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Artificial Intelligence as a Tutor: A Scoping Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Artificial intelligence (AI) has rapidly increased in educational settings. Gen AI pedagogical approaches are the next major focus in the field. This scoping literature review aims to understand the implementation and effects of AI in English as a second language (ESL) classes. This review is supported by the underpinnings of communicative language teaching (CLT) and zone of proximal development (ZPD) theories. In this review, 20 empirical studies are examined to understand the extent to which AI can serve as a native-like tutor for ESL students. The findings show the effectiveness of AI in providing personalized feedback and authentic language exposure and fulfilling the need for a conversational partner/tutor for ESL students. AI is still an exploratory tool; thus, the review ends with ethical considerations for using AI in language classes, along with some future pedagogical links.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence as a Tutor (AIT); Communicative Language Teaching (CLT); Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD); personalized feedback; Second Language Acquisition (SLA); English as a Second Language (ESL)

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INTRODUCTION

Higher education in a second language is tricky. Apart from learning the subject content, ESL (English as a second language) students use their second language to write academically and to present their research. I am an ESL international student and now an instructor who is witnessing language-related anxiety among my students every day in class. International students are individuals who travel to different host countries for educational purposes. These students study in intensive English programs and

universities. These IEP classes teach international students to write academically in English. Teperman et al. (2026) discuss the challenges faced by international students that go beyond language acquisition. International students immerse themselves in the culture and society of the target language, fostering multicultural identities. Hossain (2024) states that language and culture are inseparable entities. A communicative language teaching approach to second language acquisition is considered helpful. Apart from a communicative approach, real-world exposure to the target language and personalized feedback are some approaches adopted by ESL teachers in classes. Nonetheless, these approaches add extra teacher workload.

Large language models such as ChatGPT, Claude, Meta Llama, and Google Gemini have become readily accessible to educators and students. Gen AI is defined as technology that attempts to replicate human-like cognitive tasks and problem-solving abilities through natural language processing or machine learning (Ng et al., 2021). It has been well debated that language is best acquired when ESL learners are exposed to authentic target language (Shrestha, 1998; Al Zoubi, 2018; Ye, 2024). Warschauer et al. (2023) explain how Gen AI introduces authentic second-language examples into ESL classes every day. While proponents and opponents hold divergent views on the role of Gen AI in education, research on this topic is still in an exploratory stage. Gen AI could revolutionize second language education by providing ESL learners with continuous and personalized support. Its ability to mimic native-like communication enhances the overall learning experience. Thus, it is interesting to see Gen AI's ability to guide ESL students in their academic writing process.

Language learning is a daunting process (Núñez, 2014; Snow & Hoefnagel-Höhle, 1978). ESL students should be able to clarify the meaning and implications of sentences in their second language without fear of judgment. Fostering a more stress-free, anxiety-free learning environment helps ESL students learn language without judgment. This type of anxiety-free language learning becomes possible when ESL students obtain a personalized learning experience. Harris and Silva (1993) discuss the importance of peer tutors in ESL writing. A language tutor serves as a native-like partner who offers different pronunciations, target-language exposure, and communicative language use. For example, Yung (2019) explains language tutoring as a private after-school service. Yung (2019) stated, "It is defined as the paid service students use to supplement their learning of academic subjects at school outside school hours" (p. 120). A paid tutoring service is not something every ESL student at an American university can afford, but each student should have a chance to learn the language in a free zone.

Research has shown that the willingness to learn language through a communicative approach increases (Zhang, Wu, & Fu, 2024). Nash (2024) has already established AI as an intimate partner; thus, why not establish AI as a native tutor for ESL students? When ESL students use AI as a native communicator or personalized tutor, they develop a personalized learning experience that enables them to request assistance at any stage of the language acquisition process. Harris and Silva (1993) described the lengthy training required of peer tutors to help ESL students. Weigle and Nelson (2004) discussed additional challenges, such as power dynamics between peer tutors and tutees, anxiety on both the tutor and tutee sides, and overcorrection by tutors. These challenges in peer tutoring motivated me to look for a plausible intervention that provides the benefits of tutor teaching while helping to reduce these challenges.

