Writing and Assessment in the Age of AI: Reflections from the IATEFL Oxford University Press Signature Event 2025

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Abstract

The rapid integration of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) into educational practice presents profound challenges and opportunities for English language teaching, learning, and assessment. Drawing on our panel discussion at the 2025 IATEFL Oxford University Press Signature Event, here we explore emerging tensions and possibilities in writing and assessment in the age of AI. We argue for a reframing of risk that foregrounds equity, inclusion, and human agency, examining both technological advancements and pedagogical implications. Through critical perspectives, practitioner insight, and applied case studies, we outline a research-informed path for integrating AI tools in ways that support accessible, ethical, and effective learning environments.

Introduction

As Bruner (1990) famously observed, “We are storytelling creatures, and as children we acquire language to tell those stories we have inside us.” In a time when AI-generated language models now assist or even produce written outputs, educators are compelled to ask fundamental questions about authorship, learning, and the future of writing instruction. This paper reflects on key themes from the 2025 IATEFL Oxford University Press Signature Event, *Writing and Assessment in the Age of AI*, and brings together three perspectives on how generative AI is reshaping English language education: Webb-Davies’ pedagogical and equity lens; Clark’s technological analysis; and Ratner’s institutional, policy-informed framing grounded in interdisciplinary collaboration.

Reframing the Discourse on Risk and Writing

Webb-Davies proposed a critical reorientation in the discourse on generative AI and academic writing. Rather than centring debates on the potential misuse of AI tools, she called attention to the risks of exclusion associated with banning them. Writing, she argued, is not a neutral practice but a socially constructed and historically mediated technology. One that privileges specific linguistic and cognitive norms.

Particularly for students who speak non-standard varieties of English, those who are neurodivergent, or who live with learning differences such as dyslexia, writing can function as a barrier rather than a bridge to educational access. In this context, AI-powered writing tools offer more than convenience, they offer a mode of accessibility. As Street (1995) has long shown, writing must be understood in relation to broader socio-cultural literacies. Webb-Davies aligns this view with the inclusive affordances of AI.

In her English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classroom, Webb-Davies operationalised these insights through a three-stage writing assessment: (1) in-class drafting to capture original thought; (2) AI-assisted revision for linguistic clarity; and (3) a metacognitive reflection where students justified their use of AI. Outcomes included enhanced argumentation, reduced instances of academic misconduct, and improved marking efficiency. Most notably, the model shifted the focus of assessment from surface-level grammar to critical thinking and conceptual development.

This reframing invites educators to reconsider entrenched assumptions, such as the notion that “writing is thinking.” As Webb-Davies argued, privileging written expression as the sole marker of intellectual work risks marginalising alternative ways of knowing and communicating.

GenAI and the Transformation of Language Learning Technologies

Clark provided a complementary yet distinct perspective, tracing the evolution of AI in language learning technologies. From early rule-based platforms to today's generative models, the capabilities of AI in personalising, assessing, and delivering English instruction have expanded dramatically.

Apps such as Duolingo and Babbel now use adaptive algorithms, speech recognition, and real-time feedback mechanisms to tailor learning experiences. Newer applications like ELSA Speak integrate advanced pronunciation analytics, while ChatGPT and similar models offer learners instant generation of grammar explanations, exercises, reading texts, and writing prompts.

Clark also discussed emerging multimodal AI systems—tools that combine text, speech, image, and video to simulate authentic language use. The development of AI avatars, such as Call Annie, enables users to engage in highly realistic spoken interactions. These innovations

respond to long-standing pedagogical goals around immersion and feedback but do so at scale and with increasing nuance.

Supporting these claims, Clark referenced Xu and Wang's (2024) meta-analysis, which synthesised findings from 35 studies involving over 3,000 learners. The authors reported a substantial positive effect size (0.812) for AI-enhanced English learning outcomes. As Clark concluded, AI is no longer supplementary. It is now central to how language education is delivered, accessed, and experienced.

