

Notes from presentation, “Using AI to Teach English”

By James Reeves

Introduction

This is a limited and non-technical introduction to some of the ways in which we might use Artificial Intelligence (AI) in developing and delivering instruction. I focused on ChatGPT, which is a general-purpose AI tool, and contrasted it with ESL-specific AI products, which *in my opinion* are less appropriate for our purposes than ChatGPT.

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Open AI’s ChatGPT

This is how ChatGPT responded when I asked it to describe itself in the context of ESL teaching:

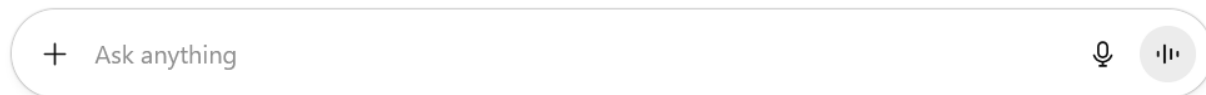
ChatGPT is an advanced language tool that understands and produces human-like text. You can think of it as a very smart writing and brainstorming assistant. You type or speak a question or a request, and it responds in plain English, immediately, with ideas, explanations, examples, or materials you can use.

It isn’t a search engine, and it doesn’t require technical skills. Instead, it helps you create or improve thing—lesson plans, exercises, explanations, dialogues, quizzes, feedback, and more. You simply tell it what you need, and it works with you to produce it.

To get to know it, simply enter “ChatGPT” into a search engine, then select “Try for free”. The free version has limits on how many requests you can make in a day; various paid versions remove this restriction and add functionality. The least expensive paid option is about \$20/month.

Here is what you will see when you start:

What are you working on?



if you click on the microphone, showing that you want to speak your request instead of typing or pasting it, you will have to log in (“Continue with Google, Facebook or e-mail?”). After you enter a prompt, tap/click the up-arrow ↑ to submit it. After ChatGPT responds to your request (called a “prompt” in geek-speak), it usually offers a dialogue to allow you to refine or expand its output.

If you have logged in, to retrieve your earlier chats you can tap/click the icon



at the upper left of the screen. (On an Android phone it’s two horizontal lines.)

I began by demonstrating several examples of how I have used it in my pronunciation class. Start with these to become familiar with how it works, or just make up your own. It’s fine to err on the side of excessive detail, or even to pause and correct yourself while speaking; it’s very patient. Below are some of the examples:

“My first language is Urdu, and I am struggling with the American R. Please provide guidance and exercises to help me with this.”

The response started by contrasting the Urdu R equivalent with the American R.

“For my ESL Advanced Pronunciation class, with all students somewhat fluent in English, I would like 40 sentences that illustrate the most challenging connections across words, with four categories of ten sentences each:

-from a word ending in a vowel to a word beginning with a vowel

-from vowel to consonant

-From consonant to vowel

-from consonant to consonant.

At the end of each group of ten, provide general guidance on overcoming that type of combination.”

Note that I started by describing the level of the class, and specified “most challenging.”

To modify an existing explanation, exercise or quiz in the Ventures textbooks (which are available online) or any other source that you can copy and paste:

I said, “I want an exercise similar to the one below, but with high-intermediate to advanced vocabulary, longer sentences, and a few questions that are really tricky,” then I copied and pasted this interactive quiz from ESL Lounge (which IMO is a wonderful site):

<https://test-english.com/grammar-points/b1/past-simple-present-perfect/>

ChatGPT has no problem with casual language.

“Teaching my ESL Advanced Pronunciation class, I became confused while teaching the seven rhotic vowels. When we came to words like fire, choir and higher, it seemed as if that rhotic vowel was different from the others: while the others formed diphthongs from the vowel to the following R (or from the first half

of the vowel if it was itself a diphthong), that doesn't seem to work with the IRE sound – it seems more like a triphthong. Can you help me with this?"

It's comfortable with rambling requests like this one. In fact, it feels like I'm talking with a real person who... knows everything. And it remembers things; I asked it once whether colleges in Denmark were state-owned, and after the basic answer it suggested how I might use that information in my ESL pronunciation class. Which makes no sense, of course, but is kind of charming.

