and investment (Brown & Lee, 2015; Cheng & Fox, 2017). Not only that, having a test in class can also inform the instructor of the levels of understanding the students have attained, and such information can be used to improve teaching and learning in the language course (Li et al., 2012).

As an instructor, the intention when administering an assessment, such as a test, should be to support positive washback to increase meaningful learning (Cheng & Fox, 2017). Ideally, tests would increase students' motivation and increase their language proficiency as a result of having an assessment component. Although instructors can still engage in informal assessment by observing students' performance and keeping track of their learning (Li et al., 2012) instead of administering a formal assessment (i.e., tests), because informal assessment does not contribute to formal grades, students may not feel as motivated to perform well. This seemed to be a problem when I was teaching online because students did not have the motivation or pressure to perform well or improve. They were also not able to track their improvement or progress without any testing. Because tests can allow students to reflect on their learning and search for ways to improve (Li et al., 2012), without any tests, I felt that my online students were not given this opportunity to reflect on their progress.

Although instructors can certainly provide feedback based on informal assessment during a class so that students can reflect on their learning, formal assessment may provide better quality feedback (Cheng & Fox, 2017). Formal assessment such as a formative assessment can help instructors better understand the characteristics of the students, their progress, and how to support their learning, and gathering such information is crucial in creating effective feedback (Cheng & Fox, 2017). Therefore, having no formal assessment in the online course that I taught may not have been as effective for their learning as I, as an instructor, was not able to gather enough information about the students, and the students were not able to receive quality feedback to improve their learning.

At my practicum placement, not only are the students asked to do weekly tests, but also, they are asked to do a portfolio assessment, in which students organize documents used in the classroom to indicate their learning process and learning product (Li et al., 2012). I think that having such components within a language course makes it more effective for students' language learning because students are able to receive feedback from an instructor on a test, and they are also able to evaluate and keep track of their learning on a portfolio. It seems that students are given many opportunities to receive feedback at my practicum placement through assessments and oral feedback in class whether explicit or implicit, and having such feedback can influence students' motivation as well (Cheng & Fox, 2017). If students can receive quality feedback, students would have higher levels of motivation, and that, in turn, should result in students with



improved language skills (Cheng & Fox, 2017).

Conclusion

Above, I have highlighted the three major differences between the online EFL classes I have taught and the in-person ESL classes I am currently observing at my practicum placement to obtain a teaching certificate in ESL. More specifically, I have emphasized how class size, lesson materials, and assessment practices can shape the learning experience of the students depending on how the classes are run.

As the demand for online ESL/EFL classes increases, it is important that instructors understand the strengths and weaknesses of different class delivery methods and be able to accommodate a variety of learner profiles to create a more effective learning environment. While online classes offer a great deal of flexibility and accessibility for busy individuals, it comes with some disadvantages. Online students often have limited social interactions and resources, and they may not have as many opportunities to receive feedback. On the other hand, although in-person classes may lack the flexibility that online classes offer, they can facilitate peer interactions and rich learning resources essential for learning and structured assessment that can contribute to students' motivation and success.

Although there is an increasing demand for online ESL/EFL classes, there is still a lack of research comparing the effectiveness of different teaching approaches between online and in-person classes. This gap in the literature can hinder the understanding of how appropriate different teaching approaches are depending on the context. To provide a better learning experience for ESL/EFL students, the distinctions between online and in-person classes in ESL/EFL should be investigated and addressed in future research.

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Author Bios



Kanae Bessho is an undergraduate student specializing in applied linguistics and currently pursuing a certificate in teaching ESL. Drawing from her own experiences as an ESL learner, Kanae strives to implement effective teaching methodologies by bridging the gap between research and practice. Her research interests lie in language assessment, with a particular focus on examining rater effects in ESL writing assessments, aiming to enhance the fairness and validity in language testing.



Dr. Brian Strong is an Assistant Professor at Carleton University, specializing in second language (L2) vocabulary acquisition and multiword expressions. His research explores the effects of trial-and-error learning and phrasal verb usage using corpus and experimental methods. As a co-editor of *The Language Teacher*, Dr. Strong supports research dissemination and pedagogical advancement.

Building bridges: Reimagining adult literacy and language education

By Mercedes Veselka, Canada

When I started teaching an adult literacy and language classroom in a small community centre, I was not prepared for the tensions and joys specific to working with adult literacy learners (ALLs). These learners were not a culturally, linguistically, or educationally homogenous group. They differed in languages, goals, cultural knowledge, and educational background. This is not an experience unique to my own context (Belzer and Pickard, 2015; Katz, 1997; Pettitt & Tarone, 2015); however, the current educational system aims to place and categorize learners not by the diversity of skills and knowledge they bring to the classroom, but by a singular deficit: their lack of reading and writing skills (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2016). ALLs often face discrimination and experience shame due to this disconnect between their home literacies and schooled literacies, a problem more rooted in the educational system than a deficit of learners (Ade-Ojo & Duckworth, 2019; Bloome & Greene, 2015; Katz, 1997; Schneider & Daddow, 2017). Educators, like me, often find ourselves caught between the needs of our learners, the prescribed curriculum, and our own values. Davies and Gannon (2006) describe this challenge as a way of seeing where “we cannot replace the disciplinary regimes in which we work, nor can we destroy them” (p. 82). My own experiences as an educator lead me to believe teaching is most often about our ability to truly see—our learners, our curriculum, ourselves—and this sight often compounds the tensions and challenges we face. For adult language and literacy educators, who so often experience unstable work environments with low-wages, little professional development, and limited materials (Ontario Literacy Coalition, 2007; Ozanne et al., 2005; Ranta & Zavialova, 2022), we cannot help but experience shame, overwhelm, and discouragement alongside our ALLs when we see the ways the educational system ignores and devalues their literacies. In this article, we will explore together how multiliteracies theory opens up new avenues for seeing ALLs differently. Furthermore, I will share two activities and how they supported the experiences of two adult literacy and language educators in fostering classroom community.

Addressing challenges through theory

As we have discussed, adult literacy and language educators are “frustrated by the system... a system where they are controlled, sanctioned, and tremendously over-worked, a system that tells them what to teach and how to teach it and then implies that they are responsible for society’s failures” (Powell, 1999, p. 4).



Educators are asked to watch as adult literacy learners struggle and *fail* in an educational system which does not provide adequate professional development, materials, or a curriculum designed for the unique needs and strengths of ALLs (Beattie, 2022; Flynn et al., 2011; Ontario Literacy Coalition, 2007; Ozanne et al., 2005). How do we see our learners differently? How do support them in this system? In this section we will explore how multiliteracies theory offers opportunities to see our learners differently and build bridges between our own values, learners' needs, and the curriculum.

