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The Future of the Past in Language Teaching

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that contemporary English language teaching (ELT) must be reconceptualized in light of profound shifts in how learners actually acquire and use language. Traditional classrooms, long treated as largely self-contained learning environments, face structural constraints of time, exposure, and opportunity that limit attainable proficiency. In contrast, successful learners typically progress through extensive informal, digitally mediated practices which form a parallel “learner curriculum” that is often more sustained and goal-driven than classroom instruction. The paper demonstrates how digital technologies, mobile devices, and, increasingly, artificial intelligence (AI) are collapsing the boundary between formal and informal learning spaces, enabling participatory tasks, personalised pathways, and new forms of interactional practice. At the same time, it cautions against uncritical optimism. AI can streamline workload and expand opportunities for practice, yet it also risks oversimplifying pedagogy and obscuring the relational and interpretive dimensions of teaching. The paper concludes that the future of ELT depends on strengthening teachers’ capacity to design, mediate, and critically evaluate human–AI learning ecologies.

Keywords: English language teaching (ELT); Informal learning; Learner autonomy; Mobile-assisted language learning; Artificial intelligence (AI); Teacher education

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Introduction

The role of English and English language teaching (ELT) in the world has undergone a profound transformation as a result of globalisation and the expansion of English as an international language. These changes have been accelerated by popular culture, the media, and digital communication through the World Wide Web and mobile technologies. More recently, the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has introduced a further disruptive force that is reshaping how languages are taught, learned, and used. Understanding these shifts is essential, as they redefine the goals and practices of ELT in a world where human and digital interactions increasingly intersect.

Therefore, this paper traces the evolution of ELT from the pre-digital era to the present, and considers how new technological affordances, including AI, are shaping both current and future pedagogical practices. The central claim is that ELT can no longer rely on the classroom as the primary site of language learning; instead, it must engage with the expanding role of informal, technology-driven practices and emerging technological systems that are redefining how learners acquire and use English. The sections that follow build this argument by (1) examining why traditional classrooms struggle to deliver proficiency; (2) showing how successful learners achieve progress through informal, digitally mediated practices; (3) contrasting the formal classroom curriculum with the informal learner curriculum; (4) demonstrating how technologies are merging these two learning spaces; and (5) assessing emerging opportunities and challenges posed by AI.

Teaching in the Traditional Language Classroom

Those who are familiar with earlier approaches to foreign-language teaching will recall the kinds of lessons that dominated in many school systems throughout much of the twentieth century. In a wide range of English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts, courses are typically aimed at introducing the target language through graded work on grammar, vocabulary, translation, pronunciation, and reading, and to prepare students for school or national examinations (Howatt & Widdowson, 2004; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Classes were often large and heavily teacher-fronted, with instruction organised around textbook exercises and blackboard-based guided practice. Techniques such as repetition and dictation were common, and lessons were frequently conducted largely through the learners' first language (L1), a practice shaped by established pedagogical traditions, exam expectations, and, in some settings, teachers' limited opportunities to develop their own spoken English (Liao, 2004; Liu, 2015; Rao, 2002).

Elements of this model continue to surface in contemporary classrooms, especially where high-stakes examinations emphasise knowledge *about* language rather than communicative performance (Hu, 2002; Nunan, 2003). The following vignette from Indonesia illustrates this pattern:

Indonesia (Lamb, 2009):

My observation notes [of English classes in Indonesia] report teacher-dominated lessons based on a standard textbook with a grammatico-lexical syllabus and offering a set of traditional activities, including teacher explanations of language, reading-comprehension tasks, reading texts aloud, grammar and vocabulary exercises, and feedback sessions involving pupils writing their answers up on the blackboard. Oral work consisted mainly of teacher questions, plus some choral chanting. (p. 240)

A similar picture emerges from the authors' interviews with practicing teachers, as in this account from Vida, a teacher in Cambodia.

Cambodia (Example from teacher Vida):

In Cambodian public high schools, although new English teaching methods have been introduced and encouraged, most teachers still use Khmer as the primary language of instruction. The teacher follows the activities in the textbook section by section, writing new vocabulary and Khmer translations on the board. The teacher reads exercises from the book, and students repeat, copy, and follow along with the reading or listening activities in the textbook, then complete grammar exercises and answer reading or listening questions.

Similar patterns persist across the region. In China, lessons remain organised around textbook grammar and vocabulary, with high-stakes examinations leaving little room for communicative work (Song, 2024). In Japan, secondary school teachers continue to face institutional pressure to prioritise *yakudoku*, a tradition of sentence-by-sentence translation, and examination preparation over the communicative activities promoted in national policy (Thompson & Yanagita, 2017). In Thailand, successive communicative reforms have likewise had little effect on largely teacher-fronted classroom practice (Franz & Teo, 2018).

