SEM45. English language teaching and learning in the digital era: Exploring challenges, opportunities and ethical concerns

12 September h. 16:30-19:00, S4 Moro
13 September h. 8:30-11:00, S4 Moro

Convenors
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Abstract
The "Law of Accelerating Returns" posits that technological progress shows an exponential, rather than linear, growth rate (Kurzweil, 2004). Such an increasingly 'smart' world is opening up new horizons for English language teaching (ELT) and learning, blurring the boundaries between what is human(e) and what is not (Kohnke *et al.*, 2023). In this emerging context, language educators and students must develop complex skills such as digital literacy/fluency – combining digital and critical skills to evaluate AI tools for their real benefits and ethical concerns (UNESCO, 2025).

We invite scholars, practitioners and experts to explore with us the complex intersections of Critical Classroom Discourse Analysis (Kumaravadivelu, 1999), educational linguistics, ELT and technological progress, by examining key themes including:
- challenges and opportunities for teachers, learners and institutions in the digital turn of ELT
- best practices resulting from empirical investigations into new digital literacies
- ethical issues concerning brand new technological developments in educational environments and their *fair use*
- the impact of digital tools on quality education, social justice, inclusion and well-being
- metaphorical representations of AI emerging from, e.g., classroom discourse analysis, questionnaires and interviews, which can impact on the way AI is perceived and conceptualized by teachers and/or students.

The seminar will foster collaborative discussions merging theoretical and practical insights with critical perspectives, to increase awareness of the fast-evolving landscape of language education in the digital era.

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SEM45. Papers

45A   12 September h. 16:30-19:00, S4 Moro
- *Rebutting AI: Interacting with GenAI to develop critical digital literacy and critical discourse analysis in classroom practices and beyond* (Paola Giorgis, Independent Scholar / Andrea C. Valente, York University, Canada)
- *Investigating students' perspectives on the effects of AI-powered multimodal feedback in EFL writing classes* (Antonella Giacosa, Università di Torino)
- *To bot or not to bot: An analysis of young learners' interactions with AI* (Tatiana Kozlova, Sapienza Università di Roma)
- *Using generative AI to create lesson materials. Preliminary considerations from a pilot study with upper secondary teachers of English* (Laura Ferroglio, Università di Torino / Università di Genova)
- *Exploiting AI potential to enhance English writing skills: A linguistic perspective on* Wordtune (Laura Centonze, Universitas Mercatorum)

45B   13 September h. 8:30-11:00, S4 Moro
- *Local cohesion in EFL students' essays: A comparison between TAACO and human ratings* (Francesca D'Angelo, Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna / Serena Ghiselli, Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna)
- *Automated assessment of L2 English skills with ETET – a tool based on LLMs and speech technologies* (Claudia Roberta Combei, Tor Vergata Università degli Studi di Roma / Francesco Zappulla, Independent scholar)
- *A corpus-based technique in teaching English collocations* (Farideh Amirfarhangi Bonab, Università degli Studi di Napoli Parthenope)
- *Beyond templates: The DiFree repository and Moodle course for digital freelancing* (Anna Romagnuolo, Università degli Studi di Napoli L'Orientale)

SEM45. Abstracts

A corpus-based technique in teaching English collocations

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To use the English language naturally and fluently, language learners must acquire a solid understanding of collocations, particularly when there are notable differences in word order and prepositional usage between English and the learners' native language, as is the case with Persian in this study. As scholars have confirmed (e.g., Smith et al., 2008; Shahzadi et al., 2019), providing learners with direct access to corpora and the use of corpus analysis toolkits facilitates hands-on exploration of authentic language patterns. Adopting an educational linguistics perspective, this study employs the British National Corpus (BNC) to support the learning of collocations aimed at enhancing English language learners' reading and writing skills. While many previous studies (e.g., Adelian et al., 2015; Jeensuk & Sukying, 2021) have assessed learners' collocational knowledge using multiple-choice tests—which are often a source of confusion due to distractor options—this study utilizes multiple-choice cloze tests, as contextual cues can assist learners in applying collocations accurately.

