

Beyond the Textbook: Contemporary Challenges in Teaching English as a Second Language

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Abstract:

The teaching of English as a second language (ESL) has moved well beyond the confines of the printed textbook, shaped instead by rapidly diversifying classrooms, shifting learner expectations, and the disruptive presence of digital and artificial intelligence (AI) tools. This paper synthesizes contemporary research to examine five interconnected challenges facing ESL practitioners: teacher preparedness and professional well-being, the management of mixed-ability and multilingual classrooms, the affective and motivational dimensions of language acquisition, the integration of AI-driven technologies, and the persistent tension between assessment practices and authentic communicative competence. Drawing on recent empirical and theoretical literature, the paper argues that these challenges are not isolated but mutually reinforcing, requiring an integrated pedagogical response rather than piecemeal solutions. It further considers how translanguaging pedagogies and learner-centered motivational strategies can help teachers move beyond monolingual, test-driven models of instruction. The paper concludes that sustainable progress in ESL education depends on institutional investment in teacher training, thoughtful adoption of technology, and assessment reform that rewards communicative competence over rote performance.

Keywords: English as a second language, ESL pedagogy, teacher professional development, multilingual classrooms, learner motivation, artificial intelligence in language learning, translanguaging, language assessment washback.

Introduction

English continues to function as the world's most widely taught additional language, and demand for effective English as a second language (ESL) instruction shows no sign of slowing. Yet the classroom in which that instruction takes place looks markedly different from the one imagined by early communicative language teaching models. Learners now arrive with radically different linguistic repertoires, exposure levels, and motivations; teachers are expected to manage this diversity while absorbing new technologies, satisfying institutional testing regimes, and sustaining their own professional well-being. The textbook, once the organizing artifact of the ESL classroom, has been supplemented—and in many contexts displaced—by digital tools, learner-generated content, and multilingual classroom practices that resist a single, linear syllabus.

This paper examines five contemporary and interrelated challenges in ESL teaching: (a) teacher preparedness and professional sustainability, (b) the pedagogical demands of mixed-ability and multilingual classrooms, (c) the affective and motivational dimensions of second language acquisition, (d)

the rapid integration of artificial intelligence and other digital tools, and (e) the ongoing tension between standardized assessment and authentic language use. Each of these areas has generated a substantial body of recent scholarship, yet they are too rarely considered together. This paper argues that treating them as isolated problems—to be solved with isolated interventions—understates the systemic nature of the difficulties ESL teachers now face. A more productive approach recognizes that a teacher's capacity to manage linguistic diversity, for example, is inseparable from their access to professional development, their comfort with technology, and the incentives created by high-stakes testing.

The discussion that follows draws on recent empirical studies and established theoretical frameworks in applied linguistics and educational psychology. It is intended less as an exhaustive review than as a synthesis that maps the terrain contemporary ESL practitioners must navigate and identifies points of leverage for teacher educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers.

It is worth noting at the outset that these challenges are distributed unevenly across contexts. A private language institute serving adult professionals, a government secondary school in a rural district, and a university English-for-academic-purposes program each present teachers with a distinct configuration of resources, learner expectations, and institutional pressure. The purpose of this paper is not to flatten these differences into a single universal account of "the ESL classroom," but to identify recurring pressure points that surface, in varying degrees, across most of these settings, and to consider how they interact rather than treating each as a self-contained problem to be solved in isolation.

Teacher Preparedness and Professional Sustainability

Much of the difficulty in ESL classrooms can be traced back to the preparation and ongoing support available to teachers themselves. Reviews of the field consistently point to inadequate initial training, limited access to continuing professional development, and heavy reliance on outdated methods such as grammar-translation instruction as persistent obstacles to effective language teaching (Hategekimana et al., 2024). Where teachers lack sustained opportunities to update their pedagogical knowledge, classroom practice tends to default to transmission-oriented teaching that privileges rote memorization of vocabulary and grammar rules over communicative competence.

Professional sustainability is a closely related concern. Teaching is a demanding profession under ordinary circumstances, and language teachers face additional pressures tied to constantly evolving learner populations, curriculum mandates, and—in many contexts—cross-cultural adaptation when working abroad. Research on early-career teachers indicates that unpredictable student behavior and a lack of confidence in the effectiveness of available professional development are among the strongest predictors of burnout (Peterson & Baule, 2023). When professional development is treated as a compliance exercise rather than a genuine capacity-building opportunity, teachers are left to develop coping strategies largely on their own, which in turn affects instructional quality and retention.

