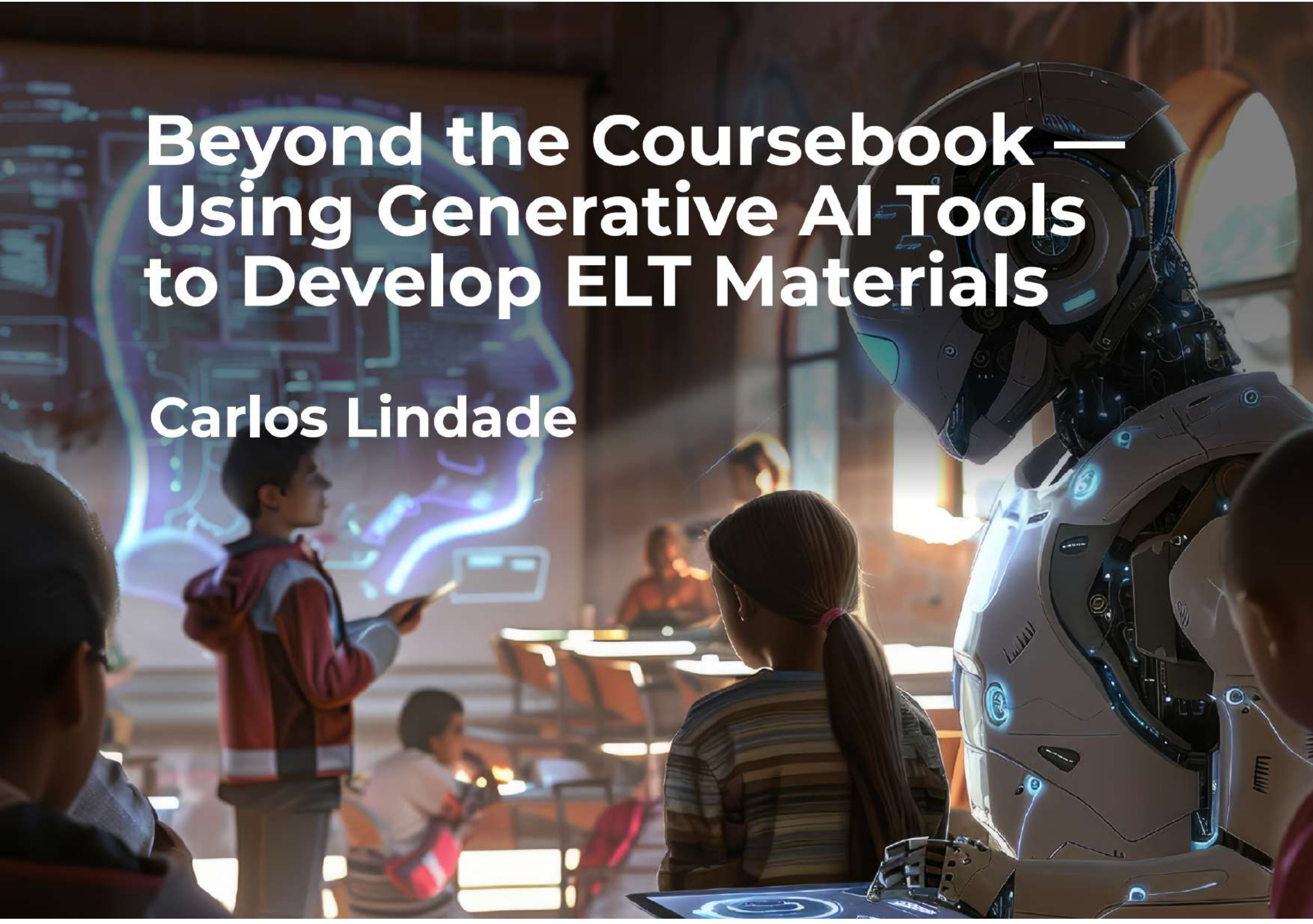
Spring / Summer 2024 · YEAR 7 · 25

ISSN 2184-7525



Beyond the Coursebook — Using Generative AI Tools to Develop ELT Materials

Carlos Lindade

During the 37th APPI Conference in Braga (May 2024), I had the opportunity of presenting a workshop called: "Unlocking the Power of Generative AI for EFL Material Development". The workshop revisited a classic debate surrounding coursebooks: Are they a product of the past? Should teachers use them or simply leave them behind? While the answer to that question is still not consensual in the era of generative AI, teachers can be challenged to use AI-powered tools to create or customise unique materials for their teaching context.

