



BAKHTINIAN POLYPHONY AND LARGE LANGUAGE MODELS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of Large Language Models (LLMs) in English language teaching through the theoretical lens of Bakhtinian dialogism. Bakhtin's ideas of heteroglossia, polyphony, and dialogic interaction highlight that meaning emerges through the interplay of diverse voices. While the traditional classroom already embodies this multiplicity through teacher-student exchanges and peer dialogue, the arrival of LLMs introduces a new interlocutor, artificial yet dialogically responsive, into the pedagogical arena. LLMs can simulate a wide range of registers, perspectives, and critical positions, creating opportunities for students to engage with multiple "voices" simultaneously. For instance, an LLM may provide feedback as a formalist critic, a peer reviewer, and a language tutor, compelling learners to evaluate, synthesise, and position themselves within a plurality of perspectives. In literature classrooms, LLMs can animate characters or critics, expand interpretive possibilities, and foster a genuinely polyphonic environment. The study employs autoethnography to examine the researchers with LLMs as learners, teachers, and critics. Reflective journaling of AI-human exchanges provides the basis for analysis, capturing both the machine's textual utterances and the researcher's responses. These narratives are read thematically through Bakhtin's framework to explore moments of dialogic expansion where LLMs simulate polyphony by generating multiple voices or perspectives, as well as tensions where the machine's lack of ethical answerability disrupts authentic dialogue. The paper argues that LLMs, when integrated critically, can cultivate dialogic competence, rhetorical agility, and AI literacy, thereby extending Bakhtinian dialogism into the digital age without displacing the ethical centrality of human pedagogy.

Index Terms: LLM, Bakhtin, Interlocuter, AI, and polyphony.

Introduction

In the early twenty-first century, the pedagogical landscape of higher education has undergone profound transformations driven by the rapid evolution of artificial intelligence. The emergence of large language models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT, Claude, and Gemini marks a turning point in how knowledge is produced, mediated, and experienced. These systems, trained on vast textual corpora, possess an ability to simulate dialogue, generate contextually responsive language, and perform interpretive tasks once reserved for human cognition. Within English language teaching (ELT), their presence raises urgent questions not only about linguistic competence and pedagogy but also about the very nature of dialogue, authorship, and meaning.

Language education has long depended on dialogic interaction as a foundation for learning. The classroom functions as a space where teacher, student, and text co-create understanding through conversation, negotiation, and response. The arrival of LLMs as classroom interlocutors unsettles traditional hierarchies. These models can mimic multiple voices: tutor, peer, critic, or author, challenging the monologic structure of conventional pedagogy and opening possibilities for a more polyphonic learning environment. Yet, their simulated responsiveness also brings ambivalence: Can dialogue remain authentic when one interlocutor lacks consciousness, intention, or ethical accountability?

This paper examines such questions through the theoretical framework of Bakhtinian dialogism, employing autoethnography to reflect on the researcher's own encounters with LLMs as both learner and teacher. By documenting and analysing personal interactions with LLMs, the study seeks to illuminate how these systems transform the classroom into a hybrid dialogic space, part human, part algorithmic, where meaning is co-constructed across human and machine voices. The aim is not to idealise technology but to interrogate its dialogic potential and its ethical limitations.

This paper contributes to the emerging intersection of digital humanities, AI pedagogy, and literary theory, arguing that Bakhtin's notion of polyphony provides a critical lens to understand how LLMs can foster, simulate, or distort the conditions of authentic dialogue in higher education. It also proposes that educators, when engaging critically with LLMs, can help students develop a new AI dialogic literacy that balances creativity with critical reflection.

Review of related literature

Large Language Models in Higher Education and Language Pedagogy

The intersection of artificial intelligence and language education has become a critical site of inquiry in recent years. Scholars in applied linguistics, digital humanities, and education have sought to understand how large language models (LLMs) reshape the dynamics of teaching, learning, and interpretation. While technological optimism often celebrates LLMs for their efficiency and adaptability, critical pedagogy urges educators to interrogate their epistemological and ethical implications.