Before the widespread availability of the Internet, mobile technology, and English as a global lingua franca, classroom-based instruction was the primary context for English learning in many institutional EFL settings. In such contexts, success was largely framed in terms of the teacher's expertise and the methods adopted, such as the Grammar Translation Method, the Audiolingual Method, the Presentation, Practice, Production (PPP) model, or Communicative Language Teaching (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Textbooks and occasionally audio or video materials served as the main instructional resources, and classrooms were typically treated as a relatively self-contained universe providing much of the input and practice learners were expected to receive.

Therefore, curriculum design focused on graded syllabuses, particularly for grammar and vocabulary, to structure learners' progression from elementary to advanced levels (White, 1988). Although some traditions, such as self-directed learning and extensive reading, acknowledged learning beyond the classroom (e.g., Holec, 1981, 1996), these were not widely integrated into mainstream programmes. Opportunities for naturalistic interaction with fluent English speakers also varied considerably and were limited in many EFL contexts. Even contemporary approaches such as Task-Based Language Teaching (Ellis et al., 2019; Long, 2015) often continue to assume that core input and task work take place within organised instructional settings where teachers coordinate activities, resources, and feedback.

The Limitations of the Classroom in Language Learning

If the traditional classroom is a largely self-contained universe, it is one with strict budgets of time and opportunity. Even with sound methods and well-graded syllabuses, limited exposure and competing demands narrow the space for effective learning. Thus, the following sections consider how time and exposure, quality of learning time, and attainable proficiency constrain outcomes.

Time and Exposure

A teacher in situations such as those described above needs to become an expert in teaching English in difficult circumstances. With classes of 50 or more students at mixed proficiency levels, the teacher's challenge is to maximise limited class time creatively. But no matter how accomplished the teacher is, she or he is faced with an insurmountable problem, namely, that while in most school subjects learning outcomes correlate with study time, language learning inherently demands much greater and more sustained exposure than is typically allocated in the school curriculum (Lightbown & Spada, 2020).

Typically, the time allocated for foreign language instruction may be as little as 45 minutes per week (as in the case of Mandarin Chinese in some UK primary schools) or around three to four hours per week at the secondary level, as is common for English or other foreign languages in many countries. According to the PISA 2018 results (OECD, 2020a),

On average across OECD countries in 2018, students spent about 3.7 hours per week in language-of-instruction lessons and in mathematics lessons, 3.4 hours per week in science lessons, and 3.6 hours per week in foreign-language lessons. The total learning time in regular school lessons (in all subjects) was 27 hours per week, on average across OECD countries. (p. 135)

Such limited exposure raises questions about how much progress is realistically achievable through classroom instruction alone.

Estimates from Cambridge English (n.d.) suggest that progression through the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) levels, from A2 to C2, requires several hundred to over a thousand hours of guided learning (see Table 1). These estimates underscore how *time-intensive* language development is, even under optimal conditions.

Table 1
Approximate study hours for CEFR and Cambridge English exam levels

CEFR Level	Cambridge English Exam	Number of hours (approximately)
C2	Cambridge English: Proficiency (CPE)	1000-1200
C1	Cambridge English: Advanced (CAE)	700-800
B2	Cambridge English: First (FCE)	500-600
B1	Cambridge English: Preliminary (PET)	350-400
A2	Cambridge English: Key (KET)	180-200

Learning efficiency also varies with *linguistic distance*, that is, the degree of relatedness between a learner’s L1 and English (Chiswick & Miller, 2005). It takes less time for a speaker of French to learn Spanish (a closely related language) than it does for a French speaker to learn Chinese and vice versa. The Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (n.d.) indicates that the instructional time needed for English L1 speakers to reach professional proficiency increases systematically with typological distance: close languages such as French, Spanish, and Indonesian require the least time; more distant languages such as Persian/Farsi, Russian, and Tagalog require longer; and the most distant languages, including Modern Standard Arabic, Mandarin Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, require the longest periods of intensive study.

Quality of Learning Time

The quantity of instructional time tells only part of the story; how that time is used is equally critical (Rosenshine & Berliner, 1978). Research on classroom learning distinguishes four overlapping categories of time (*allocated, instructional, engaged, and academic learning time*), which progressively narrow the portion of class time devoted to effective learning (Berliner, 1978; Cotton, 1989; Stallings, 1980).

1. *Allocated time* refers to the total time scheduled for instruction in the timetable, such as a typical 40- or 50-minute class period.
2. *Instructional time* is the portion of that period actually available for teaching after accounting for non-instructional routines such as taking attendance, distributing materials, or returning homework. In a 40-minute lesson, for example, only about 30 minutes might constitute instructional time.

3. *Engaged time*, also known as *time-on-task*, refers to the amount of instructional time in which students are actively participating in learning activities. Some minutes may be lost as students settle, organise materials, or transition between tasks, leaving perhaps 25 minutes of truly engaged time.
4. *Academic learning time* represents the period during which students are both actively engaged and successfully learning from the activity. When tasks are poorly designed or too difficult, students may spend time engaged in activity without achieving meaningful learning gains.

