

ChatGPT: a Boon or a Bane for ELT (Writing Skills)?

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The recent advent of ChatGPT has sparked considerable controversy around its possible uses in academia and education establishments in general around the world. While some educators have voiced concern over fears of plagiarism, others are in awe and enthused by how AI could become an invaluable learning tool. This article attempts to strike a balance between these attitudes from the point of view of ELT, with an illustration of how ChatGPT may aid learning and testing writing skills (argumentative essay).

AI; ChatGPT; ELT; essay; testing.

It is already common knowledge that ever since it became available to the general public as a *freemium* service back in November 2022, ChatGPT (OpenAI, n.d.) has been fuelling a lot of controversy, given its potentially disruptive effects that challenge the *status quo* of society in general, as well as traditional working and learning paradigms in particular. If in the case of business and working many people have started to fear the very existence of their jobs and professions, many of these possibly being supplanted by chatbots in the near future, in education in general and in the academic world in particular, stakeholders are becoming increasingly apprehensive of how AI can ‘short-circuit’ the entire learning process. The main questions arising are: (1) ‘What value (if any) can AI-aided learning produce?’ and (2) ‘How to uphold ethics in relation to AI-generated final products (e.g. student essays)?’ If question (1) requires a much longer time to answer, as it is now too early to form an overall picture of the consequences of learning within this new paradigm, question (2) is much more immediate in its relevance, as it conveys the idea of *threat* to basic ethical standards through the threat of potentially rampant plagiarism.

Noam Chomsky himself regards using AI / ChatGPT as nothing else but ‘high-tech plagiarism’ and downright irrelevant as a learning tool (Marshall, 2023). It is true, indeed, that this constitutes an absolutely legitimate concern: instead of producing a personal, original academic essay for example, students can easily generate a finished product in a matter of seconds by using ChatGPT, presenting it as their own work. However, I would argue that this is clearly the case *only* within the traditional learning paradigm, largely based on *deduction*: students are first expected to learn the rules and conditions of essay writing, then do their research and finally, painstakingly produce / create the finished product (e.g.

an academic essay). As I will be showing later on in this article, by substituting *induction* for *deduction*, a solution to this problem (i.e. plagiarism) can become possible: instead of asking students to produce a piece of writing (e.g. an academic essay) from scratch – and thus suspect plagiarism through the use of AI – teachers and examiners could start *in reverse*, from the finished product (i.e. the essay itself) down to its constitutive elements, through a process of ‘*reverse-engineering*’. This brings me to the point of the present article: ChatGPT and ELT (argumentative essay writing).

By ‘*reverse-engineering*’ in this case I mean that language teachers / examiners could start from an already existing ChatGPT-generated (argumentative) essay in order to provide subsequent learning or testing tasks. An important specification becomes crucial at this stage: an argumentative essay, as understood in ELT, is *not the same as* an academic essay! While the latter explores and produces desirably exact and rigorous content based on previous research, the former is an exercise in language ability; in other words, for the purposes of my rationale here, an argumentative essay is *one of many ways* in which language educators can teach and test students’ writing skills in a foreign language. From this point of view, an argumentative essay is about demonstrating language proficiency through the degree of linguistic accuracy in relation to a logical, polarising topic, e.g. ‘*Would you like to freelance or work in a company?*’. It is obvious that within this framework, an argumentative essay (c.f. ELT) is much different from an academic (c.f. research) essay.

Consequently, the threat of possible plagiarism posed by using ChatGPT should be interpreted differently; the situation that I have in mind here is an examination setting in which students would need to write an argumentative essay, on the spot, in response to a question like the one above, within a time limit of, say, 30-40 minutes, under invigilation; students would then hand in their essays to be marked. The possibility of plagiarism under such circumstances arises from students potentially making fraudulent use of mobile phones (c.f. easy ChatGPT access) during such an examination in order to quickly generate an essay in response to the question given, which they could manually copy on to their answer sheets in handwritten form.

In what follows, I will be illustrating how the aforementioned ‘*reverse-engineering*’ / *inductive* process could work in practice, by starting backwards, from the *output* itself (the finished product / essay). Two examples will be provided, starting from the same ChatGPT-generated argumentative essay, based on the following prompt: ‘*Using your own arguments and examples, write an essay in response to the following question: ‘Would you like to freelance or work in a company?’ The essay must be between 250 and 300 words*’. The two illustrations that follow could be used either for teaching or for testing purposes – comments are made in the next section.