AI and the Reconfiguration of Learning

The integration of AI tools in education has evolved from automated tutoring systems and grammar checkers to complex, generative systems capable of producing creative and context-aware text. Studies such as Zawacki-Richter et al. (2019) and Holmberg (2023) identify AI's transformative potential for personalisation and feedback in higher education, emphasising how adaptive systems can cater to diverse learner needs. In English language teaching, this adaptability is particularly valuable: LLMs can simulate authentic conversation, scaffold writing tasks, and provide real-time stylistic corrections (Kukulska-Hulme 2022).

The mechanisation of linguistic feedback has raised concerns about overreliance on automated voices. Selwyn (2021) and Knox (2023) caution that AI's "pedagogical efficiency" may reinforce passive learning, replacing genuine dialogue with algorithmic instruction. These tensions echo Bakhtin's critique of monologic discourse: a single, authoritative voice suppressing plurality. When LLMs offer instant answers, students risk engaging with language as fixed output rather than as an evolving dialogic process.

LLMs as Dialogic Tools

A growing strand of research positions LLMs not merely as technological aids but as dialogic agents within pedagogy. Sinha and Cassell (2023) describe how conversational AI systems can simulate peer interaction, promoting collaborative inquiry. In writing classrooms, teachers report that students using LLMs develop greater rhetorical awareness as they critique AI-generated text and compare it to their own compositions (McAuley 2024). These practices resonate with Bakhtin's notion of internally persuasive discourse, where learners engage with external voices to shape independent meaning.

The dialogic potential of LLMs depends heavily on instructional framing. When treated as neutral or authoritative, the AI's voice can dominate classroom discourse; when critically mediated, it becomes a catalyst for metacognitive reflection. Scholars such as Williamson and Piattoeva (2022) emphasise that the role of the educator is crucial in guiding students to interrogate algorithmic authority, asking not only what AI says, but why it speaks as it does.

The Question of Authorship and Agency

In the humanities, the emergence of AI-generated text has revived long-standing debates on authorship and creativity. Foucault's (1969) concept of the "author-function" and Barthes's (1977) "death of the author" find renewed relevance in the age of machine authorship. LLMs challenge the idea of a singular creative consciousness, instead generating language through statistical approximation of countless human texts. From a Bakhtinian perspective, every LLM output can be read as polyphonic, composed of the aggregated voices of its training data, though these voices are stripped of contextual and ethical grounding.

Educators such as Belova (2023) argue that this condition invites a new kind of literacy: one that recognises writing as *intertextual performance* rather than personal expression. In English language teaching, this translates into developing AI literacy, the capacity to interpret, evaluate, and ethically engage with machine-generated discourse. Such literacy empowers students to position themselves within an expanded dialogic field, where human and artificial voices coexist.

Gaps in the Literature

While empirical studies highlight AI's linguistic capabilities and pedagogical potential, few examine the lived experience of engaging with LLMs through a humanistic lens. The affective, ethical, and dialogic dimensions of these interactions remain underexplored. Most research adopts quantitative or techno-pedagogical methodologies, overlooking the subjective, interpretive, and phenomenological dimensions that shape meaning-making in digital contexts.

This paper addresses this gap through autoethnography, treating the researcher's interaction with LLMs as a site of reflective inquiry. By applying Bakhtinian dialogism to first-person encounters, it foregrounds the human experience of negotiating meaning within machine-mediated dialogue, an experience that is both pedagogical and existential.

Theoretical Framework: Bakhtinian Dialogism and Polyphony

Mikhail Bakhtin's work on dialogism, particularly in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981), provides a compelling theoretical framework for understanding the emergence of artificial interlocutors in educational settings. Bakhtin viewed language not as a neutral vehicle for communication but as a dynamic field of interaction shaped by the voices of others. Every utterance, he argued, is "half someone else's" (Bakhtin 293), always in dialogue with prior and anticipated responses. Meaning, therefore, is not fixed within words but emerges in the relational exchange between voices.