These findings suggest that addressing pedagogical challenges in ESL classrooms cannot be separated from addressing the working conditions of the teachers who staff them. Differentiated, iterative, classroom-embedded training—rather than one-off workshops—appears far more likely to translate into improved practice, particularly when it is designed around the specific linguistic and cultural composition of a teacher's actual learners rather than a generic model of the "typical" ESL classroom.

There is also a credentialing dimension to teacher preparedness that recent literature has begun to take more seriously. In many contexts, individuals teaching English hold general education qualifications but limited specific training in second language acquisition theory, applied phonetics, or the practicalities

of teaching literacy to learners who are simultaneously developing academic skills in a language they do not yet fully command. Where certification pathways do not require this specialized preparation, teachers are effectively asked to build their pedagogical content knowledge on the job, often through trial and error, with uneven results depending on how much informal mentorship or peer support happens to be available at a given school.

Mixed-Ability and Multilingual Classrooms

Contemporary ESL classrooms are rarely linguistically or academically homogeneous. Learners differ in prior exposure to English, first-language literacy, motivation, and cultural background, and teachers are routinely expected to accommodate this range within a single lesson plan. Differentiated instruction—adjusting content, process, and product according to learner readiness and interest—remains one of the most widely recommended responses to this diversity (Tomlinson, 2001), yet it requires planning time and pedagogical flexibility that many teachers are not given the institutional space to develop.

Multilingualism compounds the challenge. In many contexts, English is taught not as a foreign language encountered solely in the classroom but as one thread within a broader multilingual repertoire that includes a learner's home language and, often, a regional or national lingua franca. Research on English-medium instruction in multilingual settings has shown that a mismatch between the language policies mandated by institutions and the linguistic realities of learners can undermine both comprehension and content learning, particularly when teachers themselves have limited proficiency in the languages their students bring to class (Opere-Kumi, 2024). Rather than treating learners' home languages as an obstacle to be suppressed, an emerging body of scholarship argues that they constitute a resource that, if acknowledged, can scaffold rather than hinder English acquisition.

The practical implication is that mixed-ability and multilingual classrooms cannot be managed through a single fixed methodology. Teachers need a repertoire of grouping strategies, formative assessment techniques, and content modifications they can deploy flexibly, informed by an accurate picture of each learner's starting point rather than assumptions drawn from a generic ESL learner profile.

Class size and physical infrastructure further complicate this picture. Differentiated instruction presumes a degree of teacher mobility and flexible grouping that is difficult to achieve in overcrowded classrooms with fixed seating and limited materials, a condition that remains common in many under-resourced public-school systems. In such settings, teachers frequently report relying on whole-class instruction pitched at a perceived "middle" level of ability, a compromise that risks under-serving both the strongest and the weakest learners in the room. Addressing mixed-ability teaching, then, is not purely a matter of pedagogical technique; it is also a matter of the physical and administrative conditions under which that technique must be applied.

Motivation and the Affective Dimension of Learning

Even well-designed instruction can falter if it does not account for the affective and motivational forces that shape how learners engage with a second language. Early socio-educational models framed motivation largely in terms of learners' attitudes toward the target language community (Gardner, 1985), while more recent theorizing has reframed motivation around learners' self-concept, particularly the gap between a learner's current English proficiency and an imagined "ideal L2 self" they aspire to become

(Dörnyei, 2009). This shift matters pedagogically: it suggests that motivation is not a fixed trait learner either possess or lack, but a dynamic state that classroom practice can actively cultivate or erode.

Empirical work on motivational strategies supports this view. A widely cited study of EFL classrooms in Taiwan found that teachers who deliberately incorporated strategies to build learner confidence, create a pleasant classroom atmosphere, and present tasks in personally relevant ways saw measurable gains in learner engagement and motivated behavior compared with classrooms where such strategies were largely absent (Cheng & Dörnyei, 2007). These findings reinforce the argument that motivation should be treated as a teachable, manageable classroom variable rather than an unalterable characteristic of individual learners.

For ESL teachers working with learners who have experienced repeated failure or anxiety around English—a common pattern among older or under-schooled learners—attending to affective factors is not a peripheral concern but a precondition for any instructional strategy to succeed. Cooperative, low-stakes tasks and explicit efforts to reduce anxiety consistently appear in the literature as some of the most reliable ways to sustain motivation across a course of study.

Motivation research also cautions against assuming that all learners are motivated in the same way or for the same reasons. Some learners are driven primarily by integrative goals, a genuine interest in the people and cultures associated with English, while others are motivated instrumentally, by the practical advantages English proficiency confers in employment, higher education, or migration. These orientations are not mutually exclusive, but they do call for different classroom emphases: integratively motivated learners may respond well to culturally rich, exploratory content, while instrumentally motivated learners often respond better to tasks that make a direct, visible connection between classroom activity and real-world outcomes such as workplace communication or examination success. Teachers who can diagnose which orientation predominates in a given group are better positioned to select tasks that sustain engagement over time.