At the core, multiliteracies theory challenges the idea that literacy is synonymous with reading and writing (New London Group, 1996). Instead, multiliteracies theory asks us to reconsider literacy as *literacies*. This presents an opportunity to expand our understanding of literacy beyond reading and writing to consider digital, oral, linguistic, and cultural skills as literacies. Adult literacy learners often benefit most from literacy practices which are closely connected to their daily literacy needs (Currie & Cray, 2004; Lorimer Leonard & Gear, 2021; Pettitt & Tarone, 2015;). While they may have varied and limited educational experiences in their first language, they are not limited in literacy experiences. For example, Pettitt and Tarone (2015) follow an adult literacy learner named Roba who has linguistic literacy in seven different languages. Is Roba really illiterate with such a wide range of linguistic and cultural knowledge? Multiliteracies theory builds a bridge to demonstrate why illiterate should never be a descriptor for learners like Roba.

In addition to being a way of seeing, multiliteracies theory has concrete consequences for pedagogical choices we make in the classroom. Cope and Kalantzis (2009) outline how multiliteracies theory is a pedagogical approach as much as it is a theoretical one. There are three important elements to include when designing curriculum or materials in line with multiliteracies theory. First is including opportunities for peer-feedback and interaction (Crawford Camiciottoli & Campoy-Cubillo, 2018; Li, 2020; Turpin, 2019). Second, the activities need to contribute to supportive and low-risk environments (Choi & Yi, 2016; Qaisi, 2021). Third structural knowledge and instruction is critical to building skills and confidence (Burke & Hardware, 2015; Kumagai & Iwasaki, 2015; Lopez-Sanchez, 2015; Sagnier, 2015). These principles were foundational to building a unit of materials informed by multiliteracies theory (see Figure 1). Research demonstrates these elements contribute to learners being able to engage more deeply in both content knowledge and apply that content knowledge to their wider worlds (Burke & Hardware, 2015; Choi & Yi, 2016; Kumagai & Iwasaki, 2015; Li, 2020; Lopez-Sanchez, 2015; Sagnier, 2015; Qaisi, 2021; Turpin, 2019). Multiliteracies theory is not only a theoretical response to the limits of our current educational system, it is practical. The following sections will explore how the theoretical principles can shift our pedagogies in the classroom to honour the diverse literacies of ALLs.



Theory made practice

In exploring the practical application of multiliteracies theory in adult language and literacy classrooms, this project focused on developing a unit of materials for ALLs implemented by two different educators. This project occurred in two phases. The first phase involved the development of a unit plan rooted in multiliteracies theory and aligned with the Canadian Language Benchmarks (see Figure 1). The structural, relational, and environmental principles in Figure 1 were then used to inform the development of four weeks of materials for adult literacy educators and learners.

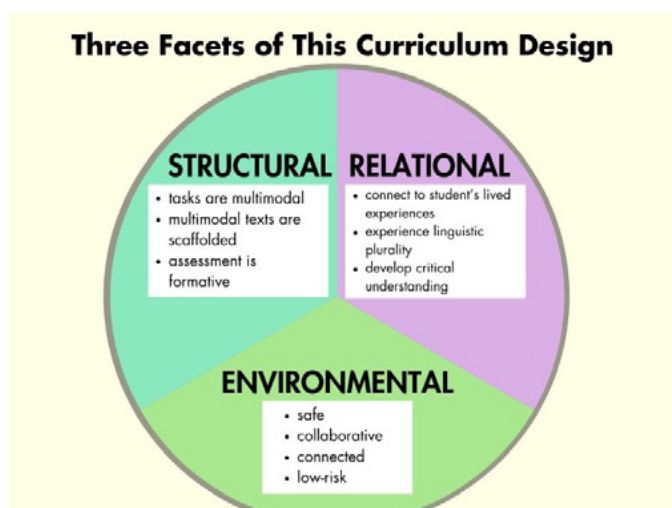


Figure 1: Multiliteracies theory and the Canadian Language Benchmarks

The second phase of this project included inviting two adult literacy and language educators to review and implement the unit of materials in their classrooms. Joy was an adult literacy educator for over 15 years and for the past seven years in adult English language and literacy classrooms in a correctional facility. For Joy, many of her ALLs had more developed oral literacy skills and would have been labelled as high-beginner or intermediate (Canadian Language Benchmark 4-5) in their oral English language proficiency. She valued community building through meeting students' goals and needs and giving room for autonomy and independence in the classroom. Sofia worked in a community-based English language program for the past two years. She works exclusively with beginner English language learners (pre-Canadian Language Benchmarks or Canadian Language Benchmark 1). As a multilingual educator, Sofia valued the use of additional languages to support inclusion and belonging as well as aligning tasks and activities to learners' goals and needs. Both educators had adult literacy learners in their classes alongside non-literacy learners. They both shared about the complexities and challenges of diverse, multi-level classrooms.

For both Joy and Sofia, differentiating instruction and building classroom community were central to their values as educators but also significant challenges. In developing the unit of materials, they were constantly seeking ways to negotiate between these values, challenges and the requirements of their curriculum. In the following section we will identify two activities, one from Joy's unit of materials and one from Sofia's, to explore how multiliteracies theory supported these educators as they fostered community and differentiated instruction for ALLs. The activities described are meant to be entry points for sparking your own curiosity. They are not meant to be prescriptive, but a launch point for your own ideas.

Activity 1: Picture Narrative Task

The first activity I will outline is a picture narrative task, co-developed with Joy to support vocabulary development in her classroom.



Figure 2: Picture Narrative Task

The purpose of the picture narrative task is to provide opportunities for learners to develop vocabulary in connection to a task for the week. For Joy's class, we chose a few target vocabulary but also discussed the importance of creating a shared vocabulary list with learners. We chose 6-8 pictures (see Figure 2 for examples) for them to organize in whatever order made sense to them to tell a story. Joy wanted to provide choice for learners about whether they complete this activity collaboratively or on their own. For those who

chose the collaborative option, learners tell the story to a peer while the other person listens for the target vocabulary. Then they switch roles. If learners want to work independently or want a focus on writing, they would use the collaborative word bank to write sentences or words underneath the pictures (depending on the learner). This writing could be done in English or in any of their most comfortable languages.

Activity 2: Multimodal sign creation

The second activity was designed for Sofia's Canadian Language Benchmarks 1 classroom and involved preparing learners for four weeks to create a park sign related to a problem in their community. The purpose of this activity was to develop learners reading and writing skills related to park signs and connect the images on a park sign to their understanding of problems in their community. This task was built up over four weeks through vocabulary activities, picture matching, and conversation. However, the assessment itself involved learners selecting a community problem (either individually or with a partner) and then choosing to create a poster related to this problem. Learners drew or created an image with the option to add colour, text, and other genre features of a sign. After learners created their sign, they were asked to reflect on the sign and languages they used. They were shown examples of other signs and asked to compare features of these signs to their own examples. After, they made any adjustments to their signs which were needed. Sofia considered colour, image, and including uppercase letters as part of the criteria for their sign. Additional criteria to consider when creating a sign could include: size of text, clarity of image in relation to the problem, uppercase letters, relevance of colours (is it a green warning sign?), languages, and cultural differences between signs in Ontario and other places in the world.

