SEM46. AI and English as a foreign language: Bridging classroom practice and research

46A 11 September h. 11:00-13:00, PN 5
46B 11 September h. 16:00.18:30, PN 5

Convenors
Adriano Ferraresi (Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna) adriano.ferraresi@unibo.it
Francesca Vigo (Università di Catania) vigof@unict.it
Anna Mongibello (Università di Napoli L'Orientale) amongibello@unior.it

Abstract
Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) is increasingly adopted across various fields of education and research, revolutionizing how knowledge is created, shared, and applied (Chen et al., 2020; European Commission, 2023). Within the specific domain of teaching and learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), a growing body of work has shown the potential of tools like ChatGPT and other Large Language Models for diverse applications, including writing assistance, automated assessment and creation of language exercises (Khonke et al., 2023). Existing studies have demonstrated substantial positive effects of AI-based tools in controlled settings, focusing on cognitive and behavioural outcomes such as improvements of students' language competence (Bibauw et al., 2022) and motivation to learn (Fryer et al., 2020). Another line of research has relied on surveys among students and lecturers, shedding light on the pedagogical affordances of these tools (Slamet, 2024). However, significant theoretical and methodological gaps remain to be addressed. These include the need to establish more precise definitions of the very notions of AI and AI-based tools, to conduct empirical studies bridging AI research with practical EFL teaching applications, and to further explore the impact of AI use on learners, educators and the broader contexts in which they are immersed (Hockly, 2023). Against this backdrop, the seminar invites theoretical and empirical contributions that explore topics including, but not limited to:

- Using AI in the EFL classroom: applications of AI and digital technologies to EFL teaching, including (creative) writing; tutoring; time planning
- The human factor: students' and/or teachers' attitudes towards technology in learning/teaching; digital literacy of students and/or teachers
- AI and EFL linguistic data: explorations of learners' language, AI-generated language and learner-AI interactions, e.g. drawing on corpus and/or experimental methods
- AI, EFL, and normative discourses: explorations of normative discourses in AI output, including assumptions about language proficiency, correctness, and underlying biases
- Digital technologies, EFL and sustainability: EFL teaching/learning and ecological issues, e.g. with reference to mobility and distance reduction and/or waste of energy provision.

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SEM46. Papers

46A 11 September h. 11:00-13:00, PN 5

- *Critical digital literacies and learner autonomy: Opportunities and challenges of AI integration* (Cesare Zanca, Università degli Studi di Siena)
- *From errors to empathy: Exploring EFL learners' interactions with LLM-based Chatbots* (Daniele Polizzi, Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna)
- *Universal design meets artificial intelligence: Chatbot accessibility guidelines for inclusive EFL learning* (Francesca Raffi, Università di Macerata)
- *Can LLM-assisted corpus annotations enhance EFL teaching and learning? The case of shell nouns* (Chiara Polli, Università degli Studi di Perugia / Carla Vergaro, Università degli Studi di Perugia)

46B 11 September h. 16:00.18:30, PN 5

- *AI, tasks, and talk: Developing academic spoken collocations with ChatGPT* (Valentina Morgana, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore / Francesca Poli, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore)
- *Prompting genre, prompting ethics: Embedding AI literacy in ESP* (Virginia Vecchiato, Università di Parma) *Twee, Cathoven and NoteLab English: A comparison of AI-powered tools for a CEFR-based English Language Teaching* (Rossana Spadaro, Università di Catania)
- *Assessing AI activities and tasks in Communicative ELT* (Salvatore Ciancitto, Università di Catania)
- *Nano open educational resources to enhance English linguistics teaching in Italian higher education: The EFFT_Mod project* (Giulia Staggini, Università di Siena / Lucia La Causa, Università di Catania)

SEM46. Abstracts

Assessing AI activities and tasks in Communicative ELT

Salvatore Ciancitto (Università di Catania) ciancitto@unict.it

Artificial intelligence (AI) is becoming increasingly pervasive in daily lives and activities, and it is used not only in social network chats and platforms but also in performing professional tasks. This is not a novelty, because early applications of AI were primarily in professional fields of medicine, as well as military operations and chemistry. However, with its diffusion, AI is revolutionizing other areas of work. English Language Teaching (ELT) is one of these areas particularly affected by the use of AI and people commonly believe that AI tutors and chatbots will replace human teachers sooner or later.