In practice, the amount of time actually available for effective learning is often far less than the length of the lesson indicated in the timetable. Research on classroom time use has shown that a substantial portion of allocated time is consumed by the non-instructional routines described above, leaving teachers with considerably less time for focused instruction (Rosenshine, 2015). Even during instructional periods, students are not continuously engaged in learning tasks, as Rosenshine found that in elementary classrooms, students were actively engaged for only about 40% of total class time.

Moreover, teachers' time is often reduced by institutional and pedagogical constraints. Many are required to follow prescribed textbooks and to prepare students for high-stakes examinations, which prioritise coverage of set content over communicative or learner-centred activities (Song, 2024). Classroom learning is also influenced by individual differences among learners, such as varying levels of proficiency, motivation, learning styles, and willingness to take risks in using English, particularly when fear of making mistakes or losing face is involved (Chen et al., 2022; Lao, 2020; M. Wang et al., 2022). Kalantar (2024) found that such negative emotions among shy learners, including fear of judgment and low confidence when speaking, often trace back to ridicule and judgmental peer behaviour experienced in their earlier schooling, and persist into adulthood. These factors erode the small window of time available for successful learning.

Attainable Proficiency under Limited Instruction

Given these limitations, one may ask what level of proficiency students can realistically attain when their exposure to English is confined to only a few hours of classroom instruction per week, despite the method or approach used by the teacher. The answer largely depends on the scope of the instructional goals. In any subject, the broader and more ambitious the goals, the greater the amount of time required to achieve them. Conversely, when the goals are narrowly defined (as in many contexts where the primary aim of language study is to prepare students for examinations), they may be attainable, but often at the expense of developing communicative competence and skills transferable beyond the classroom (e.g., Wong & Li, 2024; Zeng & Huang, 2021).

In such contexts, six years of study may produce only modest outcomes. Learners may master basic sentence structures, acquire a few hundred words, and develop the ability to take simple dictation. Their spoken proficiency, however, is unlikely to extend beyond the A1–A2 levels of the CEFR.

Consider the case of an average high school graduate in Taiwan, mainland China, South Korea, or Japan. In major cities such as Seoul, Taipei, or Tokyo, young urban professionals who work in environments where English is regularly required for transactional purposes, such as in hotels, department stores, pharmacies, airports, or banks, tend to demonstrate reasonably effective communication skills in English. However, employees in other sectors with little or no contact with international clients are often unable to handle even basic interactions in English, despite having studied the language throughout their secondary education. When these learners enter tertiary institutions, where passing an English test is typically a graduation requirement, many discover that

they must essentially begin learning English again from the start, a situation sometimes referred to as the *false-beginner syndrome* (Nakamura, 1997).

The question, then, is whether there are solutions to the dilemma posed by the limitations of the classroom. Two possible sources of insight can be identified. The first arises from the experiences of bilingual and multilingual speakers of English, whose language development demonstrates that meaningful proficiency can emerge through diverse and dynamic contexts of use beyond formal instruction (e.g., Kroll et al., 2018). The second lies in the affordances of digital technology, the Internet, and AI, which offer new possibilities for extending learning beyond the physical classroom and transforming how teachers and learners engage with language (e.g., Crompton et al., 2024). Due to limited space, the first source will not be covered in this paper, while the second source will be focused on in the following sections.

Using Learning Opportunities Outside the Classroom

The preceding section shows that even well-taught classes face structural limits on time, quality of engagement, and communicative opportunity. If proficiency depends on sustained exposure and meaningful use, then the question becomes where learners can obtain them. The answer lies in leveraging spaces outside the classroom where input, interaction, and purpose converge. Thus, we outline this shift, distinguishing formal vs. informal learning and illustrating how learners turn various forms of informal learning into continuous opportunities for language use.

Formal and Informal Learning

In second language learning, two broad types of learning experiences can be distinguished: *formal learning* and *informal learning* (Brevik & Holm, 2023; Krashen, 1976). Formal learning refers to structured and planned activities designed with explicit objectives and expected outcomes. The classroom is the typical setting for such learning, though it may also occur through online courses, workshops, webinars, seminars, or other organised programs. Formal learning is generally *teacher-directed*, guided by an expert, such as an English teacher, who determines the goals, methods, and forms of assessment. In the second language acquisition (SLA) literature, this type of learning is often described as *instructed second language acquisition* (Loewen, 2025).

By contrast, informal learning occurs outside institutional settings and is typically *learner-directed*. Learners take responsibility for managing their own learning, either individually or collaboratively with others who share similar goals. Informal learning may be *intentional*, as when a learner uses a mobile app to practise pronunciation, or *incidental*, as when language is acquired as a by-product of other activities (Leow & Zamora, 2017). For example, learners may pick up new vocabulary while reading an article, acquire idioms and conversational expressions from TV programs, or notice tense usage while following a cooking show (see Noticing Hypothesis; Schmidt, 1990). Incidental learning can also occur within the classroom, when students are exposed to unplanned language input, for instance, through teachers' instructions, explanations, or classroom management language that extends beyond the lesson's stated objectives. Research on noticing further shows that, when teachers deliberately make target forms more salient through input enhancement, learners may also attend to linguistic features even within meaning-focused contexts (Lin, 2023).