Conducted in an EFL context and following a pre-test, training, and post-test design, the study involves ten Iranian master's students majoring in non-English disciplines, who complete short cloze tests aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The training, delivered over ten sessions, focuses on multi-prepositional verbs and verb + noun collocations, practiced using the Sketch Engine corpus analysis toolkit. The multiple-choice cloze tests are administered again following the training period, and the pre- and post-test results are compared. The findings are expected to confirm the effectiveness of corpus analysis toolkits in teaching and learning English collocations and to highlight common collocational errors among Iranian learners.

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Exploiting AI potential to enhance English writing skills: A linguistic perspective on *Wordtune*

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The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into language education encourages renewed enquiry into the interplay between linguistic competence, writing development, and digital mediation. This paper examines the pedagogical potential of *Wordtune*, an AI-driven writing assistant, in enhancing English writing skills through real-time linguistic feedback. We argue that Wordtune operates not merely as a corrective tool but as a site for metalinguistic engagement and syntactic exploration.

Wordtune generates context-sensitive paraphrases and stylistic alternatives, thus enabling users to experiment with varied lexical and syntactic patterns, and fostering awareness of collocations, register variation, and semantic nuance—key dimensions of second language acquisition (SLA). Drawing on the *noticing hypothesis* perspective (Schmidt, 2001; Godfroid, 2020), AI-mediated rewriting creates opportunities for learners to observe and reflect on linguistic choices, reinforcing form-meaning connections through exposure and decision-making.

By means of classroom-based observations and learner feedback from advanced L2 English users, we point to three domains where *Wordtune* has demonstrated pedagogical value: (1) enhancing syntactic diversity and stylistic control in academic writing; (2) encouraging autonomous revision practices guided by responsive feedback; and (3) supporting collaborative writing by scaffolding peer interaction with consistent linguistic input.

The present paper also addresses the risks of algorithmic prescriptivism. While Wordtune's suggestions align with dominant usage norms, they may reinforce standardization and reduce stylistic agency. We therefore advocate a pedagogy that positions AI as a dialogic partner—one that *supports*, rather than dictates, the learner's voice and stance. This study contributes to the current debate on AI in language pedagogy by demonstrating how tools like *Wordtune* can foster metalinguistic implementation and provide linguists with a rich context for examining digital mediation in L2 writing.

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Automated assessment of L2 English skills with ETET – a tool based on LLMs and speech technologies

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Technology-Enhanced Language Learning (TELL) has transformed the interaction between teachers and learners, as well as the ways in which learners behave within the language-learning process (Walker & White, 2013). These transformations regard lesson design, classroom management, and the assessment of acquired language skills (Stockwell, 2018). The use of technologies has also given rise to new fields such as the Intelligent Computer-Assisted Language Learning (ICALL, Heift, 2021), aimed at developing tools based on artificial intelligence (AI) and natural language processing (NLP) technologies, including Large Language Models (LLMs) and automatic speech recognition (ASR). Recent studies in ICALL have shown that AI can be successfully applied both in the generation of test items (Donati et al., 2024) and in the automated assessment of language skills (Yavuz et al., 2025), including oral skills (Nebhi & Szaszák, 2023).

Our study goes in the same direction and presents ETET, a web-app for the assessment of English language skills. The tool deploys real-time feedback algorithms, LLMs, and ASR, as well as an AI engine capable of measuring various aspects of oral production such as intelligibility. ETET is designed to evaluate responses to both open- and closed-ended questions, in written and spoken language, assigning weighted scores based on the difficulty and type of task. It assesses skills in oral production and interaction, listening, reading comprehension, and written production on a 0-100 scale. These scores can be mapped to CEFR levels, both overall and by individual language skills.