Scholars and researchers have been highlighting the potential and the benefits of AI in ELT, focusing their attention on how students' performance and comprehension can be enhanced and how teachers' workload can be reduced (Gyawali & Mehandroo, 2022). When applied to activities for students, AI has been used to improve students' writing quality and confidence (Liang et al., 2021; Zulkarnain & Yunus, 2023), reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition, tailored learning experiences and speaking and pronunciation accuracy (Senowarsito & Ardini, 2023; Kristiawan et al., 2024).

In particular, research on AI chatbots has shown how chatbots can represent a valid speaking practice for students at primary and high levels, as chatbots can relieve anxiety and stress in using a foreign language (Jin et al., 2019; Hapsari & Wu, 2022). Implementing chatbots in English language classes has also provided a higher rate of student engagement and success (Yang et al., 2022).

Despite these advancements, literature shows that the Communicative Approach remains the most effective methodology in teaching English. The foreground idea of such methodology is that learning a foreign language successfully occurs when learners are involved in real communication. For this reason, Communicative Language Teaching promotes authentic material conveyed through communicative activities such as games, role-play, pair work and group work which develop all four skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing.

This paper aims to evaluate AI-based tasks and activities proposed by the British Council under the perspective of the Communicative Approach, assessing the extent to which this methodology can fit into the AI tools.

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AI, tasks, and talk: Developing academic spoken collocations with ChatGPT

Valentina Morgana (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore) valentina.morgana@unicatt.it
Francesca Poli (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore) francesca.poli@unicatt.it

This study compares guided and unguided learning tasks to explore how AI-assisted task-based language teaching (TBLT; Kim & Namkung, 2024) impacts the acquisition of spoken academic collocations (ACs) in English as a Foreign Language (EFL). While research has highlighted the potential of Generative AI (GenAI) tools like ChatGPT (Kohnke et al., 2023), little is known about their impact on learners' use of ACs in spoken discourse (Biber et al., 2004; Dang & Webb, 2022).

Two research questions guide this study: (1) Does guided use of ChatGPT through structured prompting enhance the acquisition of academic ACs more than unguided interactions? (2) How does AI-assisted instruction compare to traditional, non-AI-based approaches supporting collocational development?

The study draws on the Academic Spoken Collocation List (Li et al., 2024), 417 two-word ACs, extracted from the British Academic Spoken English (BASE) corpus using a frequency-based approach (Durrant & Schmitt, 2009; Gablasova et al., 2017). These collocations were embedded into AI-generated dialogues and learning tasks to ensure authentic input.

Forty B2-level university students enrolled in foreign language degrees participated in the study. Proficiency was verified using the Oxford Placement Test. Participants were assigned to one of three groups: (1) a guided group completing structured tasks with ChatGPT, (2) an unguided group engaging in open-ended conversations with ChatGPT, and (3) a control group receiving traditional instruction.

A pretest-posttest design with a delayed posttest measured short- and long-term gains. Quantitative analyses included ANOVA and linear mixed-effects models for examining collocational use in AI-mediated dialogues. Preliminary results indicate that both guided and unguided AI-interactions significantly outperform non-AI-based instruction. Unguided learners show more fluent and contextually appropriate use of ACS, whereas guided learners demonstrate greater accuracy and explicit knowledge retention.

Findings highlight the potential of integrating GenAI into EFL instruction, particularly for enhancing spoken competence. This study contributes evidence on how AI-mediated TBLT tasks can support lexical development, offering implications for task design, learner autonomy, and the responsible use of AI in language classrooms.