The purpose of this article is to share some insights from the session and explore how Suno and Diffit may be used in the context of EFL to create unique materials for the EFL classroom.

Beyond the Coursebook - Using Generative AI Tools to Develop ELT Materials

Generative AI is the most powerful tool for creativity that has ever been created. It has the potential to unleash a new era of human innovation.

— Elon Musk —

Introduction

The 37th APPI Conference in Braga was overflowing with thought-provoking sessions about the future of EFL instruction. A recurring theme that ignited passionate discussions was the role of Generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen AI) in the classroom. Some proponents envisioned a future where AI personalises learning, while others voiced concerns about its potential impact on the role of the teacher. While such a debate is important and will continue in different venues, with different arguments and examples, a crucial point must be made: Gen AI, when used judiciously, can be a powerful tool to augment learning scenarios. At the centre of this process, one will find the teacher, whose expertise and creativity is constantly acknowledging and addressing the learner's needs. Such often requires one to go beyond the coursebook for different reasons. The next section will revisit the coursebook debate in order to provide further context.

Coursebooks: a double-edged sword in the EFL classroom

Coursebooks have long been a cornerstone of EFL instruction, offering a structured learning path and a treasure trove of resources for teachers. In fact, coursebooks tend to offer more and more additional materials for teachers. But the debate surrounding their effectiveness continues to spark passionate debates. Proponents of coursebooks laud their ability to provide a clear and logical progression through grammar, vocabulary, and skill development. This structured approach acts as a roadmap, particularly beneficial for pre-service teachers or those with very little experience. Moreover, coursebooks come packed with drilling activities like gap-filling exercises, as well as dialogues, role-plays... which reflect the most common teaching activities taught in initial teacher training.

Another advantage often mentioned by researchers and in-service teachers is the time-saving aspect of coursebooks. With a pre-made interpretation of the *Aprendizagens Essenciais* in hand, teachers can free up valuable time. This efficiency translates to a sense of security for both teacher and student. Teachers gain confidence knowing they are covering the essential content, while students benefit from a clear reference point for their learning journey.

However, opponents of coursebooks raise valid concerns that deserve exploration. One major criticism is the potential for coursebooks to lag behind in terms of contemporary language and information. Such hinders students' exposure to the ever-evolving nature of language use. Additionally, the "one-size-fits-all" approach does not cater to the specific needs and interests of a diverse classroom, potentially leading to disengagement and a lack of motivation.

Furthermore, the overemphasis on standardised testing within contemporary coursebooks can restrict teachers from incorporating more creative and dynamic activities. This can stifle a holistic learning experience that goes beyond rote memorisation of vocabulary and grammar rules and test preparation. Another limitation lies in the lack of localisation. Coursebooks designed for a general audience often avoid integrating the local Portuguese context or cultural references to promote intercultural awareness, creating a disconnect for students that hinders their ability to connect the language to their environment.

Lastly, critics argue that the static presentation of information in coursebooks discourages active learning. Students tend to become passive recipients of knowledge rather than actively engaged participants in their own learning journey. This lack of interactivity can hinder the development of meaningful language and critical thinking skills. This is where technology usually comes into play.

Technology in EFL

While coursebooks share a considerable amount of limitations, they still provide a foundation for language learning in most contexts. Nevertheless, EFL teachers have always sought innovative ways to breathe life into language learning. Long before the digital revolution, teachers often used an overhead projector and transparencies, painstakingly crafted with colourful markers, to transform grammar points and vocabulary lists into dynamic visuals. Portable stereos were carried from classroom to classroom as students listened to songs, as well as

absorbed dialogues and pronunciation from crackling cassettes. As these are now seen as low-tech solutions, it is only natural that the boundaries will be pushed even further with Gen AI.

In previous APPI events, I have advocated for Gen AI's potential in five key areas: planning, assessment, creation, support, and sustainability. Table 1 briefly exemplifies how EFL teachers can leverage Gen AI to approach different tasks, hopefully leading to a more localised and engaging learning environment for their students.

