

Will generative AI kill off the coursebook?

Savannah Davis
and Daniel Xerri



Abstract

The emergence of generative artificial intelligence (AI) is challenging the role of traditional coursebooks in ELT. This article explores how AI-driven tools offer students more dynamic and personalized learning experiences. It also highlights the need for educators to adapt to the rapid changes that this new technological landscape promises.



Biographies

Savannah Davis (freelance) and **Daniel Xerri** (University of Malta)

Savannah Davis is a teacher with a passion for psycholinguistics and second language acquisition. She is interested in research on the relationship between language and cognition as well as the effective use of technology in language teaching and learning.

Prof Daniel Xerri is an Associate Professor in Applied Linguistics and TESOL at the University of Malta. He is the author of many publications on different aspects of English language education. www.danielxerri.com



Introduction

The release of ChatGPT in November 2022 sparked concerns among some educators about the impact of this new technology on teaching and learning. Their fears were largely a result of an awareness that generative artificial intelligence (AI) is markedly different from other technologies developed over the past few decades. Generative AI is considered a disruptive technology because it has the potential to radically alter the way things operate in many social domains (Christensen et al., 2015). As is the case in other spheres, within education the disruption caused by AI is eliciting mixed reactions: some educators are enthusiastic, viewing AI as an opportunity for the kind of innovation that can enhance the educational experience, while others are more cautious or even hostile, perceiving the technology as destabilizing the status quo they are most comfortable with.

For instance, at an institution where one of us works, there was a lengthy debate about whether the word “embrace” should be included in the AI usage guidelines being formulated for teachers and students. The high-level discussion centred on whether the guidelines should specify that generative AI should be embraced in education. Those educators and leaders arguing against the word’s inclusion were motivated by a distrust

of the technology, seeing it as undermining the kind of education they were used to. Even though the word was eventually added to the guidelines, there was still dissent among those who warned that tolerating AI’s presence in the classroom would lead to the collapse of education as we know it.

While AI will most surely lead teaching and learning to change in fundamental ways, adopting a negative attitude towards it is to dismiss the veracity of the idea that the technology’s transformative potential can be a force for good in education.

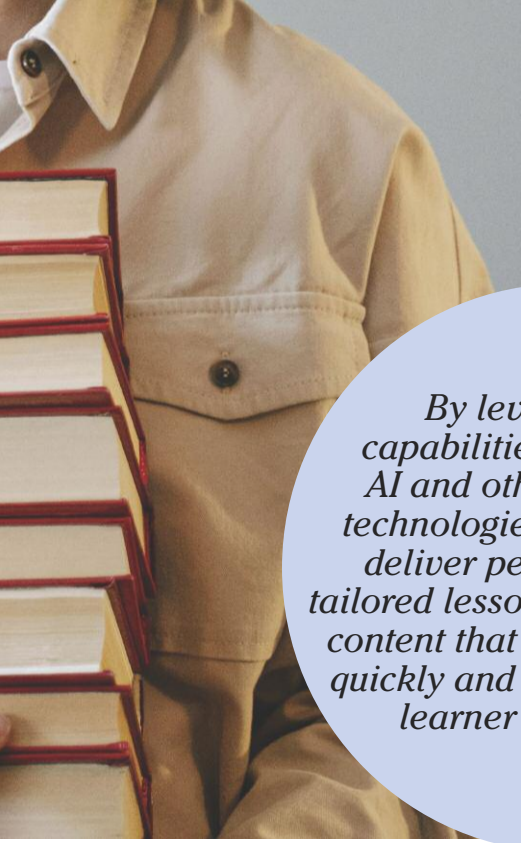
The demise of the coursebook

In the context of ELT, one of the changes we might witness due to the widespread use of generative AI by students and teachers is the demise of the coursebook. Over the years, many teachers have agonized about having to face a classroom with a lesson based on a topic that had lost its relevance throughout a coursebook’s lifespan. For example, in 2018 one of us was required to teach a lesson revolving around the usefulness of the BlackBerry phone—a device that had lost favour with the public more than a decade prior (Tauli, 2013). Such topics force teachers to toe the line, attempting to strike a balance between compliance with the syllabus and school policies while seeking to adapt topics and materials to present times. The use of lesson plans centred around contemporary topics are undoubtedly more conducive to a student’s linguistic development.

Fast forward to 2024 when generative AI is becoming as ubiquitous as the internet itself (Heaven, 2023). As a result, it is arguably increasing the speed at which our world develops (Makridakis, 2017).

In a social context in which things are advancing at a much faster pace than publishers can produce and distribute coursebooks, educators face a critical question: can these traditional resources keep up with the rapid evolution of language, technology and culture? This discrepancy impacts not only the relevance of the materials but also the engagement and effectiveness of language learning. While coursebooks have long been a staple part of language instruction, generative AI now risks usurping the power they

“
... some educators are enthusiastic, viewing AI as an opportunity for the kind of innovation that can enhance the educational experience, while others are more cautious or even hostile, perceiving the technology as destabilizing the status quo they are most comfortable with.
”



“
By leveraging the capabilities of generative AI and other educational technologies, educators can deliver personalized and tailored lessons using up-to-date content that can be generated quickly and serve to enhance learner engagement.
 ”

wield over teachers and learners. However, even though AI is becoming the new contender for the authoritative position held by coursebooks, over the past quarter of a century proponents of Dogme have challenged the key role and value this resource has in English language classrooms all around the world (Thornbury, 2000; Xerri, 2012).

