The art of prompt writing

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> Generative AI is teaching us that the way you speak is actually code itself
>
> — Lisa Huang

Generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen AI) has sparked some controversy in the field of education. However, it may be easily used by educators to support teaching and learning experiences. By integrating AI into lesson preparation and material development, teachers can expand upon lessons presented in physical textbooks, providing students with learning resources that have been catered to fit diverse contexts and meet specific learner needs. However, a critical component of effectively utilising Gen AI in education is mastering the art of prompt writing. This article briefly explains what prompt writing is, identifies common pitfalls, outlines best practices, and emphasises the importance of AI literacy.

Prompt writing is the skill of crafting precise, targeted instructions that guide Gen AI tools, such as ChatGPT, to generate responses that support specific educational goals. Well-structured prompts can produce content that aligns closely with teaching objectives, whether it involves designing grammar exercises, generating context-specific vocabulary lists, or relevelling texts for reading comprehension. As Gao (2023) points out, "carefully designed prompts can lead to significantly better outputs" (p. 1), underscoring the importance of clear, intentional input. Effective prompt writing requires a solid understanding of both the AI model's capabilities and learning goals. Educators who understand this easily generate highly localised materials that have the potential to better meet the specific needs of learners.

Ineffective Prompts

Poorly constructed prompts can lead to underwhelming outputs, leaving educators frustrated with results that lack the precision or relevance they sought. Below are three examples of ineffective prompts, along with explanations of why the prompt will likely lead to unsatisfactory responses:

1. Vague Prompt: "Explain the present perfect."

    a. Likely Output: A broad explanation covering various aspects of the present perfect without focusing on specific nuances or usage.

    b. Issue: Without clarifying the age and level of the learner, nor which aspect of the present perfect tense to focus on (e.g., contrasting it with the past simple or using it with specific time expressions), the prompt lacks direction, leading to generalised output that may not align with the learning objectives.

2. Overly Broad Prompt: "Create exercises with phrasal verbs."

    a. Likely Output: A random selection of phrasal verbs exercises that will not match the phrasal verbs covered in class, nor specific context.

    b. Issue: The prompt does not specify the target level, nor exemplify the phrasal verbs covered, making it challenging for Gen AI to create suitable activities for a particular group, such as B1/B2 students preparing for the 550 National Exam. Clearer guidance could result in more focused exercises, tailored to specific learning goals and proficiency requirements.

3. Ambiguous Prompt: "Generate a reading activity for my 7th grade class."

    a. Likely Output: A broad set of reading exercises without a clear theme or focus.

    b. Issue: With no indication of the type of text, thematic focus, or learner needs, the AI's response may not be practical. Specifying the level (e.g., A2 learners) and including context (e.g., "on the topic of daily routines") could create a more relevant set of exercises that align with expectations.

Tips for Effective Prompt Writing

To achieve meaningful and relevant AI-generated content, educators should consider the following tips:

1. Define a role. Clearly state the role the AI should assume. For example, "You are an English language teaching assistant."

2. Provide clear Instructions. Use specific action verbs to direct the AI. For instance, "Generate a list of five B1 level vocabulary exercises focusing on phrasal verbs."

3. Offer contextual information. Include relevant details about the learners or the educational setting. For example, "The students are teenage learners at a B2 proficiency level, preparing for an exchange program."

4. Include input content when necessary. If the task involves editing or analysing existing material, provide the necessary content within the prompt.

5. Supply examples. Offer examples to guide the AI's response. For instance, "An example of the desired exercise format is: 'Fill in the blanks with the correct phrasal verb: She decided to _____ the offer.'"

6. Specify formatting and style. Indicate the preferred format, style, and tone. For example, "Present the exercises in a bullet-point list, using formal language appropriate for business English."

7. Encourage clarification. Allow the AI to seek clarification if needed. For instance, "If any part of the prompt is unclear, please ask for further details."

These guidelines align with the "7 ingredients of a successful AI prompt" as outlined by Cambridge (Oliver, 2024).

An example of a detailed prompt in the context of English Language Teaching could look like this:

"You are a language tutor helping B1-level Portuguese-speaking EFL students understand the nuances of phrasal verbs related to travel. Create a list of five commonly used travel-related phrasal verbs (e.g., 'check in,' 'set off'), each with a definition, example sentence, and brief explanation of its usage. Ensure the examples are relatable for teenagers and encourage engagement by making the scenarios realistic (e.g., traveling for a holiday in an English-speaking country or participating in an Erasmus exchange). Format the output as a bullet-point list."

This prompt is effective because it:

1. Defines the AI's Role and Purpose – The AI acts as a language tutor, guiding students in understanding phrasal verbs within a specific context.

2. Specifies the Learner Profile and Level – The target learners are B1-level Portuguese-speaking students, which helps tailor language difficulty.

3. Clarifies Content and Structure – The request includes the exact elements needed: phrasal verbs, definitions, example sentences, and usage explanations.

4. Adds Context – Relating the verbs to travel and realistic scenarios makes the language meaningful and practical for the students. It can also allow the teacher to connect the material to the language covered in the coursebook.

5. Ensures Engagement – By choosing relatable topics, students are more likely to connect with the material.

This clear and detailed prompt enables a given AI model to generate content that is not only linguistically accurate but also contextually relevant. By providing clear guidance, Gen AI can produce materials that may be used to supplement or augment a coursebook's approach and reinforce language skills, making abstract concepts like phrasal verbs accessible.

Where do we go from here?

As Gen AI tools become increasingly prevalent in EFL education, the need for AI literacy is paramount. In the case of pre-service teacher training the current gap leaves the next generation of teachers uncertain about integrating AI into their lessons or, in some cases, hesitant to engage with AI tools altogether, considering they are heavily encouraged not to use AI during their university studies (at least from my own observations as a university lecturer). Such training in AI literacy would help future educators to evaluate the strengths and limitations of AI, making informed decisions about how and when to use these resources to enhance language learning. On the other hand, such focus would likely expedite the development of training sessions for more in-service teachers that are new to Gen AI.

Furthermore, sharing prompt-writing techniques with students in secondary and higher education enables them to use AI tools to support their own language journey. Educators can show students how to create clear, specific prompts that yield relevant, targeted responses, helping them to generate study materials, practise language skills, or ask for suggestions on how to improve a draft version of a given assignment. It is not about having Gen AI do the work for the learners but teaching them how it can help them develop their language skills outside the physical classroom.

Ultimately, teaching prompt writing is a valuable exercise in critical pedagogy. Educators can guide students to consider the limitations and biases inherent in AI-generated responses, encouraging them to engage thoughtfully with technology rather than accept it uncritically. By learning how to construct prompts, students gain insights into the nature of language, communication, and context, developing digital literacy skills that extend beyond the traditional language classroom. By integrating AI literacy into both teacher education and student learning, we are taking a significant step in creating a comprehensive approach that prepares all classroom participants—teachers and students alike—to navigate and use AI responsibly, effectively, and critically.

Closing Thoughts

Developing prompt writing skills enables educators to add Gen AI as a useful tool in the EFL teacher toolkit. Through well-crafted prompts, teachers can generate relevant, meaningful content for highly localised and personalised language learning.

While AI is not a substitute for the teacher, far from it, it requires responsible use and critical engagement. Introducing AI literacy into pre-service and in-service teacher training can help bridge the gap between technology and education, empowering all to use AI tools and unlock new opportunities for growth and creativity in a world where technology and learning increasingly intersect.

References

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