



Special issue TEL in English language teaching, learning and assessment | **More at** <https://doi.org/10.21428/8c225f6e.2c972374>

TEL in English language teaching, learning and assessment: Introduction to the special issue

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1. Introduction

English Language Teaching (ELT) has often found itself at the cutting-edge of technology enhanced learning (TEL), firmly in ‘the vanguard’ (Levy, 1997, p.3) of classroom technology usage. From the language labs of the 1950s via the emergence of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) in the 1980s, the use of technology in ELT has given rise to a plurality of terms (Miles, 2022) covering distance learning and telecasting, hybrid classrooms, blended learning, learner autonomy, informal learning and automatic feedback platforms among others. The use of language learning apps, virtual environments and interactive multimedia are seen to increase motivation and improve retention through the creation of personalized, interactive and engaging learning environments (Harahap et al., 2025; Siumarlata, 2024). At the same time, the rapid evolution of technology necessitates the need for ongoing professional development and an awareness of access issues if the use of technology in ELT is to be maximized (Zou & Thomas, 2019). It is also, of course, impossible to ignore the impact of generative artificial intelligence upon ELT practice, generating both positive and negative reactions from language teaching practitioners and researchers (Lee et al., 2025; Pack & Maloney, 2023). This special issue examines how TEL in ELT is reshaping not just what tools we use, but how we understand belonging, literacy, access, and intercultural exchange.

2. Overview of the Special Issue

This special issue aims to examine this key junction where theory, practice and technology collide in ELT. There are five full papers and three commentaries drawn from a wide range of international contexts across a diverse group ranging from established scholars to early-career researchers. We have *not* included any papers focusing solely on generative AI, although it is central to one commentary. While AI is a highly important area it is important to not lose sight of other issues in TEL, and the contents of this special issue offer a broad range of alternatives that can be grouped under four overarching themes.

2.1 Belonging, identity, and engagement in TEL for English for Academic Purposes (EAP)

Simpson (2024) uses the lens of Wenger's Communities of Practice (COP) (Wenger, 1999) to examine how digital collaboration tools can foster a sense of belonging among UK EAP students. The author highlights the central role of the teacher in scaffolding this sense of belonging among international students, a group at high-risk of marginalization. Belonging can thus be seen as a critical lens for understanding TEL not simply as functional tools, but as spaces that foster inclusion and community. The paper also provides actionable insights beyond EAP for educators from any field looking to create inclusive learning environments using digital collaboration tools.

Also focusing on international students, this time in pre-sessional online courses, Gorrell's paper (Gorrell, 2024) investigates the extent to which they experienced transformative learning. Gorrell finds that transformative learning occurs through patience, intercultural communication, and the dual roles of the participants as both learners and facilitators. There is a possibility here that the interactions in the online environment can benefit both the students and those supporting them. Both papers raise many interesting avenues for future research.

2.2 Academic literacy, literacies, and communities

Hudson (2024) also draws on Wenger (Wenger & Wenger-Trayner, 2015) and reviews how online COPs (OCOPs) can foster academic literacy for EAP learners. Hudson's paper makes the connection between digital literacies, intercultural competence and transliteracy, situating

these within global academic contexts. Hudson argues for embedding OCOPs more strategically into EAP pedagogy and also stresses that the skills students learn in academic contexts will also train them in the necessary practical skills to flourish outside the classroom in an increasingly digital world. This is a key paper addressing an area that has received relatively little attention to date.

2.3 Designing TEL for language learning

Chen (2024) provides us with a systematic evaluation of *Reading Bear*, an open-access multimedia phonics programme through the lens of Mayer's twelve principles of multimedia learning (Mayer & Fiorella, 2014). The article identifies clear strengths in spatial contiguity, segmenting and multimedia integration, and thus demonstrates an example of design aligning well with cognitive learning theory. At the same time, the author also identifies weaknesses in areas such as redundancy, personalization and modality principles, pointing out the programme's overreliance on text and the lack of a conversational tone. Chen shows how careful instructional design is crucial in order to ensure that a tool is both engaging yet also pedagogically sound. In summary, the paper offers practical insights for educators and policymakers, particularly those considering how multimedia phonics programmes can support early literacy and phonics instruction in ELT classrooms.

2.4 Internationalisation and global competence

The final paper represents a global collaboration between Brazil and the USA, and details a Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) and Virtual Exchange (VE) project preparing English teacher trainees for intercultural learning (Fields & Hübner, 2025). In their project, the authors show how TEL can support global citizenship, cross-cultural dialogue and linguistic growth, and position COIL as an inclusive, scalable strategy for Internationalization at Home (IaH). IaH promotes internationalization through cross-cultural exchange, in this case online, as opposed to the more traditional, but more exclusive, internationalization through mobility. The authors also stress that COIL projects can foster critical reflection on power and diversity in ELT. Furthermore, the study shows how COIL can expand international opportunities for students in the Global South, where traditional mobility is often limited, which opens up valuable avenues for future research.

