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Using AI to Create Activities for Vocabulary Practice in Academic English Language Courses

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It is safe to say that artificial intelligence (AI) is on every educator's mind today. At professional conferences, at the water cooler at work, and on social media, there are conversations everywhere about how AI is impacting education. Though AI itself is not a new phenomenon, it seems that it appeared suddenly when ChatGPT was made available to the public in late November 2022. With this release came easy access to AI and a greater awareness of its capabilities. These developments in turn led to a range of emotions about how AI would disrupt teaching and learning, including in English language teaching (Toncelli & Kostka, 2024).

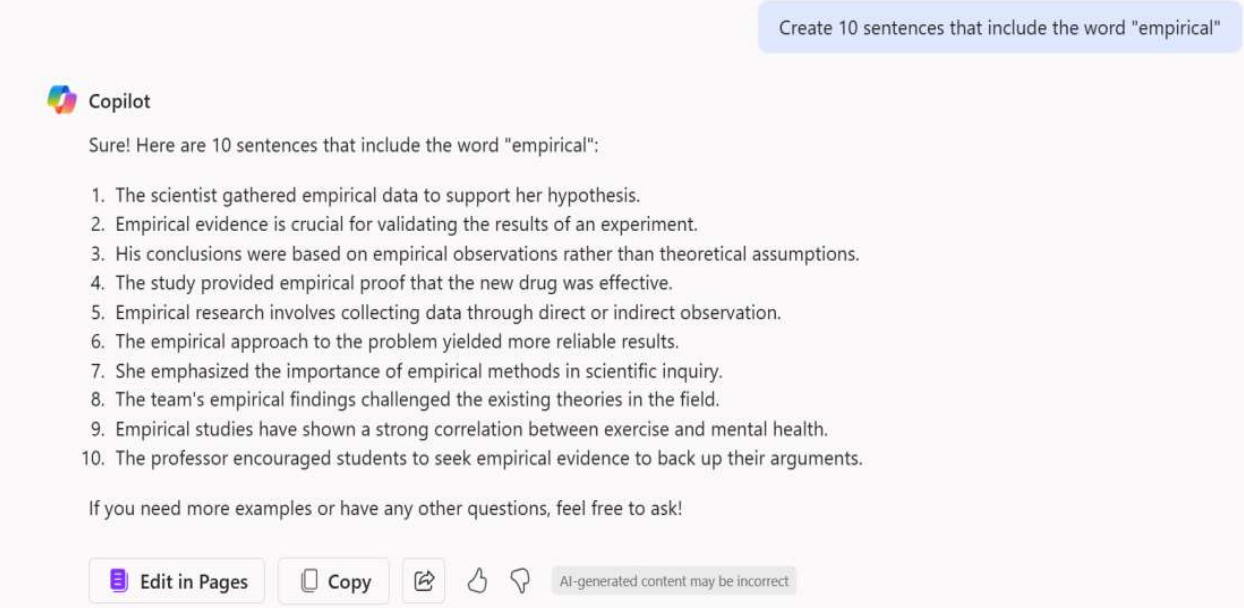
No matter how we feel about the good, bad, and ugly of AI, it is worth considering its potential for enhancing what we do in our English language classrooms. For instance, preparing for class with materials we already have takes time, but finding new materials that are appropriate to students' language level and needs can take even longer. I have found that using AI to develop teaching materials has made preparation for class more efficient and more enjoyable, as it has allowed me to explore new ways of teaching the same skills. In this article, I share examples of how I have used AI to create in-class activities in my post-secondary academic English language courses, focusing specifically on three activities for vocabulary.

Sample Sentences

One simple way I use AI is to create sentences that include target vocabulary. In the past, I used to spend a lot of time writing different ones myself, as I could not easily find sentences that used the target word appropriately. Now I can enter a simple prompt (e.g., *Give me 20 sentences that use the word "empirical"*) and generate sentences in seconds. If I need more sentences or want to focus on a topic we are studying in class (e.g., multiculturalism or technology), I can quickly prompt AI for new ones that include both the vocabulary word and the topic. It sometimes takes a few iterations of prompting to get exactly what I need, but creating these sentences takes significantly less time than when I wrote them myself. Figure 1 shows a screenshot of 10 sample sentences that include the word *empirical*, generated by Microsoft Copilot. When students discuss these sentences together, they quickly see how the word is used to describe research (e.g., *empirical data, empirical evidence, empirical research involves collecting data*), noticing recurring patterns in how the word is used.

Figure 1

Screenshot of Sample Sentences from Copilot



Once I have these sentences, I can use them to develop other activities. For instance, students can analyze the sentences before learning the target word in order to practice guessing the meaning of the word in context. I can also remove the target vocabulary word from the sentence(s) and ask students to fill in the gap (e.g., The team's [+ adj.] findings challenged the existing theories in the field). Lastly, I can use these sentences to increase students' awareness of collocations. Table 1 shows an example of an activity that my students do together in class to analyze collocations across all sentences in context. Sometimes I ask them to choose words they prefer to analyze, and other times I choose words for them and include them in the first column of the table. In either case, they need to look carefully at the target word's meaning. When they work in groups, they can share ideas and also practice listening and speaking skills. When they are finished, they present their findings to the class.

Table 1

Example of a Collocations Analysis Handout

Collocations analysis

The goal of this activity is to help you analyze how words are used in context so you can better understand and remember them. Prompt Copilot for 15-20 sample sentences that include the word in column 1 and then discuss the sentences with your partner(s). Fill in the table below.