To summarize a video:

I said "For the video below, summarize its instructional content in outline form," then I pasted this link to a 5-minute video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WdQ9dinI7p0>

*"Watching the video" appeared for about ½ second before it produced the outline. Total elapsed time was about 3 seconds. This can save time when reviewing multiple videos to find an appropriate one. **(But, as a participant wisely pointed out, I would review the selected video before using it, because AI can certainly make mistakes!)***

I have also asked it to find videos meeting certain criteria, like "less than five minutes, for a general audience, comparing and contrasting ChatGPT, Gemini and Copilot". It provided a few options, then several suggestions about how I might refine my own search.

"I'm tutoring a Honduran at the high intermediate level, and trying to explain how to use mnemonic devices to memorize new English vocabulary. I'm talking about finding another word that he already knows and that sounds like the target word, and making up a creative story linking the two words. For example, to memorize "torn," think of a toro (bull) tearing the seat of a matador's pants and the crowd laughing. I would like ten examples of this technique, and I want the similar-

sounding words to be in Spanish. Provide English translations of the Spanish words that you employ.”

The first time I tried this I omitted the part about providing the English translations of the Spanish words, and I got something that was hard for me to understand. The examples the second time around were generally good, and they helped my student start using mnemonic devices on his own.

To simplify text passages: I selected (highlight, ctrl/c, or however a Mac does it) a few paragraphs of advanced reading from ESL Lounge, said “For the passage below, simplify it to the Intermediate level, provide a glossary of the words that you omitted or changed, and, in square brackets in the simplified version, include the parallel passages from the original.”, then pasted in (ctrl/v) the text.

Another suggested prompt is: “I need a long intermediate paragraph with ten assorted grammatical errors, and below an explanation of each error.”

ChatGPT always offers more, based on what it thinks might be helpful--cleaner formatting, tables, deeper explanations, student handouts, etc. Unfortunately, the free version will not provide audio examples – instead, it uses the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) in its answers.

ESL-specific platforms

Products that use AI and are designed specifically for ESL teaching (for example, Almanack and edio) are large expensive frameworks, or even back-end systems requiring extensive customization. They handle all aspects of instruction (registration, lesson planning, progress tracking, grading, attendance...). In my opinion, they might work well in a school system or corporation, but not so well for individual teachers.

They are also much less simple to use than general-purpose AI tools like ChatGPT, Google Gemini and MS Copilot. (The last two resemble ChatGPT but are designed to work smoothly with Google or in Microsoft apps, respectively.)

I admit that I gave short shrift to these products, mainly due to time limitations. But they all offer some kind of limited free trial if you are interested.

My question while exploring these products was always “How is this better for us than ChatGPT?”

(My question since then has been “How do I stop the avalanche of e-mails, texts and even Facebook messages from the systems and salespeople with whom I unwisely shared my contact information?”

Here are two of the more popular ones:

ALMANACK

Free trial at <https://www.almanack.ai/>

Or for how it supports individual teachers (with \$ to spare):

<https://www.almanack.ai/solutions/teachers/>

Its self-description: “Creation of lesson plans, resources for multi-level instruction, cultural adaptation tools, visual & interactive materials, etc.”

Also, “Almanack helps teachers save time and create more engaging, personalized learning experiences. Our AI-powered tools support you in planning, differentiation, and content creation - all while maintaining your unique teaching style.”

I showed the interface for lesson plan development, which asks about 40 questions and then provides lesson materials for the teacher to assemble. As a contrast to this approach, I entered the following prompt into ChatGPT:

“For an ESL class I am teaching, I would like a one-hour lesson plan, high intermediate, conditionals, including ten groups of three sentences, each group illustrating first, second, third conditionals with concise explanations of the structure, and any other information needed to flesh out student’s grasp of conditionals, for example use of Were instead of Was in the second conditional, inverted structure (then clause before if clause), and the concept of moving tenses backwards as we go from first to third conditional. Lesson

should include at least one interactive game. Subject matter should be domestic pets and getting enough sleep.” The result was outstanding, and when I entered the same prompt the next day it provided a very different lesson using the same criteria.