Thus, to understand the potential effects of peer tutoring for ESL learners, native partners, and scaffolding, I proposed this conceptual scoping review. In this conceptual scoping review, I have applied the principles of scoping review by Grant and Booth (2009) to develop an asset-based conceptual framework. My aim with this conceptual scoping review is to explore AI-based educational conversations and propose a framework that is beneficial for ESL students using AI for their language tutoring. The research questions guiding this review are as follows:

1. What is the effect of learning a second language through personalized feedback provided by AI in language classes, if any?

2. What kind of second language exposure and learning experience does AI provide to ESL students?
3. What kind of native-partner-like scaffolding structure does AI provide for ESL students to learn the language from authentic language exposure?

Therefore, in this review, I argue that second language acquisition could use an AI-based tutoring conceptual framework for language education research.

I advance a critical perspective on AI as a tutor for ESL learners by supporting my claims with well-established conceptual frameworks such as communicative language teaching (CLT) and the zone of proximal development (ZPD). First, the scoping review presents a brief description of CLT and ZPD. It explains how AIT (artificial intelligence as a tutor), a proposed framework, depends on existing theories and the literature. Next, it describes the inclusion/exclusion criteria and explains the reasons for choosing the research terms. The review also presents a detailed description of the databases used for conducting the analysis. Drawing from the frameworks of ZPD and CLT, it argues that AI can fulfill the need for a native partner or a peer tutor in the ESL language learning process. AI can provide ESL learners with real-world language examples and personalized learning experiences. Finally, my research concludes with a discussion of the proposed framework of AI as a tutor and highlights the key considerations of language exposure and the need for a tutor in ESL classes.

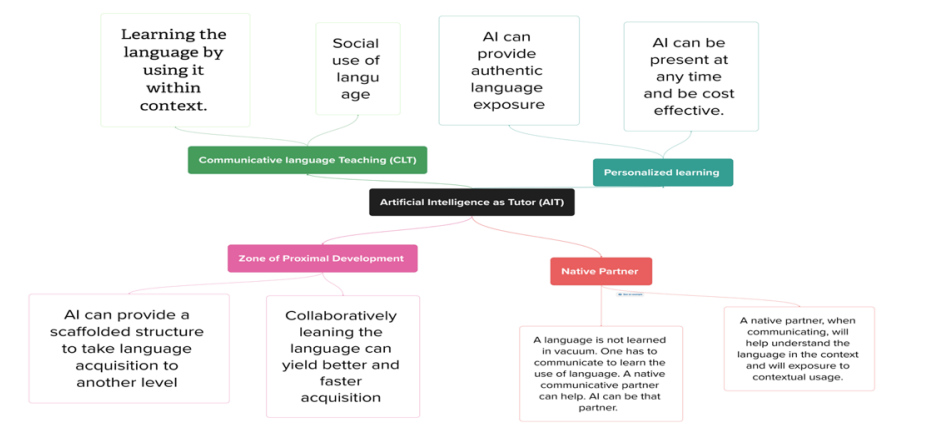
The significance of this research is rooted in my experience of learning to write academically in my second language. Academic writing for an international student could be difficult. It is an intimidating and stressful task, and English language status and power contribute to that stress. As an SLA researcher, I believe in bridging the gap between research and practical implementation of pedagogical approaches in ESL classes. Thus, presenting AI as an ESL tutor is my way of serving the SLA community. My motivation for presenting AIT (artificial intelligence as a tutor) as a conceptual framework is to help move pedagogical approaches in new directions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As the selected studies share a common theoretical foundation, I provide a concise overview of two crucial theoretical frameworks: communicative language teaching (CLT) and the zone of proximal development (ZPD). These frameworks are essential in developing the AI as tutor (AIT) framework. The convergence of CLT, which offers authentic language exposure, and ZPD, which provides scaffolded educational structures, can be applied to novel and emerging approaches to utilizing AI in teaching. Using the theoretical frameworks in the sections below, I propose using AI as a tutor in language classes.

Figure 1

Theoretical Map



Note: The figure depicts the underpinning of CLT and ZPD's collaboration to inform the AI as a tutor (AIT) framework.

Communicative Language Teaching

CLT is learning to communicate in L2. Almost all the teachers globally defined CLT as learning to communicate with other people using L2. A few specifically added to that definition the idea of using language for real purposes. (Sato & Kleinsasser, 1999, p. 502)

CLT proposes that English as L2 should be learned and taught for real-life usage, not mere rote memorization. Language is used to communicate and convey meaning between the speaker and the receiver. It is imperative that language is learned through authentic exposure (Yeh, 2024). CLT explains the importance of building language through social interaction. The forefather of CLT, Hymes (1972), says, “A model of language must design it with a face toward communicative conduct and social life” (p. 60).