Artificial Intelligence and the Changing Technological Landscape

Few developments have altered the ESL classroom as rapidly as the emergence of accessible generative AI tools since late 2022. Large language models and AI chatbots are now used for conversation practice, writing feedback, pronunciation coaching, and personalized content generation, and early evidence on their instructional value is generally positive. Chatbot-assisted instruction has been associated with gains in learners' willingness to communicate and measurable improvement in oral proficiency among young learners (Jeon, 2024), while AI-supported pronunciation tools have shown similar promise for learners practicing outside formal class time (Alharthi, 2024).

At the same time, the literature is careful to frame AI as a complement to, rather than a replacement for, human instruction. Jeon and Lee (2023) describe the relationship between teachers and large language models as complementary, arguing that AI systems are well suited to tasks such as generating practice material and offering immediate feedback, while human teachers remain essential for the relational, motivational, and culturally responsive dimensions of teaching that current systems cannot replicate. This complementary framing helps explain why studies of teacher attitudes find that trust and pedagogical beliefs, not technical familiarity alone, are the strongest predictors of whether educators adopt AI tools in their classrooms (Choi et al., 2023).

AI adoption also introduces new risks. Machine translation tools, now commonly embedded in learners' devices, can be used to bypass genuine language production, and teachers report difficulty

distinguishing authentic learner work from AI-generated or AI-translated output (Alharbi, 2023). Concerns about academic integrity have grown correspondingly; a study of Vietnamese EFL teachers found considerable uncertainty about how to detect and respond to generative-AI-assisted writing, with many teachers calling for clearer institutional guidance rather than being left to develop ad hoc policies on their own (Cong-Lem et al., 2024). Broader reviews of AI in K-12 education echo this caution, noting that pedagogical benefit depends heavily on how thoughtfully a tool is integrated into instructional design rather than on the sophistication of the technology itself (Mintz et al., 2023), a point reinforced by classroom comparisons showing that pairing learners with both a human mentor and an AI tool can outperform either resource used alone (Li et al., 2024).

Taken together, this literature suggests that AI is neither a panacea nor a threat to be resisted outright. Its instructional value depends on teachers possessing enough pedagogical and technical confidence to integrate it purposefully—returning, once again, to the centrality of teacher preparation discussed earlier in this paper.

Equitable access is a further, and sometimes overlooked, dimension of the AI conversation. Many of the tools discussed in the literature assume reliable internet connectivity, personal or shared devices, and a degree of digital literacy that cannot be taken for granted in every ESL context. Where these conditions are absent, AI-enabled instruction risks widening rather than narrowing the gap between well-resourced and under-resourced classrooms, even as it offers genuine pedagogical benefits where it can be implemented. Any institutional strategy for AI adoption therefore needs to weigh not only pedagogical effectiveness but also the practical question of which learners and teachers can realistically access the tools being recommended.

Translanguaging and the Limits of Monolingual Instruction

A further contemporary challenge concerns the ideological assumptions embedded in much ESL methodology, particularly the long-standing preference for English-only instruction. Translanguaging pedagogy challenges this assumption directly, treating learners' full linguistic repertoire—rather than English alone—as the appropriate unit of instruction. Foundational work in this area reframed bilingual classroom talk not as a deficiency to be corrected but as a legitimate pedagogical resource that can scaffold comprehension and deepen engagement with content (Creese & Blackledge, 2010).

Subsequent classroom-based research has extended this argument into English-medium instruction contexts, showing that deliberately incorporating students' home languages can make content more accessible to linguistically and culturally diverse learners without diminishing their English development (Tai, 2021). For ESL teachers trained under monolingual norms, however, adopting translanguaging practices represents a significant shift, both pedagogically and institutionally, particularly in settings where policy explicitly mandates English-only instruction. The tension between top-down monolingual policy and bottom-up multilingual classroom realities remains unresolved in much of the literature, and represents one of the clearer points at which teacher training, institutional policy, and classroom practice pull in different directions.

In practice, translanguaging need not mean abandoning English as the primary medium of instruction. Teachers who adopt translanguaging principles typically use learners' home languages strategically—for brief clarification, peer explanation, or activating prior knowledge before shifting back into English—rather than as a wholesale substitute for the target language. Framed this way, translanguaging is less a rejection of English-medium teaching than a recognition that learners think and

reason multilingually long before they can express that reasoning fluently in English, and that suppressing this reasoning process in the name of English-only instruction can slow rather than accelerate language development.

