Reflections on Pearson's 'Building Confidence in AI Skills for English Language Teaching' Webinar Series'

By

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Pearson Languages hosted a five-part live webinar series titled "Building Confidence in AI Skills for English Language Teaching," from September 23rd to 27th, 2024. The series featured leading AI experts who explored topics such as generative AI, ethics, AI literacy, language testing, AI-enabled learning tools, and AI prototypes, with a particular focus on how to effectively use the latest tools, trends, and techniques to enhance English language teaching.

On the first day, Dr. Jules White, Director of Vanderbilt's Initiative on the Future of Learning & Generative AI, discussed how generative AI can reshape language learning. Dr. White highlighted its transformative impact on education and communication, emphasizing the importance of teaching language skills to enable effective interaction with AI. He demonstrated practical applications such as personalized learning experiences and problem-solving through conversational AI.

Below are key takeaways from the first session, titled *"Understanding the AI Framework: A Back-to-School Guide":*

-Teaching students to communicate effectively in English is becoming increasingly critical in an AI-driven world. Mastering language skills empowers students to engage not only with humans but also with AI. This shifts the focus from traditional search methods to meaningful dialogues with AI.

-Generative AI enhances learning by enabling users to create tailored content for practice, such as creative storytelling. It allows learners to use personas to simulate conversations, translate complex concepts like *relativity* into more relatable terms through metaphors, and use real-world images to explore vocabulary and context.

However, there are certain challenges to address:

- Engagement with generative AI should prioritize the development of critical thinking and creativity rather than just seeking direct answers. Students must cultivate skills that allow them to leverage AI for deeper learning, rather than relying on it for quick responses or simply copying content.

- AI "hallucinations"—where the technology generates incorrect or fictional information—can also foster creative thinking and new ideas, but users must remain critical and fact-check outputs for accuracy.

Dr. White concluded his session by describing augmented intelligence as an "exoskeleton for the mind," encouraging educators to amplify human attributes rather than attempt to replace them.

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Augmented intelligence, not "artificial

Don't try to replace human intelligence and creativity with an "artificial" substitute, we want ***augmented intelligence*** ***that puts humans as an integral piece at the center***.

Augmented Intelligence (AI+) is about augmenting and amplifying human creativity and problem solving.

You want to augment and amplify your unique human attributes, not attempt to replace them.

Augmented Intelligence serves as an "exoskeleton for the mind"

Part 2 of the series, "*Navigating the Challenges of AI Literacy for Educators*," explored three key areas: incorporating AI into lectures, assignments, and assessments. Victoria Lansdown, AI Education Instructional Designer, led the session and demonstrated how to create engaging, tailor-made lessons. A key takeaway from this section was the importance of crafting precise prompts to generate personalized content using AI. Lansdown also emphasized the need to carefully design rubrics, especially for creative tasks that AI may struggle with, while also addressing issues related to AI ethics and literacy. She recommended using evidence-based approaches to teaching that keep humans in the loop, while also recognizing the existing cheating risks and the importance of giving students agency and choice. She concluded her session by briefly referencing two important UNESCO documents: *'AI competency framework for students'*[1], *'AI competency framework for teachers.'*[2]

Table 1. AI competency framework for students

Competency aspects	Progression levels		
	Understand	Apply	Create
• Human-centred mindset	• Human agency	• Human accountability	• Citizenship in the era of AI
• Ethics of AI	• Embodied ethics	• Safe and responsible use	• Ethics by design
• AI techniques and applications	• AI foundations	• Application skills	• Creating AI tools
• AI system design	• Problem scoping	• Architecture design	• Iteration and feedback loops