CLT establishes the importance of learning the language socially and emphasizes the communicative part of learning a new language. It is because of an educator's duty to present that communicative component in language classes. The issue here is the lack of social interaction with a native partner. It is not possible to bring that communicative component into class at every point in the learning process. Additionally, language learning does not occur in the four closed walls of a classroom. Thus, Gen AI can fulfill that need for a social communicative partner. AI immersion (Byrne, 2024) is a language teaching strategy in which AI can harness students' language learning capacity in ESL classes. It provides them with personalized learning experiences and feedback on their academic writing. This teaching method helps ESL students reach heights in their zone of proximal development (ZPD).

Zone of Proximal Development

The distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under guidance in collaboration with a more capable peer (Vygotsky 1998, p. 86).

ZPD, as quoted above, is part of sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1998) and emphasizes the importance of a peer in education. Vygotsky understood how a peer can help students move from one level of independent understanding to a higher level. According to Vygotsky, this could be accomplished by developing a scaffolded structure around a task that is too difficult for learners.

The need for a scaffolded structure around ESL academic writing is well developed in the field (De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Mirzaei & Eslami, 2015; Eun, 2019). CLT explains that language is learned better when used communicatively, and ZPD fulfills that need for a partner/tutor for ESL students. A peer can only be present in a classroom when a teacher provides collaborative learning time and opportunity. This may not be possible because of L1 barriers or even time issues in a classroom. Gen AI is an emerging tool that can help overcome the challenges of providing a native peer who can be well versed in students' L1 while being present at any time, even outside a classroom. Thus, the current research on Gen AI presents the idea of an Intelligent Tutoring System (ITS). This is a system that uses AI as a tutor for education (Lin et al., 2023; Kohnke et al., 2025). Therefore, considering the theoretical implications discussed above and the conversation regarding Gen AI and language learning, the purpose of this review is to propose a theoretical framework termed artificial intelligence as a tutor (AIT).

Artificial Intelligence as a Tutor (AIT)

Artificial Intelligence, or AI, has experienced a remarkable surge across various industries, including science, business, and education, in recent years. Large language models such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, and Google Gemini have become readily accessible to educators and students. AI can be defined as technology that endeavors to replicate human-like cognitive tasks and problem-solving abilities

through natural language processing or machine learning (Ng et al., 2021). AI provides real-world conversations and scenarios to ESL students as they learn the language in class. Mahapatra (2024) conducted a mixed-methods study that examined writing feedback provided by Gen AI chatbots. This study investigated the role of ChatGPT specifically to understand whether this tool can positively affect ESL students' writing practices. Interestingly, it did. A quantitative and qualitative analysis by Mahapatra (2024) revealed that ChatGPT positively affects ESL writing. The study revealed that ESL students had a positive attitude toward ChatGPT. Students returned to using the tool positively, not just copying from it. That said, it is imperative that ESL/EFL students and teachers learn to use this tool critically.

AI, as understood, is rapidly growing, and this tool has the potential to address language-teaching issues such as a lack of authentic language exposure and personalized feedback and to provide a scaffolded structure for ESL students. The theoretical map presented in Figure 1 places AI at the center of the suggested theoretical frameworks. Gen AI provides the necessary scaffolding structure for ESL students to advance to a higher level of proficiency (Goodarzi & Namaziandost, 2025). Building on the ZPD, Wei (2023) conducted a mixed-methods study emphasizing the importance and effects of personalized, tailored feedback on language acquisition. Thus, we can conclude that AI could play the role of a tutor for ESL students and help them understand the meaning of language. Similarly, AI can provide real-world examples to ESL students and help them understand language through authentic exposure. Nash (2024) discusses the relational aspects of Gen AI and how it fulfills the need for conversational partners. My scoping review reciprocates that the everyday relationship suggested by Nash (2024) applies to language classes and proposes artificial intelligence as a tutor (AIT).

