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# Teaching Reading in the era of AI

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“Until I feared I would lose it, I never loved to read. One does not love breathing.”

— Harper Lee

Generative AI has shaken the educational landscape, especially for teachers who feel their practices are becoming obsolete overnight. This new reality makes it particularly challenging for EFL teachers whose focus often revolves around fostering productive skills such as speaking and writing over listening and reading. However, as educators like Daniel Herman (2023) pointed out in an op-ed featured in *The Atlantic*, the rise of AI might provide a much needed refocus on reading.

## Introduction

The integration of generative AI into educational settings is transforming the landscape of ELT. As teachers quickly grapple with the implications of AI in their classrooms, one major shift is occurring: the reevaluation of traditional writing-focused pedagogy in favour of a renewed emphasis on other skills. This contribution briefly explores the importance of reading in the context of EFL education and advocates for a well defined focus on digital literacies and critical thinking to adjust to this evolving educational landscape.

## Reading in the context of ELT

Reading is one of the cornerstones of EFL education. Proficiency in reading is an indispensable tool for

achieving academic excellence and constitutes a fundamental aspect of any language course. Reading serves not only as a way to gather information and engage in an enjoyable pastime but also as a vehicle for broadening and deepening one's language expertise. The significance of reading is underscored by its ubiquitous presence in our lives, as it remains an essential activity for seeking knowledge and information. If we think about academic contributions to this area, Nunan (2003) considers reading as a procedure undertaken by readers, which involves merging information from the text with the background knowledge of students to create understanding (Brown's *Teaching by Principles* (2015), or Scrivener's *Learning Teaching* (2005) also share valuable insights on reading). Being a fundamental language acquisition skill, reading cannot be disregarded when considering other language learning abilities. Proficiency in reading not only helps learners to comprehend written material but also boosts their listening, speaking, and writing skills. However, and in very broad terms, when one considers how current EFL educators teach reading, very little has changed in the past few decades. From my observations of different ELT classrooms, teachers often shift from different kinds of reading,

such as intensive reading, reading aloud and silent reading (sacrificing extensive reading due to time constraints), while formatively assessing what students understood from a given text through different comprehension tasks: written responses, multiple choice tasks and gap filling are among the most common. Yet, In the age of AI, reading must become something more. Reading needs to be closely intertwined with digital literacies to help our students, the citizens of tomorrow, critically navigate, understand, create, and communicate in the digital world. Literacy is not restricted to being able to read and write. Building on Harmer's (2015: 197) position on digital literacy: just because most children (depending, of course, on the societies they are born into) grow up in a digital world, it does not mean that they will become digital experts. They are surrounded by books, too, but not all of them will become successful readers and writers, unless they are helped to learn how to do and appreciate these things – that is, unless we help them to become literate.

Although other literacies have been identified by Hockly, Dudeney and Pegrum (2022), by providing learners with interesting texts from unique sources teachers can engage learners to go beyond the surface of the text. A critical reader does not

absorb information passively but engages with the text, questioning its content, identifying biases, and assessing the credibility of sources. In an age where misinformation and fake news proliferate, the skill of critical thinking in reading is a shield against manipulation and a gateway to acquiring meaningful knowledge. It equips students with the tools to separate fact from fiction and engage with written material in a thoughtful and discerning manner, contributing to personal growth and informed citizenship.

### **Strategies for Teaching Reading in the 21st Century Classroom**

As adults, we are aware that generative AI is already being used for nefarious ends. However, teaching reading skills today should help teenage students to quickly isolate news outlets or social media accounts that are spreading misinformation or disinformation. While preparing this contribution in November 2023, ChatGPT 3.5 was fed the following prompt: "As an EFL teacher, which reading skills should I be teaching my teenage students in the era of ChatGPT? I want my students to be responsible 21st century citizens that are able to spot fake news quickly."

