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Generative AI: Same same but different?

Diane Pecorari

Warschauer and colleagues' focus piece on generative artificial intelligence (AI) and second language (L2) writing makes a valuable and nuanced contribution to a debate too often characterised by simplistic and polarised disagreement about whether to circle the wagons against a perceived threat or uncritically embrace the new technology. Generative AI cannot be wished out of existence, so the question is not whether but how to use it, and this piece provides a starting point.

This is especially important in relation to L2 writing, a field in which, unlike many, student writing is more than just the vehicle for assessing attainments; the ability to produce written texts *is* the intended learning outcome. In making that point, the authors illustrate the need for writing skills and AI skills to develop in relation to each other:

Just as a young child should first learn arithmetic before being introduced to the graphing calculator, L2 writing instructors should introduce AI tools or partial functions of such tools in ways that align with students' learning goals and proficiency levels. (p. X)

The calculator analogy resonates with students' perceptions. A recent survey (Malmström et al., 2023) found that university students were positive about the affordances of AI, with one

respondent observing that the calculator "didn't mean that math teaching stopped in school, it became a tool. Similarly, education should learn to coexist with AI tools" (p. 7).

Maths teachers used to explain that arithmetic skills were important because it would be impossible to always have a calculator at hand. They were mistaken, not only about the impossibility of constant access to calculators, but also in suggesting that the main reason for learning a skill is in case technology lets us down. Many people fish or knit or bake bread recreationally, not in preparation for a day when there are no supermarkets or clothing stores, and thereby develop an understanding of what goes into the making of store-bought products. In the case of AI, this is what Warschauer et al. term the "with or without contradiction": people with well developed writing skills are more effective users of generative AI.

So with this helpful demonstration of why and how to exploit the affordances of AI, are we good to go? My optimism is limited, not because the model offered by Warschauer et al. is flawed, but because AI in many ways is reminiscent of older, more familiar pedagogical challenges which demonstrate that understanding a situation is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for an effective response. Here are some examples of what I mean.

We are invited to consider the case of a student who is surprised that AI use has attracted criticism, because "more affluent peers regularly hire tutors to help edit their work." Precisely analogous situations arise when students are pulled up for recycling human-generated text—i.e., patchwriting (e.g., Howard, 1999)—while the "tutor's" work for the affluent peer goes undetected.

The authors call for transparent acknowledgement of AI use, and optimistically predict that while "the standards for how to do so have not yet emerged [they] will certainly do so over time." Is that confidence merited? Harwood et al. (2010) investigated students' use of third-party proofreaders and their respondents "reported much uncertainty, and called for more explicit guidance" (p. 54). I suspect that such explicit guidance is lacking because institutions like categorical rules, and are uncomfortable acknowledging that some questions, such as what assistance a proofreader, a tutor or a critical friend should provide, are subjective and complex. However, regardless of the reason, if standards for proofreading, which predates the internet era, have not emerged, despite an evidenced need for them, will they for AI?

Another reminder that understanding an issue does not resolve it can be found in the observation that AI skills are needed in the workplace because "employers value efficiency and productivity over authenticity." One could also add, over originality: unattributed recycling of earlier texts is a common workplace writing practice (e.g., Shaw & Pecorari, 2013), yet this skill is not commonly taught, because the potential benefits in the future workplace pale in comparison to the here-and-now risk of encouraging students to re-use text written by someone else.

A further observation, that "the key is to ensure that students have developed foundational writing skills before incorporating AI tools," is a specific instantiation of a basic pedagogical principle: meeting the learners where we find them. Misjudging their starting point, or how far they can realistically go, always yields poor results, yet it persistently happens. For example, patchwriting exists because students are admitted to educational contexts with insufficient linguistic resources for the high-stakes assessment tasks they will be called upon to perform.

In short, this focus piece demonstrates that a new feature on the educational landscape (generative AI) calls for an old-school response (good pedagogy). The problem lies not in the

analysis presented, but in the reality that the policies and practices of educational institutions are largely driven by considerations other than pedagogy. This may be particularly visible in questions of intertextuality—whether the source is human or a machine—because intertextuality straddles the boundary between accepted, conventional writing practices, which are beautifully messy and chaotic, and illegitimate or unauthorised writing practices, which are regulated by systems which abhor shades of grey.

I am therefore intrigued and inspired by this thoughtful and constructive response to AI, but the sceptic in me has low expectations of seeing it widely adopted by a sector with a track record of ignoring available pedagogical solutions to potentially problematic situations. The optimist in me retains some hope that the newness and rapid spread of the technology may shock educational institutions into a return to first pedagogical principles, along the lines the authors suggest. If so, the knock-on effects on other educational issues could be salutary.

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