NOTE: I’ve included ChatGPT’s response to this prompt at the end of this paper.

A less experienced teacher could omit most of those specifics, then interact with ChatGPT to refine its more generic lesson plan to fit the teacher’s style and preferences. My own contention is that this simpler, very flexible method is more useful in our environment than Almanack’s approach.

edio

Self-description: “A language-teaching platform: Interactive platform for teaching languages with AI-assistant for exercises, automatic checking, ready-made material.”

edio.ai Video sales pitch <https://edio.ai/>

Here is the “before/after” graphic from their website:

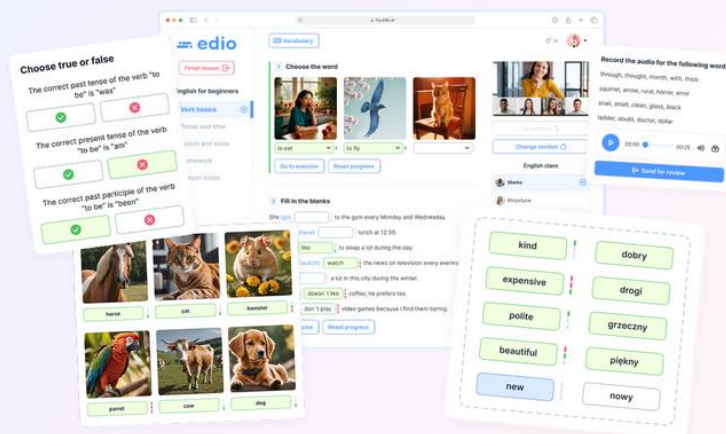
Before

- ❌ Teaching with books and PDFs
- ❌ Spending hours preparing for each lesson
- ❌ Limited interaction with students
- ❌ Manually checking all student answers



With edio

- ✅ Access ready-to-use lessons or create your own with AI assistant
- ✅ Manage every activity in one platform without switching tools
- ✅ Use 25+ engaging exercises to boost learning
- ✅ Automatic answer checking and feedback for students



I signed up for a half-hour one-on-one interview with an edio salesperson in Ukraine, and learned that, like Almanack, it is a comprehensive system designed to handle all aspects of ESL teaching including administration, checking student work and lesson development. After some prodding, she admitted that their AI is a ChatGPT bot, and when I asked how edio could help an individual teacher better than ChatGPT alone could, the answers were all about the large unifying system. So again, unless the Literacy council were to adopt edio (or another package) as a standard, I can see little advantage for a teacher.

Apps that listen and correct pronunciation

I looked far and wide for this kind of product, and found two that I could install and that seemed at least interesting and had positive reviews:

SpeechAce (Pronunciation & Fluency Assessment API / Platform)

<https://app.speechace.co/placement/>

ELSA Speak (English Language Speech Assistant)

