AI As Empowerment in The Applied Linguistics Classroom

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On a recent panel with other Hawai'i-based educators on the topic of "AI in Education," I shared how I encouraged my students to use AI for certain assignments on the premise that they are *transparent* and *responsible* about their use: If they use AI when preparing for presentations, they should say so at the start of the presentation (transparency); and if they decide to use AI output, they must do their due diligence to check for hallucinations (responsibility).

As an example, I shared that I once had to call out a student for failing to acknowledge a sentence generated by AI on a slide. I explained that including an obviously AI-generated sentence without disclosure may negatively impact the audience's perception of the presentation. To me, it was a valuable learning moment: The callout would make my students more responsible for AI use in the future. Yet after the panel, a parent approached me with an unintended takeaway: "Are you sure you want to let your students use AI?"

More recently, I visited a second language (L2) classroom to talk about my entrepreneurial experience building an AI-powered language learning app. Given the students' major and interests in business, I included a demo on "Turning AI into Your First Employee." I began by asking, "Has anyone used AI before?" No one raised their hands. To encourage participation, a teacher repeated my question but added, "Be honest." Right then, I knew AI had already been framed as the devil—it is bad, and if you are a good student, you should not use it.

The emergence of generative AI in education has certainly fueled much debate: Some educators, myself included, have become AI enthusiasts, actively integrating AI into our curriculum; others, such as the parent and teacher described above, have expressed deep concerns about the harms AI may cause to education. While these concerns should not be dismissed, it is important to recognize that AI, when implemented into the curriculum appropriately, can not only facilitate learning and teaching but also empower those who engage with it.

In this paper, I reflect on my experience incorporating generative AI into the applied linguistics classroom. My goal is to show that AI plays a complementary role in education (e.g., Oleet & Yu, 2025; Seo et al, 2025), and when used with care, it manifests as a form of empowerment. To demonstrate this point, I present three vignettes from three university applied linguistics classrooms, highlighting emergent moments of empowerment through AI.

Teaching Contexts

Between Spring 2024 and Fall 2025, I had the privilege of incorporating AI into three bi-level (BA & MA) applied linguistics courses at two universities. The teaching contexts are summarized below.

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At Hawai'i Pacific University (HPU), I taught a course on teaching L2 reading and writing skills. Students worked in pairs to design a creative use of AI for teaching reading or writing. We hosted a hackathon to showcase their work (a recording of the AI Hackathon can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8fSMVnCwE1M. Within the same year, we published these ideas in the HPU TESOL Working Paper Series (see Asuncion & Bruno, 2024; Choe, 2024; Cruz-Alvarado & Hamada, 2024; Davidson & Jones, 2024; Potter & Coppock, 2024).

Fall 2024

I taught an L2 learning and technology course at HPU, where topics included (1) AI and language teaching and (2) AI and language learning. Students were encouraged—but not required—to use AI. The reason for not making AI usage a requirement is because a student had indicated reluctance to use AI for ethical reasons before the course began (see Vignette #3 below). To make the class more inclusive and respectful of students' choices, I made sure all assignments could be completed through alternative means without using AI.

Fall 2025

More recently, I taught a course on language learning with apps at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. Students came from diverse backgrounds: applied linguistics, computer science, interdisciplinary studies, mechanical engineering, and Asian studies. The first half of the class focused on L2 learning and teaching theories. The rest of the course was dedicated to individually designing and building a working prototype of a language learning app. Students presented their work at various stages through a hackathon, during usability testing, and in a final product pitch.

To contextualize AI familiarity at the time: In Spring 2024, most students had used ChatGPT since its release in November 2022. Other frontier large language models (LLMs)—for example, Gemini, Claude, and Grok—were used relatively less frequently. By Fall 2025, students were familiar with many popular LLMs, especially ChatGPT. Vibecoding (AI-assisted coding) tools had rapidly advanced since the term was coined in February 2025, though most students encountered it for the first time in my class.