Heteroglossia and the Classroom

In Bakhtin's schema, heteroglossia, the coexistence of multiple speech types and social voices within a single discourse, defines the vitality of language. A classroom, when functioning dialogically, is a microcosm of heteroglossia: teachers' authoritative discourse meets the students' internally persuasive discourse, creating zones of tension where meaning is negotiated rather than imposed. When an LLM enters this ecosystem, it introduces an additional, artificial voice that amplifies heteroglossia in unprecedented ways. It can simulate the discourse of a literary critic, a translator, or even a fictional character, expanding the dialogic range available to learners.

This multiplication of voices also raises the problem of authenticity. Bakhtin emphasised that genuine dialogue involves answerability, the ethical responsibility of the speaker toward the other. An LLM, while capable of mimicking responsiveness, cannot bear responsibility for its utterances. It operates through probabilistic associations, not moral or experiential consciousness. Thus, it risks producing what Bakhtin would call monologic illusion, a conversation that appears dialogic but lacks the ethical grounding of human reciprocity.

Polyphony and Artificial Voices

Bakhtin's notion of polyphony, first articulated in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984), describes the presence of multiple, autonomous voices within a narrative, none of which is subordinated to a single, authoritative perspective. When applied to pedagogy, polyphony invites an educational model where learning arises from a plurality of standpoints, encouraging students to inhabit multiple interpretive positions.

In this sense, LLMs can function as artificial agents of polyphony. For instance, when a student queries an LLM about a poem, the model might generate interpretations from a feminist, structuralist, and postcolonial perspective within seconds. Such outputs expose learners to a multiplicity of discourses, prompting critical comparison and metacognitive reflection. Polyphony in its Bakhtinian sense is not mere multiplicity; it requires interpersonal tension and dialogic struggle among voices. The danger lies in the LLM's ability to flatten difference by presenting divergent perspectives as equivalent, reducing ideological conflict to stylistic variation.

Answerability and Ethics in AI Dialogue

Bakhtin's concept of answerability (*otvetstvennost*) foregrounds the ethical dimension of dialogue, the recognition that each utterance carries responsibility toward others. In human communication, this ethical weight underpins trust, empathy, and intellectual growth. In contrast, LLMs generate responses without experiential or moral investment. When students engage with these systems, they enter into a simulation of dialogue that lacks genuine ethical reciprocity.

This does not negate pedagogical value. Instead, it places responsibility upon educators to mediate between human and machine utterances, helping students discern the boundaries of authenticity and authorship. By teaching learners to interpret the "voices" of LLMs critically, educators can transform the interaction into an exercise in dialogic literacy where students learn not only to read language but also to read agency, bias, and intention within digital discourse.

Dialogism in the Digital Age

In digital contexts, Bakhtinian dialogism acquires renewed significance. The online classroom, shaped by social media, collaborative tools, and AI interfaces, is inherently polyphonic. Voices intersect across human and nonhuman agents, producing complex layers of discourse. The LLM thus becomes a new form of "text within the text", embodying what Bakhtin called double-voiced discourse, language that carries the intention of another speaker within it.

From this vantage, the study of LLMs in English language teaching becomes not merely a technological inquiry but a philosophical one: How do artificial utterances reshape our understanding of authorship, responsibility, and interpretation?

Methodology: Autoethnography as Reflexive Inquiry

Rationale for Autoethnography

Autoethnography situates personal experience within cultural and theoretical frameworks, allowing the researcher to examine how individual interactions illuminate broader social and pedagogical dynamics. In the context of this study, it serves as a bridge between subjective reflection and critical theory, enabling a nuanced understanding of how LLMs transform dialogic engagement in English language teaching.

Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) define autoethnography as "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience to understand cultural experience" (273). This method aligns with Bakhtin's dialogic philosophy, which privileges the relational and responsive nature of meaning-making. Just as Bakhtin rejects monologic authority, autoethnography resists detached objectivity, affirming the researcher's situated voice as a legitimate site of knowledge production.