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From errors to empathy: Exploring EFL learners' interactions with LLM-based chatbots

Daniele Polizzi (Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna) daniele.polizzi2@unibo.it

Rapid digital advancements are giving rise to a new paradigm in language education, centred around the integration of Generative AI-driven technology (Konke et al., 2023). A key feature of its implementation lies in the models' dynamic ability to assign meaning and context to questions and answers, enabling natural-language exchanges in a chat-like environment (Lorenzoni, 2024). The interactive mechanism underlying this mode of text production becomes especially relevant for dialogue-based Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), where learners are asked to engage in native-like conversations with automated agents known as chatbots. Despite established claims about conversational AI's effectiveness in enhancing competence and motivation (Bibauw et al., 2022), direct observation of students' interactions with these tools remains limited (Han, 2024). To address this issue, the present study offers corpus-based evidence of emerging features and idiosyncrasies in interactions between Generative-AI systems and EFL learners, framed within the context of written, dialogue-based language practice. The corpus employed consists of 326 interactions (722,537 tokens) by as many Italian university students aged 19-25. Participants were enrolled in diverse degree programs and included learners with disabilities and learning disorders, in line with the principle of equal access to learning opportunities (CAST, 2018). Interactions were collected based on a protocol involving two different LLM-based chatbots (ChatGPT and Pi.AI) and two EFL learning scenarios (small talk and role play). Leveraging the corpus data and annotation scheme – which features structural information on turns and contextual information on the chatbot used, the tasks performed and the learner profile – this study explores the potential of AI-mediated learning for language development through both learner and chatbot contributions. First, it provides quantitative and qualitative evidence of errors characterizing learners' inputs, annotated following an adapted version of the Louvain Error Tagging Manual (Granger et al., 2022) that includes extended use cases and new tags tailored to digitally mediated conversation. Second, it highlights the socio-emotional responsiveness of chatbots to these errors, focusing on positive and negative politeness strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987), such as mitigation, hedging, formal address, inclusion and expressions of concern. These are examined in light of two key pedagogical functions that chatbots may serve in L2 development: negotiating meaning as interlocutors and giving feedback as instructional partners.

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Can LLM-assisted corpus annotations enhance EFL teaching and learning? The case of shell nouns

Chiara Polli (Università degli Studi di Perugia) chiara.polli@unipg.it
Carla Vergaro (Università degli Studi di Perugia) carla.vergaro@unipg.it

This contribution presents the early stages of an ongoing project that explores the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI), specifically Large Language Models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT and Claude, in annotation tasks within English-language corpus-based pragmatics and discourse analysis with the aim of developing tools that can assist research and education in these fields. The focus of this study is on *shell nouns* – a class of abstract nouns that act as conceptual containers for complex, proposition-like meanings (Schmid, 2000; Vergaro, 2018) and play a key role in structuring a discourse (Flowerdew & Forest, 2014). Despite their functional importance for cohesion and argumentative clarity, shell nouns may pose a significant challenge for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Their interpretation relies on advanced cognitive-pragmatic and discourse-level reasoning, yet they are frequently overlooked in EFL instruction and materials. Shell nouns have typically been investigated through corpus-based methods. However, manual annotation of corpora is time-consuming and demands substantial linguistic expertise.

Building on the methodology proposed by Yu et al. (2024), this project investigates the potential of AI-assisted annotation for both research and didactic purposes. We compared the performance of ChatGPT-4.5, Claude 3.7 Sonnet, and a human coder in identifying shell nouns across a 1,000-text English-language corpus. The aim is twofold: to evaluate the LLMs' ability to carry out complex linguistic tasks that require human-like cognitive-pragmatic skills, and to lay the foundations for a future application as a support in teaching and learning these challenging discourse features by creating a body of materials that can be easily consulted (e.g. types and tokens, lexico-syntactic patterns). The results reveal that LLMs can identify shell nouns with promising accuracy, making their usage patterns more visible and accessible, though some recurring criticalities were identified. Still, this study ultimately discusses how these findings open new avenues for data-driven, AI-informed EFL teaching. By demonstrating how LLMs can be employed in a linguistically principled way and, in particular, how they can support the identification, explanation, and contextualization of shell nouns, this case study aims to respond to recent calls for bridging AI and didactics (Hockly, 2023; Kohnke et al., 2023), reimagining the role of AI as a resource for fostering metalinguistic reflection and discourse awareness.