Multiliteracies-informed activities

Both of these activities share three key features which are especially relevant to adapting and expanding upon multiliteracies-inspired activities in our classrooms. First, both activities were multimodal. These activities focused specifically on written, oral, and visual literacies and notably included a combination. Second, this activity connected to learners' lived experiences and helped both learners and teachers to build bridges between their school and home literacies. Finally, these activities provided opportunities to build community in low-risk and collaborative environment.

Both activities provided choice for learners to engage through writing, oral language, and visual literacy skills. In other words, they were multimodal. Joy noted that "In my class I have a lot of people [ALLs] who speak and understand English better than my non-literacy learners.... So they that's where they shine right." Sofia shares a similar experience noting "And I find I found that I think [multimodal activities] it's universal for all levels.... Give them one picture, like a real-life picture and some words, some vocabulary. They just



do.” Exploring multimodal activities provided opportunities for ALLs to shine no matter their English level. For ALLs who may often feel sidelined or inadequate in classrooms not designed for them (Ade-Ojo & Duckworth, 2019; Katz, 1997), multimodal activities ask them to move beyond passive understandings of a text (Burke & Hardware, 2015) and enhance their communication practices (Crawford Camiciottoli & Campoy-Cubillo, 2018).

Connecting to learners’ real-life experiences was another key element of these activities. The picture narrative we chose to explore was one Joy identified as relevant to her learners’ experiences and goals for the future. “It’s got, it’s real-life context, which we know that our learners thrive in that.... It makes more sense for us to have relevant tasks, right?” Sofia even expanded upon this activity by having learners go out into their communities and take pictures of the community signs they found. This led to the realization that uppercase letters were part of the sign genre and ended up on her assessment as a result. When sharing about her learners’ *aha* moment, she discussed how this activity promoted noticing of a grammar form they hadn’t connected with before. “This is some kind, something of awareness, right? And yeah, most of them didn’t aware that.... They cannot connect with the words they have learned before just learned yesterday, and now they are aware of it.” This connection between their school learning and literacies and their communities and experiences is crucial for ALLs (Lorimer Leonard & Gear, 2021) but also for all learners. It is through multimodal, relevant tasks learners gain complex knowledge and extend this to the wider world (Choi & Yi, 2016; Kumagai & Iwasaki, 2015). In multiliteracies theory, understanding how and when to apply knowledge is just as critical as gaining new knowledge (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009) and multimodal activities offer ALLs opportunities to make connections between their own knowledge and the wider world.

Finally, both activities were built on the foundation of a collaborative and low-risk environment for learners. Both Joy and Sofia deeply valued learners’ autonomy and these activities gave room for learners’ choices. Whether it was in providing opportunities to work with a partner or on their own, or honouring that not all learners like to draw and providing options for tracing and copying, Joy and Sofia adjusted these activities to the actual learners they had in their classrooms, not an idealized vision. Research suggests safe and open environments where learners don’t fear making mistakes is crucial to supporting their learning (Choi & Yi, 2016; Qaisi, 2021). In adjusting activities to the interests, level, and goals of their learners Joy and Sofia were fostering a safe, collaborative and low-risk environment.

Conclusion

Multiliteracies-informed activities can’t eliminate the problems we face as adult literacy and language educators. What it does offer us is a bridge towards more equitable ways of seeing our learners. As Joy and Sofia highlight, often what we need are creative theories and activities to shift our perspectives and light up



our curiosity. Joy articulates this by noticing how “it still boils down to the fundamental concepts like, you know, community of practice and realistic relevant tasks, everyday life tasks, right?... And you know, small group learning and you know, social interaction, and like things like breakdown to the same fundamental concepts that engage adult learners.” With so many challenges and barriers for ALLs, Joy and Sofia invite us to see how multiliteracies theory might help us get unstuck (paraphrase from Joy) and inspire the creativity (paraphrase from Sofia) we need to do things differently.

Adult literacy learners may have unique goals and literacies (Currie & Cray, 2004; Lorimer Leonard & Gear, 2021; Pettitt & Tarone, 2015;). By questioning the deficit perspective of the curriculum, we may find creative ways to respond to their needs without labelling ALLs as ‘illiterate’ (Ade-Ojo & Duckworth, 2019; Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2016). Multimodal activities which are connected to learners lived experiences and rooted in safe and low-risk classrooms are not only supportive to ALLs, but also to every learner in our classroom (Burke & Hardware, 2015; Choi & Yi, 2016; Kumagai & Iwasaki, 2015; Li, 2020; Lopez-Sanchez, 2015; Qaisi, 2021; Sagnier, 2015; Turpin, 2019). With diverse and multi-level classrooms, multiliteracies-informed curriculum opens up possibilities for seeing the diversity of our learners as an asset and not only a challenge. To respond to an educational system which devalues the learners we are trying to support, we need an alternative vision to guide our curriculum development and classroom cultures (Powell, 1999). Multiliteracies theory proposes a vision of literacy which does not value some literacies above others but trusts educators and learners to explore with curiosity the gaps and skills learners need for their futures.

If you are interested in learning more about multiliteracies theory, you can find a YouTube video here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zSupHJnDdLs&feature=youtu.be>

If you are interested in the curriculum plan developed with Joy and Sofia, find it on Tutela here:

https://tutela.ca/Resource_52056



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Author Bio



Mercedes Veselka is a graduate student at York University. She is also an English language instructor who has primarily worked in community-based LINC programs. While her current research interests include curriculum development for adult literacy learners, generative AI, and literacy policy, all of these have in common a deep interest in the experiences of language and literacy instructors. Her work hopes to contribute to supporting the needs of educators both in theory and practice.

Better AI prompts for essay grading: Enhancing educational practices

By Joseph Ng, Canada

Abstract

This article adapts a TechKnow presentation with the same title and by the same author from the 2024 TESL Ontario Conference. The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in educational contexts, particularly essay grading, presents both opportunities and challenges. This article explores the limitations of traditional essay grading methods, the ethical considerations of using generative AI for assessment, and practical strategies for implementing AI prompts effectively. By focusing on the implications for educators, students, and the broader educational landscape, this article aims to provide insights into the future of essay grading in the context of AI technology.

Introduction

As educational institutions increasingly adopt technology to enhance teaching and learning experiences, the grading of essays remains a significant challenge. Traditional grading methods often suffer from limitations such as rater fatigue, subjectivity, and consistency issues. The emergence of generative AI tools, like but not limited to ChatGPT, offers potential solutions to these problems. This article examines the effectiveness of AI prompts in essay grading and the ethical implications of their use, drawing parallels with concerns about AI in healthcare.