<https://elsaspeak.com/en/experience/#/exercise>

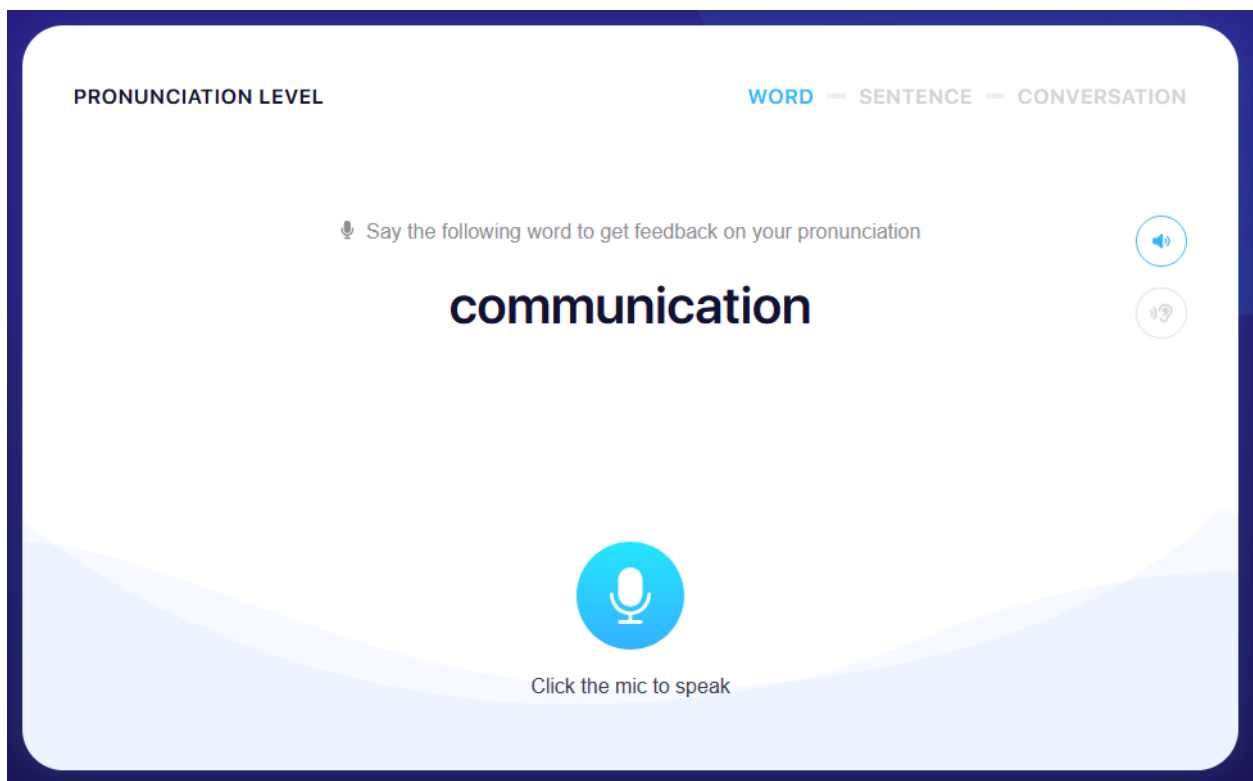
I used these links after signing up for free trials, and I think they will work for you, but if not you can get in with <https://elsaspeak.com/en/> and <https://www.speechace.com/>.

They both provide text to pronounce, then score your pronunciation and allow you to click on highlighted portions of the text for detailed guidance for improvement. They also both provide complete correct pronunciations. As we

discovered in the class, both tend to be very lenient: I pronounced “Communication” into ELSA Speak as “COW-moon-EE-kah-TEEOHN,” and it actually complimented me, and didn’t even catch the problem with the last syllable.

I would not use these tools in a class, but I might suggest that students use them on their own if they’re willing to buy them. I expect that they will improve dramatically over the next year or so, as AI in general keeps improving.

Here’s the ELSA Speak interface, at least in the demo version:



And again, if you want to play with either one, use the links above.

I surveyed several others that looked as if they might offer this service, including Pronunciation Coach, Lingvis, LingoDeer, EnglishClass101, Voxy, Beelinguapp, and Mango Languages, and I found nothing of interest.

NOTE: A very simple way for a student to practice pronunciation on his own is to dictate something into Word (optionally while recording it on a phone), then have

word “Read Aloud” and compare the two versions. Word’s pronunciation is casual and accurate.

And a fun one, which I use once in each class: in Google, enter “How to pronounce [single word].” It will offer the option of British and American pronunciation, so I use “photographer,” “water, and” “schedule” as a way to tell them to be careful with British sites!

The screenshot shows a Google search for "How to pronounce schedule". The search bar contains the text "How to pronounce schedule". Below the search bar, there are navigation options: "AI Mode", "All", "Videos", "Images", "Short videos", "Shopping", "News", "More", and "Tools". The search results for "schedule" are displayed, with tabs for "Overview", "Usage examples", "Pronunciation", and "Similar and opposite words". The "Pronunciation" tab is selected, showing the American pronunciation of "schedule" as "skeh · jool". There is a "Sounds like" section with a speaker icon and a "Slow" toggle switch. A diagram of a mouth is shown with the word "Feedback" below it.