Example (1): (guided) writing / range of language structures

In order to teach or test students' ability to use (/ identify) a level-graded range of language structures (grammar and vocabulary) in a piece of writing such as an argumentative essay, teachers / examiners can first generate an essay using ChatGPT, which they subsequently transform into a gapped text practising or testing performance when dealing with a range of language problems.

For direction (A) below, students will demonstrate ability in using:

- all categories of pronouns, including possessives;
- determiners and quantifiers;
- definite / indefinite articles;
- auxiliary verbs;
- conjunctions;
- (dependent) prepositions;
- any compulsory element of a fixed phrase.

For direction (B) below, students will demonstrate ability in using:

- only prefixes;
- only suffixes;
- both prefixes and suffixes;
- more difficult derivatives (e.g. STRONG > strength, SOLVE > solution etc.).

For direction (C) below, students will demonstrate ability in using:

- semifixed expressions (collocations);
- fixed expressions (phrasal verbs, idioms, prepositional phrases);
- confusable words.

Directions for students: read the following essay in response to the question: '*Would you like to freelance or work in a company?*' Fill in each blank with ONE word, as explained below:

- A. for only a blank space, fill in with a word that best fits the context;
- B. for a blank space followed by a word in CAPITALS, change that word to form one that best fits the context;
- C. for a blank space followed by a few word options in CAPITALS, choose the option that best fits the context (you do not have to change the word form).

The essay:

01 ____ choice between freelancing and working for a company is 02 ____ decision that can 03 ____ SIGNIFY shape one's career and lifestyle. 04 ____ options offer unique advantages and drawbacks, and the decision ultimately depends on an individual's goals, 05 ____ PREFER, and circumstances.

Freelancing, for many, represents the 06 ____ ALLURE / EXAMPLE / INTENTION / TEMPTING of freedom and autonomy. 07 ____ a freelance professional, you have the flexibility to choose your projects, set 08 ____ working hours, and work 09 ____ anywhere with an internet connection. This independence can be particularly appealing for those seeking a better work-life balance or those with creative or 10 ____ ENTREPRENEUR aspirations. For instance, a graphic designer may prefer freelancing to explore diverse projects and showcase their creative flair.

11 ____, freelancing can offer financial benefits. Freelancers can often command higher hourly rates or project fees compared to salaried 12 ____ EMPLOY, given their specialized skills and the absence of overhead costs for employers. 13 ____ can result in a potentially higher income, especially for experienced professionals in fields 14 ____ software development or copywriting.

On 15 ____ other hand, working for a company has 16 ____ own set of merits. Company employees benefit from a stable income, job 17 ____ SECURE, and access to employee benefits such as health insurance, pension schemes, and paid leave. Companies often provide structured career development paths and opportunities for skill 18 ____ ENHANCE, which can be valuable for those looking to 19 ____ ELEVATE / LIFT / CLIMB / UPLIFT the corporate ladder.

20 ____ addition, company employment fosters a sense of belonging and camaraderie 21 ____ colleagues. Teamwork and collaboration are integral to many company cultures, which can 22 ____ personally fulfilling and professionally 23 ____ RICH. Furthermore, companies often provide a structured work environment 24 ____ can enhance productivity and discipline.

25 ____ conclusion, the choice between freelancing and working for a company is a subjective 26 _____. Freelancing offers autonomy, 27 ____ DIVERSE, and potential financial gains, but it can be 28 ____ COMPANY by uncertainty and the need for self-discipline. On the other 29 ____, company employment provides stability, benefits, and a supportive work environment 30 ____ may come with less flexibility. Ultimately, the decision should align with one's career goals and lifestyle preferences.

Answers:

- 01 *The*
- 02 *a*
- 03 *significantly*
- 04 *Both*
- 05 *preferences*
- 06 *allure*
- 07 *As / Being / Becoming*
- 08 *your*
- 09 *from*
- 10 *entrepreneurial*
- 11 *Moreover / Besides / Additionally*
- 12 *employees*
- 13 *This*
- 14 *like*
- 15 *the*
- 16 *its*
- 17 *security*
- 18 *enhancement*
- 19 *climb*
- 20 *In*
- 21 *among*
- 22 *be*
- 23 *enriching*
- 24 *which / that*
- 25 *In*
- 26 *one*
- 27 *diversity*
- 28 *accompanied*
- 29 *hand*
- 30 *but*

Example (2): (guided) writing / integrated reading and writing

Another such use of ChatGPT is the possibility of teaching and testing (guided) writing by integrating reading and writing skills. This basically combines comprehension of a global and particular context (essay > paragraph) and production of adequate output (one or more paragraphs, c.f. writing) based on this particular comprehension (c.f. reading). Again, in the case of an argumentative essay, teachers / examiners can first

generate an essay using ChatGPT, from which they subsequently remove 1 or 2 or 3 etc. paragraphs; students will have to supply the missing paragraph(s) by writing a number of words as specified by the teacher / examiner. It is obvious that teachers / examiners have the freedom to decide, based on necessity, how many and which paragraph(s) students must supply as answers. This could be a very useful way of testing together both reading skills (i.e. how students comprehend given information) and writing skills (i.e. how students use that initial comprehension to generate logical output adapted to the purpose / style / audience etc. required) within one single task. In the following example, the same essay as above is used as an illustration.

