

30 Essentials for Using Artificial Intelligence in English Language Teaching



Book Review

By Nicky Hockly

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Introduction

Nicky Hockly's *30 Essentials for Using Artificial Intelligence in English Language Teaching*. Cambridge University Press. (ELT), published by Cambridge University Press in 2024, is a timely and insightful addition to the Cambridge Handbooks for Language Teachers series. Authored by Nicky Hockly, a seasoned educator and technology consultant with over three decades of experience, the book draws on her journey with Artificial Intelligence (AI), from her 1980s encounters as a student living with AI researchers to her pioneering role in developing online ELT materials in the 1990s. Hockly's stated aim is to demystify AI, providing educators with practical strategies to integrate it into language teaching while critically addressing its ethical and societal implications.

Structured into four sections—A: Setting the Scene, B: AI in Language Teaching and Learning, C: The Big Questions, and D: Self-Development and AI—the book comprises 30 concise “essentials” or chapters, each offering a focused exploration of AI's role in ELT. This review summarizes the book's content, evaluates its contributions to the field, and critiques its strengths and limitations. As AI increasingly reshapes educational landscapes, Hockly's work serves as an essential guide for ELT educators navigating this transformative technology.

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Summary

Section A

Setting the Scene establishes a historical and conceptual foundation for AI in ELT. Hockly traces AI's roots to the 1960s with Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), which introduced basic digital tools, and the 1990s, when multimedia CD-ROMs enhanced interactivity. She distinguishes narrow AI—specialized tools like automated gap-fill exercises—from Artificial General Intelligence (AGI), which emulates human-like adaptability and problem-solving. Using vivid analogies, Hockly likens narrow AI to a factory machine assembling chairs and AGI to a skilled carpenter crafting bespoke furniture, positioning generative AI tools like ChatGPT closer to AGI on this spectrum. The section also charts AI's evolution from rule-based systems to data-driven Large Language Models (LLMs), critiquing the hype fueled by economic interests in the EdTech industry and a “technology solutionism” mindset that oversimplifies learning.

Section B

AI in Language Teaching and Learning, the book's practical core, outlines AI's applications in ELT classrooms. Hockly identifies three drivers of AI hype: economic motives within the lucrative EdTech sector, a pervasive belief that technology is indispensable for education, and a mechanistic view of language acquisition that reduces learning to assembling discrete components, neglecting empathy, cultural context, and social interaction. AI's practical applications include generating comprehension questions for texts, creating tailored practice tests for exam preparation, and serving as a conversation partner to enhance learner engagement. Tools like chatbots (e.g., Speak, ELSA) facilitate speaking practice, though they often struggle to interpret non-native accents accurately. Emerging technologies like Augmented Reality (AR) enable mixed-skill lessons, while Virtual Reality (VR) fosters immersive language use, though high costs limit their accessibility. Automated Writing Evaluation (AWE) supports writing development, and Intelligent Tutoring Systems (ITS) provide adaptive learning, albeit without the interpersonal dynamics of human teachers.

Section C

The Big Questions tackles the ethical, philosophical, and legal dimensions of AI in ELT. Hockly reviews research indicating that chatbots enhance speaking skills but lose appeal over time, while AWE delivers teacher-like feedback, particularly in large classes. She introduces “digital pedagogy,” emphasizing the need for teachers to master prompt engineering—crafting precise AI queries—and critically assess AI outputs for accuracy and bias. Ethical challenges include AI's bias against non-standard English varieties, which marginalizes diverse learners, and data privacy risks from the “datafication” of education, where student data may be sold. Academic integrity is another concern, as AI-generated texts challenge traditional assessments. Hockly advocates rethinking evaluation methods, such as adopting project-based tasks that integrate AI as a tool, rather than banning it. Copyright violations by AI companies using online content without permission and the environmental costs of AI's energy-intensive infrastructure underscore the need for critical literacy among educators and learners.

Section D

Self-Development and AI examines AI's impact on teacher well-being and professional development. Teachers' reactions to AI vary: some embrace its time-saving potential, while others fear job displacement or misuse by students. Hockly suggests that understanding AI's mechanics can alleviate these concerns, fostering confidence in its use. She proposes strategies like action research to evaluate AI's classroom impact, such as testing chatbots' effects on speaking confidence. AI can also promote learner autonomy by enabling self-directed practice, though students still value human interaction. As a Socratic tutor, AI aids teachers in deepening conceptual understanding, while "skills leveling" through AI tools can upskill less-confident educators. However, Hockly warns that overreliance on AI risks deskilling, emphasizing the need for balanced integration.

Critical Analysis

Hockly's book is a compelling synthesis of theory, practice, and critical reflection, making it an indispensable resource for ELT educators. Its strengths lie in its accessibility, structure, and balanced perspective. The 30-essentials format delivers concise, digestible chapters, ideal for time-constrained teachers seeking practical insights. Hockly's personal narrative—from her early AI encounters to her current expertise—adds authenticity, making technical concepts relatable and engaging. Her critique of AI hype in Section B is particularly robust, exposing how economic motives in EdTech and oversimplified views of language learning (e.g., reducing it to mechanical tasks) distort AI's potential. Section C's nuanced exploration of ethical issues, such as bias against non-standard English and data privacy risks, is a standout, encouraging educators to adopt a digital literacy critical lens that questions AI's societal implications. The practical applications in Section B, from chatbots to VR, are actionable, while Section D empowers teachers with strategies to leverage AI for professional development, fostering learner autonomy and confidence.

However, the book has limitations that warrant attention. First, it lacks robust empirical evidence to substantiate claims about AI's effectiveness, particularly for newer tools like generative AI. While Hockly cites studies on chatbots and AWE, the evidence is often dated or limited, leaving readers seeking more data on tools like Speak or ELSA. For instance, a deeper analysis of chatbot efficacy across proficiency levels could strengthen her arguments. Second, the book offers limited guidance on implementing AI in under-resourced settings, a significant oversight given ELT's global reach. Many schools lack access to VR or stable internet, and Hockly could have explored low-tech alternatives, such as offline AI apps or text-based chatbots, to address this gap. Third, the environmental impact of AI, briefly noted in Section C, deserves greater emphasis, as it aligns with the critical literacy she champions. Expanding on AI's carbon footprint and its implications for sustainable education would enhance the book's relevance.

Despite these shortcomings, Hockly achieves her goal of demystifying AI. The book avoids technical jargon, making it accessible to educators new to AI, while its ethical focus ensures it transcends a mere how-to guide. Compared to earlier ELT handbooks on CALL, Hockly's work is forward-looking, addressing not only current tools but also future challenges, such as AGI's

potential to disrupt education. Its emphasis on digital pedagogy and critical literacy aligns with ELT's evolving needs, where technology integration must balance innovation with ethical responsibility.

Conclusion

Nicky Hockly's *30 Essentials for Using Artificial Intelligence in English Language Teaching* is a vital resource for ELT educators navigating AI's transformative role in education. It demystifies AI with clear, accessible explanations, provides practical applications for classroom use, and confronts ethical challenges with nuance. While it falls short in offering robust empirical evidence and addressing under-resourced contexts, its concise structure, critical perspective, and actionable strategies make it a valuable guide. Recommended for language teachers, teacher trainers, and researchers, the book equips readers to harness AI thoughtfully, fostering a balanced approach to technology in ELT. As AI continues to shape education, Hockly's work serves as a timely call to engage with it critically, creatively, and responsibly, ensuring its benefits are realized without compromising educational equity or integrity.

Reference

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