This was the result:

Here are some important reading skills you should focus on:

- **Critical Thinking:** Encourage your students to question what they read. Teach them to evaluate the credibility of sources and to consider the author's perspective, bias, and intent.
- **Source Evaluation:** Teach students how to assess the reliability of the sources they encounter. Discuss the differences between credible news outlets and unreliable sources.
- **Fact-Checking:** Emphasize the importance of fact-checking. Show them how to verify information using fact-checking websites and tools like Snopes or FactCheck.org.
- **Media Literacy:** Help your students understand the different types of media (e.g., news articles, opinion pieces, social media posts, videos) and how to critically analyze each.
- **Confirmation Bias:** Discuss the concept of confirmation bias and how it can influence what people choose to believe. Encourage students to seek out diverse perspectives.
- **Analyze Headlines and Titles:** Many fake news stories rely on sensational headlines. Teach students to look beyond the headline and read the full article to understand the context.
- **Context Awareness:** Stress the importance of understanding the context in which information is presented. Discuss how information can be taken out of context to mislead.
- **Skepticism:** Encourage a healthy level of skepticism. Teach students that not everything they read is necessarily true, and they should approach information with a questioning mindset.
- **Critical Reading Strategies:** Teach specific strategies like skimming, scanning, and close reading. These skills can help students quickly evaluate and understand the content they encounter.
- **Discussion and Debates:** Engage students in discussions and debates on various topics, encouraging them to express and defend their opinions with well-reasoned arguments.
- **Recognizing Misinformation and Disinformation:** Explain the difference between misinformation (false information shared without harmful intent) and disinformation (false information shared with the intent to deceive). Teach them to recognize both.

- **Awareness of Manipulative Techniques:** Discuss common manipulative techniques used in fake news, such as emotional appeals, logical fallacies, and selective use of evidence.
- **Privacy and Security:** Teach students about online privacy and security to help them safeguard their personal information and reduce the likelihood of being targeted by disinformation campaigns.
- **Fact-Based Research:** Show students how to conduct proper research using reliable sources, such as academic journals, government websites, and reputable news outlets.
- **Digital Literacy:** Emphasize the importance of understanding how algorithms and social media platforms work, as they can shape the information students encounter online.

Incorporate real-world examples and current events into your lessons to illustrate these concepts. While most ELT coursebooks do not cater for digital literates and provide a conservative approach to reading, often requiring students to only look at written material at a superficial level, reading must evolve from a traditional language skill into a critical competency for the digital world.

The suggestions outlined above provide a possible roadmap for teachers to foster digital literacy and critical thinking in their classrooms through reading. In fact, by focusing on source evaluation, fact-checking, media literacy, among other vital skills, we can prepare our students to navigate our current information-rich and often misleading digital landscape. Furthermore, fostering a culture of skepticism and encouraging open discussions on various topics will empower students to think critically and make informed decisions. As EFL educators, we do not have the luxury of waiting for a new breed of coursebooks to change the status quo, the change must start now from within our classroom, and it should start by how we approach reading.

