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Legal, Affective, and Policy Dimensions of the AI Ecosystem in Language Education

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ABSTRACT

The integration of artificial intelligence into language education occurs within a complex ecosystem of legal frameworks, emotional responses, institutional policies, and assessment practices. This paper moves beyond pedagogical considerations to examine three interconnected areas: first, legal issues including intellectual property, liability, misrepresentation, and privacy concerns raised by processing learner data; second, affective dimensions including technostress, precarity, digital wellbeing, and the impact of working alongside systems that appear to surpass human capabilities; third, the policy environment, arguing that AI must be addressed through institutional dialogue, coherent guidelines, and curriculum integration. Assessment is also addressed, arguing for a shift from product-focused to process-inclusive approaches. Drawing on the Gartner Hype Cycle, the paper argues that the transition from technology-focused enthusiasm to productive integration is neither automatic nor inevitable, and that attending to ecosystem-level concerns is essential for sustainable AI adoption.

KEYWORDS

Artificial Intelligence, Language Education, Legal Issues, Intellectual Property, Technostress, Digital Wellbeing, Policy Development, Assessment, Hype Cycle

INTRODUCTION: BEYOND PEDAGOGY

Since the emergence of ChatGPT in late 2022, the volume of literature on artificial intelligence in language education has been nothing short of extraordinary. Researchers and practitioners have explored the potential of generative AI tools for writing feedback, materials development, conversational practice, error correction, and a host of other pedagogical applications (Crompton et al., 2024; Li et al., 2025), and the pace at which new studies appear shows little sign of slowing. Much of this work has been valuable, providing teachers with insights into what these tools can do and how they might be incorporated into classroom practice. Yet in the rush to understand the pedagogical affordances of AI, there has been comparatively little attention paid to the broader ecosystem within which these tools are being adopted. The conversation has been overwhelmingly focused on what AI can do for teaching and learning, and while ethical concerns have been raised broadly, with far less consideration has been given to the systemic conditions that will ultimately determine whether AI integration is sustainable, equitable, and responsible.

This paper argues that three such conditions are particularly consequential and that their neglect carries real risks. A teacher who develops innovative AI-enhanced materials may find that questions

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of intellectual property ownership remain unresolved. An institution that encourages the use of AI without coherent guidelines may discover that its learners are confused, anxious, or disengaged. A profession that fails to address the emotional toll of rapid technological change risks losing experienced practitioners who feel unable to keep pace. These are not hypothetical scenarios; they are already playing out in educational settings around the world, and they point to a set of interconnected concerns that extend well beyond pedagogy. Legal frameworks determine what is permissible; the affective realities of teachers and learners determine whether those who are expected to work within such frameworks can do so sustainably; and institutional policy is the mechanism through which both legal boundaries and human needs are translated into coherent practice. Without attention to all three, even the most promising pedagogical applications of AI risk being undermined.

It is worth acknowledging that many of the challenges associated with AI are not entirely without precedent. Language education has a long history of grappling with the implications of new technologies, from the early days of computer-assisted language learning through the emergence of the internet and, much more recently, machine translation. Each of these transitions raised questions about pedagogy, integrity, and professional practice that echo the current debates about AI. What distinguishes the current moment, however, is both the speed and scale of the change and the breadth of the capabilities that AI tools offer. As Warschauer and Xu (2024) have argued, generative AI represents more than an incremental advance; it marks a turning point for the field, comparable to the transformation that the internet brought to language learning three decades ago, yet arguably more far-reaching in its implications for how language is produced, consumed, and assessed. The lessons of previous transitions are valuable, but they are not sufficient on their own to guide the profession through what is arguably the most significant technological disruption it has faced.

The purpose of this position paper is to examine the legal, affective, and policy dimensions that together constitute the broader AI ecosystem in language education. The paper also considers assessment as the domain in which the practical consequences of all three dimensions become most immediately apparent. To organise these arguments, the paper draws on the Gartner Hype Cycle (Fenn & Raskino, 2008) as a framework for understanding the current moment and the trajectory that lies ahead. The paper concludes with recommendations for institutions, policymakers, and teachers as the field moves towards what we hope will be a more sustainable and evidence-based approach to AI in language education.

SITUATING AI IN THE HYPE CYCLE

The trajectory of enthusiasm and disillusionment that we have seen with generative AI in education is by no means unique to this particular technology. Fenn and Raskino (2008), drawing on earlier work within Gartner's research consultancy, proposed the Hype Cycle as a model for understanding how emerging technologies move through predictable phases of reception. The model describes five stages: the Technology Trigger, where a new innovation first captures attention; the Peak of Inflated Expectations, where enthusiasm outpaces evidence and the technology is credited with transformative potential; the Trough of Disillusionment, where limitations become apparent and early adopters encounter setbacks; the Slope of Enlightenment, where more realistic understandings develop and evidence-based practices begin to emerge; and finally the Plateau of Productivity, where the technology is integrated sustainably and its genuine value is understood. While the model was originally developed for the technology industry, where it was intended to guide investment decisions and product strategy, its applicability to educational technology adoption has been recognised by a number of researchers, and it provides a useful lens through which to examine the current state of AI in language education.

Mapping the experience of generative AI in language education onto this framework is instructive, and the broad contours of the path have already been traced in some detail (Stockwell, 2024). The Technology Trigger occurred in late 2022 with the release and widespread recognition of ChatGPT's