The problem with traditional essay grading

Rater fatigue and subjectivity

One of the most pressing issues in essay grading is rater fatigue. Research indicates that as graders assess multiple essays, their performance can decline, leading to less thorough feedback and inconsistent scoring

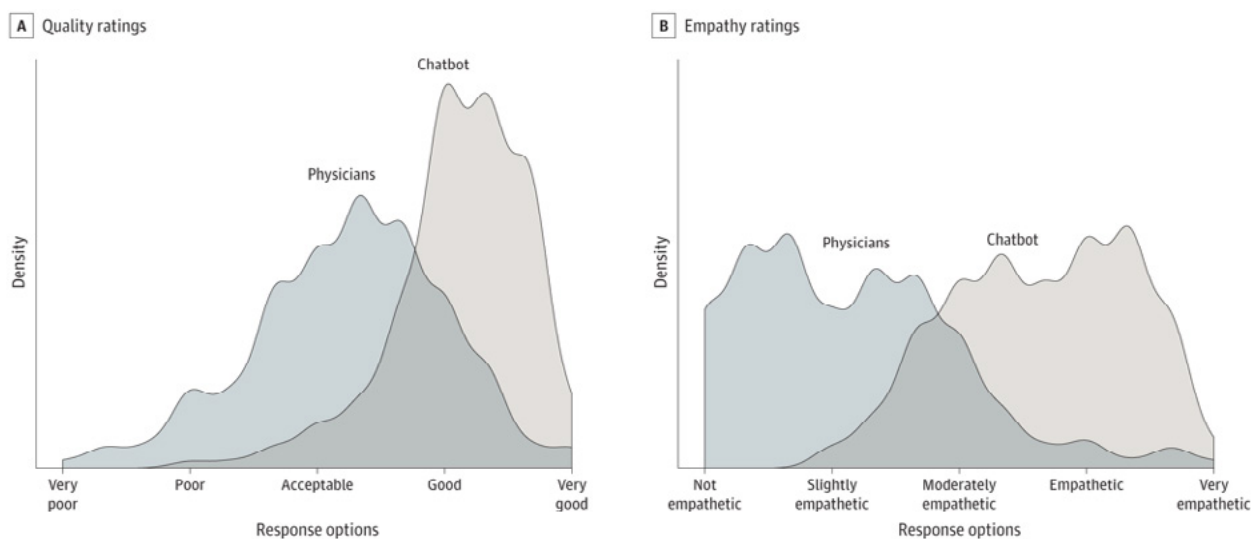


(Erturk et al., 2022; Mahshanian et al., 2017; Mahshanian & Shahnazari, 2020;). This fatigue impacts the frequency and quality of comments, particularly regarding grammar and organization, which then disproportionately affects students' learning outcomes.

Ethical considerations

The ethical implications of grading essays with AI tools are complex. Key concerns include learner privacy, the reliability of AI assessments, and the potential for overreliance on technology. Educators must navigate these challenges while ensuring that the use of AI tools does not compromise the integrity of the grading process.

AI chatbots have already outperformed their human counterparts in responding to patient questions posted on social media (Ayers et al., 2023).



On both criteria of *Quality* and *Empathy*, robots were clearly the preferred responders. Ratings on quality and empathy decidedly favoured chatbots over physicians, with no “Very poor” or “Not empathetic” votes on the chatbots. The question to ponder, of course, is the implication on pedagogy and assessment should the same results be replicated in language instruction as in medicine.