RESEARCH METHOD

The approach of this scoping review (Grant & Booth, 2009) was taken from Galvan and Galvan (2017). Following Galvan and Galvan's (2017) approach, I constructed inclusion criteria and selected 20 peer-reviewed articles. To manually select the articles for the review, I searched the following databases on the University library website: EBSCOhost, ERIC, Academic Search Complete, Education Research Complete, Academic Search Premier, and Education Full Text (H.W. Wilson). I also researched SCOPUS, Web of Science, and Google Scholar as external databases. I aimed to research as many databases as possible to justify my inclusion criteria. I researched many databases, and ERIC was the main database I focused on.

I manually selected 20 peer-reviewed articles using research keywords such as “generative ai” or “chatgpt” AND “writing skills” or “academic writing” AND ESL or English as a second language AND “literature review” or “review of the literature” AND “artificial intelligence” AND “English as a second language” AND “English as a foreign language” or ESL or EFL or “English language learners” AND “Usage of AI in education or benefits of AI in education” AND “CLT in L2” AND “CLT in AI” AND “ZPD or benefits of ZPD in ESL”. These research terms were all directly related to the review's research questions and yielded approximately 350 articles. The articles were then selected on the basis of the inclusion/exclusion criteria.

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

Table 1 below is a detailed description of the inclusion and exclusion criteria used to select the articles and literature for this article. These criteria were used to select articles that informed the theoretical underpinnings of ZPD and CLT in language learning through AI.

Table 1*Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Article Selection*

Criteria Type	Description
Inclusion Criteria	• Articles are peer-reviewed. • Empirical studies. • Written in English. • 10 articles use ZPD as theoretical underpinning. • 10 articles use CLT as theoretical underpinning. • All articles focus on AI use in ESL education. • Selected manually by reading abstracts.
Exclusion Criteria	• Not peer-reviewed. • Not empirical. • Not in English. • Do not focus on AI in ESL education. • Do not use ZPD or CLT as theoretical frameworks. • Irrelevant to the research questions. • Excluded based on manual abstract screening.

Note: CLT = communicative language teaching; ZPD = zone of proximal development; ESL = English as a second language.

Data Extraction and Analysis

Once all 20 articles were selected, the data were collected using Google Forms. Two Google Forms were created with 11–12 questions each. One form was used to collect data from articles with ZPD as their theory, and the other was used to collect data from studies with CLT as their theory. These forms included questions about citations, author details, the purpose of the study, the type of study (qual, quant, or MMR), the study's findings, and the use of AI in the study. Some of the questions on these forms were "How is the study uses ZPD framework? What is the need of partner communicating with AI or how AI can be the partner? ", "How was AI used? How is it for personalization learning or providing language exposure?" and "How is the study dealing with CLT, language exposure?"

Using Google Forms for data collection and organizing the findings into a tabular format facilitates the identification of conceptual overlaps between the two theoretical frameworks and depicts how these theories complement one another. The analysis revealed shared principles between ZPD and CLT, suggesting the need for a native-like tutor to effectively support second language acquisition. It also highlights the potential of AI to fulfill this instructional role by providing adaptive and individualized scaffolding. Building on these findings, this scoping review examines the various types of scaffolding that AI can provide to ESL learners. My aim is to explore the enhanced language learning opportunities that AI could provide to ESL students. These research questions help in understanding the influence of AI pedagogical practices in ESL classes.

1. What is the effect of learning a second language through communicative practices and personalized feedback provided by AI in language classes, if any?
2. What kind of second language exposure and learning experience does AI provide to ESL students?

3. What kind of native-partner-like scaffolding structure does AI provide for ESL students to learn the language from authentic language exposure?

The next sections discuss the commonalities found in the two theories and answer the research questions on the basis of the data collected and analyzed by reviewing the literature in the field.

RESULTS

This scoping review aimed to understand the exploratory use of AI tools for teaching a second language. Once the articles were selected on the basis of the inclusion criteria explained in the methods section, I manually coded the themes through the lens of CLT and the ZPD. Some themes included personalized feedback, a scaffolded structure, and learning from authentic language exposure. The sections below present detailed discussions of the themes analyzed from the data collected. Using the theoretical lens of CLT and ZPD, the findings propose the use of AI as a tutor in language classes.