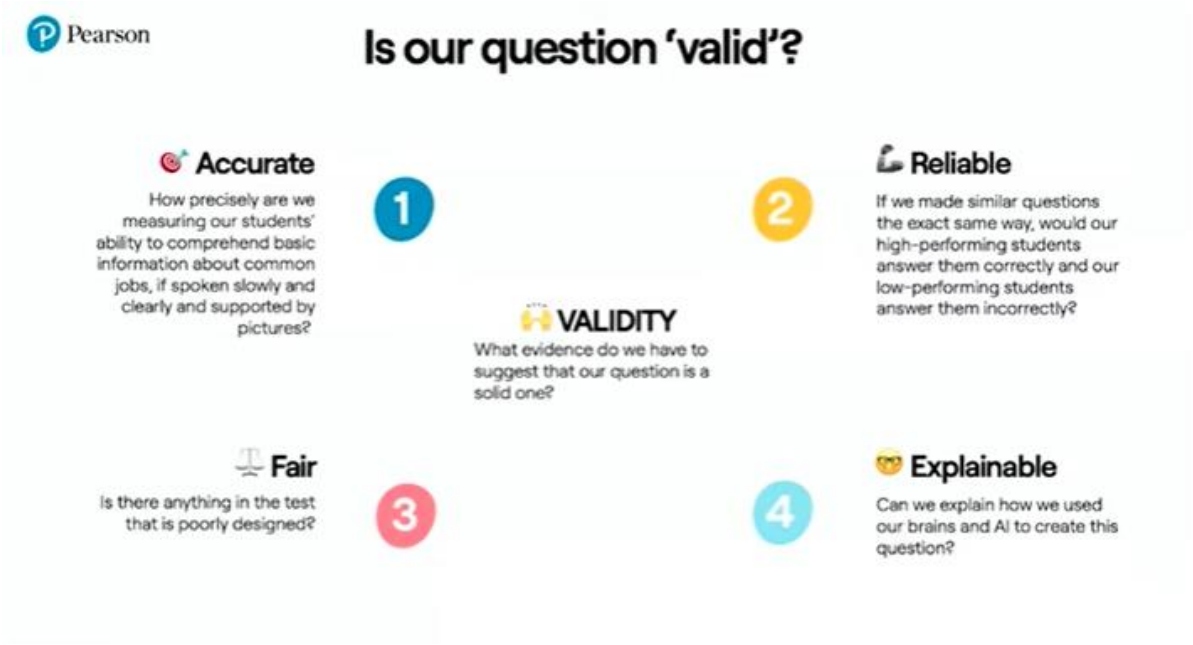
[1] UNESCO. (2024). *AI competency framework for students*. https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/ai-competency-framework-students

[2] UNESCO. (2024). *AI competency framework for teachers.* https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000391104

In part 3 titled *"Is AI the magic solution for language testing?"* the speaker, Jarrad Merlo, an AI Product Manager in Pearson's English Language Learning Accelerator, challenged the idea of using the rapidly evolving GenAI tools straight 'off the shelf' for language testing. He began with an engaging analogy, comparing a 'thermomixer' to the process of preparing a listening progress test using AI tools. This comparison highlighted the need for a thoughtful combination of GenAI capabilities and human expertise.

Merlo then walked the audience through the various stages of developing a listening test. These stages included selecting appropriate vocabulary, defining the context and objectives, creating the transcript, formulating questions, and incorporating design elements such as visuals. He demonstrated the use of ChatGPT-4 for generating the transcript, DALL-E for producing visuals, and ElevenLabs for creating audio content. It was fascinating to witness the step-by-step process of designing instructional materials from scratch.

Merlo concluded by emphasizing the importance of thoroughly testing all assumptions to ensure that AI tools used in language testing are accurate, reliable, fair, and explainable.