Table. Example Questions With Physician and Chatbot Response^a

Question ^b	Physician response	Chatbot response ^c	Evaluation scores
Question about risk of dying following swallowing and ingesting a toothpick.	<p>If you've surpassed 2-6 h, chances are they've passed into your intestines. Which means it can't be retrieved easily.</p> <p>Many people can swallow razorblades and toothpicks without issue. In case you develop stomachache, then don't hesitate seeking out an emergency room, and remember to point out the swallowed toothpick.</p> <p>For now, they won't be doing much.</p>	<p>It's natural to be concerned if you have ingested a foreign object, but in this case, it is highly unlikely that the toothpick you swallowed will cause you any serious harm.</p> <p>Toothpicks are made of wood, which is not toxic and will not cause poisoning. However, it is possible for a toothpick to cause injury if it becomes stuck in the throat or if it punctures the digestive tract. However, this is unlikely to happen with a dull, cooked toothpick that is only 2 cm long.</p> <p>If you are experiencing any discomfort or symptoms such as abdominal pain, difficulty swallowing, or vomiting, it is important to contact a health care provider for further evaluation. However, if you are not experiencing any symptoms, it is safe to assume that the toothpick has passed through your digestive system and you do not need to be concerned.</p> <p>It's always a good idea to be cautious when consuming food and to remove any foreign objects before eating. It's understandable that you may be feeling paranoid, but try not to worry too much. It is highly unlikely that the toothpick will cause you any serious harm.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 100% preferred the chatbot • 4.67 mean quality score (chatbot) • 3.33 mean quality score (physician) • 4.33 mean empathy score (chatbot) • 2.00 mean empathy score (physician)
Question about needing to see a physician following injury that occurred by hitting head on a metal bar while running, resulting in lump on head, headache, and sore neck.	<p>Things that signify you should see a doctor:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nausea/vomiting • Dizziness • Severe or worsening headache • Loss of consciousness • Confusion • Neck stiffness • Problems with vision • Limb weakness <p>If you develop any of these in the next 24 h, rush to the emergency room.</p>	<p>It's always best to err on the side of caution when it comes to head injuries. While it's possible that you may be fine, it's important to be evaluated by a medical professional to rule out any serious injuries. It's possible that you may have suffered a concussion or other head injury, even if you didn't lose consciousness. Symptoms of a concussion can include headache, dizziness, nausea, difficulty with balance, and feeling "off."</p> <p>The location of the impact and the apparent force of the injury could potentially make a difference in the severity of the injury. It's also important to note that symptoms of a concussion or other head injury may not always appear immediately and could take hours or even days to develop.</p> <p>It's important to seek medical attention as soon as possible if you experience any of the following symptoms after a head injury:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of consciousness, even if it's just for a few seconds • Severe or worsening headache • Nausea or vomiting • Slurred speech • Difficulty with balance or coordination • Seizures • Changes in behavior or personality • Clear fluid draining from the nose or ears <p>It's also a good idea to see a doctor if you experience neck pain after a head injury, as this could be a sign of a neck injury.</p> <p>In the meantime, try to rest and avoid activities that could potentially cause further injury to your head, such as contact sports or activities that involve high speeds or heights. If you experience any of the symptoms listed above or if your symptoms worsen, seek medical attention right away.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 100% preferred the chatbot • 4.33 mean quality score (chatbot) • 4.67 mean quality score (physician) • 4.67 mean empathy score (chatbot) • 2.33 mean empathy score (physician)
Question about risk of going blind following bleach being splashed into an eye, resulting in irritated and dry eye.	<p>Sounds like you will be fine. You should flush the eye anytime you get a chemical or foreign body in the eye. You can also contact Poison Control 1-800-222-1222.</p>	<p>I'm sorry to hear that you got bleach splashed in your eye. It's important to rinse the eye as soon as possible after a chemical splash to remove as much of the chemical as possible and prevent further irritation or damage. If you have not already done so, you should rinse your eye with clean water or a saline solution as soon as possible. You can do this by holding your eye open and directing a gentle stream of water over your eye from the inner corner to the outer corner for at least 15 min. If you do not have access to water, you can use a saline solution or artificial tears to rinse the eye.</p> <p>If you are experiencing significant pain, redness, or vision changes, or if you are unable to rinse your eye properly, you should seek medical attention immediately. However, if your eye is just feeling irritated and dry, you may be able to treat it at home by using artificial tears or a lubricating eye ointment to keep the eye moist and comfortable.</p> <p>It is unlikely that you will go blind from getting bleach splashed in your eye, but it is important to take care of the eye and seek medical attention if necessary to prevent further irritation or damage.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 100% preferred the chatbot • 4.00 mean quality score (chatbot) • 3.33 mean quality score (physician) • 4.67 mean empathy score (chatbot) • 2.33 mean empathy score (physician)
Question about needing emergency assessment, going to walk-in center, or making an appointment to see a physician after noticing a hard lump under the skin of the penis, close to the urethra tube. The lump is not moveable and occasionally urine stings. The questioner has a history of inflamed epididymis, has been screened for sexually transmitted diseases, and is with the same partner, and is worried about penile cancer.	<p>No glands in the area. Not an emergency. Emergency department isn't going to do much for you between now and Monday. Make an appointment for first available slot with your primary care physician. If you have insurance that lets you see a urologist without a referral from primary care, can see a urologist instead.</p>	<p>In this case, given the location and description of the lump and the fact that it does not move, it is possible that it could be a benign cyst or abscess. It is also possible that it could be a lymph node that has become enlarged due to an infection or other condition. It is not possible to accurately diagnose the cause of the lump without a physical examination and potentially additional testing.</p> <p>Given the concern about the possibility of penile cancer, it is important to have the lump evaluated as soon as possible. If you are unable to see a health care provider until Monday, it is reasonable to visit a walk-in clinic or an emergency department if you are experiencing pain or discomfort, or if the lump is rapidly growing or changing in any way. If you are not experiencing any symptoms and the lump has not changed in size or appearance, it may be reasonable to wait until you are able to see a health care provider on Monday.</p> <p>It is important to remember that the vast majority of lumps or bumps on the penis are benign and are not cancerous. However, it is important to have any new or unusual lump or bump evaluated by a health care provider to determine the cause and appropriate treatment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 100% preferred the chatbot • 5.00 mean quality score (chatbot) • 3.33 mean quality score (physician) • 3.33 mean empathy score (chatbot) • 1.67 mean empathy score (physician)
Question about concern noticing a small amount of blood after wiping following defecation. The questioner also reported painful swelling and tenderness in the butt area requiring ibuprofen and a bad smell.	<p>Could be an infected pilonidal cyst. You should see your primary care provider or an urgent care.</p>	<p>It is not normal to have persistent pain, swelling, and bleeding in the area around the tailbone (coccyx). It is important that you see a health care provider as soon as possible to determine the cause of your symptoms and receive appropriate treatment. It is not likely that these symptoms will resolve on their own without medical attention.</p> <p>There are a number of potential causes for these symptoms, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hemorrhoids: Swelling and bleeding in the area around the anus can be caused by hemorrhoids, which are swollen veins in the lower rectum and anus. Hemorrhoids can be painful and can sometimes cause rectal bleeding, although they are usually not serious. • Anal fissure: An anal fissure is a tear in the skin lining the anus. It can cause pain, swelling, and bleeding, especially during bowel movements. • Infection: An infection in the area around the anus or rectum can cause pain, swelling, and discharge. <p>Other possible causes include abscesses, anal cancer, and inflammatory bowel disease.</p> <p>It is important to see a health care provider to determine the cause of your symptoms and receive appropriate treatment. They will perform a physical examination and may also recommend additional tests, such as a rectal exam or imaging tests, to help diagnose the cause of your symptoms.</p> <p>In the meantime, try to avoid straining during bowel movements and avoid sitting for long periods of time. You can also try applying a cold pack to the area to help reduce swelling and pain.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 67% preferred the chatbot • 4.00 mean quality score (chatbot) • 3.00 mean quality score (physician) • 2.00 mean empathy score (chatbot) • 1.33 mean empathy score (physician)
Question about illness that includes 3-4 wk of lingering cough, making sleep difficult. Illness began with sneezing, now mostly cough. Water does not appear to help. Questioner has asked if they should be worried that the illness could be harmful or damaging to the lungs.	<p>You can try using some pseudoephedrine to dry it up for a few days, but you'll get some rebound congestion in the meantime. Realistically just takes time. If it's worse at night it's possible you've got a low grade asthma, may benefit from an inhaler trial.</p>	<p>It's always a good idea to pay attention to changes in your health, especially if they are persistent. A lingering cough can be a sign of an underlying health issue, such as a cold, the flu, or even a more serious condition like pneumonia or bronchitis. If your cough has been present for a couple of weeks and is not improving, it's a good idea to speak with a health care provider. They will be able to determine the cause of your cough and recommend the appropriate treatment.</p> <p>In the meantime, there are a few things you can try to help alleviate your cough:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Drink plenty of fluids, including water and warm liquids like tea or broth, to help thin out mucus and make it easier to cough up. 2. Use a humidifier or take a hot shower to add moisture to the air, which can help loosen mucus and make it easier to cough up. 3. Avoid irritants like tobacco smoke, strong perfumes, and pollution, as they can make your cough worse. 4. Try over-the-counter cough medications, such as cough suppressants or expectorants, to help relieve your cough. <p>It's also important to practice good hygiene, such as washing your hands frequently and covering your mouth and nose with a tissue or your elbow when you cough or sneeze, to help prevent the spread of illness.</p> <p>Again, if your cough persists or is accompanied by other symptoms, it's a good idea to speak with a health care provider for further evaluation and treatment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 33% preferred the chatbot • 4.00 mean quality score (chatbot) • 3.67 mean quality score (physician) • 3.00 mean empathy score (chatbot) • 2.67 mean empathy score (physician)

^a The above shows summarized questions posted to an online forum with the corresponding response from a verified physician and a chatbot. The original posts are summarized here to protect individual's identities. The original unedited posts were used to obtain the chatbot responses.

^b The questions were posted to Reddit r/AskDocs in October 2022.

^c The chatbot used was ChatGPT (version GPT-3.5, OpenAI).



Looking closer at the actual responses of the Ayers et al. study, the verified physician's response was invariably terser and often overwhelmingly (100%) passed over for the robot's. To juxtapose them using just one example, concerning the chances of someone going blind from getting bleach splashed in the eye, the human doctor summarily decides, "Sounds like you will be fine," whereas the AI bot states: "I'm sorry to hear you got bleach splashed in your eye If you are experiencing significant pain, redness, or vision changes It is unlikely that you will go blind from getting bleach splashed into your eye" And this was done using an older version of ChatGPT (namely, 3.5).