Word	Which other words collocate with this word?	What do you notice about these collocations?	Do you think the word has a positive or negative *connotation*? Or does the connotation depend on the context?	Choose THREE sentences that will help you remember this word's meaning. Copy and paste them here. *Please include three sentences for each word.*
1. *empirical*				
2. *ironic*				
3. *alternative*				
4. *equivocal*				

Image Generation

I also use AI to generate images of target vocabulary, a process that is both quick and simple. When teaching academic English before I used AI, I would spend a lot of time looking for images that helped students understand the meaning of abstract vocabulary or ideas (e.g., irony). Using traditional internet searches usually did not bring me to the image I wanted. However, with AI, I can create an image in exactly the way I want. Figure 2 shows an example that I have displayed in class to help students understand the meaning of the word irony. In groups, they look at the images and discuss why the image shows the particular concept. For instance, they discuss what irony means and why it would be ironic for a fire station to be burning. I was pleased to see that in the following semester, students told me that they still remembered the image of the fire station and the use of the word irony to explain it. In other classes, I have projected images at the front of the room and asked students to figure out which word the image conveys. Students use their vocabulary list to figure out which words are shown in the image and explain why. This activity works well in pairs or small groups.

Figure 2

AI-Generated Image to Illustrate the Concept of "Irony"

Note. Image created with Copilot (October 16, 2024)

Examples and Non-examples

A third way in which I have used AI for vocabulary practice is for generating examples and non-examples of target words in context. Similar to the collocations analysis, students need to look carefully at each sentence and decide whether the target word is accurately used and explain why. What is interesting about this activity is that sentences are grammatically correct; however, non-example sentences use words in ways that are lexically inappropriate. For this reason, I have found that analyzing these examples encourages students to look very carefully at the sentence and focus on its meaning. For instance, "to be the epitome of + noun" is a correct grammatical structure, but not any kind of noun can be included in the prepositional phrase. Figure 3 shows an example of the words epitome, consequence, and equivocal. In the first set of sentences using the word epitome, students discussed that someone could be the "epitome of kindness" because an epitome refers to a representation of someone's quality or characteristic. They correctly stated that one cannot be the "epitome of loud noise" because noise is not a personal attribute.

Providing examples and non-examples can also allow students to think carefully about a word's connotation. For instance, the word consequence usually has a negative connotation as it is associated with a negative outcome (e.g., The student knew the consequences of lying to the teacher but did it anyway). In the sentence in Figure 3, a beautiful sunset would not logically result from a negative situation or action. Thus, this sentence could be considered a non-example. Similarly, students need to think carefully about what the word equivocal means. If they think about the sentence in Figure 3 carefully, they will see that a statement cannot be equivocal and clearly outline plans for the future. I like activities like these because it reinforces the idea that a word's grammatical structure is one element of vocabulary learning; they also need to also think about a word's use in context.

Figure 3

AI-Generated Examples and Non-Examples

Example or non-example?

For each pair of sentences, determine whether it is an example of a good sentence or a non-example (i.e., how the word cannot be used). Place a ✓ in the table to show whether each sentence is an example or non-example. Some groups may have two examples or two non-examples.

Sentence	Example	Non-example (and why)
Mae is the **epitome** of kindness and always helps those in need.		
Mae is the **epitome** of loud noise, and it's hard to concentrate when she's talking.		
Failing to study for the exam had a serious **consequence** because Mitch failed the test.		
The **consequence** of the beautiful sunset was that everyone felt happy.		
The teacher's instructions were **equivocal**, so students were confused about how to begin.		
The politician's statement was **equivocal**, clearly outlining his plans for the future.		

Reflection

I have found that students enjoy using AI openly in class and exploring its strengths and limitations both with me and with each other. Including them in my exploration of AI in class has given me insights into perspectives towards using AI to support learning. In this way, I can build students' AI literacy skills while modeling uses of AI for learning purposes. Nonetheless, it is important to emphasize that not all students are eager to use AI, as they may have privacy, ethical, or environmental concerns. For this reason, I do not require students to use AI for any course-related activities. They can either opt out of the activity, work in a group of students who already have accounts or use my account. While I have found that the majority of my students do have accounts for a range of AI tools, I do not want any student to feel that they need to use AI in order to fully participate in class.

In addition to working with students, I prioritize collaborating with colleagues. For instance, when developing materials, I often share them with other instructors to get their feedback. I also enjoy working with them to create activities that we can experiment with in different courses. It is interesting to see how another instructor has adapted materials to meet their needs or aligned an activity with the content of their class. Collaborating with others also allows me to use the same materials across courses and experiment together. In a recent article, I describe how I worked with a colleague to use AI-generated images (Kostka & Toncelli, 2024). We used the same images in our respective courses to achieve different learning objectives. My colleague used AI images so students could develop hooks for speech introductions, and I used them for impromptu speaking practice. Afterward, we compared notes and reviewed what worked well and what we would change in future semesters. We both found that students

really enjoyed these activities, and as educators, we found it valuable to exchange resources and ideas. I believe that we can reach a deeper understanding of how AI may either be helpful or ineffective for any given activity when we talk to each other and work together.

Conclusion

The goal of this article was to show what is possible when we invite AI to enhance our teaching preparation and class activities. In the spirit of the topic, I generated an image using DALL-E to convey the idea of where I believe we are today in terms of AI (OpenAI, 2024). Figure 4 shows an image of toothpaste coming out of the toothpaste tube, an analogy I often use to refer to the current moment we are in regarding AI. It is hard to imagine going back to a world in which AI does not play a significant role because these tools will continue to develop and be integrated into everyday life, both in and out of the classroom. Nonetheless, we might consider AI as one of the many tools we have in our teaching toolkit and not a tool to replace our expertise. If we keep an open mind about how AI could support our teacher preparation, we can create opportunities to innovate and tackle challenges in class preparation while adding creativity to in-class activities.

Figure 4

AI-Generated Image Showing Toothpaste out of the Tube

Note. Image generated by Dall-E on February 3, 2025

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