Importantly, AI is also altering the landscape of assessment. Automated scoring of essays and speech, intelligent tutoring systems, and instant feedback loops are becoming not only feasible but reliable. These tools promise to reduce educator workload and expand feedback capacity, but they also raise new ethical and validity considerations.

Human Agency and Educator Voice in an AI Era

Ratner emphasised that institutional responses to AI must prioritise human agency, systemic inclusion, and research-informed action. Drawing on her work as the founder of the interdisciplinary research hub, AI in Education at Oxford University (AIEOU), Ratner highlighted the need to position educators, students, and policy actors as co-creators of AI futures in education rather than passive recipients.

AIEOU was established to convene a global, interdisciplinary community of practice focused on four pillars: the design, regulation, implementation, and impact of AI in education. Informed by systems theory and participatory research methods, the hub engages with diverse stakeholders including teachers, learners, developers, and policymakers to explore how ethical, equitable, and effective AI use can be scaled and sustained (Ratner, Williams & Wonnacott, 2025).

Ratner invoked Freire's (1994) concept of *critical hope* to articulate the importance of maintaining educator voice in the face of technological transformation. AI tools in education must not render the human role redundant. Rather, they should be co-designed with educators and embedded within pedagogies that value human judgment and creativity. To facilitate reflective decision-making, Ratner proposed a triadic framework to guide educators and institutions:

1. **Could** AI be used to support writing? If so, what competencies and digital literacies are needed?

2. **Would** AI be used? What contextual and pedagogical considerations shape its appropriate use?
3. **Should** AI be used? How do we assess the ethical and epistemological implications of its use in learning environments?

These guiding questions are now central to AIEOU's policy engagement and professional development work across more than 100 countries. They invite not only compliance or caution but deep, informed reflection on the pedagogical, social, and moral dimensions of AI integration.

Ratner's institutional and policy work demonstrates how critical hope, grounded in interdisciplinary collaboration, can shape a proactive, inclusive vision for AI in education. Rather than merely responding to change, educators can lead it. Provided they are equipped with the tools, spaces, and support to do so!

Redefining Assessment and Literacy in the Age of AI

A key theme across all three presentations was the redefinition of assessment in an AI-enabled world. If AI can assist or even outperform humans in surface-level language accuracy, what remains the role of writing assessment? The panelists converged on a shared belief that assessment must evolve to value higher-order thinking, creativity, and learner reflection. This requires a shift from policing to partnering. Rather than attempting to detect or prohibit AI use, institutions should focus on building assessment formats that integrate transparency, reflection, and intellectual ownership. This includes alternative formats such as multimodal portfolios, scaffolded writing processes, and AI-use disclosure statements.

In parallel, digital and AI literacy must become part of language curricula. Students need not only technical proficiency in prompting AI tools but also critical awareness of their affordances and limitations. As Warschauer (2006) has shown, digital literacies are not simply instrumental, they are deeply tied to identity, agency, and social participation.

Implications for Policy and Practice

At the institutional level, AI challenges established frameworks for academic integrity, assessment, and digital strategy. In response, initiatives like AIEOU have collaborated with policymakers and education ministries to co-develop responsible, inclusive AI policies (UNESCO 2024; Ratner et al., 2025). These collaborations highlight the need to both mitigate risks and enable innovation, avoiding paralysis in the face of uncertainty.

Educators and administrators must engage in sustained professional development, critical reflection, and collaborative experimentation to develop robust AI strategies that promote equity, transparency, and learner autonomy.

Conclusion

GenAI poses significant questions for the future of writing and assessment. However, as this panel demonstrated, it also opens possibilities for more inclusive, responsive, and human-centred education.

Whilst Clark asserts that resistance is futile and AI is destined to be the primary driver for the future of education. Ratner reminds us that educators are not powerless in this transformation. They remain essential guides, helping learners navigate the complexities of language, identity, and communication. If integrated thoughtfully, AI can amplify rather than diminish these roles.

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