One could imagine a similar set of responses to essays from a human, TESL-certified graders, and any up-to-date ChatGPT version, with equivalent outcomes in terms of quality and empathy.

The role of generative AI in essay grading

Enhancing consistency and objectivity

Generative AI can improve grading consistency by providing standardized assessments based on predefined rubrics. For instance, AI tools can analyze essays against specific criteria, offering a more objective evaluation than human raters who may have varying interpretations of grading standards. With the teacher taken out of the picture beyond the setting of the prompt, the use of AI can mitigate the subjectivity that often plagues traditional grading methods.

Addressing rater fatigue or even boredom

AI tools can alleviate the burden of rater fatigue or even contempt by assisting educators in the grading process. By automating initial assessments, AI can help educators focus on providing qualitative feedback or exceptional interventions rather than merely scoring. If the instructor has noticed a pattern in the student's writing over time, such as the recurrence of a disturbing or promising theme or of systemic spelling or grammar errors, they can add a note to the AI-generated feedback. This approach not only enhances the grading experience for teachers but also improves the learning experience for students by providing more comprehensive feedback.

Implementing effective AI prompts

Designing AI prompts for optimal feedback

To maximize the benefits of AI in essay grading, educators should not try to design perfect prompts. After all, no AI robot is perfect; they are all evolving. There will and must be a fair amount of back and forth in prompt writing as both parties learn from each other. Repeated and increasingly pertinent prompts can lead to more accurate assessments and relevant feedback. For example, prompts might tweak criteria to



sharpen clarity, coherence, and argument strength on a specific rubric or provide narrative feedback of 20 or 50 words.

Example AI prompt

An initial AI prompt could be as follows:

“Grade the following essay based on the rubric provided. Give a score from 0 to 2 for each category: clarity, coherence, argument strength, grammar, and overall effectiveness. Then, provide a 20-word feedback highlighting strengths and areas for improvement.”

A follow-up prompt could go:

“Replace the criterion of argument strength with formatting, and give the feedback in 50 words in language targeted at lower-intermediate learners with two of the sentences beginning with ‘Please try to ...’ and ‘You should consider ...’”

This structure encourages the AI to provide both a quantitative assessment and qualitative feedback with increasing relevance to student needs, which can be invaluable for student development.

Ethical considerations in AI grading

Privacy and data security

One of the primary ethical concerns surrounding AI in education is learner privacy. Contrary to intuition, the risk of data breaches without proper anonymization is minimal. While educators must ensure that any AI tools used for grading adhere to commonsense privacy standards to protect students’ personal information, such as not advertising one’s social security/insurance numbers or debit card information online, it is highly unlikely that the nature and substance of TESL teacher’s and students’ content is identifiable or worth identifying. The satisfaction of discovering the nature of Farida or Farid’s sentential blowouts, that they were due SVOs rather than run-ons or comma splices, may not be enough to bait the attention and enthusiasm of higher-level cyberhackers.

Addressing privacy concerns in AI systems

Concerns about privacy are not limited to educational contexts; they also arise in healthcare, particularly regarding the use of AI chatbots. Yet, a sense of proportionality is important.

A cursory prompt of ChatGPT by the present author elicited an estimated 0.036% risk of a privacy breach should essays be submitted without anonymization compared to 0.022% with anonymization. These are,



again according to ChatGPT, between the risks of being born with more fingers/toes (polydactylic) or finding a double-yolked egg and seeing a four-leaf clover.

Considered in terms of security incidents, thanks again to ChatGPT, the risks in the preceding paragraph fall within low-risk scenarios. This compares favourably with medium-risk scenarios, with “Possible user error or slight vulnerability exposure): 1%-3% chance,” and high-risk scenarios, with “Major vulnerabilities or targeted attacks): 3%-7% chance under extreme circumstances such as targeted cyberattacks or insider threats.”

While no absolutely risk-free opportunities are available (even handwritten homework is vulnerable to canine ingestion), the scenarios should be weighed against the educational opportunity cost.

Trust and transparency

Trust in AI systems might be assumed to be vital for their acceptance by educators and students. The temptation would be to provide extensive persuasive evidence and arguments to calm the class regarding an impending essay about to be graded by AI. Yet a recent study questions “the effects of explanations in automated essay scoring systems on student trust and motivation” (Conijn et al., 2023).

Using two kinds of explanations, “full-text global explanations and an accuracy statement,”:

“The results showed that both explanations did not have an effect on student trust or motivation compared to no explanations. Interestingly, the grade provided by the system, and especially the difference between the student’s self-estimated grade and the system grade, showed a large influence” (Conijn et al., 2023).

It appears that students’ trust in AI capability was implicit, and their focus was chiefly on any variance between their self-judgment and the machine’s grade, which may mean the teacher need not overthink this concern.

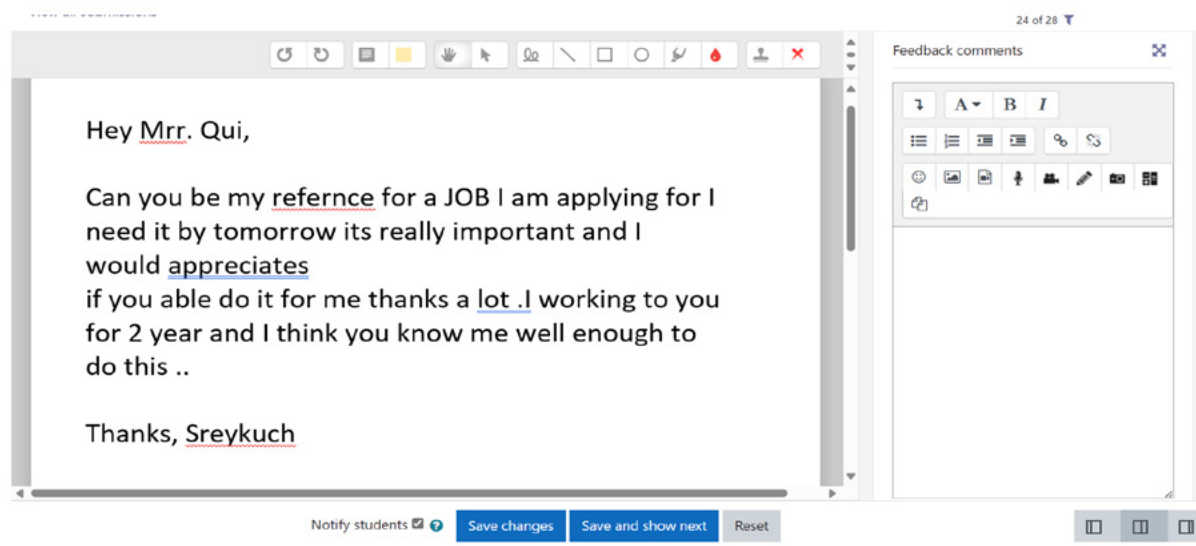
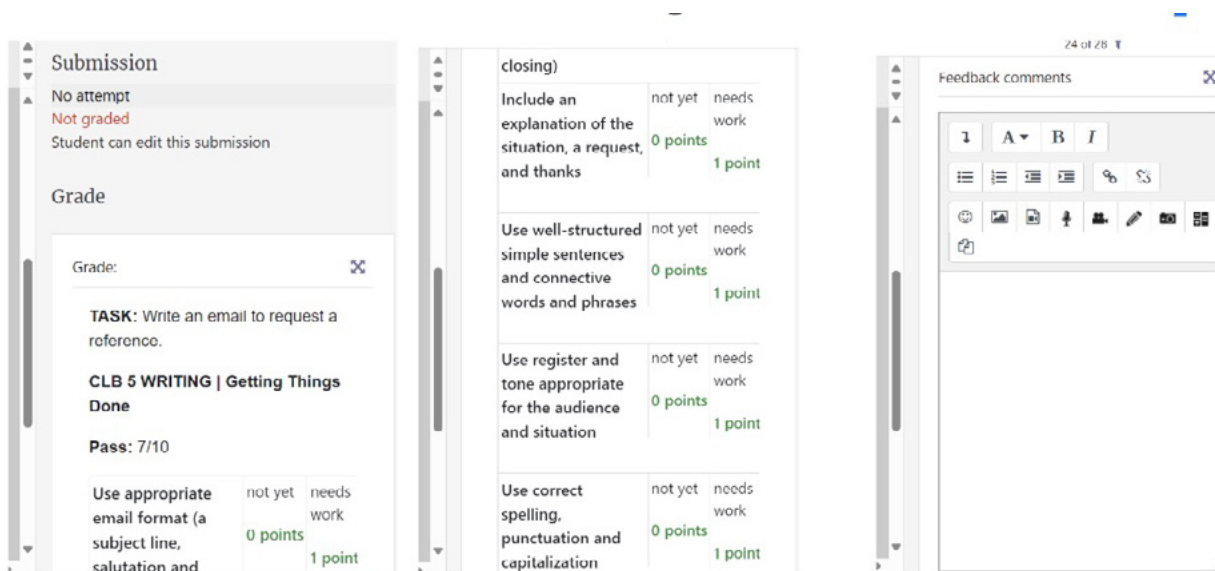
AI essay grading as real-world tasks