Generative AI vs coursebooks

Traditional coursebooks are often criticized for their inability to keep pace with rapid cultural and technological shifts (Graves, 2000). The BlackBerry lesson example mentioned above highlights a disparity between current events and printed materials published long before the mainstream integration of generative AI, with lesson topics often lagging years behind the latest developments in society. This affects the relevance of learning materials, potentially demotivating students whose daily realities differ sharply from what is presented through coursebook materials. Moreover, the content of coursebooks often reflects the socio-cultural context of the time in which they were published, which can quickly become outdated. For instance, discussions on technology, social issues and even informal language constantly evolve. A coursebook’s ability to showcase these changes is severely limited, presenting the danger of exposing students to cultural and linguistic trends which might have lost their currency.

Digital lesson plans and digital extensions of coursebooks have been available through subscription services and online platforms for several years. Although most educators do not see them as a cost-effective solution, such materials still face the issue of quickly becoming outdated. On the contrary, the capabilities of AI have

now expanded educators’ ability to constantly update their materials. Freemium AI platforms (a combination of “free” and “premium”, where you can pay for supplemental features) such as Diffit allow teachers to generate lesson plans from video links and articles available online. These tools even provide the facility to grade the language within articles, allowing for the creation of materials that reflect current events, trends and general student interests. This enables students to connect their learning to their everyday experiences. Creating customized and up-to-date lessons was previously a very time-consuming task, making the ready-made lesson materials in coursebooks a more attractive option. However, by means of generative AI, teachers can now easily create an entire lesson adapted to the needs of their teaching context and students in the space of a few minutes.

Unlike the affordances of AI, coursebooks are limited in terms of opportunities for interactivity and the incorporation of multimedia elements, which are increasingly significant as more and more of the global population actively uses smartphones and social media. Some coursebooks do attempt to harness the interactive potential offered by interactive whiteboards, but the content of digital versions tends to be as static as their physical counterpart. AI, in conjunction with other learning technologies, allows for simulations, interactive exercises and real-time updates, which are far beyond the capabilities of printed coursebooks. For instance, PDF content can be extracted by AI and transformed into a digital game instantly on platforms such as Quizizz. Such technology also provides the flexibility needed to continuously and easily adapt to the diverse and ever-evolving student needs.

Harnessing generative AI in language classrooms is not just about “embracing” new technologies but transforming and enhancing the pedagogical approach through strategies like gamification. Gamification applies game elements in non-game contexts, enhancing learner engagement through fun, competition and rewards (Deterding et al., 2011). Traditional coursebooks are static in nature, lacking dynamic elements which can stimulate and promote sustained learning. AI-driven platforms can adapt to the learner and target individual weaknesses; the personalized approach they afford can significantly enhance the learner’s engagement and motivation (Harry & Sayudin, 2023), as well as the overall quality of the learning experience.

Conclusion

As the education landscape continues to evolve, it is crucial for educators to embrace and adapt to the affordances presented by novel learning technologies such as AI-driven tools. While coursebooks have played a significant role in the history of English language education, their limitations when compared to rapid technological and cultural advancements necessitates a shift towards more dynamic and interactive digital solutions. By leveraging the capabilities of generative AI and other educational technologies, educators can deliver personalized and tailored lessons using up-to-date content that can be generated quickly and serve to enhance learner engagement. As the capabilities of generative AI continue to expand and propel forward the evolution of every aspect of our lives, it seems plausible to conclude that this technology is also sounding the coursebook’s death knell.

References

Christensen, C. M., Raynor, M. E., & McDonald, R. (2015, December). What is disruptive innovation? *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2015/12/what-is-disruptive-innovation>

Deterding, S., Dixon, D., Khaled, R., & Nacke, L. (2011). From game design elements to gamefulness: Defining “gamification”. In *Proceedings of the 15th international academic MindTrek conference: Envisioning future media environments* (pp. 9–15).

Graves, K. (2000). *Designing language courses: A guide for teachers*. Heinle & Heinle.

Harry, A., & Sayudin, S. (2023). Role of AI in education. *Interdisciplinary [sic] Journal and Humanity [sic] (INJURY)*, 2(3), 52–60. <https://doi.org/10.58631/injury.v2i3.52>

Heaven, W. D. (2023, February 8). ChatGPT is everywhere: Here’s where it came from. *MIT Technology Review*. <https://www.technologyreview.com/2023/02/08/1068068/chatgpt-is-everywhere-heres-where-it-came-from/>

Makridakis, S. (2017). The forthcoming artificial intelligence (AI) revolution: Its impact on society and firms. *Futures*, 90, 46–60. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2017.03.006>

Taulli, T. (2013, September 23). Lessons from the fall of BlackBerry. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/tomtaulli/2013/09/23/lessons-from-the-fall-of-blackberry/>

Thornbury, S. (2000, February/March). A dogma for EFL. *IATEFL Issues*, 153, 2.

Xerri, D. (2012). Experimenting with Dogme in a mainstream ESL context. *English Language Teaching*, 5(9), 59–65. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/elt.v5n9p59>