Directions for students: read the following essay in response to the question: 'Would you like to freelance or work in a company?' Based on the general context, supply the missing paragraphs according to the directions in brackets.

The essay:

PARAGRAPH 1 (INTRODUCTION)

The choice between freelancing and working for a company is a decision that can significantly shape one's career and lifestyle. Both options offer unique advantages and drawbacks, and the decision ultimately depends on an individual's goals, preferences, and circumstances.

PARAGRAPH 2

[____ Missing paragraph; write between 50 and 70 words as a logical paragraph. ____]

PARAGRAPH 3

Moreover, freelancing can offer financial benefits. Freelancers can often command higher hourly rates or project fees compared to salaried employees, given their specialized skills and the absence of overhead costs for employers. This can result in a potentially higher income, especially for experienced professionals in fields like software development or copywriting.

PARAGRAPH 4

On the other hand, working for a company has its own set of merits. Company employees benefit from a stable income, job security, and access to employee benefits such as health insurance, pension schemes, and paid leave. Companies often provide structured career development paths and opportunities for skill enhancement, which can be valuable for those looking to climb the corporate ladder.

PARAGRAPH 5

In addition, company employment fosters a sense of belonging and camaraderie among colleagues. Teamwork and collaboration are integral to many company cultures, which can be personally fulfilling and professionally enriching. Furthermore, companies often provide a structured work environment that can enhance productivity and discipline.

PARAGRAPH 6 [CONCLUSION]

[____ Missing paragraph; write between 50 and 70 words as a logical paragraph. ____]

Model answers:

PARAGRAPH 2

Freelancing, for many, represents the allure of freedom and autonomy. As a freelance professional, you have the flexibility to choose your projects, set your working hours, and work from anywhere with an internet connection. This independence can be particularly appealing for those seeking a better work-life balance or those with creative or entrepreneurial aspirations. For instance, a graphic designer may prefer freelancing to explore diverse projects and showcase their creative flair.

PARAGRAPH 6 [CONCLUSION]

In conclusion, the choice between freelancing and working for a company is a subjective one. Freelancing offers autonomy, diversity, and potential financial gains, but it can be accompanied by uncertainty and the need for self-discipline. On the other hand, company employment provides stability, benefits, and a supportive work environment but may come with less flexibility. Ultimately, the decision should align with one's career goals and lifestyle preferences.

As a final note here, for testing purposes, teachers / examiners could decide whether to use two ChatGPT-generated essays (on two different topics) if they want to test both the range of language structures in writing and also, reading integrated with writing, or just one essay in order to test either the range of language structures or reading integrated with writing. Obviously, both types of task offer a great amount of freedom in choosing what structures to test, how many and how complex, as well as which paragraphs, how long, how complex etc.

Learning value

Traditional language teaching / learning has been based on a causative sequence of processes: teachers explain the rules > students practise applying them > students produce an output > teachers assess the output. Differently put, the traditional paradigm has been 'Present-Practise-Produce' (Lewis, 2000, p. 177). Extrapolating from the principles of the Lexical Approach, starting from the finished product (i.e. ChatGPT-generated essay) and going back (c.f. '*reverse-engineering*') to its constitutive logic and form through tasks like the ones exemplified above, a new paradigm could become the future of language teaching and learning: 'Observe-Hypothesise-Experiment' (Lewis, 2000, pp. 177-180): the output (c.f. the finished essay) justifies the input (c.f. the tasks based on *induction* / '*reverse-engineering*'). Granted that 'the ultimate purpose of input is learner output' (Lewis, 2000, p. 180), I would argue that as long as the output could be considered *a given*, as a ChatGPT-generated text / essay, the focus is shifted on to the input, i.e. the suggested tasks above, towards the already existing output. In other words, by being able to solve tasks like the ones illustrated above, students could still provide clear proof of their level-graded language ability, both in terms of reception (i.e. understanding the general context of a given essay) and production (i.e. 'filling in the gaps' with the missing constitutive parts of a given essay).

