

THE BEST ENGLISH TEACHER IS NOT AI, IT IS PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

WHY ENGLISH CLASS SHOULD FEEL SAFE BEFORE IT FEELS SMART

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Whenever we discuss the future of English Language Teaching (ELT), the conversation almost inevitably turns to Artificial Intelligence (AI). New AI-powered platforms continue to emerge, each promising to revolutionize language education through personalized learning, instant grammar correction, pronunciation assessment, automated feedback, and virtual conversation partners that are available twenty-four hours a day. These innovations have undoubtedly changed the educational landscape and opened new possibilities for both teachers and learners. Yet, amid the excitement surrounding technological advancement, one fundamental issue often remains overlooked: students' emotional experience in learning English.

For many English lecturers, there is a classroom moment that feels remarkably familiar. A discussion begins, the lecturer asks a simple question, and suddenly the room falls silent. Students lower their heads, exchange hesitant smiles, or quietly hope that someone else will volunteer to answer first. Such silence is often interpreted as evidence of limited English proficiency. However, the reality is frequently more complex. Many students understand the lesson, possess sufficient vocabulary, and know the correct answer. What prevents them from speaking is not necessarily a lack of linguistic competence but rather the fear of making mistakes, being judged by their classmates, receiving public correction, or appearing less capable than others.

This reality reminds us that the greatest challenge in English language learning is not always linguistic; it is often psychological. Unlike many other academic subjects, learning a foreign language requires learners to communicate before they feel completely ready. Mispronouncing words, producing grammatically imperfect sentences, and searching for appropriate vocabulary are not signs of failure; they are natural stages in language acquisition. Unfortunately, many learning environments unintentionally encourage students to avoid mistakes instead of embracing them as opportunities for growth. As a result, silence becomes a safer option than participation, and the classroom gradually shifts from being a place of exploration into a place where students worry more about being correct than about learning.

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This is precisely where Artificial Intelligence offers an opportunity that extends beyond technological sophistication. The true educational value of AI does not lie in its ability to replace teachers or provide perfect answers within seconds. Instead, its greatest potential lies in creating learning experiences that reduce unnecessary anxiety and encourage students to participate more confidently. Imagine a student who lacks the confidence to speak English in front of classmates. Before entering the classroom, the student practices speaking with an AI assistant, repeating difficult pronunciations as many times as necessary without fear of embarrassment. Feedback is delivered privately, allowing the learner to improve at a comfortable pace without the social pressure that often accompanies classroom performance. In this context, AI does not replace the teacher; it helps students develop the confidence they need before entering authentic classroom interaction.

Perhaps this is the conversation that English educators should begin having. Instead of asking which AI platform is the most advanced or which application generates the best learning materials, we should ask a different question: Does this technology make students feel safer to learn? Educational innovation should never be measured solely by computational capability or algorithmic sophistication. A highly intelligent system may still fail educationally if students remain too anxious to participate. Conversely, even relatively simple technology can make a significant difference when it helps learners overcome fear, ask questions, express ideas, and view mistakes as an essential part of learning rather than something to be avoided.

This shift requires a broader change in how we understand the role of AI in English language education. For years, much of the discussion has been dominated by an AI-centered perspective, where innovation is primarily measured by what technology can accomplish. While this perspective has produced remarkable advances, it often places technology at the center of educational decision-making. It may now be time to move toward a more human-centered approach, where technological innovation begins not with the capabilities of machines but with the needs of learners.

In a Human-centered AI framework, technology is designed to support learners' confidence, emotional well-being, and readiness to participate, rather than simply improving instructional efficiency.

Within this perspective, teachers remain at the heart of education. No matter how sophisticated AI becomes, it cannot replace the uniquely human qualities that define effective teaching. Teachers understand emotions, recognize hesitation, build trust, inspire confidence, and create meaningful relationships that encourage students to grow. Artificial Intelligence should therefore be viewed not as a substitute for teachers but as a learning companion that complements their work by providing additional opportunities for practice, personalized support, and flexible learning experiences.

This philosophy also underpins the research currently being developed on an adaptive AI learning model for English language teaching. Rather than focusing exclusively on improving students' language proficiency, the project seeks to integrate technological innovation with psychological well-being by designing learning experiences that reduce anxiety and foster greater confidence in using English. The objective is not simply to produce students who speak English more fluently but to create learning environments in which students feel secure enough to participate, experiment, make mistakes, and continue learning without fear.

Ultimately, the future of English language teaching will not be determined by who develops the most powerful Artificial Intelligence. It will be shaped by educators who understand that meaningful learning begins with trust rather than technology. AI may personalize instruction, provide immediate feedback, and expand learning opportunities, but it cannot replace the sense of psychological safety that enables students to speak, ask questions, and learn from their mistakes. Students do not learn best when they are expected to be perfect; they learn best when they know they are allowed to be imperfect. Perhaps that is why the best English teacher is not Artificial Intelligence, but psychological safety, a learning environment where every student feels safe enough to say, "Let me try."



Let me try