Conclusion

Some general recommendations for using AI in ESL teaching:

- **Start small.** Get comfortable with a tool before throwing the kitchen sink at it.
- **Verify everything.** Some of the offered mnemonic device examples before I refined the prompt were really awful, and I got some “non-rhotic” examples

that actually were rhotic. This would have caused confusion in my class if I hadn't caught it.

- **Keep it human-centered.** Some sources mention (yet another) 80/20 rule: 20% of time obtaining ideas from AI, 80% refining them and adapting them to your own situation and teaching style. Not sure about the numbers, but we should always treat AI as an assistant and remember that we humans are the ones (at least so far!) who interact with students.

Sample response

This is ChatGPT's unedited response the first time I entered the lesson planning prompt shown above in my discussion of Almanack. I would probably add my own elaboration of the was/were issue, explaining examples of both options, and maybe some other tweaks, but it's certainly a good point of departure, the response was complete in about two seconds, meaning I could go through a lot of versions in little time.

“For an ESL class I am teaching, I would like a one-hour lesson plan, high intermediate, conditionals, including ten groups of three sentences, each group illustrating first, second, third conditionals with concise explanations of the structure, and any other information needed to flesh out student's grasp of conditionals, for example use of Were instead of Was in the second conditional, inverted structure (then clause before if clause), and the concept of moving tenses backwards as we go from first to third conditional. Lesson should include at least one interactive game. Subject matter should be domestic pets and getting enough sleep.”

1-Hour Lesson Plan: “If I Had Slept More, My Cat Wouldn’t Hate Me”

Level

High Intermediate (B2)

Duration

60 minutes

Theme

Domestic pets and getting enough sleep

Grammar Focus

First, Second, and Third Conditionals

- “Were” vs. “Was” in the Second Conditional
- Inverted conditionals (e.g., *Had I known...*)
- Tense backshifting across conditionals (present → past → past perfect)

Lesson Breakdown

Time	Stage	Purpose / Activity
0–5 min	Warm-Up Discussion	Activate prior knowledge and set theme
5–15 min	Presentation	Explain conditionals clearly with examples
15–35 min	Guided Practice	Students identify, complete, and compare conditional forms
35–50 min	Interactive Game: “Conditional Chain”	Practice fluency and spontaneous use

Time	Stage	Purpose / Activity
50–60 min	Production / Reflection	Write and share real or imaginative examples

1. Warm-Up Discussion (5 min)

Prompt:

Ask:

- “Do you have (or want) a pet?”
- “What happens if you don’t get enough sleep?”
- “How do your pets affect your sleep?”

Encourage full-sentence answers, e.g.,

“If my cat wakes me up early, I feel tired all day.”

Transition:

“Those are conditionals — sentences that talk about results depending on conditions.”

2. Presentation (10 min)

A. Explanation of Forms

Type	Structure	Meaning / Time	Example
First Conditional	If + present, will + base verb	Real, future possibility	<i>If I take my dog for a long walk, he will sleep better.</i>
Second Conditional	If + past, would + base verb	Unreal, present/future imagination	<i>If I had a cat, I would never be lonely.</i>

Type	Structure	Meaning / Time	Example
Third Conditional	If + past perfect, would have + past participle	Unreal, past / regret	<i>If I had gone to bed earlier, I would have heard my hamster escape.</i>

B. Notes on Form

- Use were for all subjects in the second conditional (*If I were you...*).
- You can invert and drop *if*:
 - *Had I known the dog would bark all night, I would've slept on the couch.*
 - *Were I more responsible, I'd feed my fish on time.*
- Tense backshift:
 - First: present → will
 - Second: past → would
 - Third: past perfect → would have

3. Guided Practice (20 min)

Ten Groups of Three Sentences (Each group = 1st, 2nd, 3rd conditionals)