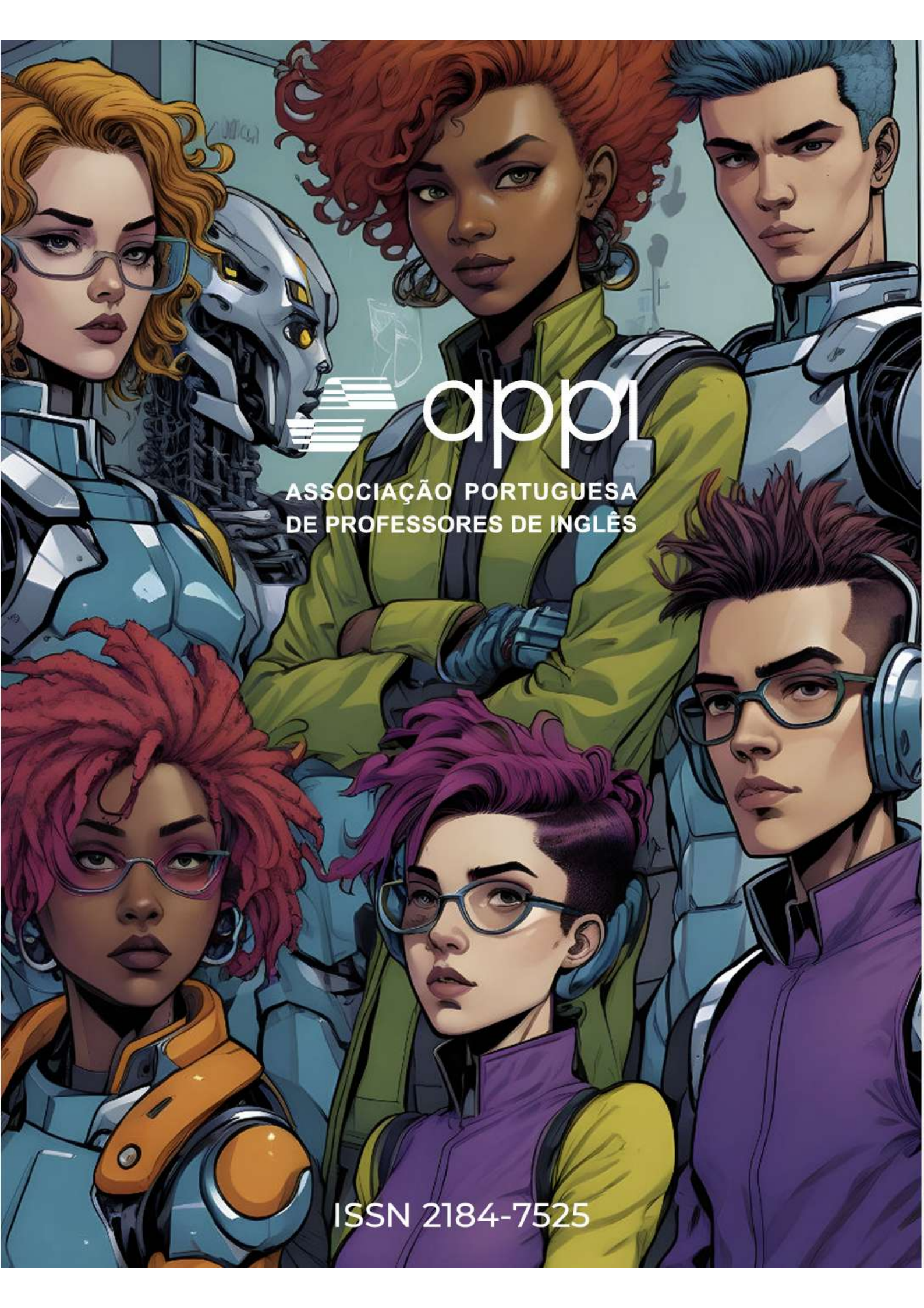
### Closing Thoughts

While some teachers are worried that this is the end of writing, I share Daniel Herman's position: this is the beginning of reading. While generative AI can provide polished essays rapidly, they lack the human touch, the personal experiences, and the cultural nuances that learners bring to the table. Recognising this distinction helps educators realise the true potential of reading as a bridge between

structured language learning and personal expression. Teachers are far from being replaced by AI. Celebrities such as RuPaul Charles would argue that teachers have a particular blend of “charisma, uniqueness, nerve, and talent” that is irreplaceable. While generative AI can provide valuable insights and guidance, even provide some form of professional development when none is available, teachers must continue to foster human connections and interactions in their classrooms, while reevaluating what they teach and how they teach EFL: less writing and more critical thinking through reading is one way forward. Ultimately, we are in the business of teaching the leaders of tomorrow, and while we do not exactly know what it will look like, I am certain that the importance allocated to reading will only grow in the near future.

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