Learner-Initiated and Goal-Oriented Informal Learning

Over the years, our observations and interviews with proficient English speakers have documented a wide range of informal learning opportunities they have engaged in. Many were able to recall vividly the activities they found most effective in improving their English, reflecting how informal learning is learner-initiated and goal-oriented.

One such example is Danilo, a recent university graduate from Chile. His first exposure to English followed the pattern of traditional classroom instruction, which he soon found ineffective. Motivated by a strong personal interest in languages, including English, French, and more recently German, Danilo took charge of his own learning. He identified three activities that contributed most to his progress: watching TV shows and movies, viewing YouTube clips, and learning songs in English. Reflecting on the value of watching movies, he explained:

TV and movies help the most, because you have plenty of conversation between characters, and they usually speak in a correct manner. If they have a different way of speaking it is always noticeable what group in particular the person comes from and helps learning as well.

Danilo also reflected on the limitations of English teaching in Chile:

In Chile, my country, English taught in school is usually not useful at all, unless you go to an English private school, because you can be surrounded by it every day all day, but other than that, even in an English after school Institute, it is very likely that you come out of it knowing very little. Everyone that I know here in Chile, that speaks English, and also myself, have learned by themselves, getting surrounded by the language, and having a willingness to learn. I think what's the most important and helped me the most was that I would speak with myself, or try to think in English and use the words I learned for expressing things that happened around me, even though if I didn't have the need to, or I wasn't talking to anybody, so that the language would become a part of me.

Like Danilo, many learners described goal-oriented approaches that arose from specific interests or communicative needs. Juan, a student from Colombia, joined an online chat group of young learners who shared his goal of improving English pronunciation. Members regularly exchanged techniques and strategies for refining their pronunciation in a supportive, peer-led environment. Similarly, Ming, a Chinese learner, wanted to develop the ability to talk about sports in English during casual conversations with other students. To achieve this, he joined an online community that played digital baseball games, allowing him to practise English naturally in an engaging, interactive context.

These cases demonstrate how self-motivated learners draw on digital and social spaces to pursue both immediate communicative goals and broader linguistic development. By integrating entertainment, social connection, and learning, they blur the boundary between formal and informal contexts, transforming everyday digital experiences into sustained opportunities for language use. Recent research supports this pattern, showing that purpose-driven engagement in online informal English learning, whether for entertainment, information, or social interaction, can significantly enhance vocabulary knowledge and overall language development when learners engage strategically (Lai & Wang, 2025).

Learning through TV Series, Music, Gaming, Social Communication and Social Media

Informal learning can take various forms. Some learners described how they watched TV series to enhance their English proficiency. Daniel, an Iranian student, became particularly fascinated by the New Zealand TV series *Flight of the Conchords*, which follows a musical comedy duo on their adventures in the United States. Daniel had memorised long sections from several episodes and could clearly describe the words, expressions, and turns of phrase he had learned from them. A similar experience was reported by another learner who was an avid fan of the TV series *Friends*: “Memory is an incredible thing: Not only can I still recite punchlines from episodes I haven’t seen in 20 years, but I can also remember whom I talked with about those episodes the next day”.

The language-learning potential of the TV series *Friends* has often been recognised by teachers and learners alike. The director of one language school explained why she recommends the show as a valuable resource for English learners:

One of the reasons we believe Friends is the best TV show to learn English is because it has the perfect concept. It is about a group of six friends that sit around a café and talk about all of life's ups and downs. So the language used tends to be everyday and practical. You spend a lot of time talking with your friends, too, right?

A similar appreciation comes from a member of the Korean boy band BTS, who noted that Friends is widely used by mothers in South Korea to spark their children's interest in English, even during meals or playtime. He estimated that he had watched all ten seasons at least five times, studying not only the dialogue but also the actors' gestures and expressions to learn, in his words, "how to communicate American emotion".

These accounts illustrate how exposure to authentic and entertaining language input can foster incidental learning and enhance both linguistic and intercultural competence. The value of such media-based learning is also recognised within the teaching community. For example, an online blog published by Cambridge University Press recommends popular TV series as effective tools for promoting out-of-class English learning (Walker, 2023), reflecting teachers' growing awareness of the educational potential of informal media engagement.