To evaluate the reliability of the tool we are conducting a case study involving 40 Italian-speaking participants with varying levels of English proficiency. For each participant, we collected data on socio-demographic variables and linguistic background. The ongoing analysis aims to: (1) compare the automated test results with the participants' self-

reported proficiency; (2) evaluate participant feedback on the usability of the web-app; (3) compare the automated results with evaluations by human experts. The preliminary results show that as regards (1) and (3), in at least half of the cases, the system assigns a proficiency level that corresponds exactly to the self-assessed level reported by the participants and the one indicated by the three experts. In the remaining cases, the assessed proficiency level generally falls either one level above or below the self-/human-reported level. As for (2), overall, the feedback provided by the participants was positive and helped us to optimize the graphical user interface and response times.

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Local cohesion in EFL students' essays: A comparison between TAACO and human ratings

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The analysis of cohesive devices is essential in assessing L2 academic writing in EFL. However, the roles these devices play in L1 and L2 writing need to be further examined. In L1 writing, some studies have found a negative correlation between local cohesive devices and writing quality, contrasting with the positive correlation found with global cohesion (Crossley et al., 2011). In this study local cohesion corresponds to cohesion at the sentence level, that is between smaller chunks of text (ex. noun overlap between sentences, use of connectives to link sentences). On the other hand, global cohesion is related to cohesive devices used to connect larger chunks of text (ex. noun overlap between paragraphs) (Crossley et al., 2016b). For L2 writing, other studies (Crossley et al., 2016a; Jiang & Pu, 2024) show a positive relationship between cohesive devices and writing quality over time. More empirical research is needed to better understand how cohesion impacts essay quality in L2 academic contexts.

This study addresses the gap by focusing on local cohesion (sentence-level devices) in essays by 70 first-year undergraduates in 2024—20 in Intercultural Communication and 50 in International Studies. TAACO 2.0.4 (Crossley et al., 2016b, 2019) and SPSS were used for the analysis. The goal was to examine how classic and recently developed cohesion indices relate to human ratings of EFL academic writing quality in participants having a variety of mother tongues and English as a foreign language. A stepwise regression model (Pallant, 2020) used TAACO's connective indices as independent variables (local cohesion) and exam grades as the dependent variable (text quality). Two indices showed significant correlations: temporal connectives positively impacted writing quality, while basic connectives, such as *and* and *so,* had a negative effect. The model accounted for 19% of variance in the ratings.

The findings have implications for EFL writing assessment, highlighting differences between human and automated scoring. Understanding various cohesive devices—local, global, and overall—can better explain L2 writing proficiency and expert raters' expectations. Temporal connectives help organise ideas, a focus in writing classes, whereas overused basic connectives may lead to error-prone long sentences.

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Using generative AI to create lesson materials. **Preliminary considerations from a pilot study with upper secondary teachers of English**

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Following the release of ChatGPT 3.5 in late 2022, the implications of Generative AI (GenAI) in education have attracted increasing attention. Consequently, research studies addressing advantages and drawbacks of GenAI chatbots have soared (Crompton et al., 2024; Law, 2024): the opportunity to personalize materials, provide authentic texts and reduce teachers' workload (Amonova et al., 2023) appear to be counterbalanced by overreliance, threats to privacy, and bias (Barrot, 2024). One recurring aspect in current research is the importance of training and professional development for effective integration of GenAI in teaching practice (Allehyani & Algamdi, 2023; Crompton et al., 2024). Although teachers' acceptance and use in higher education have been explored, as well as hands-on use by English Language Teachers to create materials or plan lessons (Dornburg & Davin, 2024), few studies have linked educators' existing knowledge to practical applications in the language classroom (Buendgens-Kosten 2024) according to the TPACK framework (Mishra & Koehler, 2006), which advocates the integration of technological, pedagogical and content knowledge for successful teaching and learning outcomes (pp. 1025-1034).