The vignettes below derive from these courses, capturing moments when AI supported adult learners in developing technological confidence, expressing ideas more clearly despite language barriers, and engaging critically with the ethical dimensions of AI use.

Vignettes

Vignette 1: Novia—The self-proclaimed Luddite

The self-proclaimed Luddite is a learner who expresses a lack of confidence in, or even fear of, using AI due to past negative experiences with technology. They are the opposite of those who self-identify as "tech-savvy." To such learners, AI sounds technical, complex, and difficult to navigate. Novia is one such learner. A second-career learner, she brings years of work experience from education and other industries. She is highly dedicated but often hindered by difficulties with software use. Despite calling herself a Luddite, she is not anti-technology—she simply gets frustrated when interfaces are unintuitive, such as not knowing how to move an action forward.

For her final project, Novia decided to create a pronunciation app for English learners. While getting from point A to point B was not without challenges, Novia actively took advantage of office hours, during which we discussed effective strategies to troubleshoot with AI. I encouraged her to treat

AI as a software engineer who could help realize the technical aspects of her pedagogical ideas. When chatting with AI, Novia provided the AI with an example website that she wanted to model her app after, which enabled the AI to generate more specific and targeted designs aligned with her expectations. Eventually, she created a working prototype of the app she had set out to build. The working prototype reached its 50+ iteration, showing Novia's commitment to the project. More importantly, completing the prototype demonstrates her transformation from a self-proclaimed Luddite in the beginning of the course to an app builder by the end of it.

Empowerment in Novia's case emerged through technological capability and perseverance. What began as self-doubt transformed into purposeful engagement as she learned to navigate AI effectively. By the end of the course, Novia no longer positioned herself as a Luddite but as someone who could teach others how to build pedagogical tools with AI.

Vignette 2: Jun—The seemingly lost language learner

Jun is a language learner who often displays trouble in understanding assignment instructions due to language barriers. As an early assignment, I asked my students to interact with an AI chatbot of their choice to generate an interactive mini-game. To observe students' baseline comfort with AI, I intentionally withheld prompting instructions. While I had imagined that Jun would need additional scaffolding to prompt AI effectively, I was proven wrong in the next class when he showed the class a sophisticated, functional English pronunciation game designed for Japanese language learners. Notably, Jun did not draft his prompt in advance nor did he have prior knowledge of how prompts "should" be structured. Instead, he simply interacted with the AI naturally, as if speaking to a person who could help him accomplish the task. Although his prompt contained occasional typos, the AI was able to recognize his intent and fulfill his query accordingly. The entire game was generated through a single prompt.

Jun's interaction with AI revealed a different side of his linguistic capability—one that was not visible through traditional assignments. While he sometimes struggles to verbalize ideas or follow instructions in English, he was able to communicate effectively with the AI to achieve his intended outcome. This observation is consistent with Tarone's (1979) characterization of interlanguage as "chameleon-like," in that learner performance varies systematically across tasks and interactional contexts. It also resonates with Young's (2008) argument that competence is not a fixed trait but an interactionally contingent phenomenon that emerges differently depending on the activity and interlocutor. In communicating with AI—where communicative intent was prioritized over linguistic form and where typographical errors did not obstruct meaning—Jun demonstrated his ability to communicate meaning for task accomplishment, regardless of his English proficiency level.

Empowerment for Jun manifested through expression and creative agency. AI functioned as a communicative partner that allowed him to focus on expressing ideas rather than decoding language or instructions. His success demonstrates how flexible tools allow language learners to show competencies that might otherwise remain hidden.

Vignette 3: Shelley—The ethically concerned learner

Shelley consulted with me even before the course began, knowing I had previously incorporated AI into assignments. An environmentally responsible and ethically reflective student, Shelley had researched the ecological impact of AI—for instance, that large AI data centers "can consume up to 5 million gallons per day, equivalent to the water use of a town populated by 10,000 to 50,000 people" (Yañez-Barnuevo,

2025). She expressed genuine concerns about contributing to this footprint and asked whether she was required to use AI in my class.