Artificial Intelligence, Language Learning, & Sociocultural Context

Language is not learned in a vacuum. Second-language learners should communicate and understand the language culturally and socially to use it correctly. Trimadona et al. (2024) quantitatively tested the implementation of conversative language teaching (CLT) techniques in EFL classrooms. By analyzing the pre- and posttest data, they concluded that CLT improved the language skills of ESL students immensely. Trimadona proves that CLT works in a language classroom. The quantifiable results that Trimadona presents warrant researchers to replicate CLT techniques in ESL classes using AI-based tools. Zhang et al. (2024) also note the importance of learning the language by doing it and using it. Zhang et al. (2024) reported, “Given the advances in educational technology, educators, researchers, and technical experts are responsible for designing and developing technological tools to offer learners authentic, adaptive, and interactive learning environments for practicing speaking skills” (p. 2). CLT emphasizes that language should be learned through authentic language examples and that AI can provide these examples to ESL students. As Zhang et al. (2024) note, ESL teachers and technology developers should work to replicate the underpinnings of CLT in language classes.

CLT points out that language is a socially and culturally constructed concept. When one is learning a new language, one is learning the cultural and societal norms of the language. Recent shifts in the literature in the ESL field suggest that CLT can be used through AI tools and help individuals learn language communicatively. Busso and Sanchez (2024) help me answer the first research question, and they explain the difference between learning a language linguistically in a classroom and using it authentically in real-world situations through AI tools in the context of learning the Japanese language EFL. The article highlights that Japanese EFL students are linguistically competent in using grammar and language for classroom purposes but lack communicative competence. The EFL students in this study could not use the language in real-world situations. This emphasizes the importance of communicative competence while learning a new language. According to Busso and Sanchez (2024), AI can answer this issue: “Chatbots have been recognized as an ideal tool for raising communicative competence compared to other language learning technologies” (p. 6). AI has rapidly emerged as a tool that can provide real-world situations for learning a language from anywhere. Similar results were also presented by Lee and Davis (2024), indicating the positive impact of Gen AI tools in language classes.

Lee and Davis (2024) help answer the second research question by explaining the language exposure opportunities Gen AI offers ESL students. The study used a survey to understand the impact of Gen AI on language acquisition. Lee and Davis (2024) reported that Gen AI tools improved ESL students' motivation, increased confidence, and reduced anxiety during the language learning process. Gen AI did all this while providing personalized feedback and being a conversational partner for ESL students.

Therefore, AI can provide ESL students with multiple language exposure and language learning affordances. It can provide real-world language examples and cultural implications of the language and can also present a scaffolded structure for students. The following section explains how AI chatbots and tools can support language acquisition by providing scaffolded support and serving as tutors for ESL students.

Artificial Intelligence and Scaffolding for Language Learning

The need to provide scaffolding for language acquisition in ESL classes is well established in the field (De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Mirzaei & Eslami, 2015; Eun, 2019). Language is learned better when used communicatively, and the concept of ZPD explains how knowledge is constructed socially. Thus, when the ZPD concept is used, language is acquired better when one is exposed to the target language socially. When students can perform complex tasks without scaffolding, it is considered that the student has moved to a higher level of acquisition and ZPD. However, a peer can only be present in a classroom when a teacher provides collaborative learning time and opportunities to work together. Exposure to peers is only fulfilled when a teacher or parent provides a scaffolding structure for the student. This may not be possible depending on students' first language (L1) barriers or even time constraints in a classroom. Gen AI can be that scaffolded structure that is always present. Gen AI is a current emerging tool that can help overcome the challenges of providing a native peer who is well versed in students' L1 while being present at any time, even outside a classroom (Cai et al., 2025).

Cai et al. (2025) and Crompton & Burke (2023) are some systematic reviews that explain how the field of SLA is actively using the ZPD theoretical framework to explain the usage and affordances of AI-driven curricula in language classes. Cai et al. (2025) help in answering the third research question by emphasizing the positive impact of the scaffolding and personalized feedback provided by Gen AI in language classes: "The AI tools can generate personalized recommendations for educational resources, such as books, articles, videos, and other learning materials, based on a student's past performance, interests, and goals" (p. 4). Personalized feedback is a form of scaffold structure that Vygotsky describes in ZPD. Gen AI is proving to be a tool that can move ESL students to a higher level of their personal ZPD by teaching the language collaboratively.