This paper reflects ongoing insights from the author's PhD research, which investigates how Italian upper secondary teachers of English use Generative-AI to create writing materials. A pilot study was conducted in autumn 2024 to introduce ChatGPT for materials design. Participants' perceptions and experiences were gathered through reflective questions, saved interactions with ChatGPT and discussion groups. Key themes from these data will be addressed briefly in the presentation, allowing for question time. Despite the study's limitations, preliminary findings show how teachers have had the opportunity to apply their pedagogical and content knowledge when interacting with the chatbot, and gained insights into the tool's opportunities and awareness of their training needs.

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Investigating students' perspectives on the effects of AI-powered multimodal feedback in EFL writing classes

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Innovation is essential for effective teaching in 21st-century classrooms (Harari, 2018). As AI becomes increasingly prevalent, EFL teachers should enhance their practices by using AI-powered tools (Kohnke et al., 2023). These tools serve as a cross-cultural semiotic system, merging computer-mediated communication with multimodality (Herring, 2025; Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2020). They can improve teachers' communicative competence and assist in crucial tasks like providing feedback, which is vital for successful learning (Steiss et al., 2024). One such tool, Grammarly, adopts a multimodal approach, merging summative feedback—focused on pinpointing errors—with formative feedback that inspires learners (Kerr, 2020). It evaluates student writing by assigning scores and providing colour-coded feedback and visual cues for grammar, spelling, style, and tone. It also offers suggestions for improvement while encouraging users with positive reinforcement.

Given the essential role of feedback and the effectiveness of visual aspects in learning (Hattie, 2009), the impact of AI-powered multimodal feedback on learning is a timely area of research (Jiang and Yu, 2024). This mixed-method study investigates how multimodal feedback influences students' accuracy and motivation in EFL contexts, focusing on two questions: the impact on writing skills and students' perceptions of multimodal versus traditional feedback. Fifty high-school students participated in an activity using Grammarly, providing qualitative and quantitative data through pre- and post-session questionnaires. Findings reveal that students find multimodal feedback motivating and less judgmental compared to traditional feedback. They appreciated the quantitative scores from Grammarly for clearer insights into their progress and valued the opportunity to learn how to improve their writing autonomously. This study demonstrates how integrating AI-powered tools can yield comprehensive, motivating feedback and enhance students' learning experiences.

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Rebutting AI: Interacting with GenAI to develop critical digital literacy and critical discourse analysis in classroom practices and beyond

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This presentation examines the impact of digital technology on pedagogical practices and classroom relationships. On the grounds of dialogic models of classroom communication inspired by Freire (2013), we will examine how generative AI, with its emphasis on mechanicist, efficiency-driven methods (Tuomi, 2024), may challenge collaborative human learning experiences.

We will present three distinct activities carried out in two educational contexts (Canada and Italy), which allowed us to engage in critical approaches to the use of GenAI. Two examples involve classroom activities, and one is a sample guideline on how to write with AI when generating a text for a dictionary entry or an assignment. The first example introduces an undergraduate assignment in which students critically interacted with ChatGPT at a university level for a course in philosophy of education in Canada. The Canadian example showcases a group assignment for an undergraduate course in which students interact with ChatGPT by prompting the role of education in today's world. Each group engages

in turn-taking with the GenAI to develop argumentative thinking supported by course content and documents it in a script format. We will demonstrate how students built their rebuttal arguments through discourse markers and course knowledge.

The activity carried out in an Italian high school classroom engaged students to write the entry *colonialism* for the online dictionary *In Other Words* (IOW), with some students relying on ChatGPT to compose some parts of the entry. The result of their writing, which contained several limitations and gaps, became an opportunity to discuss AI technology. Both activities were therefore used to develop the students' recognition of the way in which AI generates information and to develop their critical digital awareness.

