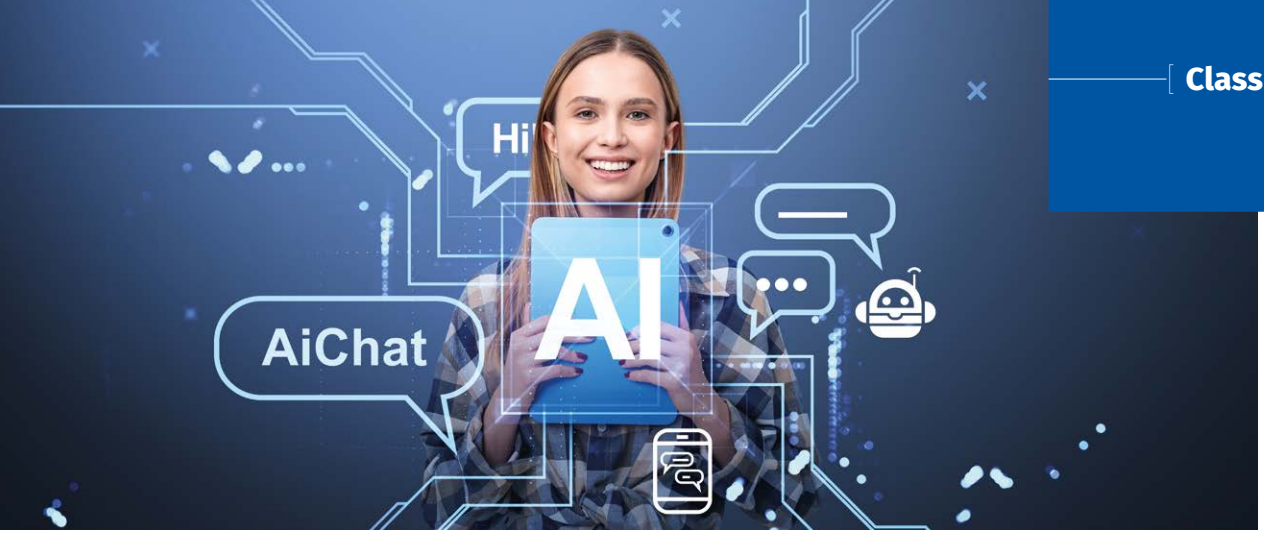


The role of AI in ELT

Bircan Ay
describes her transition from tactile to digital.

In 2019, I started working as an ESL teacher in a kindergarten. Teaching five-year-olds requires reimaging language instruction entirely, moving beyond traditional textbook-based approaches. I spent hours creating handmade games with different colours and tactile elements, searching for interactive songs that would make vocabulary memorable.

However, in March 2020, Covid-19 changed everything overnight. We experienced a lockdown that forced us to abandon everything we thought we knew about effective language teaching. My colleagues and I faced what felt impossible back then: teaching English to five-year-olds through a screen, without physical interaction. I tried to create digital alternatives, working hard to translate our physical games into PowerPoint presentations and adapt our storytelling sessions for online delivery. Many dismissed our efforts as impractical for such young learners, questioning whether children could develop language skills effectively through screens.

Yet what seemed revolutionary and even controversial to some in 2020 has become completely usual today. This dramatic transformation taught me a profound lesson: educational change can occur whether institutions are prepared or not, driven by necessity rather than careful planning or gradual implementation. Little did I know that this rapid shift would mirror what's happening with AI in education today.

Rise of AI in the world of ELT

ELT has been at the forefront of adopting new technological innovations, from CDs to digital dictionaries, interactive whiteboards to online teaching. However, 2023 marks a pivotal moment in the ELT world with the appearance of AI, which we have gradually adapted to fit our existing pedagogical frameworks. AI has arrived with such transformative power that we find ourselves restructuring our teaching practices around its capabilities.

One great example of that can be seen in the research field. More questioning studies are being conducted on AI in ELT compared to a decade ago.

According to the British Council's report on AI and ELT (Edmett *et al.*, 2024), there has been an unprecedented increase in the number of published studies since 2017, and it is projected to continue with a sharp increase (Figure 1).

Research also indicates that the majority of this research trend comes from countries whose first language is not English. The innovative transformations of AI have attracted many countries in Asia with a competitive and long-term solution to language learning, rapidly driven by the extensive incorporation of AI in English language teaching. This growing adaptation is also reflected in a recent study by Crompton *et al.* (2024), who found a striking surge in publications containing the keywords 'AI' and 'ELT' rising from 137,000 to 368,000, evidence of both the global spread and the accelerating interest in AI-driven language education.