Grading on Avenue.ca

For Ontario’s ESL teachers and administrators, Avenue.ca is the platform of choice for online lessons and assessments, having been approved by both the province’s education ministry and the federal department for immigration, refugees, and citizenship since September 2023. Avenue.ca allows the grading of essays by teachers using its provided rubric and box. The traditional way was for teachers to read through each essay and fill in the rubric and box by hand. The number of essay assignments would be limited to the number assigned as assessment tasks in the system unless the teacher decides to add skill-using tasks to supplement



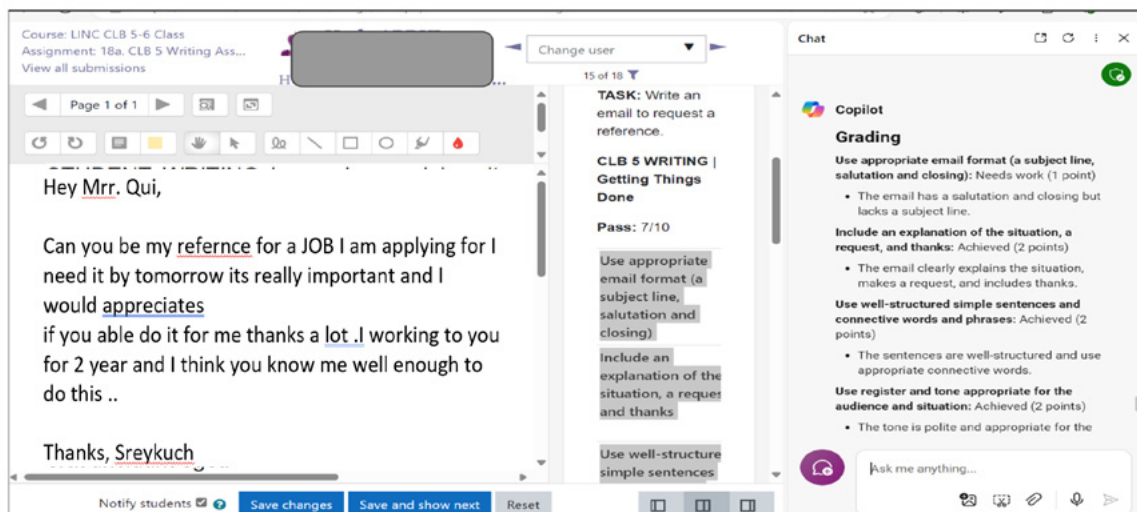
the pre-assigned. And the teacher’s grading stamina would perhaps be the main limitation to the provision of extra practice with feedback for the class.



The teacher could copy and paste the submitted essay into an AI robot, instructing it to accept and assess each one at a time until the entire class has been graded. Nor does this first prompt have to be anywhere near perfection.

Using Copilot sharing the screen on the right column, a typical result that could be copied into Avenue.ca would look like this:

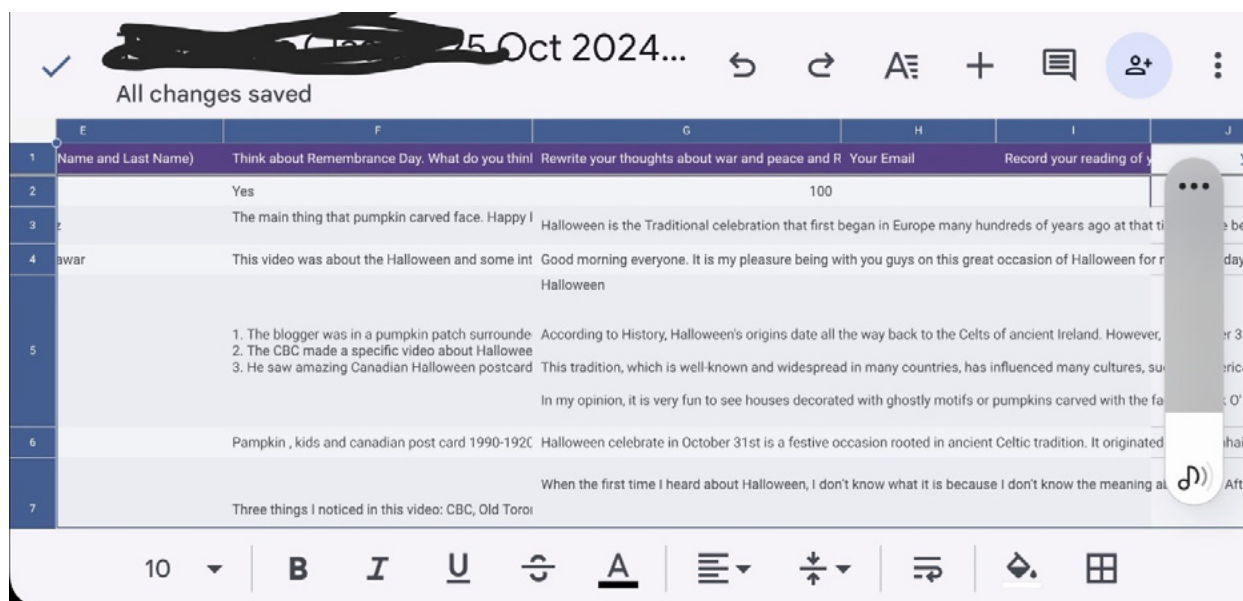




With AI assistance, the number of these assessments and feedback could be multiplied with a few rote drags and clicks on the computer.