In addition to these two examples, we will end the presentation by sharing a sample guideline for writing an entry for the IOW dictionary when using ChatGPT. Despite the GenAI's apparent efficiency in generating dictionary entries and arguments as seen in the Italian and Canadian examples, the generated text usually needs to undergo a critical revision for language and culture biases, generalizations, and superficiality. The sample guideline can be used in high school and post-secondary classrooms to raise students' language awareness and to support digital literacy based on critical pedagogy.

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To bot or not to bot: An analysis of young learners' interactions with AI
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Despite the important lessons learned about the negative impacts of social media and big tech over the past two decades, there is a growing sense of optimism regarding artificial intelligence (AI) and its potential, especially in the field of education. AI-powered tools, particularly chatbots, present an appealing solution to address longstanding challenges in English language teaching (ELT). These tools offer new opportunities for interactive, personalized learning experiences that can supplement traditional teaching methods. However, the pressure to integrate AI into educational curricula raises important questions about the readiness of both teachers and students to effectively engage with this technology.

When is it the right time to introduce AI to students in a way that ensures they are not only linguistically ready but also cognitively and emotionally prepared to benefit from these interactions? This on-field empirical study investigates the use of AI technology in Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) classrooms, focusing on history and art in a bilingual Italian school in Rome. Specifically, it examines the interactions of primary school (Grade 5) and lower secondary school (Grades 6-7) students with AI-powered tutors on the SchoolAI platform. By qualitatively analyzing these interactions, the study explores the dynamics between students and chatbots, highlighting both the potential benefits and challenges associated with AI-mediated learning.

The study aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on AI in education, offering insights into how AI can be effectively implemented in language classrooms while ensuring that it aligns with the developmental needs of young learners. In doing so, this paper addresses the urgent task of separating the hype from the reality of AI-driven education.

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Beyond templates: The DiFree repository and Moodle course for digital freelancing

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Over the past decade − and especially since the COVID19 pandemic − the proliferation of digital technologies, remote-work platforms, and entrepreneurial ecosystems has accelerated the growth of freelance and self-employment careers, particularly in the digital sector. These include established professions such as translation, writing, and web development, as well as a new generation of "portfolio careers" shaped by contract-based, platform-mediated, project-driven work. As of 2023, the number of freelancers in the European Union reached approximately 27.97 million, while in the United States freelancers are projected to constitute over 50% of the workforce by 2027 (Statista, 2024).

Despite this dramatic shift, higher education still centers on preparation for salaried, organizational roles, leaving a growing gap between academic training and the skills needed to thrive in the freelance economy. This gap is particularly evident in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) instruction. While ESP textbooks remain anchored in traditional industries (e.g., business law engineering) and EAP materials focus on academic writing and critical reading, few educational resources address the genre-and-skills demands of freelance work. Consequently, students and recent graduates − especially non-native English speakers − are often unprepared to pursue sustainable self-employment. They lack training in digital self-presentation, proposal writing, and "cold pitching", all essential for success in the online freelance marketplace.

The purpose of this paper is to present the second intellectual output of the Erasmus + KA project, Digital Freelancing for Higher Education. Originally conceived as a multilingual, multimodal repository of CV résumé and portfolio templates to support aspiring freelancers, it evolved into much more by project's end. To enhance learner engagement − especially for non-native speakers − the repository was complemented by the Moodle-based open-source course From Job Hunting to Cold Pitching. Organized into modular learning units, the course fosters both language competence and digital self-presentation skills essential to freelancing. It addresses a range of scenarios, from conventional job applications to unsolicited "cold" proposals for freelance platforms, guiding learners through interactive vocabulary tests, scaffolded writing tasks, self-assessment tools, and reading-comprehension materials adapted from professional-communication resources and career development sources.

Together, the DiFree Repository and its Moodle course provide learners not only with usable models, but with the linguistic and rhetorical tools to personalize, adapt, and effectively deploy them in real-world contexts. They also illustrate a scalable model for integrating language pedagogy with practical digital-career tools, filling a critical gap in higher education training especially for non-native English-speaking freelancers.

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