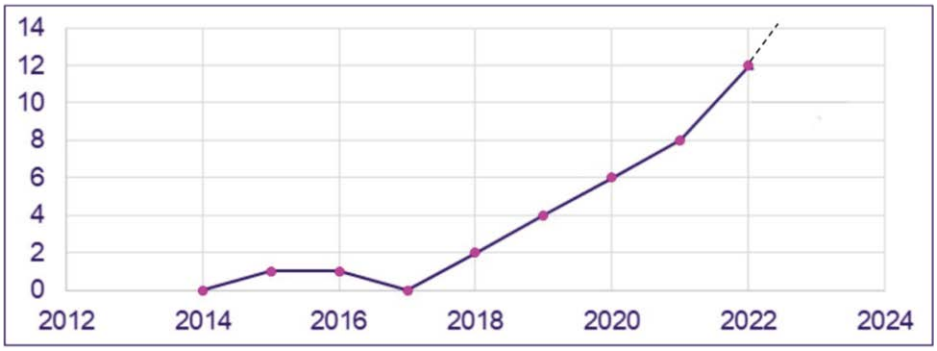


Figure 1: Publications on AI by year

Note: 2023 figures were collected for only half of the year; the dotted line represents the expected upward trend.

Figure 2: AI used to personalise language learning

This exponential growth in search activity suggests that while formal academic research is still catching up, practitioners, educators and institutions are actively seeking information about AI's role in language teaching. Whether the ELT community feels fully prepared or not, AI's presence in our field is no longer a question of *if* but *how* we will exploit its potential to enhance language learning outcomes.

Revolutionising language learning mechanics

Today, the best-known AI chatbot is ChatGPT. When it first came out in 2022, it felt like chatting with a bright secondary school student, and it often hallucinated. With the release of ChatGPT 4.5, it jumped to something closer to an undergraduate student's level. Now, as of August 2025, with the release of ChatGPT 5, it feels more like speaking with a PhD expert (Taylor, 2025). AI has reached a point where it could potentially teach us more than we might ever discover on our own in seconds. Unlike the pandemic-forced transition, where educators actively participated in shaping the transformation by developing new materials, learning new platforms, and adapting pedagogical approaches, the integration of AI has occurred organically, without institutional permission.

I've observed students make a month's worth of traditional progress in two weeks using AI-assisted learning. While some students find carefully planned lessons too easy because they've been advancing independently through AI tutoring, others arrive with sophisticated vocabulary. AI has created a new classroom dynamic by generating a new reality that challenges the traditional teaching models. Students are no longer recipients of instructions, and teachers are no longer the sole gatekeepers of knowledge. Instead, learners have become active participants in their educational journey, empowered to choose and utilise the AI tool that best suits their learning styles and needs.

Personalised learning and enriched teaching

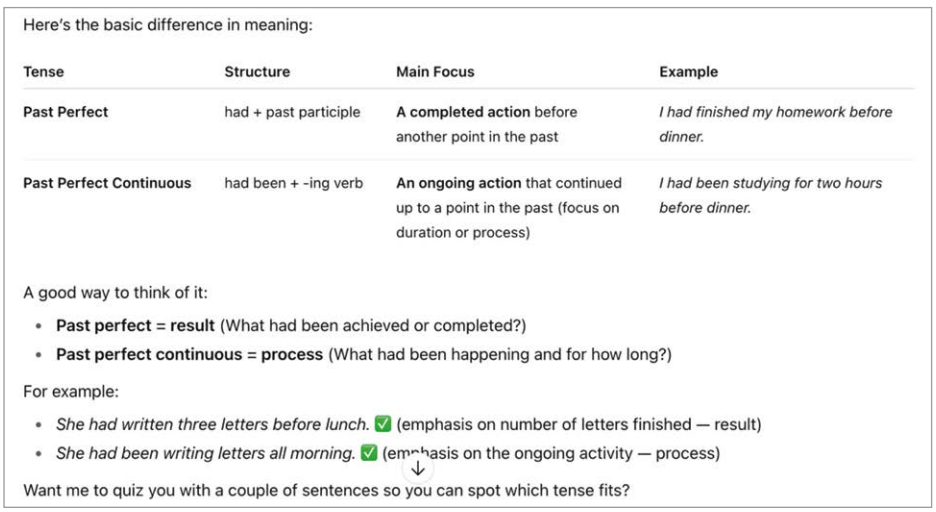
Since the beginning of the early 20th century, traditional ELT teaching has employed various methodologies to enrich students' capabilities. Over the years, methods like grammar translation, the Direct Method, and Task-based Language Teaching have guided many teachers. They all focused on the ability to teach language effectively, and they are all driven by the same idea: understanding the different teaching techniques and approaches that are most appropriate to the students' needs.

Today, what we see with AI is transforming many fields which were considered the core of the system. This rapid transformation, like ELT methodologies, aims to meet students' diverse needs by personalising learning experiences. AI has already proved to be a language learning tool for learners. The majority of students have been using AI either for their assignments or daily life tasks. Take my student Mina, for example, after her morning class, she chooses to stay in the classroom, pulls out her phone and opens an AI-powered language tutor; she practises pronunciation, receiving instant feedback, and has natural conversations about her favourite hobbies.

AI can adapt lessons to an individual's needs, and it allows students to discover adaptive learning paces independently, creating their educational ecosystems parallel to traditional classroom instruction. This organic adoption represents a fundamental shift in educational power dynamics, where students have become the drivers of technological integration.