Table 1: Areas where Gen AI can help EFL teachers

Area	How Generative AI Can Help	Examples
Planning	Tailored lesson plans: Generate personalised lesson plans based on student needs, learning objectives, and specific topics.	Create a lesson plan focused on ESP for a group of intermediate level students studying the Portuguese tourism industry.
Assessment	Automated grading: Utilise AI to grade specific types of assessments like multiple-choice quizzes or vocabulary exercises, freeing up teacher time for more in-depth feedback.	Generate a multiple-choice quiz on irregular verbs and have the AI automatically grade and provide basic feedback to students.
Creation	Engaging activities: Generate interactive exercises, games, and simulations to reinforce learning.	Create a dialogue simulation where students role-play ordering food at a restaurant.
Support	Differentiation: Develop differentiated instruction materials to cater to various learning styles and skil levels.	Generate a variety of exercises (multiple choice, gap-fill, open-ended questions) on the same grammar point for students with different learning paces.
Sustainability	Content updates: Easily update course materials with current information or trends using AI prompts.	Update a travel vocabulary list with new words and phrases relevant to recent Portuguese tourism developments.

Table 1 offers a glimpse of what Generative AI models like ChatGPT, Gemini, or Claude can do to support teachers. However, the quality of the AI's output hinges heavily on the quality of the prompt the teacher provides. Furthermore, while numerous AI tools are readily available, it is important to be mindful that most operate on a freemium model. This means free plans will restrict the number of outputs one can generate or limit access to advanced features.

In this context, it is also important to remember that AI-generated content requires fact-checking and often requires further tailoring to meet the needs of a specific learner. Despite these limitations, by understanding how to use AI, educators can leverage its power to craft engaging and unique learning materials. In the next section, the article will briefly discuss how Suno and Diffit can be specifically utilised by EFL teachers.

Suno https://suno.com/create

Suno is an AI-powered music generator that utilises two core AI models, Bark and Chirp, to create vocal melodies and instrumental sounds based on user input. It features a user-friendly interface.

During the conference session, I provided the following prompt "an updated 80s dance song for an EFL Teacher Training Workshop (The Future of Education)". In a matter of seconds, it provided two unique songs. It also generated the lyrics, and options to access a downloadable lyric video or mp3 and a link to easily share the song on other platforms. By clicking here, it is possible to listen to the AI song.

In the context of EFL, teachers can use Suno in many ways. For instance, to generate songs using vocabulary or themes from recent lessons to reinforce listening skills. Students can analyse the lyrics for comprehension and discuss the vocabulary or themes used. This tool is particularly useful when teachers want to go beyond the lexis featured in a specific unit of the coursebook and want a fun way to present these words in the classroom.

Another way to use this tool is to challenge learners to craft a short musical piece to accompany a story or poem. This can make the narrative more engaging for students and encourage creative thinking.

Lastly, AI generated music may be a new way to expose students to the cultural diversity of music around the world. This can lead to projects where learners engage in research on multiple platforms about the cultural context, the singers and bands and iconic tunes to build a playlist on Spotify.