#	Theme	Sentences
1	Sleep	<p>1 <i>If I go to bed before midnight, I will feel great tomorrow.</i></p> <p>2 <i>If I went to bed earlier, I would feel better in the mornings.</i></p> <p>3 <i>If I had gone to bed earlier, I would have felt better today.</i></p>

#	Theme	Sentences
2	Dog walks	<p>1 <i>If I take my dog for a walk, he will stop barking.</i></p> <p>2 <i>If I took him out more often, he would behave better.</i></p> <p>3 <i>If I had taken him out yesterday, he wouldn't have destroyed my shoes.</i></p>
3	Cat allergies	<p>1 <i>If I'm allergic, I will sneeze a lot.</i></p> <p>2 <i>If I were allergic, I would avoid cats.</i></p> <p>3 <i>If I had been allergic, I couldn't have adopted my cat.</i></p>
4	Hamster care	<p>1 <i>If I clean the cage, it will smell fresh.</i></p> <p>2 <i>If I cleaned it more often, my hamster would be happier.</i></p> <p>3 <i>If I had cleaned it last week, it wouldn't have smelled so bad.</i></p>
5	Sleep habits	<p>1 <i>If I drink coffee late, I won't sleep well.</i></p> <p>2 <i>If I didn't drink coffee at night, I would sleep better.</i></p> <p>3 <i>If I hadn't drunk that coffee, I would have fallen asleep earlier.</i></p>
6	Pet food	<p>1 <i>If I buy good pet food, my cat will be healthy.</i></p> <p>2 <i>If I bought better food, my cat would stop meowing for snacks.</i></p> <p>3 <i>If I had bought better food, my cat wouldn't have gotten sick.</i></p>
7	Sleep routines	<p>1 <i>If I set an alarm, I will wake up on time.</i></p> <p>2 <i>If I set an alarm earlier, I would have more time for my dog.</i></p> <p>3 <i>If I had set the alarm, I wouldn't have overslept.</i></p>

#	Theme	Sentences
8	Responsibility	<p>1 <i>If I remember to feed my fish, they will stay alive.</i></p> <p>2 <i>If I were more responsible, my fish would never go hungry.</i></p> <p>3 <i>If I had remembered last night, the fish would have eaten.</i></p>
9	Exercise	<p>1 <i>If I play with my cat, she will stop scratching furniture.</i></p> <p>2 <i>If I played with her every day, she would be calmer.</i></p> <p>3 <i>If I had played with her, she wouldn't have attacked the couch.</i></p>
10	Rest & stress	<p>1 <i>If I sleep enough, I won't be cranky with my pets.</i></p> <p>2 <i>If I slept more, I'd have more patience.</i></p> <p>3 <i>If I had slept more, I wouldn't have yelled at my dog.</i></p>

 **Activity:**

Students identify the type of conditional in each sentence and explain why it's used.

Then, in pairs, they choose a group and personalize it:

"If I went to bed earlier, I would have time to play with my cat in the morning."

 **4. Interactive Game: "Conditional Chain" (15 min)**

Setup:

Students form small groups (3–4).

Instructions:

1. The first student makes a *first conditional* sentence related to pets or sleep.
 - *If my dog sleeps on my bed, I will dream of bones.*

2. The next student responds with a *second conditional* sentence that continues logically:
 - *If I had a dog like that, I would buy a bigger bed.*
3. The next adds a *third conditional*:
 - *If I had known dogs take so much space, I would have stayed single!*
4. Continue the chain with new prompts for 5–10 minutes.

Give points for creativity, accuracy, and humor.

5. Production / Reflection (10 min)

Writing prompt:

“Write one short paragraph (4–5 sentences) about how your sleep or your pet’s behavior could change — using at least one of each conditional.”

Example:

If I go to bed earlier, my cat won’t wake me up at dawn. If I were more disciplined, I would avoid caffeine at night. If I had gone to bed earlier last night, I would feel great today.

Share aloud with feedback focusing on correctness and intonation.

Optional Extension (Homework)

Students write a humorous “If…” diary entry (e.g., “If my hamster could talk…”), using all three conditionals correctly.