Figure 2 shows how AI can be used to personalise language learning. In simple terms, AI analyses a learner's progress, pinpoints areas for improvement and gives instant feedback on the target language. This approach puts students at the centre of the learning process, guiding them through language acquisition tailored to their level, preferences and goals. With the depth of knowledge AI can offer, it also encourages inquiry-based learning where students feel free to ask any question without hesitation or fear of being judged, creating a safe space for curiosity and deeper understanding (Szabó & Csépes, 2023).

AI can also be a powerful partner for teachers, adapting language teaching to fit each teacher's needs and abilities. With the constant updates, AI can guide and provide in-depth support to newly graduated teachers, guiding them to build confidence in the classroom by commenting on their self-reflection and helping them to become more confident in their teaching. By using AI chatbots, teachers can create authentic content for more experienced teachers. It offers a way to keep their knowledge fresh



Here's the basic difference in meaning:

Tense	Structure	Main Focus	Example
Past Perfect	had + past participle	**A completed action** before another point in the past	*I had finished my homework before dinner.*
Past Perfect Continuous	had been + -ing verb	**An ongoing action** that continued up to a point in the past (focus on duration or process)	*I had been studying for two hours before dinner.*

A good way to think of it:

- **Past perfect = result** (What had been achieved or completed?)
- **Past perfect continuous = process** (What had been happening and for how long?)

For example:

- *She had written three letters before lunch.* ✅ (emphasis on number of letters finished — result)
- *She had been writing letters all morning.* ✅ (emphasis on the ongoing activity — process)

Want me to quiz you with a couple of sentences so you can spot which tense fits?

Figure 3: Comparison of past perfect and past perfect continuous tenses, including structure, main focus and usage examples (content generated with ChatGPT)

and stay up to date daily without relying solely on textbooks or pre-made materials found online.

Learner autonomy

Thornbury (2006) gave us a great definition describing learner autonomy as 'the capacity to take responsibility for, and control of, your own learning, whether in an institutional context, or completely independent of a teacher or institution'.

With the launch of ChatGPT, people have started to use AI chatbots offering assistance with vocabulary, grammar and writing, which has enhanced self-directed practices. When the 'Study and Learn' feature was introduced, I tested it by asking 'What is the difference between the past perfect and the past perfect continuous?'. The generated comparison (Figure 3) demonstrated how AI can go beyond search results, providing clear explanations and contextual understanding.

AI tools in ELT go far beyond just googling; in fact, they serve more like a conversational partner by generating tailored examples without constraints of time and location. By addressing the knowledge gaps, AI also reduces the ongoing dependency on teachers for while fostering skills like digital literacy.

This dynamic interaction that AI brings has proved to be a powerful tool for supporting learners' autonomy by adapting to individuals' needs and providing personalised, targeted activities with instant feedback. This responsive system encourages learners to take ownership and responsibility for their learning process. In such a flexible learning environment, students are constantly being empowered to set their own goals and discover their 'ability to take charge of one's learning' (Holec, 1981).

The role of teachers

The World Economic Forum's *Future of Jobs Report 2025* positions teaching among the fastest-growing professions globally, stating that human educators remain essential despite increasing automation across many sectors. However, this doesn't mean our role remains unchanged; rather, we're experiencing a profound transformation in what it means to be a language teacher in this new AI century.

As Crompton *et al*. (2024) note, with the increasing use of AI in education, educators must understand how AI can support English language teaching for our language learners while recognising the unique value that human teachers provide.

We're shifting from being the primary sources of target language input to becoming curators of human-centred learning experiences. By focusing on the elements of language learning that remain uniquely human, we guide students in understanding when and why to adapt rules for style or impact. We help them navigate cultural nuances that algorithms often miss, read between the lines to catch tone and implied meaning, and appreciate the emotional resonance that words can carry beyond their grammatical form.

Human interaction remains irreplaceable. Our value lies not in replicating what AI can do more efficiently, but in offering what it cannot. We can prepare learners to adapt their language across different situations, levels of formality and relationships, an area where AI still pauses. This means teaching not only the 'what' of language, but also the 'when', 'how' and 'why' – so students can make confident, effective choices in real social and cultural contexts.

Conclusion

The pandemic showed us that transformation can be immediate when circumstances demand it and change happens with or without institutional readiness, driven by necessity, student needs and the opportunities technology provides. In ELT, AI tools are advancing quickly, making learning more personal and giving students more control over their progress. Our job is to help them use these tools thoughtfully, think critically about language in real contexts and shape learning journeys that match their goals and pace. When we pair this autonomy with truly customised learning experiences, students gain a stronger sense of ownership. This keeps language learning relevant and human, turning it from a routine exercise into a rich exploration of communication, culture and personal growth in the age of AI.

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Further reading

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Bircan Ay is an TEFL professional with over 15 years of international teaching experience across the UK, USA, and Turkey. She holds a Master's degree in English, along with TESOL and CELTA certifications, and currently as Assistant Director of Studies at GG Colleges in London. With a strong focus on innovation, inclusivity, and technology integration. She has developed expertise in curriculum design, teacher training, and student progress monitoring. Her current interest lies in the role of AI in ELT, where she explores how emerging technologies can enhance both teaching practices and learner outcomes.