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Universal design meets artificial intelligence: Chatbot accessibility guidelines for inclusive EFL learning

Francesca Raffi (Università di Macerata) f.raffi@unimc.it

This paper presents the development of the *Chatbot Accessibility Guidelines*, a structured set of principles grounded in Universal Design for Learning (UDL), conceived to assess the extent to which chatbots powered by Artificial Intelligence (AI) and used for dialogic interaction promote inclusion in university-level English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting. The guidelines are intended to support educators, designers, and researchers in evaluating whether AI-driven conversational agents contribute to equitable, flexible, and learner-responsive digital language learning environments. The study is part of UNITE (*UNiversally Inclusive Technologies to practice English*), a PRIN research project funded by MIUR through NextGenerationEU (https://site.unibo.it/unite/en). The project aims to promote the integration of AI tools into university-level EFL instruction and autonomous language learning for all students, including those with disabilities and specific learning disorders (ANVUR & CNUDD, 2020). In response to the growing use of chatbots in educational contexts (Adamopoulou & Moussiades, 2020), considering growing concerns regarding usability, accessibility, and

learner diversity, the guidelines draw on a robust body of literature on chatbot design (Johari & Nohuddin, 2021; Borsci et al., 2022; Silva & Canedo, 2022) and on established accessibility frameworks (Stanley et al., 2022). Rooted in the three core principles of UDL—engagement, representation, and action and expression (CAST, 2024)—the *Chatbot Accessibility Guidelines* include descriptors designed to evaluate multiple dimensions of the user experience, such as adaptability to individual needs, support for emotional and cognitive engagement, clarity of interaction, and the degree of user control offered by the system. While the guidelines have not yet been tested in full, their structure was informed by data from a quasi-experimental study involving university students learning EFL who interacted with two AI-powered chatbots (ChatGPT 3.5 and Pi.AI). Following these interactions, students completed a post-task questionnaire designed to assess perceived levels of engagement, immersion, discomfort, and potential bias or discrimination. The *Chatbot Accessibility Guidelines* were subsequently validated in collaboration with CAST (Center for Applied Special Technology), the internationally recognized organization that originally developed the UDL framework (https://www.cast.org). By aligning chatbot evaluation with UDL principles, these guidelines aim to provide a theoretically grounded and pedagogically actionable framework for critically assessing the degree of inclusion offered by AI-mediated learning tools in EFL contexts.

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Twee, Cathoven and NoteLab English: A comparison of AI-powered tools for a CEFR-based English Language Teaching

Rossana Spadaro (Università di Catania) rossana.spadaro@phd.unict.it

The aim of this paper is to assess what the benefits of using Artificial Intelligence (AI) - powered tools for teaching English as a foreign language are, according to the key aspects of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for languages, with particular regard to the updated version of the Companion Volume (Council of Europe, 2020). These include the notions of the user/learner as a social agent; the adoption of an integrated approach to language activity, moving from four skills to four modes of communication, through the addition of interaction and mediation; a positive approach to communication strategies; the action-oriented approach, and plurilingualism (North, 2020).

Since innovative technologies have the potential to significantly enhance CEFR-based English language teaching by providing personalized, interactive, and immersive learning experiences (Gulyamovich, 2025), the impact of "Twee", an AI-based system to create didactic materials for learning English (Ushkova, 2024), in comparison with "Cathoven" and "NoteLab English" on the design of activities in the EFL classroom will be investigated, in order to assess potential positive outcomes such as improved learning quality and personalized learning plans (Galán-Rodríguez et al., 2025) and to provide EFL teachers with an outline of how these tools can be used at a secondary school level, thus addressing the need for a holistic and applicable set of ethical principles for AI in an educational context (Nguyen et al., 2023).

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Nano open educational resources to enhance English linguistics teaching in Italian higher education: The EFFT_Mod Project

Giulia Staggini (Università di Siena) giulia.staggini2@unisi.it
Lucia La Causa (Università di Catania) lucia.lacausa@unict.it

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the global transition to online education (Turnbull et al., 2021; García-Morales et al., 2021; Fernández-Batanero et al., 2022; Mospan, 2023; Aristovnik et al., 2023, among others). Within the specific context of Italian higher education, this change has contributed to the introduction of digital educational tools for teaching and learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) (Kohnke, 2023; Sotomayor Cantos et al., 2023). The present proposal lies within the Project of Relevant National Interest (PRIN) for the creation of a good practice Higher Education network through the Eco-Friendly Flexible Teaching Model (EFFT_Mod), aiming at proposing a model for effective, flexible, and transferable teaching practices in EFL across Italian universities. The main research question addressed how Nano Open Educational Resources (NOER) can optimize instructors' time and resources in teaching linguistically related subjects. The research adopts a three-phase methodology. In the first phase, an explorative questionnaire was distributed to EFL university instructors to identify their pedagogical needs, challenges, and expectations regarding digital and hybrid teaching environments. The findings informed the second phase, which involved the design and implementation of NOERs, which are aimed at supporting teachers in adopting more flexible and student-centered approaches. In the third phase, a satisfaction questionnaire was administered to evaluate usability, pedagogical value, and perceived impact on teaching practices. Pilot studies carried out at the University of Siena and the University of Catania will be described to illustrate the application of this methodology in practice. These studies serve as a foundation for scaling the model to a broader network of institutions, ultimately contributing to a more cohesive and innovative EFL teaching landscape in Italian higher education.