3. Commentaries

Alongside the research articles, we received three commentaries that deepen and extend the debates embedded in the special issue. The commentaries offer critical, contextualised reflections that situate TEL in relation to equity, belonging and global perspectives.

Howard (2025) works to expand Simpson's belonging framework (2024) and explores how generative AI, more specifically ChatGPT, might shape engagement, imagination and alignment in English Language Learning (ELL). The author highlights the need to balance the potential benefits of AI, such as inclusion, support and feedback, with the risks of over-reliance, inequality and ethical concerns. Howard proposes a possible new dimension of belonging, hybrid mediation, occurring at the intersection of human and AI participation in language learning. As the author concludes, these are exciting yet uncertain times, signaling both the opportunities and challenges of AI in ELT.

Chen's commentary (2025) raises important questions related to accessibility, and critiques the assumption that effectiveness alone guarantees educational value, highlighting accessibility as a crucial yet neglected factor. The author uses ChatGPT and VR to illustrate disparities between contexts where these technologies are available, and those where they are not. The commentary concludes with a call for a shift away from an effectiveness-to-adoption logic towards an access-to-equity framework in TEL research and practice.

In the final commentary, Hübner (2025) positions TEL, and especially COIL/VE, as a tool for fostering intercultural dialogue as well as for developing global competence in teacher education. The author returns to one of the themes from her article and highlights how TEL offers alternatives to international mobility. This is particularly valuable in the Global South, where obstacles to mobility remain and educational inequities persist. The author concludes by reinforcing the need for a critical, socially aware approach that situates ELT within broader concepts of power, positionality and inequality.

Together, these commentaries suggest that TEL in ELT is as much about equity and context as it is about innovation, and highlight accessibility, future-facing AI debates, and Global South perspectives. These are fitting contributions to the special issue.

4. Shared Themes and Collective Contributions

Taken as a whole, it is possible to draw together clear threads across the special issue. These fall under four main themes. The first to emerge is TEL as *shaping belonging and identity*. Simpson and Howard show how technology can foster or disrupt learners' sense of belonging. Identity is shaped through digital tools, and increasingly through generative AI. This influences engagement, imagination and alignment within language learning communities.

The second thread sees TEL as *transformative and intercultural*. The articles from Gorrell and Wright Fields & Hübner, plus the Hübner commentary, emphasise the transformative potential of TEL. TEL can cross institutional and cultural boundaries, from international student internships to COIL projects. This offers us new pathways towards intercultural understanding and global competence.

Thirdly, we see TEL as a *design challenge* that balances innovation with accessibility. Chen's paper and commentary remind us that innovation alone is insufficient. We must instead evaluate TEL in terms of usability, affordability and equity if we want to achieve real impacts in diverse classroom contexts.

The final thread sees TEL as *literacy and competence-building* in globalised education. Hudson's paper and the combined commentaries demonstrate how TEL can support not only language proficiency but also wider digital skills and literacies, thus providing students with the critical competencies today's globalised academic and professional contexts demand.

To conclude, TEL in ELT is not just about tools, but about rethinking belonging, equity, intercultural exchange, and digital literacy for the future of the field.

5. Conclusion

The editors would like to express our thanks to all the authors and reviewers. We extend a special thank you to our reviewers, Dr Mick King, Dr Christine Howling, Dr Natalie-Jane Howard, Ms Haya Alnuami, Dr Katrina Kinsella and Dr Shorouk Hanafy. We believe this special issue provides a critical, international, and future-facing view of

TEL in ELT, and we hope the ideas presented will serve as a springboard for further debate and research, particularly around AI, equity, and the global futures of English language teaching.

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Rob Miles is a Senior Lecturer in Education at the Higher Colleges of Technology in the United Arab Emirates. He has extensive international experience, having worked in the UK, Greece, Spain, Italy, and Brazil, and has been based in the UAE since 2005. His research and teaching focus on technology-enhanced learning, expansive learning, and professional development within teacher education. Drawing on Activity Theory, his work explores how educators and students adapt to emerging technologies, including generative AI, in meaningful and ethical ways. Rob is an Alumni Member of the Centre for Technology Enhanced Learning at Lancaster University and also a member of ISCAR, the International Society for Cultural-historical Activity Research.

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