Moreover, several interviewees highlighted the power of music and songs in learning English. Hamed, an English teacher from Iran with a passion for music, explained that one of his main goals in learning English was "to be able to sing with my favourite songs in English". He recalled, "I used to sing aloud at home or when I was taking a walk, mostly Rock and Rap songs by LinkinPark". This experience reflects widely recognised benefits of using music for language learning. The British Council notes that songs help learners internalise rhythm, pronunciation, and vocabulary through repetition and emotional engagement, making them a particularly effective tool for informal language learning (British Council, n.d.). Similarly, Hamilton et al. (2024) concluded in their systematic review that songs offer substantive linguistic benefits, particularly for vocabulary and pronunciation development, while also creating positive affective conditions for language learning.

Digital gaming represents another highly motivating form of informal language learning. Like the Chinese student, Ming, mentioned earlier, Hamed also enjoyed playing video games: "My goal was to understand what my favourite video games were about and to complete different missions". Research supports the value of such engagement. Xu et al. (2019) found that digital game-based learning consistently enhances vocabulary acquisition, pronunciation, and learner motivation, particularly when learners interact with authentic, goal-oriented game environments. However, they also note the need for longitudinal and methodologically rigorous studies that integrate commercial games more systematically into language pedagogy. More recent experimental work confirms that the design of game-based activities is decisive. Rasti-Behbahani and Mashhadi (2026) found that digital game-based vocabulary activities produced substantially greater acquisition and retention when their design managed learners' cognitive load, suggesting that the effectiveness of such tools depends on principled instructional design.

Informal learning also extends to face-to-face interactions and online social media environments, where communication itself becomes a form of language practice. Several interviewees described their strong desire to communicate with people beyond their local contexts:

Whenever I saw a tourist, I would try my best not to be shy and talk to them. This talking to strangers happened mostly on yahoo messenger when chatting with people around the world. (Hamed)

But I think I learned more through communicating with foreigners. I often approached foreigners I met to speak with them. (Vida)

These examples show how everyday social interactions can serve as powerful opportunities for authentic language use and intercultural engagement. Informal learning can also occur through

digital social communication. Danilo, the Chilean student mentioned earlier, described how he uses Instagram to learn German:

I created an Instagram account in which I only follow profiles that posted content for learning German and many other topics, all in German. In this way the time I spend every day scrolling through social media is all in German and in this way I am absorbing German vocabulary and grammar. At first it was quite tough but after about a month and a half I started being able to understand most of what I read and I can also understand the structure of the language as well. I also complement this with research on the web and the use of ChatGPT to learn basic conversation and phrases.

This example illustrates how learners can transform everyday digital habits into productive language-learning experiences by curating the linguistic content of their online environments. Supporting this observation, Lee and Chiu (2023) found that learners become more willing to communicate in English, both online and offline, when they experience lower anxiety, greater self-confidence, and authentic interaction opportunities, highlighting the importance of informal, digital, and intercultural communication beyond the classroom.

Implications for Language Teaching

The examples above illustrate how successful learners take active responsibility for managing their own language development. In each case, the learner's choices reflect a response to the inherent limitations of the classroom as a learning environment. This is not to diminish the value of classroom instruction. On the contrary, the classroom provides an essential foundation and preparation for learning that extends beyond it. One of the key aims of classroom-based teaching should hence be to equip learners with the skills and strategies needed to engage in independent learning outside the classroom. It should help them develop both the language required to access out-of-class opportunities and the awareness of how to identify, evaluate, and make effective use of the wide range of resources available.

The Classroom Curriculum and the Learner Curriculum

The previous section suggests that two distinct curricula shape what and how students learn. The first, *the classroom curriculum*, consists of the sequence of language items and skills prescribed by the course, along with the activities teachers draw on during instruction. This is the curriculum we observe when watching lessons: grammar explanations, sentence manipulation, vocabulary exercises, and other form-focused tasks, as illustrated earlier. In contrast, *the learner curriculum* refers to the activities learners initiate for themselves beyond the classroom as they manage and extend their own learning. These include the informal, self-directed practices described by the proficient English users, including the previously mentioned Iranian teacher, Hamed.

Table 2 highlights the contrast between these two curricula, illustrating how traditional classroom routines differ markedly from the kinds of experiential, interest-driven, and socially embedded practices learners adopt independently.

Table 2*Contrasting the Classroom Curriculum and the Learner Curriculum*

The classroom curriculum	The learner curriculum (based on Hamed's experience)
Pronunciation Minimal-pair practice Listen-and-repeat drills Alphabet and phonics games Vocabulary Total Physical Response Picture flashcards Labelling items Sorting and categorising words Bilingual flashcards Memorising word lists Matching words with definitions or L1 equivalents	Individual and Incidental Learning Learning the lyrics of English songs Learning and singing songs in English Singing aloud at home or when walking Practising words from product names Playing video games in English Watching TV shows (e.g., <i>Friends</i>) or YouTube videos Recalling lines and expressions from TV shows Talking to oneself in English (e.g., watching one's lips in the mirror). Observing and imitating pronunciation and expression in TV shows Recording oneself on a cassette player, talking about daily routines Keeping a diary or journal in English
Grammar Modelling and guided practice Substitution drills Sentence analysis and completion Comparing L1–L2 grammar Translation exercises Information gap tasks Grammar-in-context stories	Interactive and Purposeful Learning Greeting and talking with foreigners Engaging in simple conversations in English with foreigners Chatting with international peers online (e.g., Yahoo Messenger)
Language Sub-skills Model dialogues Choral repetition Pair practice Role plays Reading aloud Taking dictation Completing guided writing exercises Simple everyday conversations Simple interviews	