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Prompting genre, prompting ethics: Embedding AI literacy in ESP

Virginia Vecchiato (Università di Parma) virginia.vecchiato@unipr.it

This paper aims at exploring English for Specific Purposes (ESP) as a key area for developing AI literacy. The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into educational and professional contexts, particularly through generative technologies, has prompted a substantial re-evaluation of literacy practices, genre conventions, and communicative norms.

Drawing on posthumanist approaches to literacy and current debates in AI ethics (Wang & Wang, 2025), this paper calls for a pedagogical shift from conventional "prompt engineering" to what has been termed "educational promptization" (Haugsbaken & Hagelia, 2024). This new approach encourages learners to engage dynamically with AI-generated texts (Sichen, 2020)—such as research abstracts, business correspondence, and legal documents—through iterative processes like planning, translating and reviewing (Pallotti et al., 2021; Alamargot & Fayol, 2009; Flower & Hayes, 1981), thereby re-conceptualizing AI systems as literacy partners.

The implications for ESP pedagogy are threefold. First, integrating AI tools aligns with the objectives of the White Paper on Artificial Intelligence (2020) and the Digital Education Action Plan 2021–2027, which promote digital competence and critical thinking. Second, incorporating AI into genre-based instruction offers an opportunity to reframe genre theory through the lens of human–AI collaboration, with a focus on audience, purpose, rhetorical stance, and prompt optimization (Henrickson & Meroño-Peñuela, 2023). Third, ethical engagement with AI must address concerns related to algorithmic transparency, surveillance, and data bias (Taddeo & Floridi, 2023).

Set against the broader post-pandemic context of AI-enhanced education (Hockly, 2023; Moorhouse et al., 2023; Bakhtiar, 2022; Munday, 2021), this approach supports the integration of generative AI into ESP curricula. It highlights the need to cultivate attentional literacy (Pegrum, 2021), critical prompting, and genre awareness, preparing learners not only for linguistic proficiency but also for AI literacy that is rhetoric-sensitive (Hart & Burks, 1972), ethically informed, and future-oriented.

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Critical digital literacies and learner autonomy: Opportunities and challenges of AI integration

Cesare Zanca (Università degli Studi di Siena) cesare.zanca@unisi.it

The integration of AI-powered tools such as ChatGPT into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and literature education appears likely to reshape both classroom practices and the skills learners are expected to develop. Drawing on preliminary findings from the PRIN project "The Eco-Friendly Flexible Teaching Model" and on a theoretical framework that conceptualizes AI as both an enabler and a disruptor of traditional learning paradigms (Bibauw et al., 2022), this study explores how Italian university lecturers may be approaching the pedagogical challenges and opportunities posed by AI-driven innovation.

While digitalization initiatives such as the European Commission's Digital Education Action Plan (2023) advocate the adoption of innovative technologies to enhance learning, our data reveal a more complex scenario. Instructors recognize AI's potential to support language practice but also express concerns about preserving critical digital literacies, fostering learner autonomy, and promoting effective engagement with technology. Particular attention is given to the risks of uncritical reliance on AI-generated texts, which often encode normative biases and homogenize language use (Hockly, 2023; Chen et al., 2020).

By integrating corpus-based methodologies, the paper illustrates how AI-generated outputs can serve as sites for discourse exploration, encouraging learners to critically reflect on language use, register variation, and genre conventions. The findings suggest that, rather than replacing human judgment, AI should be positioned as a tool to enhance learners' agency, metalinguistic awareness, and sustainable engagement with English as a global language (Ruiz-Mallén & Heras, 2020).

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