I reassured her she would never be required to use AI if it conflicted with her values. For every assignment, I provided parallel pathways, sharing a list of resources that included both AI-based tools and non-AI alternatives. Shelley chose the non-AI routes and also independently located additional resources, which she later shared with the class. She completed all assignments successfully without using any AI-powered applications, demonstrating that ethical restraint does not preclude rigor, creativity, or academic success.

During one class session, I dedicated time for Shelley to share her concerns with her peers. She spoke clearly and passionately about water consumption, carbon emissions, and the often invisible ecological costs of rapid AI adoption. Her contribution prompted thoughtful discussion and became a learning moment for the entire class. Whether we use AI or not, it is essential to understand the impact of our technological choices. For students who choose not to engage with AI, it is important to offer alternative pathways that are equally rigorous, meaningful, and aligned with course learning outcomes. Doing so respects students' ethical choices and reinforces that principled refusal is also a form of empowerment in AI-mediated classrooms. As for students who do choose to engage with AI, ethical awareness should inform how, when, and for what purposes these tools are used, including recognizing the environmental impact of AI and avoiding unnecessary queries that could be easily resolved with general internet searches.

Shelley's ethical stance also illustrated that resistance is not always absolute. In one class activity, I demonstrated using AI to generate music for L2 learning, inviting each student to contribute a sentence to collaboratively create a song. Shelley chose to participate by offering a line for the lyrics, while maintaining her personal boundary of not directly operating the AI tool herself. As educators, our role is not to mandate a single ethical position on AI but to create spaces where students can articulate their own boundaries, make informed choices, and have those choices respected. Ethical engagement, in this sense, is not about uniform compliance but about cultivating critical awareness, agency, and dialogue around technology use.

Empowerment in this vignette took a different form: Rather than being empowered through AI use, Shelley exercised agency by resisting it—and was supported in that choice. By offering alternatives and a platform to share her knowledge, the class benefited from her ethical awareness. Empowerment here meant having the freedom to act according to one's principles while contributing meaningfully to the learning community.

Discussion and Conclusion

Across these vignettes, AI manifested not as a "replacement for humans" but as a catalyst for different forms of learner empowerment. For Novia, empowerment meant gaining technological capability and confidence. For Jun, it meant finding a channel through which his ideas could surface more clearly than traditional classroom assignments allowed. For Shelley, empowerment took the form of ethical agency —the choice to critically resist AI and the opportunity to help others consider its environmental implications.

These stories together highlight the multidimensionality of AI as empowerment. This empowerment is cognitive, linguistic, and ethical. AI itself is not inherently empowering; rather, empowerment arises when learners are given the support, flexibility, and respect to engage with AI in ways aligned with their abilities, goals, and values.

In many ways, AI is like a kitchen knife. A knife is designed to make cutting easier by increasing efficiency, extending human capability, and improving everyday tasks. Yet, it can also be misused. The knife itself is not the problem but rather actors who use the knife with malicious intent or a lack of critical awareness. AI is similarly a sharp tool: powerful, assistive, and productive. But like any sharp tool, its effective use requires guidance, critical awareness, and responsibility.

Our role as educators, then, is not to shield students from AI nor to push them toward it uncritically. Instead, our task is to create the conditions in which students can learn to "hold the knife" safely—to experiment, to question, to adopt, or to resist with informed autonomy. Whether learners choose to engage deeply with AI, use it selectively, or critically resist it entirely, they benefit when we position AI as a complementary tool rather than a threat, and as a matter of agency rather than obligation.

The future of language education will be determined by how we empower learners to make thoughtful decisions about AI. AI is the present and the future; it is here to stay. It has quickly become a must-have 21st-century skill, and as a university instructor, part of my responsibility is to equip students with the marketable skills, literacies, and awareness that will make them competent and confident members of any workplace after graduation. So, to answer the concerned parent's question posed in the beginning of this paper—"Are you sure you want to let your students use AI?"—my answer remains: Yes, absolutely. But I will do so in ways that are transparent, responsible, and respectful of students' choices.

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