Diffit https://web.diffit.me

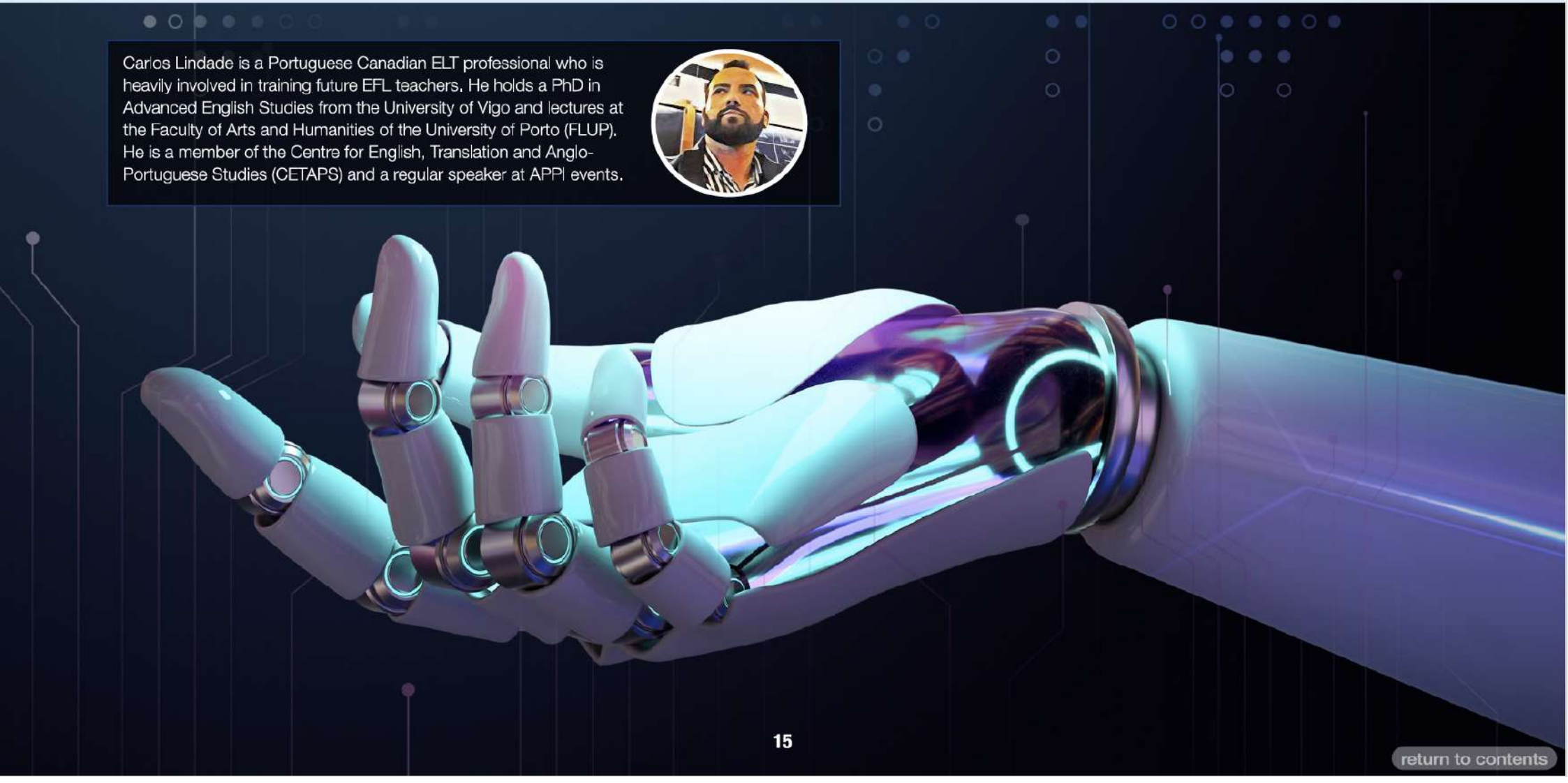
Diffit is an AI-powered educational tool designed to support teachers in creating differentiated learning resources. It provides "just right" instructional materials that allow teachers to bring to the classroom interesting up-to-date resources, while providing students grade-level content. What does this mean? Diffit offers teachers the ability to generate a reading lesson by providing a link to an online news article, or YouTube video, and customise the content to match the level they are teaching and make further adjustments for SEN learners. It includes features such as re-leveling of texts, vocabulary customisation, and translation. Additionally, it integrates with Google Classroom. A lot like Suno, it offers a user-friendly interface and is available in multiple languages, making it a versatile tool for teachers working in a bilingual school, collaborating in an eTwinning project, or an aid when teaching an additional foreign language, where engaging materials are scarce.

If a teacher believes their coursebooks present an inadequate way to challenge learners in reading or writing, critical thinking, or vocabulary, Diffit can aid in generating materials to enhance comprehension and make learning localised and engaging for students. I have found it very useful to connect language learning with real-life issues and the interests of the learners.

Closing Thoughts

In 2024, it is undeniable that the proliferation of AI-powered tools offers an outlet for teachers to move beyond the restrictions of a traditional coursebook, which is physical (and used repeatedly for several years) and offer engaging materials, which are contextually relevant and crafted specifically for the needs of the learners. However, a judicious use of Gen AI is necessary because ultimately some tasks will be better served with pen and paper. Moreover, with so many tools being released every month, it is possible that some teachers may feel they are missing out (FOMO). It is paramount that all educators acknowledge that they are not going to be able to use every single tool, the same way they do not explore every single page from a coursebook. It is only natural that each teacher explores two or three tools and use the ones that work best for them and their learners.

Carlos Lindade is a Portuguese Canadian ELT professional who is heavily involved in training future EFL teachers. He holds a PhD in Advanced English Studies from the University of Vigo and lectures at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of the University of Porto (FLUP). He is a member of the Centre for English, Translation and Anglo-Portuguese Studies (CETAPS) and a regular speaker at APPI events.



ASSOCIAÇÃO PORTUGUESA
DE PROFESSORES DE INGLÊS

ISSN 2184-7525

FORMAÇÃO
CONTINUA
appiforma