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REIMAGINING ESL PEDAGOGY IN THE AGE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE: FROM ASSISTANCE TO CO-CONSTRUCTION

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Abstract: Artificial intelligence (AI) has been widely integrated in many ESL classrooms, yet our comprehension of its pedagogical potential often remains behind its capabilities. Traditionally viewed as a tool for assistance or automation, AI can do much more. In this article, I argue for reconceptualizing AI as a co-constructive partner in language learning. Based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and constructivist principles, I explore how AI can personalize instruction, facilitate interactive feedback, and simulate authentic communication. I also address ethical concerns, including learner dependency, academic dishonesty, and algorithmic bias. Rooted in my professional experience teaching English in India, the UAE, Maldives and Uzbekistan across schools, universities, IELTS centers, and private tutoring, I illustrate how AI can enhance learning efficiency. Finally, I propose a practical human–AI synergy framework that balances technological innovation with human judgment and empathy.

Keywords*:* ESL pedagogy, artificial intelligence, co-construction, AI literacy

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between technology and language teaching has always been uneasy. From language labs in the 1960s to interactive whiteboards in the 2000s, each innovation promised transformation – and often made only modest gains. I have taught English in India, the UAE, Maldives and Uzbekistan over several years, and I have seen this cycle repeat. Teachers adopt something new, it helps a bit, and then the fervor fades. AI might be different. Not because it is more powerful, but because it is interactive in a way earlier technologies were not. A student can ask an AI system why a sentence is ungrammatical, and the system explains. The student can then revise and ask again. That back-and-forth is qualitatively different from watching a video or clicking through a drill. However, most of the academic literature still treats AI as a support tool (Pokrivčáková, 2019; Crompton & Burke, 2023). The language is often about "assistance," "efficiency," or "scaffolding" – as if the AI were a teaching assistant. I want to challenge that framing. This article asks: what if we treat AI as a co-constructor of knowledge, not just a helper?

The argument unfolds in several steps. First, I revisit sociocultural and constructivist theories to show how AI could fit into a co-construction model. Then I describe three concrete ways of AI contributes to ESL learning – personalization, interactive feedback, and simulation – using examples from my own teaching. After that, I discuss ethical concerns that are often ignored. Lastly, I propose a simple framework and reflect on what this means for teachers. I am not offering a formal research study; this is a conceptual piece grounded in practice and selected literature.

2. Theoretical grounding – not just for show

2.1 Vygotsky and mediated learning

Vygotsky (1978) argued that learning is social and that higher mental functions develop through interaction mediated by cultural tools. The zone of proximal development (ZPD) is the space between what a learner does alone and what they can do with guidance. Teachers or peers usually provide that guidance. But why not an AI system? Consider automated writing feedback. A learner submits a

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paragraph. The AI flags unclear referencing, suggests a better version, and offers a rephrased or refined example. This is not just error correction; it is mediated learning. The AI becomes a kind of tool – but more than a tool, because it responds contingently. Luckin (2018) calls this "intelligent scaffolding." I have seen this work with IELTS students who go through five drafts with AI feedback, each time asking follow-up questions. That is the ZPD in action, just with a non-human mediator.

2.2 Constructivism and distributed cognition

Constructivism says learners build knowledge actively, not passively. AI supports this by forcing engagement. You cannot just watch an AI explain a grammar rule; you have to apply it, get feedback, revise. That is active learning. Also, consider distributed cognition (Hutchins, 1995). The idea is that thinking is not locked inside individual brains but extends into tools and environments. In an AI-mediated classroom, cognition is shared among the learner, the AI, and the teacher. This is not a radical claim; we already distribute cognition when we use dictionaries or calculators. AI just makes the distribution more dynamic. So theoretically, the co-construction idea holds up. But theory alone is not enough. Let me turn to what AI actually does in real classrooms.

3. What ai brings to esl – three affordances

3.1 Personalization at scale

Large classes make personalization hard. I have taught groups of 30 or 40 students, and it is impossible to give each one tailored exercise. AI can do a passable job. For example, in a medical English class in Uzbekistan, I used an AI simulation that adjusted vocabulary difficulty based on student responses. One student needed simpler doctor-patient dialogues; another was ready for complex case histories. The same AI served both. In another English contexts in the UAE, I have seen AI tools generate different tasks for different proficiency levels. The weaker students get more sentence frames; the stronger ones get open-ended prompts. Personalization like this used to require a teaching assistant or a lot of teacher time. Now AI does it reasonably well – though I still check the outputs for bias or odd suggestions.