This table highlights how, in the past, successful learners often navigated two largely separate learning universes with minimal overlap. One emphasised language as a system of rules, while the other centred on using language for real communication. Ideally, a well-designed language course would integrate both dimensions. These earlier distinctions between a formal, teacher-led classroom curriculum and the informal learner curriculum were shaped partly by the limits of the instructional technologies available at the time. Today, however, the expanding resources of the Internet, mobile devices, and AI are changing what learners can do and how teachers can design learning. These developments mean that the two once-separate learning universes are increasingly intertwined, setting the stage for the opportunities and challenges discussed in the next section.

Making Use of the Resources of Digital Technology, the Internet and AI

As argued above, digital devices, online resources, and AI-based tools now make it possible to bring learner-generated content, informal practices, and personalised pathways directly into classroom learning. This section illustrates how these technologies are reshaping learner participation, teacher workload, adaptive design, and interaction.

Mobile Technologies as Participatory Tools

Most teachers have lived through several major technological shifts, each leaving a clear imprint on educational practice. The Internet and mobile phones, for example, have transformed everyday communication and extended the spaces and opportunities in which learning can take place (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008; Selwyn, 2021). Within language education, mobile technologies are now widely recognised for supporting more participatory, learner-centred tasks and enabling authentic communicative engagement (Stockwell & Hubbard, 2013; Godwin-Jones, 2017). Here is a simple classroom technique we observed recently. The teacher gave the following instructions:

1. *Please turn on your mobile phones.*
2. *Go to your photo gallery.*
3. *Now turn to the person next to you and discuss the last two photos you added to your gallery, and discuss these questions.*
4. *Where were you when you took the photo?*
5. *Why did you take it?*
6. *Who or what does it show?*

This activity demonstrates how mobile devices can facilitate meaningful interaction by drawing on learners' own experiences and resources. AI for Workload Reduction and Instructional Design

More recently, AI has emerged as another significant technological development. Early analyses from educational researchers and international agencies suggest that AI is likely to shape how learning tasks, decision-making, and educational processes are mediated (Holmes et al., 2019; Luckin et al., 2016). Reid Hoffman (2024), co-founder of LinkedIn, captures the scale of this shift by noting that "AI will reshape the lives of *all of us*. It will become the primary technology that we use to make decisions and navigate life".

AI-enabled tools have been part of teachers' professional environments for many years, even if recent advances have made them more visible. In workshops and seminars, it is often revealing to ask teachers how they already use the Internet, digital devices and AI-based applications in their work. These discussions typically generate many examples. Teachers commonly describe using AI and digital tools across tasks, such as diagnosing learners' proficiency, tracking their progress, and

generating assessment materials; producing visuals, bilingual glossaries, captioned videos, quizzes, and model texts to support lesson preparation; and offering feedback on reading, pronunciation, and grammar during instruction. These tools are also used to facilitate collaboration, motivate learners through personalised activities, and record or archive student performances. In practice, AI now touches every stage of the teaching process, from initial planning to ongoing assessment and classroom interaction. This pattern aligns with findings from systematic reviews showing that AI tools often support teachers' planning, monitoring, and assessment tasks, including real-time feedback, workload reduction, and automated scoring (Celik et al., 2022).

Many of these tasks can be done manually, but doing so is time-consuming. Studies of teacher workload consistently show that planning, materials preparation and assessment occupy a large proportion of teachers' working hours (OECD, 2020b). Digital and AI tools can help streamline these routine demands, freeing teachers to focus on higher-value instructional decisions.

Tools such as *MagicSchool* can support teachers' preparation work by helping to structure lesson plans, generate categories, and produce rubrics or scoring guides for assignments and projects. Applications like *Content Samurai* (now *Vidnami*, as integrated into other platforms) can automatically convert written text into draft video content with visuals, animations, and voice-over. Likewise, tools such as *Podcastle* can generate audio materials by converting text into natural-sounding speech. These tools allow teachers to produce customised instructional resources, such as short videos, audio recordings, or listening activities, more efficiently and to tailor materials to learners' interests and language needs. However, scholars caution that the effectiveness of these tools depends heavily on task design, data quality, and the transparency of the underlying algorithms (Holmes et al., 2022; Selwyn, 2022).

