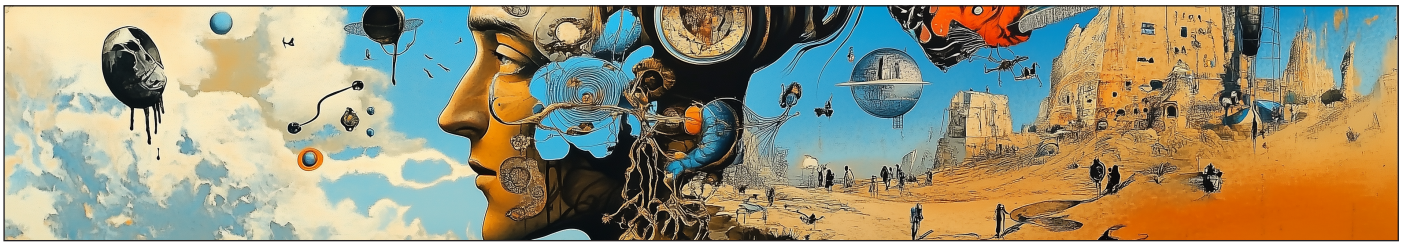
Studies in Technology Enhanced Learning

Journal homepage: **stel.pubpub.org**

Article type
Commentary, review by editors.

Publication history
Accepted: 12 September 2025. Online: 31 October 2025.

Cover image
Badly Disguised Bligh via flickr.



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

Generative AI and a sense of belonging in ELL

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Keywords
commentary

Citation
Howard, N.-J. (in press). Generative AI and a sense of belonging in ELL. **Studies in Technology Enhanced Learning, 4**(2), 1-4.

https://doi.org/10.21428/8c225f6e.cdc5db77

1. Introduction

In this issue, Simpson (2024) looks at how digital tools in the EAP context can foster a sense of belonging, using Wenger's (1998) Communities of Practice (CoP) framework to gain theoretical purchase on his inquiry. The seminal CoP framework has been utilised to inform studies across a broad range of domains in educational research, including identity, social learning and institutional arrangements (Howard, 2021). Meanwhile, with the rapid development of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) models, particularly ChatGPT, there has been a proliferation of debate regarding its implications for education, including English language learning (ELL) (Samala et al., 2025). Bringing these two strands together, I consider how Wenger's (1998) lens might be extended to consider AI's inevitable presence in the realm of language learning. How can we ensure that GenAI models are utilised in a way that creates a sense of learner belonging, through the tripartite framework of engagement, imagination and alignment that Simpson (2024) mobilises in this issue?

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2. Engagement

For Wenger (1998), engagement encompasses the negotiation of meaning through active participation. It has been suggested that GenAI tools such as ChatGPT offer educators new modes of increasing student engagement (Floris, 2025). This might manifest through the tool's capacity to model language, act as a virtual dictionary and perform as a translator, to name a few. Moreover, the capability of AI to generate text, provide instant feedback and design activities could further augment the language acquisition process (Ziaja, 2024). Using an autoregressive algorithm, ChatGPT might present itself as a digital imitation of an interaction partner (Ziaja, 2024). In this regard, ChatGPT can translate, simplify, or explain materials to a range of learners from disparate linguistic backgrounds, increasing inclusion, participation and providing conditions for engagement.

In contrast, an over reliance on the model could also intervene in human-to-human engagement; it may become the preferred conversation partner and distract from in-class discussion and peer-learning. In turn, this may erode the shared human repertoire and agentic learning trajectory which are fundamental to Wenger's (1998) theory of social learning. Issues of equity might also arise in situations where some students are more adept at prompting and using ChatGPT effectively, leading to some suffering from lower levels of engagement, frustration and even marginalisation.

3. Imagination

Imagination refers to the process of expanding knowledge by creating emergent images of the world during learning (Wenger, 1998). While ChatGPT might be said to augment creativity, it is also said to be limited in its original idea generation. AI generated text might also miss the mark: it may be inaccurate, contain bias and be unnecessarily complex (Tlili et al., 2023), since GenAI does not possess the purely anthropomorphic sensibilities of social experience and embodiment (Cambridge et al., 2024). What impact might this have on the condition of imagination for our learners? Perhaps ChatGPT might be utilised to facilitate creative and reflective activities, but it may also subvert spontaneous language use. While we know that there may exist further limitations with its output – such as shallow content or predictable text, students may simply revert to passive use. By delegating too much of the cognitive work to the model, users may overindulge and not sufficiently examine alternatives. This potential limit to criticality might detract from the necessary facet of sense-making in imagination, which is arguably vital for language learners who need to produce and express thoughtful language output.

4. Alignment

Simpson (2024, p. 2) describes alignment as 'following directions, aligning self with expectations/standards, coordinating actions towards a common goal.' We might consider how students can align themselves with grammatical rules, task instructions and institutional policies. Recent studies have demonstrated empirically that the use of GenAI models such as ChatGPT result in improved grammar knowledge and application (e.g. Merazi, 2025). ChatGPT might also act as a digital assistant in understanding complex rubrics and breaking down task descriptions to learners of English. It might even be leveraged to help organize group work, divide tasks, and create schedules aligned with pressing deadlines and learning goals.

Alongside these potential avenues for alignment, some have opined that ChatGPT may fail to offer lucid interpretations of the educational milieu (Gunkel & Coghlan, 2025). Furthermore, academic integrity is a salient issue. Students might be over cautious due to potential ethical issues which invokes reticence in using GenAI for their studies. Conversely, learners may use ChatGPT in ways which disregard institutional guidelines for academic honesty. This signals a need to teach compatibility between the logic of use among language learners and the logic behind the design of GenAI models. Without this robust alignment, we can't envision a genuine sense of belonging in the language learning context.

5. Concluding remarks

The inevitable spread of AI in ELL foregrounds an exciting time as the debate widens – is GenAI a precursor to the demise of human thought or a panacea of unrestrained optimism for its capacity to produce and translate language? Can GenAI truly be utilized to enable students to engage, imagine and align themselves and what is the role of English teachers in this emerging landscape? Ultimately, as our experience interacting with GenAI is still at a place of relative infancy, using the models in the context of language learning will require accountability, vigilance, caution and education (Cambridge et al., 2025). As Simpson (2024, p. 11) states 'the transition to digitally enhanced learning is irreversible' and this undoubtedly extends to GenAI in ELL. For researchers this continues to be a controversial, yet edifying area

of study, indicating there is work to be done in capturing GenAI's distinctive enrichment, while remaining wary of its potential subversion of language learning. Perhaps it's time for scholars to examine whether a further facet of belonging should be integrated. This might be in the realm of hybrid mediation, as students are required to effectively negotiate their human intelligence in conjunction with GenAI's participation, as the latter intervenes to reshape knowledge and scaffold learner autonomy.

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https://doi.org/10.21428/8c225f6e.cdc5db77

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