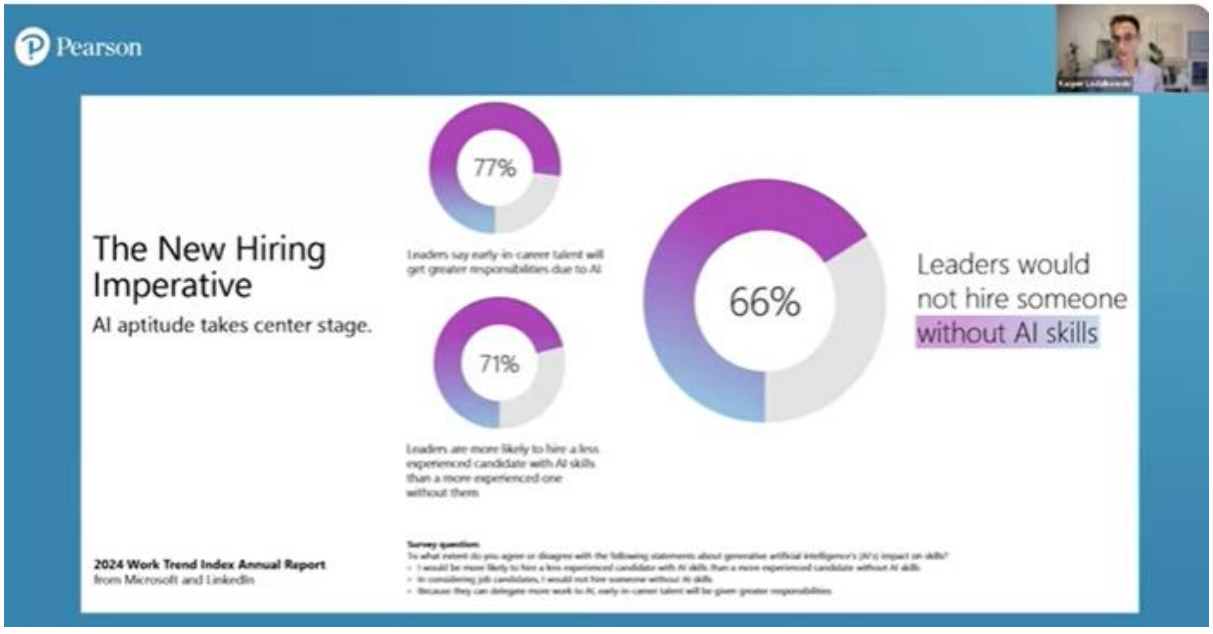


In part 4, "*AI-enabled language teaching and learning with Pearson*", Kacper Łodzikowski, Vice President of AI Capabilities at Pearson, demonstrated recent examples of scenario-based practice of future skills, AI-enabled feedback in the virtual classroom and a content generation toolkit for teachers. Łodzikowski shared insights on how AI tools are used to enhance educational experiences, from assessment to personalized learning. He particularly focused on AI's role in assessment, comparing human scoring vs. machine scoring.

He argued that current out-of-the-box large language models (LLMs) are unsuited for summative, high-stakes assessments for several reasons. One key issue is that their output cannot be 100% reliable. Additionally, fine-tuning their behavior is challenging, as these models are trained on datasets that can perpetuate socio-cultural biases. Proper safeguards are necessary to ensure that any feedback they generate is appropriate and unbiased.

Interestingly, Łodzikowski emphasized that for generative AI, hallucination is "not a bug, but a feature." He explained that hallucinations—where the AI generates incorrect information—can be minimized by grounding the AI in trusted knowledge sources.[3]

At the end of his session, Łodzikowski stressed the importance of helping students future-proof themselves for the AI-driven economy. He referenced "The New Hiring Imperative" from *2024 Work Trend Index Annual Report* from Microsoft and LinkedIn[4], which states that 66% of leaders would not hire someone without AI skills.