Assessment, Washback, and Institutional Constraints

Even where teachers embrace communicative, learner-centered methods, high-stakes assessment can quietly undo that work. The concept of washback—the influence that a test exerts on what and how teachers teach—was formalized by Alderson and Wall (1993), who observed that both teachers and learners frequently "do things they would not necessarily otherwise do" because of an impending test. Where an examination emphasizes discrete grammar or vocabulary knowledge over communicative performance, teachers report feeling compelled to narrow their instruction accordingly, even when they believe a more communicative approach would better serve their learners.

This dynamic is not inevitable. Washback can be positive when assessment design is closely aligned with communicative curricular goals, incorporating performance-based tasks and formative feedback rather than relying solely on discrete-item testing. The difficulty for most ESL teachers is that assessment design is rarely within their control; it is set by ministries of education, examination boards, or institutional policy, leaving teachers to mediate between what they are asked to test and what they believe constitutes genuine language proficiency. This mismatch between institutional accountability structures and classroom pedagogy represents one of the more intractable challenges identified in this paper, precisely because its solution lies largely outside the classroom itself.

Parents and school administrators are also implicated in this dynamic. Because examination results often function as a visible, comparable measure of school and teacher performance, pressure to "teach to the test" frequently originates as much from local expectations as from the formal curriculum itself. A teacher who introduces more communicative, less test-aligned activities may face resistance not from students but from parents anxious about examination outcomes, or from administrators evaluated on aggregate test scores. Meaningful assessment reform therefore requires attention not only to how tests are designed, but to how test results are used and interpreted by the wider community around the school, since narrowly instrumental uses of test data tend to reproduce narrow, test-focused teaching regardless of what the test itself was originally intended to measure.

Toward an Integrated Response

Considered individually, each of the challenges discussed above has a plausible, well-documented remedy: more robust teacher training, differentiated instruction, motivational classroom strategies, thoughtful AI integration, translanguaging pedagogy, and assessment reform. Considered together, however, they reveal a more systemic pattern. Teachers who lack sustained professional development are less likely to feel confident managing mixed-ability classrooms, experimenting with translanguaging, or integrating AI tools purposefully rather than defensively. Institutions that assess narrowly undercut teachers' motivation to invest in communicative, learner-centered practice, regardless of how well-trained those teachers are. And learners' motivation—arguably the variable most directly within a teacher's daily influence—is itself shaped by whether the classroom environment feels responsive to who they are linguistically and culturally.

This interdependence argues against piecemeal reform. A professional development initiative focused solely on technology, for instance, is unlikely to succeed if teachers remain accountable to

assessments that reward rote performance. Likewise, curriculum guidance promoting translanguaging will have limited effect if teachers have not been given the training or institutional permission to depart from monolingual norms. Policymakers and teacher educators seeking to improve ESL outcomes would therefore do well to treat these domains as a connected system, in which progress in one area is both supported by and constrained by the others.

A useful starting point for institutions is to identify which of these domains is currently acting as the binding constraint in a given context. In some settings, the most urgent barrier is teacher supply and training; in others, it is an assessment system that actively discourages communicative teaching regardless of how well-trained teachers already are; in still others, adequate teacher training and reasonable assessment design coexist alongside a rigid monolingual policy that leaves little room for translanguaging or differentiated instruction. Diagnosing the specific configuration of constraints in a given school or system is likely to be more productive than importing a generic reform package developed for a different context, however well evidenced that package may be elsewhere.

Conclusion

Teaching English as a second language today demands considerably more than fidelity to a textbook or a fixed methodology. Teachers are asked to sustain their own professional growth and well-being, differentiate instruction across widely varying linguistic and academic profiles, cultivate learner motivation as an ongoing pedagogical project, integrate rapidly evolving AI tools with appropriate caution, extend genuine legitimacy to learners' home languages, and navigate assessment systems that do not always reward the practices research supports. None of these challenges is new in isolation, but their simultaneous intensification—particularly the recent, rapid arrival of generative AI—has made the contemporary ESL classroom considerably more complex than the one for which many current methodologies were originally designed.

Addressing these challenges will require coordinated investment: sustained, classroom-embedded teacher training; institutional flexibility around language policy and assessment design; and clear, evidence-informed guidance on technology integration. Future research would benefit from longitudinal, cross-context studies that examine how these factors interact over time, rather than treating them as separate strands of inquiry. For practitioners, the more immediate takeaway is that moving "beyond the textbook" is not a single decision but an ongoing, adaptive practice—one that depends as much on institutional support as on any individual teacher's skill or goodwill.

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