Within the above framework, the traditional input-output relationship is inverted: the taught / learnt / tested input becomes the output (i.e. measurable student performance). The learning value remains the same as in the traditional paradigm ('Present-Practise-Produce'), albeit achieved in reverse, by *induction*.

Another practical learning value can be derived from the ease of access to a vast amount of possible output: essays (or any *other* kinds of ELT-oriented pieces of writing) can be instantly produced (ChatGPT-generated) on a large variety of topics in order to subsequently serve as a basis for understanding, exploring and processing language through '*reverse-engineering*', something that traditional ELT books cannot provide substantially. Naturally, this leads to a change in the teacher's role – extrapolating again from the tenets of the Lexical Approach: the teacher becomes a 'learning manager', as 'a primary aim of teaching must be to raise the students' awareness of their responsibility for, and power over, their learning' (Woolard, 2000, p. 46). In effect, this amounts to *embracing* AI / ChatGPT in language teaching / learning / testing, rather than banning it. In doing so, teachers not only acknowledge the existence of ChatGPT-like services, but can also encourage their students to make the most of them through transparent training in class (c.f. prompt-engineering); as a result, the teacher's role becomes more and more that of facilitating learning (Woolard, 2000, p. 36).

Test security

In terms of test security, this could be an issue or a non-issue, depending on how language teachers / examiners relate themselves to (students using) ChatGPT; three logical approaches to ChatGPT can be derived from the existing controversy over the threat of plagiarism:

(1) *Ignoring it*: this scenario functions as an *open secret*; both teachers and students know that ChatGPT exists and is freely available / accessible, but neither will acknowledge this; on the one hand, teachers would not like to 'give students ideas' and, on the other hand, students would not want to 'blow their cover' by bringing it up. Obviously, this attitude would be totally unrealistic and untenable, on both sides – burying one's head in the sand will not solve the problem.

(2) *Policing it*: such an approach suggests that both teachers (examiners) and students acknowledge the existence of and free ready access to ChatGPT; teachers (examiners), however, make a deliberate point of cautioning students against using ChatGPT, especially in examination settings, with punitive measures in place in case of unauthorised use (i.e. cheating by using ChatGPT in exams). Incidentally, this currently appears to be the main 'bone of contention' in the controversy over AI in academia.

(3) *Embracing it*: in this case, both teachers (examiners) and students not only acknowledge the existence and free availability of ChatGPT, but this AI service is also promoted as a viable learning tool; teachers devote ample class time to training students in using ChatGPT (prompt-engineering) effectively towards performance success in exams and also in further professional endeavours (i.e. students' future professions in which they would have to *produce text*, in one form or another). It can also be an honest and transparent way of empowering students through language analysis and awareness.

Point (3) above is basically the underlying message of this entire article. Not only that it justifies the illustrations given in the previous section, but it also renders point (2) above unnecessary – i.e. *policing it* becomes useless, as ChatGPT is openly assumed as a valuable tool in language acquisition, serving both teaching / learning and testing purposes, albeit in a new, modern paradigm that could also do justice to technological progress.

Conclusion

It goes without saying that the adoption of new technologies can be problematic at first. Less than one year from its inception, the use of ChatGPT in learning / academic establishments has been surrounded by controversy that still rages on. A lot of things will need to be done towards a concrete and final stance on the part of teachers and academics – we are now practically witnessing one of the greatest paradigm shifts in education.

As an early adopter, I have chosen to *embrace* the inevitable: AI is here to stay and artificially or anachronistically denying technological progress would be totally unwise, in my

opinion. Let us not forget that intellectual evolution has already offered plenty of such precedents: from typewriters we have evolved to PCs and the Internet, from physical archives and libraries to digital ones, from snail mail to email; we have got used to Google and Wikipedia as household names; in the blink of an eye we can look up words and facts using digital / online interfaces rather than paper-based dictionaries and encyclopaedias.

ChatGPT is nothing else but one more instance of humanity's intellectual evolution. Admittedly, ChatGPT is an extremely *powerful* embodiment of this evolution in that it can promise desired results in a 'fast and furious' manner, unrivalled so far. As educators in general and language instructors in particular (or 'learning managers', c.f. above), it is up to us to come up with the best strategies and decisions apt to empower students in their learning endeavours. Finally, ChatGPT is a *tool* already in use – among many other (learning) *tools* that have gradually come into being; besides, in most cases, students belong to at least one generation ahead of us, teachers.

Ultimately, finding '*proper*' ways to reconcile educational tradition and educational progress through technological advancements is, obviously, *work in progress*.

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