

Using AI Tools to Enhance Language Learning for Emergent Multilingual Learners

Today, the United States has 5.3 million multilingual learner students (accounting for more than 10 percent of the school-aged population); however, 55 percent of educators have at least one multilingual learner (ML) in their classroom. This makes it critical for all educators to become familiar with artificial intelligence (AI) tools and the role they play in supporting ML students who are concurrently learning the English language and core academic content to achieve academic success.

AI can generate personalized learning materials, such as worksheets, quizzes, and reading assignments, aligned with students' learning goals, strengths, and interests. AI analytics can provide educators with insights into student progress and areas that require additional support, allowing educators to provide targeted interventions during small-group instruction. AI-powered tools can enable text-to-speech and speech-to-text capabilities, ensuring that all students, including multilingual learners and those with visual or hearing impairments, can access educational content. AI-driven language translation tools can break language barriers, making academic content accessible to multilingual learners and allowing full engagement in their learning process.

However, educators are still seeking guidance on how to harness AI's power to ensure equitable access, enhance digital literacy, and prepare all students to thrive in an AI-driven world while also balancing the growing AI technology actively permeating their personal and professional lives. Educators can meet these needs by engaging with existing professional development opportunities designed to empower them to manage increasingly complex learning environments, support them in meeting their diverse student needs, and develop the essential skills to integrate that technology to effectively and ethically assist them in fostering AI literacy in their classrooms.

Finally, it cannot be stressed enough that throughout this brief, AI is not a replacement for educators but a powerful ally in the pursuit of education excellence.

Getting Started: Using AI Technology in the Classroom

Many AI program developers recommend that educators interested in understanding and leveraging AI tools in their practices gradually become familiar with these technologies before introducing them into the classroom to understand their strengths and weaknesses. Once educators develop proficiency in using AI-assisted tools, such as Open AI ChatGPT, they can teach these tools little by little as part of a lesson plan.

In November 2022, OpenAI launched ChatGPT, a program ML educators have been using to develop English language development (ELD) lessons designed to help ML students acquire proficiency in reading, writing, listening, and speaking English. These lessons are tailored to meet the needs of younger students learning English as a second language. Similarly, secondary school educators used this technology to develop comprehensible input (language acquisition occurs when learners are exposed to input slightly beyond their current proficiency level) and communicative competence (language used appropriately in various social contexts) while concurrently enhancing English language development opportunities for ML students. Both scenarios aim to support language acquisition in a structured, supportive, and engaging way.

Educators can use the AI tool Perplexity to support ML students as they learn new content. Perplexity, a free AI-powered search engine, can turn challenging text into easily digestible content and identify key details on a chosen topic. It searches the internet in real-time, identifies relevant sources, and generates high-quality answers. Perplexity prioritizes accuracy and reliable answers, aiming to serve as the definitive source for knowledge discovery. Unlike a Google search, Perplexity shelters the content by significantly reducing the time it takes to process all the various resources. This tool enables students to read a few paragraphs on the topic, further assisting MLs learn the content more efficiently by using their more proficient language.

The great thing about AI-assisted tools, like ChatGPT and Perplexity, is that you don't need to understand how they work to use them effectively. AI-driven language translation tools can break language barriers, making educational content accessible to multilingual learners.

Unintended Consequences of Potential Overdependence on ChatGPT Among Emergent Multilingual Learners

While ChatGPT can be a helpful resource, educators who excessively rely on the AI tool without careful integration into learning processes may face various challenges. It is also imperative for educators to understand the potential impact that overdependency on these technologies can have on their students' overall language development.

Below are six key indicators of overdependency on ChatGPT to consider.

1. Diminished Language Acquisition Skills

When MLs rely too heavily on ChatGPT for translations or explanations, they may miss the crucial cognitive processes for acquiring grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Language learning thrives on active engagement, practice, and the ability to make mistakes. In addition, MLs may become more passive in their language practice, relying on AI to produce responses or write work, which reduces the opportunities for productive language output (speaking and writing).

2. Cognitive Overload or Dependence

Suppose MLs use AI to answer questions or translate text without fully understanding the material. This may prevent them from developing the problem-solving and critical thinking skills necessary for mastering a new language. Continuous dependence on AI for every linguistic challenge may erode MLs' self-confidence in communicating and solving problems independently.

3. Loss of Contextual and Cultural Understanding

AI language, while powerful, is deeply tied to culture and oversimplifies translation that does not always accurately capture nuanced cultural meanings, idiomatic expressions, or regional variations in language. This may lead to misunderstandings or the loss of crucial cultural context. This also means MLs may miss out on the wealthy, contextual nuances that come with real-life interactions and cultural immersion.

4. Lack of Personalized Support

AI may fail to address specific learning gaps or personal preferences that only a human educator can identify to meet their MLs' unique challenges. AI might not constantly tailor responses appropriately to those needs. Furthermore, AI tools lack the emotional intelligence and social sensitivity required to fully support MLs' psychological and emotional needs, which are often critical when acquiring a new language.

5. Impeded Peer Interaction and Collaboration

Language learning is often most effective when MLs engage in collaborative dialogue. Overdependence on ChatGPT may decrease opportunities for peer-to-peer communication and cooperative learning, which are vital for social language acquisition. It may also impede the opportunity for real-world interactions with native speakers, which is essential for honing their language skills.

6. Missed Opportunities for Educator-Learner Interaction

Overreliance on AI tools might mean MLs are less likely to seek feedback or clarification from educators, which can stymie growth and cause them to miss essential learning opportunities. Educators are critical in guiding students through language learning, offering support, and creating a nurturing environment. MLs relying too heavily on AI may miss the personalized, empathetic support that only human educators can provide.

Mitigating These Risks

To avoid these unintended consequences, educators should integrate ChatGPT as a complementary tool rather than a crutch. This can be done by:

- Encouraging balanced use of AI alongside human interactions and authentic language exposure;
- Promoting critical thinking by asking learners to evaluate AI-generated responses and use them as starting points for further exploration; and
- Fostering social, real-world language practice through peer collaboration, community involvement, and educator-student interactions.

In summary, while ChatGPT can be a valuable tool for enhancing language learning, overdependence can hinder key aspects of language development. AI must be used as part of a balanced and varied language learning approach that includes authentic, real-world practice and critical thinking skills. While ChatGPT can be a valuable resource, its role should always be to enhance—not replace—the core experiences that foster deep language learning. This equilibrium ensures that technological advancements enhance the learning process, supporting rather than overshadowing the vital educator-student relationship.

¹ Quintero, D., & Hansen, M. (June 2, 2017). English Learners and the Growing Need for Qualified Teachers. Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/english-learners-and-the-growing-need-for-qualified-teachers/>.

² Snyder, S., Staehr Fenner, D., Smith, S. & Singh, J. (2023, March). Terminology to Describe Multilingual Learners: Labels and Their Implications. SupportEd. <https://supported.com/terminology-to-describe-multilingual-learners-labels-and-their-implications/>.

³ Artificial Intelligence: Learning with AI, Learning About AI. (2023). California Department of Education. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1k8kjbLRolKOB7pu5s4wh-4_CufUNJEAI/view

⁴ Southern Methodist University, Simmons School of Education and Human Development. (2025). How to Use AI in the Classroom Ethically and Responsibly. <https://learningsciences.smu.edu/blog/how-to-use-ai-in-the-classroom>.