Grading on Google forms/sheets

Untethered from the Avenue.ca interface and possibly even more real-world task, the use of Google apps extends well beyond funded language programs and access to Avenue for both the teacher and student. We will not go into the creation of Google Forms except to point out that the output of a spreadsheet facilitates even more rapid grading.



Given that Column G of the spreadsheet output, attached as an .xls file, captures all the 100-word essays on Halloween that the students submitted, the following is a real prompt (warts and all but in the style of an Avenue rubric) that was used to grade it:

“Prompt: Ignoring all other columns, grade and tally up only column g on a 2 point scale with 0 for needs work, 1 for achieved, and 2 for mastery in the areas of adequate expression of attitudes towards halloween, plans for this halloween, sentence mechanics, and good variation of styles. then include for each student a 30-word feedback incorporating 3 areas of doable improvement”

The results for the entire spreadsheet, in this case using Poe.com’s Assistant, came within a couple of seconds, including:

Student Name	Expression of Attitudes	Plans for Halloween	Sentence Mechanics	Variation of Styles	Total Score
Zina	1	0	0	0	1
Sak	1	0	1	0	2
Faiz					
Mo	1	1	1	1	4
Mu					
San	2	1	1	1	5
Peo					
Sur	2	1	1	2	6
Le l	0	0	0	0	0
Her	1	1	0	0	2
Als					
Sha	2	1	1	1	5
Mu					

Feedback for Each Student

Z: Consider elaborating more on your feelings about Halloween. Work on sentence structure and try to include more varied vocabulary in your writing for better engagement.

S: Great start! Aim to express your Halloween plans more clearly. Focus on improving your sentence structure and incorporating different styles to make your writing more engaging.

M: Good job! You conveyed your ideas well. To enhance your writing, consider using more varied sentence structures and expanding on your Halloween plans for additional detail.

The above results could be tweaked for blind spots and could be repeated for Remembrance Day or other topics to the teacher’s satisfaction, all the while drawing on student responses to each essay-grading iteration.

On January 27, 2025, when China’s budget AI DeepSeek’s debut precipitated a near-17% drop for the AI titan chipmaker Nvidia, I decided to download an Android version of it to try it out using a similar prompt as the foregoing. Anecdotally, it seemed to take a couple of seconds longer before the output showed. The results were comparable:

	1. Z	2. S	3. M
Originality vs Plagiarism	Highly original, with clear personal reflection and historical context.	Original with personal plans and historical context.	Original but lacks depth in personal reflection.
Mechanics	Excellent sentence structure and punctuation.	Minor punctuation issues (e.g., missing commas).	Some awkward phrasing and punctuation errors.
Spelling	No errors.	Few errors (e.g., “pampkin” instead of “pumpkin”).	No major errors.
Vocabulary	Rich and varied (e.g., “pagan ritual,” “ghostly motifs”).	Good range but repetitive (e.g., “spooky” used multiple times).	Limited range (e.g., repetitive use of “interesting”).
Sentence Variety	Well-structured sentences with varied lengths.	Some variety but could improve.	Basic sentences with little variety.
Feedback	<i>Your response is excellent! To improve further, try adding more personal anecdotes (e.g., “Last year, I watched a horror movie marathon and...”). Also, vary sentence openings (e.g., “Interestingly, Halloween...”). Finally, consider using more advanced transitions (e.g., “Furthermore, Halloween traditions...”).</i>	<i>Great job! Work on spelling (“pumpkin”) and punctuation (e.g., “Halloween, celebrated on October 31st, is...”). Expand vocabulary (e.g., use “eerie” instead of “spooky”). Vary sentence structure (e.g., “While Halloween is fun, it also...”). Keep up the good work!</i>	<i>Good effort! Improve sentence variety (e.g., “After watching the video, I found the postcards fascinating because...”). Expand vocabulary (e.g., “intriguing” instead of “interesting”). Add more personal details (e.g., “I plan to carve a pumpkin with my family because...”). Keep practicing!</i>
Score	2/2	1.8/2	1.5/2

Dueling in academia

Theses and dissertations, being upsized essays, might also be graded by AI, albeit including formatting (APA, MLA, etc.) and other criteria. Preliminary experiments have shown promise with my online postgrad students in Cambodia, all from EFL backgrounds in various Southeast Asian countries. Reading, or rather proofreading, through dozens of pages of their research contributes significantly to fatigue or worse. In some

cases, this is partially mitigated by students' use of Grammarly and Quillbot, but this also raises questions of quality and ethics. My harnessing of AI to help give essay feedback brings some symmetry to the cuts and thrusts of machine-aided submissions in higher education, with the hope of an overall positive outcome in the not-so-distant future.

The future of AI in essay grading

A collaborative approach

The future of essay grading may lie in a hybrid approach that combines teacher expertise with AI efficiency. Educators can certainly utilize AI for preliminary assessments, while the nature of final evaluations and feedback can be decided on by human raters. As in the case of medical feedback, this collaboration can reduce essay grading time and enhance the quality of feedback.

Continuous improvement of AI tools

As AI technology evolves, so too will the capabilities of grading tools. Continuous feedback from educators can drive the development of more sophisticated AI systems that better understand the nuances of language and writing. Already, there's fierce alternation for leadership in the pack, with ChatGPT, Copilot, Perplexity, Llama, Claude, Poe, and others vying for pole position and paid subscriptions. We have yet to see dedicated personal cybertutors that will give feedback and mentoring to students.

Conclusion

The integration of AI in essay grading represents a transformative opportunity for educators. While challenges related to ethical considerations and the limitations of AI exist, the potential benefits—such as increased consistency, reduced rater fatigue, and improved feedback—are significant. For the student, this may catalyze a positive effect and accelerated mastery of essay-crafting skills. By strategically and boldly issuing AI prompts while maintaining a collaborative approach to grading, educators can enhance their practices and ultimately improve student learning outcomes.



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Author Bio



Joseph Ng, OCELT, TESL Trainer, PTCT Trainer, is the LINC Coordinator at TNO with experience in settlement English, EAP, ESP/OSLT, ed tech, standard setting, and Duolingo English Test. In a past article in Contact Magazine, he explored fun field trip options in the post-funding era. Now he welcomes the radical opportunities GenAI affords and believes the half hath not been told as global players pile in, both programmers and practitioners.