Artificial Intelligence and Native-Like Tutors for Language Learning

AI provides authentic language exposure to ESL students, which was previously challenging for ESL teachers to incorporate into daily classroom instruction. Marzuki et al. (2023) utilized a qualitative approach to understand ESL teachers' views on the use of AI-based pedagogical approaches in ESL classes, and their results were positive. ESL teachers agreed that AI can help ESL students learn the language with little less anxiety. Numerous studies have demonstrated that ESL students acquire language proficiency more effectively when exposed to authentic language examples or through conversational interactions with native speakers. However, the shift to online education has resulted in a lack of this exposure for students. Warschauer et al. (2023) elucidate how AI can facilitate authentic language exposure for ESL students and outline the benefits of the scaffolding structure it provides. Educators must reevaluate our approach to incorporating AI into our classrooms. Rather than viewing AI solely as a tool for copying, we should consider it a valuable educational resource that can enhance the learning experience for ESL students.

Xu and Tan (2024) conducted a study exploring various AI tools and chatbot applications in ESL classrooms. Their findings encompass AI as a tool, resource, threat, and enigmatic entity. This study focused primarily on the utilization of AI as an educational tool or tutor. When educators request the integration of AI, they do not intend to generate novel ideas. Instead, they seek its role as a scaffolding tool that enhances language comprehension. Kubota (2023) and Pang et al. (2024) also presented AI as a tutor and elucidated its extensive capabilities, excluding its ability to compose entire papers for students.

For instance, AI can be employed to provide authentic language exposure and instruct ESL students on idiomatic expressions.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of the scoping review was to understand the relational aspect of artificial intelligence as a tutor in the language learning process for ESL students. The review relied heavily on two theories: communicative language teaching (CLT) and the zone of proximal development (ZPD). AI chatbots are very exploratory tools in educational settings. These theories must inform research on AI and its educational use. This review proposed that AI can provide real-world language exposure to ESL students, be a conversational partner, and provide personalized feedback at any time. AI is present at the convenience of these students, and they do not have to wait to ask their questions when they go to class next time. AI also helps reduce the anxiety associated with learning the language.

This theory proposes that AI could be used as a tutor in ESL classes and discusses AIT as a framework emerging from empirical research conducted using AI in language educational settings. The research questions I asked earlier in the review wanted to understand what kind of language exposure ESL students can obtain from using an AI-based curriculum. After conducting a thorough review of the empirical literature, I can confidently propose that AI provides real-life language exposure and personalized feedback to ESL students. Although AI provides valuable exposure, it has some setbacks. AI is a novel and experimental idea that cannot be used without guidance.

The tool is still in its exploratory stage, and there is a lack of empirical evidence (Mahapatra, 2024) to use the tool independently and critically. The tool is available freely, but it can still provide incorrect information. Alsaweed and Aljebreen (2024) used a mixed-methods approach to detect writing errors in ESL classes. Yang and Li (2024) systematically present the implications of ChatGPT in language classes. We, as educators, should prepare students to learn and explore this AI tool and shift their perspective from seeing it as a cheating tool or simply a way to copy to viewing it as a critical tool in ESL students' language arsenal. Pedagogical practices should aim to incorporate a critical and innovative use of AI to learn language. The effectiveness of AI is based on how well it can be integrated into the L2 curriculum. Students should be well informed about plagiarism practices. Tai et al. (2023) empirically noted that the integration of AI also feeds into the ethical usage of the tool: "However, ChatGPT should not be used as a substitute for critical thinking or research skills. Using ChatGPT to generate content can be helpful" (p. 24). Thus, the following sections detail what is still unknown and exploratory with respect to Gen AI and the critical implications of the tool in ESL language classes.

FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

This review proposed artificial intelligence as a tutor (AIT) framework. This framework suggests the use of AI as a tutor in language classes. The underpinnings of this framework come from theories such as CLT and ZPD. Even after 20 empirical studies are reviewed, the nature and use of AI remain exploratory in educational settings. AIT can be a game changer for ESL students and teachers only if AI-based tools are used ethically and critically. AI is still not developed enough to be used without a human instructor. It can be integrated as a helping tutor in ESL classes. After class, teachers cannot always provide personalized feedback in a classroom. With respect to future pedagogical implications, teachers should not close the door to AI. They should embrace it and include the use of AI-based tools in their curricula. AI is the future, and it is here to stay. A teacher should prepare their students for the real world.

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