Data Collection and Reflective Practice

The data for this study consists of a series of reflective practices documenting the researcher's interactions with an LLM (ChatGPT) across multiple contexts, lesson planning, essay feedback, and literary interpretation. Each entry records both the LLM's utterances and the researcher's immediate reflections, noting emotional reactions, critical observations, and pedagogical implications.

Example,

Prompt: "Explain T.S. Eliot's concept of the 'objective correlative' in simple terms for students."

LLM Response: "Eliot believed that emotions in poetry should be expressed indirectly through a set of objects, situations, or events that evoke those emotions. This prevents the poem from becoming sentimental."

Researcher Reflection: "The clarity of the response is useful pedagogically, but it flattens the critical nuance. The LLM speaks with the authority of a textbook rather than the curiosity of a learner. Its tone is informative but lacks dialogic depth."

Such vignettes capture the dynamic tension between clarity and complexity, between the pedagogical utility of AI and its monologic tendencies.

Analytical Process

Analysis was conducted through iterative, thematic reading of the journals, guided by three Bakhtinian categories:

1. **Heteroglossia** – the range and layering of voices in each exchange.
2. **Polyphony** – the degree of dialogic engagement among those voices.
3. **Answerability** – the ethical or affective responsibility displayed (or absent) in the interaction.

Each recorded dialogue was coded for instances where the LLM either expanded or constrained dialogic potential. For instance, when the model presented multiple interpretive frameworks for a literary text, this was categorised as dialogic expansion; when it imposed a single authoritative interpretation, it was marked as monologic closure.

Reflexivity and Researcher Positioning

Autoethnography demands reflexivity, the ongoing awareness of one's positionality as both participant and analyst. As an educator working in higher education, the researcher's engagement with LLMs is shaped by institutional pressures to adopt technology alongside personal scepticism about its dehumanising tendencies. This double consciousness mirrors Bakhtin's own emphasis on the coexistence of voices within the self, a "dialogic consciousness" constantly negotiating between affirmation and critique.

The researcher's reflections are not presented as universal truths but as situated encounters that illuminate the broader pedagogical condition of the digital age. The goal is not to evaluate the accuracy of LLMs but to explore the quality of dialogue they make possible, and the implications of that dialogue for teaching and learning English in an era of machine-mediated communication.

Dialogic Expansion: Simulated Polyphony in AI Interaction

One of the most striking findings was the LLM's ability to generate multiple interpretive positions within a single exchange, producing an effect of polyphony. In a reflective journal entry,

Prompt: "Discuss the symbolism of the sea in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*."

LLM Response: "The sea in *The Waves* represents both unity and dissolution, functioning as a metaphor for the collective human consciousness. From a feminist lens, it may also signify the fluidity of gender identity, while a psychoanalytic reading might interpret it as the unconscious that underlies individual identity."

Researcher Reflection: “The response performs an impressive ventriloquism of critical voices. It does not claim authority but presents interpretive plurality. In this sense, the LLM enacts a form of polyphony inviting me to respond, compare, and refine my own reading.”

The AI’s multiplicity functions as a pedagogical provocation, encouraging the learner to engage dialogically with multiple perspectives. The classroom potential is clear: students can be exposed to an array of interpretive frameworks within seconds, transforming the LLM into a “polyphonic catalyst”

This polyphony is synthetic, generated by the probabilistic stitching of discourses. The model’s “voices” are not autonomous or intentional but algorithmically assembled echoes of prior human utterances. Yet, pedagogically, this simulation still has value. It prompts learners to situate themselves within a discursive continuum, to discern difference, and to practice the interpretive act of positioning a central skill in both literary studies and language learning.

Findings and Discussion

The autoethnographic reflections reveal the complex dialogic terrain that unfolds when large language models are introduced into English language pedagogy. The interactions oscillate between moments of profound dialogic engagement when the LLM stimulates intellectual curiosity and reflexivity and instances of closure, in which the algorithm’s monologic tendencies become apparent. Through Bakhtin’s framework, these findings can be organised into three interrelated themes: 1) dialogic expansion, 2) monologic tension, and 3) ethical answerability.

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