[3] Banerjee, S., Agarwal, A., & Singla, S. (2024). LLMs will always hallucinate, and we need to live with this. *arXiv*. https://arxiv.org/abs/2409.05746

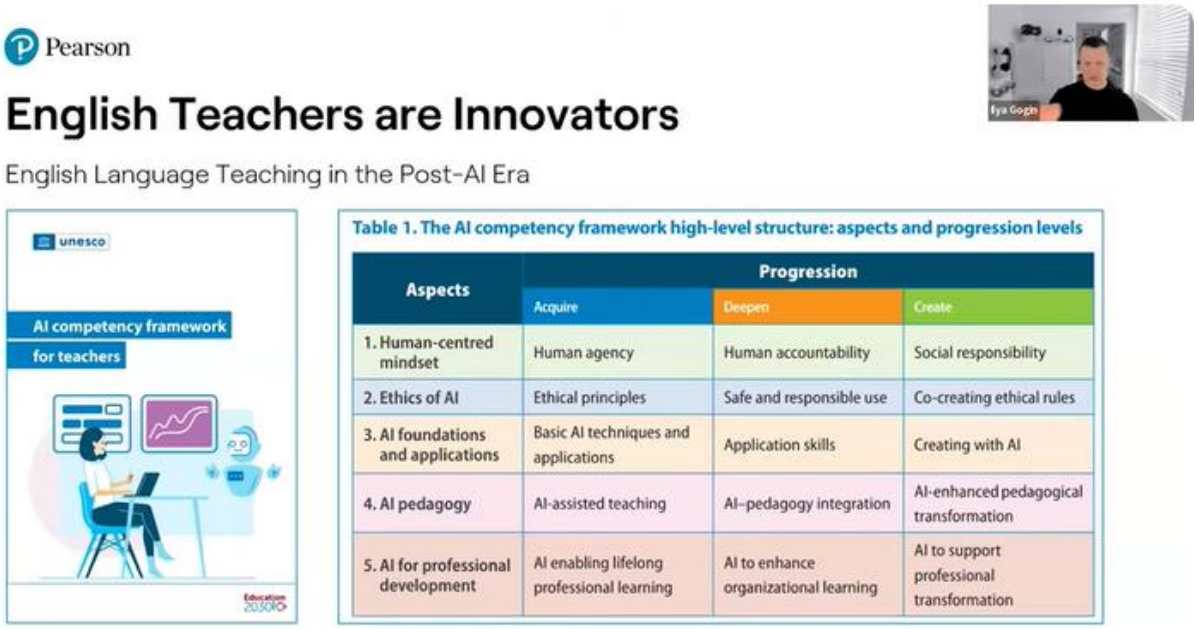
[4] LinkedIn. (2024). *2024 work trend index annual report*. https://assets-c4akfrf5b4d3f4b7.z01.azurefd.net/assets/2024/05/2024_Work_Trend_Index_Annual_Report_6_7_24_666b2e2fafceb.pdf

"*Hacking ELT with AI: Teaching as prototyping*", the final part of the webinar series offered simple, hands-on techniques to revamp the language classroom. Ilya Gogin, formerly an instructional designer and now the director of product management, presented the audience with a plethora of tools for prototyping, along with the principles of design thinking and learning experience to expand our pedagogical toolkit. Drawing on the *AI competency framework for higher level structure* in UNESCO's *AI competency framework for teachers,* Ilya highlighted a paradigm shift from AI literacy and AI use towards AI customization and AI tool design. Today's teachers are already creators using AI; however, they will eventually become creators of AI through pedagogy. Below is a list of various AI tools/platforms the speaker presented the majority of the session:

- Creating interactive quizzes with *Claude Artifacts*
- Custom listening passages with *ChatGPT* and *ElevenLabs*
- AI-Generated images to illustrate concepts with *DALL-E* & *Leonardo*
- Talking avatars with *Synthesia*
- AI-Generated songs with *Udio*
- For PD purposes, *NotebookLM*

Ilya concluded the session with a list of simple yet highly effective suggestions that left many, including myself, wondering why we hadn't thought of them before. Here are my top picks:

If stuck, ask AI to write the prompt.
Ask AI to generate a detailed description (chain of thought prompting)
Outsource! Delegate some of your work to AI avatars.
Use two AI tools at once.
All AI tools are input-output machines: better the prompt, better the response.



The recordings of the webinar can be accessed from the link below.

https://www.pearson.com/languages/community/webinars/building-confidence-ai-english-teaching.html

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