Adaptive Learning Systems and Learner Profiling

Many widely used educational apps, most of which were developed for mainstream K–12 teachers in the United States, also offer functions that language teachers may find useful. In addition, a growing number of applications are designed specifically for language learners. A key area where AI is increasingly applied is in *adaptive learning systems*, which personalise learning experiences by analysing learner performance and offering individually tailored recommendations. Popular examples include *Babbel*, *Rosetta Stone*, and *Duolingo*, all of which use learner data to adjust task difficulty, sequence activities, and provide feedback.

Another example is the Shanghai-based application *Linlishuo* ("speak fluently"), a mobile English-learning platform with a large user base. It uses AI-driven speech recognition to analyse a learner's pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and fluency, and then provides targeted suggestions based on these scores. According to the product's developer (Synced, 2018):

After completing the test, the system selects a starting level for each user. Users improve their English through the immersive learning of scenes from images and animations, without any subtitles or translations. They must attempt to understand the scenario, which is followed by suggested practices, which is then followed by more progressive scenarios. This back and forth is highly effective in improving the user's English language skills.

Although adaptive learning systems seem promising, they tend to reinforce discrete-point learning and rarely model sociocultural aspects of communication. As Kabudi et al. (2021) cautioned, the field remains immature, with many systems untested and a persistent gap between technical capability and pedagogical uptake. They call for more implementation research, better evaluation frameworks, and efforts to bridge the divide between educational theory and AI development.

Conversational AI and Interactional Practice

Using English to interact with others is central to language development, a point long emphasised in the interaction-oriented literature (Gass, 2017). AI-powered chatbots have recently been developed to simulate conversational exchanges with learners and provide opportunities for low-stakes practice. Studies show that AI-driven chatbots can support vocabulary, grammar, speaking, and motivation in L2 through offering a supportive environment for rehearsing speaking or writing, experimenting with alternative forms, and receiving immediate feedback (Wiboolyasarín et al., 2025). Tools such as *ChatGPT* can therefore function as supplementary resources for practising predictable interactional routines or short task-based exchanges.

At the same time, public discussions often contain highly optimistic claims about the pedagogical potential of these tools, as seen in YouTube video headlines such as “*ChatGPT Voice Just KILLED Traditional Language Learning*”. Critical perspectives caution, however, that current chatbots still struggle to approximate the full complexity of human communication. Research highlights persistent limitations in handling pragmatics, contextualisation, and multimodal features of interaction such as gesture, prosody, and facial expression (Wiboolyasarín et al., 2025). Consequently, while chatbots may be useful for controlled interactional practice, they may not yet replicate the richer socio-interactional conditions necessary for authentic communicative competence.

Blurring Formal and Informal Learning Spaces

One observation we can make from hearing accounts of teachers’ and learners’ experiences and practices in using technology and AI applications is that the distinction between classroom-based learning and out-of-class learning is no longer clear-cut. The same device and often the same application can function as part of formal instruction in class as well as informal, self-directed learning beyond it. These two universes increasingly reinforce one another. Classroom learning shapes how learners engage with tools outside school, and out-of-class practices feed back into classroom activity.

A useful illustration comes from Teacher Martin, whose students reported that they enjoyed using Duolingo outside class. When he integrated the app into his lessons, even lower-achieving learners were more willing to participate because the adaptive, gamified tasks aligned with their individual pace and proficiency. Loewen et al. (2019) observed the same pattern that Duolingo’s flexibility and game-based features can enhance learner engagement. At the same time, they noted that when the app is used as the sole mode of learning, its pedagogical limitations, such as repetitive, decontextualised exercises and minimal interaction, constrain deeper language development. For these reasons, the tool is better used as a supplement and should be integrated thoughtfully within a communicative classroom design.

Teachers Rosa and Carmen offer a different illustration. They asked intermediate learners to identify online resources they found personally useful, write short blog posts about them, present them to the class, and evaluate one another’s recommendations. Highly rated resources were then integrated into subsequent learning modules. This approach aligns with evidence that structured opportunities for students to create, curate, and assess digital learning resources can foster agency and improve learning outcomes, as shown in McDonald et al.’s (2021) large-scale study of an online co-creation platform.

A further example comes from Maria’s class, where students use *WhatsApp* as a continuous communication space that supports interaction during lessons and extends engagement well beyond scheduled class time. Learners exchange ideas, share materials, and respond to prompts throughout

the week, while the teacher can provide targeted clarification or corrective feedback in a discreet, low-disruption way. Research shows that WhatsApp enables persistent, quasi-synchronous interaction that supports language-focused exchanges outside the classroom (Murphy et al., 2023) and can strengthen students' motivation, collaboration, and sense of community (Alamer et al., 2023). Studies also highlight that WhatsApp facilitates ongoing cognitive, social, and teaching presence, allowing learners to construct and refine knowledge across different spaces and times (Annamalai et al., 2025). These findings illustrate how mobile messaging platforms blur temporal and spatial boundaries, enabling sustained collaboration that spans both classroom and non-classroom contexts.