3.2 Feedback That becomes dialogue

Classroom feedback is often delayed and one-way. A student submits an essay; the teacher returns it a week later with comments. By then, the student's memory of their own reasoning has faded. AI gives immediate feedback. More importantly, the student can respond to that feedback. They can ask "Why is this wrong?" "Can you give me another example?" "What if I phrased it this way instead? "I have observed that this dialogic feature changes learner behavior. In my IELTS preparation classes, students used to wait for my comments. Now they interact with AI, revise, and then bring me a much better second draft. My role shifts from error-marker to discussion partner. That is more satisfying for me, and probably more effective for them – though I do not have empirical data, just observation.

3.3 Simulating real communication

Many ESL learners fear real-world speaking. A medical student nervous about talking to a real patient. A business student anxious about a negotiation. AI simulations provide a low-stakes practice environment. The AI can act as a patient, a client, or a colleague. The student makes mistakes, learns from them, and no one judges. That kind of confidence building is valuable. Simulations are not perfect – AI still struggles with nuanced cultural cues – but they are getting better.

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4. Ethical concerns – let's acknowledge it

4.1 Over-reliance and cognitive laziness

I have seen students copy AI output without reading it. That is a real danger. If learners outsource their thinking, they do not improve. My response has been to require a first draft without AI. Only after that can they use AI for feedback. Then they must write a short reflection on what they changed and why. This reduces mindless copying, though it does not eliminate it.

4.2 Academic integrity – a moving target

Where is the boundary between legitimate help and cheating? If a student asks AI to brainstorm ideas, is that cheating? If they ask it to correct grammar? I do not have a definitive answer. My current practice is to tell students to cite AI use, just as they would cite a human source. Transparency is better than prohibition.

4.3 Bias and fairness

AI models are trained on large internet datasets, which contain biases. I have seen an AI tool mark a student's Indian English phrasing as "incorrect" because it did not match standard American English. That is not just a technical flaw; it is a form of linguistic discrimination. Teachers need to discuss this with students. AI is not neutral. We should treat its outputs as suggestions, not gospel.

4.4 Critical ai literacy

These ethical issues point to a need for critical AI literacy. Learners should understand how AI works, what its limits are, and how to question its outputs. I now spend class time on this – not as a separate module but woven into regular lessons. For example, after an AI feedback session, I ask: "Did the AI miss anything? Was it unfair? Why?"

5. The teacher's changing role – no, we are not obsolete

Some people worry that AI will replace teachers. That seems unlikely. AI cannot provide emotional support, cultural insight, or spontaneous humor. It does not notice when a student is quietly frustrated. It cannot build a classroom community. But my job is changing. I spend less time on grammar correction and more on designing tasks that require critical thinking about AI outputs. I facilitate discussions about bias. I also model my own struggles with AI – sometimes the AI gives bad advice, and I show students how to push back. The teacher becomes a mentor and a critical guide. That is not a demotion; it is a shift.

6. A human–ai collaborative framework – practical and simple

I do not propose a complex model. Instead, I offer four principles that have worked in my classes:

1. Enhance, do not replace. Learners always attempt tasks first without AI. Then AI provides feedback. Then learners revise and reflect.

2. Require reflection. After using AI, learners write one or two sentences explaining what they learned or why they disagreed with the AI.

3. Gradually reduce AI support. At the beginning of a course, learners can use AI freely. By the end, they use it only for self-checking.

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4. Keep humans in the loop. Pair work, peer review, and teacher conferences remain central.

A typical lesson might look like this:

· Phase 1 (human): Warm-up discussion in pairs.

· Phase 2 (individual, no AI): First draft of a writing task.

· Phase 3 (AI): Students paste draft into AI tool, receive feedback, revise.

· Phase 4 (reflection): Students write a brief note on what they changed and why.

· Phase 5 (human again): Peer comparison of drafts, then teacher-led discussion of common issues. This is not revolutionary, but it balances AI efficiency with human judgment. I have used variations of this in IELTS, ESP, and general English classes.

7. Limitations – what this article does not do

I need to be clear about what I am not claiming. This is not an empirical study. I have no pre-/post-test data, no control group, no statistical significance. My evidence is observational and experiential. That is a limitation. Future research should track learning outcomes over a full semester with mixed methods. Also, AI tools change fast. What works with ChatGPT-4 today may not work with the next version. But the principles – reflection, gradual autonomy, critical literacy – are likely to remain relevant.

CONCLUSION

AI is already in ESL classrooms, whether we are ready or not. The question is not whether to use it but how. If we treat AI only as an assistant, we miss the opportunity for deeper co-construction. If we treat it as a replacement for teachers, we make a mistake. The sensible path is somewhere in the middle: AI as a fallible, responsive partner that works alongside humans. Teachers will still be needed – for empathy, for cultural context, for the moments when a student needs a real person to say "I understand." AI can handle grammar and practice. We handle the rest. That is not a compromise; it is a better division of labor.

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