Looking Forward: What does the Future Hold?

Beyond Voice Cloning: The Promise and Limits of AI “Teacher Replicas”

AI is rapidly expanding the range of tools available for language practice, feedback, and instructional support. At the more experimental end, models are now capable of simulating the voice and interactional style of specific individuals, “griefbots” being a striking example. Although unsettling, such systems demonstrate that LLMs can approximate biographical knowledge and conversational traits with surprising fidelity.

This capability raises an intriguing, if still speculative, question for language education: could similar techniques be used to construct “teacher replicas” for routine aspects of early language learning? The idea is no longer entirely hypothetical. BBC Studios, for example, is using AI to recreate the voice and likeness of Agatha Christie for a digital masterclass designed to teach aspiring writers how to craft crime fiction. The technical effort behind that project, as documented in their production materials, supports both the promise and the cost of constructing such systems.

Transposed into language teaching, an AI teacher-model could, in principle, handle repetitive groundwork: drilling, pronunciation modelling, phrase recognition, and basic interaction. Such functions echo the language laboratories of the audiolingual era, which offloaded routine practice so teachers could focus on higher-order instruction. However, a critical caveat remains. Simulating a teacher's voice is not the same as reproducing their pedagogical judgment. These systems risk mimicking surface behaviours while lacking the interpretive, relational, and context-sensitive expertise that defines effective teaching. Without careful design and stringent ethical oversight, a “teacher clone” could easily become pedagogically shallow, biased, or misleading.

AI-Enabled Autonomy: Expanding Self-Learning While Reshaping Motivation

A further dimension worth considering is the increasing capabilities for self-learning with some of the newer AI models. C. Wang et al.'s (2024) study shows that learners use generative tools not simply to shortcut writing tasks but to organise and guide their own learning. They use AI for idea generation, refining drafts, managing pace, and experimenting with prompts to improve outcomes. However, the study is clear that these benefits depend on learners' critical engagement. Without deliberate monitoring and basic AI literacy, the tool can just as easily encourage superficial work or over-reliance. In other words, AI expands the possibilities for self-directed learning, but only for learners who are able to regulate their use of the system.

Another growing capability of AI is to provide simultaneous translation, allowing learners to access the meaning of the target language more easily and accurately, opening up another line of inquiry related to translanguaging and multilingual meaning-making (Jeon et al., 2025). However, it also allows people to communicate more easily in cross-language encounters (e.g., tourists). This raises a provocative question: if AI can mediate cross-linguistic communication so seamlessly, will some

learners come to view L2 study as optional? There are early signs of such attitudes emerging in public discourse. On Chinese social media, for instance, some users now argue that learning English is unnecessary because AI translation has become highly accurate and ubiquitous. In 2021, this sentiment surfaced in policy debate when a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference proposed that English and other foreign languages should be downgraded as core subjects and removed from national entrance examinations. Although AI's impact on learners' motivation and willingness to engage in L2 study has not yet become a sustained topic of applied linguistics research, it is likely to become one.

Recalibrating Teacher Education for an AI-Mediated Landscape

These possibilities point to a broader implication for teacher education. If AI-mediated instruction becomes more common, teacher educators will need to review the content of their programs to ensure that teachers can critically evaluate, shape, and integrate such tools in their teaching. This includes developing competence in AI literacies, data ethics, blended-learning design, and the coordination of human-machine interaction in classrooms. At the school level, however, the success of any educational innovation, including AI-driven ones, depends on several familiar conditions (Rogers, 2003):

1. Perceived advantages over existing practices
2. Alignment with current instructional routines
3. Consistency with prevailing beliefs, attitudes, and organisational structures
4. Manageable levels of complexity
5. Evidence of effectiveness in comparable contexts
6. Teacher and learner interest
7. Visible champions and advocates
8. Robust ongoing support and professional learning

In terms of practical support, Godwin-Jones offers useful guidance for teachers exploring the this fast-changing field of technology-enhanced language learning (Yan & Moorhouse, 2023):

1. Attend workshops—onsite or online—to keep up with emerging tools
2. Explore approaches colleagues are experimenting with
3. Use channels such as YouTube, podcasts, and teacher-oriented social media to monitor developments
4. Identify specific ways technology could strengthen or refine existing classroom practices
5. Experiment with tools from a learner's perspective to understand their affordances and limitations
6. Share insights with peers and learn collectively

Looking ahead, AI is unlikely to replace teachers, but it will continue to change what effective teaching looks like. Classroom research bears this out. In a study of AI image and audio generators used with very young EFL learners, Sadykova and Kayumova (2025) found that vocabulary gains depended on teachers mediating every stage of the children's interaction with the tools, from co-constructing prompts to counteracting inappropriate or inaccurate output. Hence, the challenge is

to cultivate the professional judgment needed to evaluate AI critically, deploy it ethically, and ensure that its use strengthens the human dimensions of language learning.

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