

When the Machine Speaks: AI-Generated Language, Relational Authenticity, and the Three-Stage Engagement Model in ELT

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Received: July 27, 2026

Accepted: August 27, 2026

Online Published: September 9, 2026

doi:10.11114/ijecs.v9i2.9293

URL: <https://doi.org/10.11114/ijecs.v9i2.9293>

Abstract

The rapid proliferation of large language models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT and Gemini has introduced a profound conceptual challenge to English Language Teaching (ELT): can language generated by artificial intelligence qualify as authentic input? Traditional definitions of authenticity, grounded in the assumption that genuine texts are produced by and for native speakers, are fundamentally destabilized by AI-generated language, which is statistically derived from human discourse yet produced by no human author. This paper argues that the native-speaker-origin criterion is theoretically insufficient to resolve this challenge, and proposes instead that a relational, process-oriented model of authenticity offers a more productive analytical framework. Extending a foundational distinction between genuineness and authenticity into the era of generative AI, the paper examines whether AI-generated texts can serve as authentic input when engaged through three stages: interaction with text, decoding and interpretation of meaning, and contextually appropriate response production. The paper further considers the dual role of AI as both a source of linguistic input and a mediational tool supporting learner engagement, arguing that the critical determinant of authenticity is not textual origin but the quality and depth of learner engagement with language in use. Pedagogical implications for task design, teacher preparation, and learner agency in AI-mediated language learning environments are discussed.

Keywords: large language models, authenticity, ELT, communicative language teaching, relational authenticity, generative AI

1. Introduction

Few concepts have generated more sustained debate in English Language Teaching than authenticity. Since the mid-twentieth century, scholars have contested what it means for language learning materials to be authentic, who or what confers authenticity upon a text, and whether authenticity resides in texts themselves or emerges through the processes by which learners engage with them. For much of this period, the dominant answer has been rooted in origin: authentic texts are those produced by native speakers for communicative purposes in real-world discourse communities, rather than crafted expressly for pedagogical use (Wallace, 1992; Nunan, 1988; Lee, 1995). This textual criterion has anchored curriculum design, materials development, and classroom practice across decades of communicative language teaching (CLT).

The emergence of large language models (LLMs) — systems capable of generating fluent, contextually appropriate, and genre-sensitive language across an extraordinary range of topics, registers, and text types — introduces a challenge to this framework that is qualitatively different from any that has preceded it. Unlike simplified readers or non-native speaker writing, AI-generated language cannot be straightforwardly positioned within the authentic/inauthentic binary. It is derived from vast corpora of human language and can closely approximate the discourse conventions, stylistic features, and pragmatic norms of any genre a practitioner might require, yet it is produced by no speaker and serves no communicative purpose in the ordinary sense. Under a textual definition of authenticity, AI-generated text would appear to be the most sophisticated form of inauthentic language yet created. Under a relational model, the picture is considerably more complex.

In a recent theoretical contribution, Esfandiari and Gawhary (2026) proposed a reconceptualization of authenticity in ELT that shifts the analytical focus from the textual properties of materials to the processes through which learners engage with them. Their three-stage framework — comprising interaction with the text, decoding and interpretation of

meaning, and the production of contextually appropriate and genuinely communicative responses — draws on Widdowson's (1978, 1990) distinction between genuineness and authenticity to argue that the locus of authenticity lies in the dynamic relationship between learner and textual input, not in the text itself. Authenticity, on this view, is not guaranteed by a text's origin but is realized through sustained, purposeful engagement with language in use.

The present paper extends this framework into territory that Esfandiari and Gawhary (2026) did not explicitly address: the growing presence of AI-generated language in learners' lives and learning environments. It asks a question that is both theoretically productive and practically urgent — can AI-generated language function as authentic input in ELT? — and uses this question as a lens through which to clarify and deepen the relational model of authenticity. The paper argues that the answer is conditional but affirmative: AI-generated texts can support engagement authenticity when learners are afforded meaningful opportunities to interact with them, interpret them purposefully, and produce communicative responses that reflect real-world language use.

A note on the paper's methodological orientation is in order. This paper constitutes a conceptual and theoretical contribution: it does not report empirical findings from a classroom study or experimental investigation, but rather develops a conceptual framework through critical synthesis of existing theoretical literature. The methodology is analytical rather than empirical — it proceeds by identifying tensions and gaps in the existing authenticity literature, bringing theoretical resources from learner-centered pedagogy, relational authenticity theory, and the emerging scholarship on AI in language education to bear on those gaps, and constructing a principled argument for a reconceptualized account of authenticity that accommodates AI-generated language. This approach is consistent with a well-established tradition of theoretical framework development in applied linguistics (cf. Widdowson, 1990; Van Lier, 1996), in which conceptual clarification and theoretical integration are recognized as essential preconditions for empirically productive research.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 revisits the authenticity debate, tracing the shift from textual to relational conceptions and positioning the Esfandiari and Gawhary (2026) framework as the theoretical foundation for the analysis. Section 3 theorizes AI-generated language as a new category of text and introduces the distinction between origin authenticity and engagement authenticity. Section 4 applies the three-stage model systematically to AI-generated texts. Section 5 draws out the implications for task design and teacher preparation. Section 6 concludes by considering what the AI challenge reveals about authenticity as a concept, and where the research agenda should move next.

2. The Authenticity Debate Revisited: From Textual Origin to Learner Engagement

2.1 The Textual Tradition and Its Limitations

The concept of authenticity entered applied linguistics discourse in the mid-1960s, when scholars began questioning whether learners were receiving adequate exposure to texts that accurately reflected target language use in real-world contexts (Wong, Kwok, & Choi, 1995). During this period, a text was considered authentic if it had been "created to fulfill some social purpose in the language community in which it was produced" (Little, Devitt, & Singleton, 1989, p. 25); texts written for instructional purposes were categorically inauthentic because they had no existence outside the classroom (Swaffar, 1985).

Within Communicative Language Teaching, this textual conception acquired considerable pedagogical weight: if the goal of language learning is communicative competence, learners must be exposed to language as it actually functions, since simplified or pedagogically modified input ill-prepares learners for real-world encounters with the language (Guariento & Morley, 2001). Authentic materials — newspaper articles, broadcasts, advertisements, literary texts, professional correspondence — were accordingly positioned as more motivating and pedagogically effective than materials written for the classroom (Peacock, 1997).

Yet this tradition carried assumptions that later scholars found untenable. Chief among these was the native-speaker standard: authentic texts were those produced by and for native speakers, whose norms of grammar, pragmatics, and discourse defined what counted as real language use (Wallace, 1992; Nunan, 1988). This assumption conflated authenticity with nativeness and rendered invisible the vast body of language use occurring between non-native speakers — a category that, as the English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) literature has since demonstrated, constitutes the majority of English use globally (Canagarajah, 2007; Jenkins, 2000). The textual view also treated the text as a self-contained object whose communicative character was fixed prior to any act of reading, ignoring the constitutive role of the learner in making meaning.

2.2 The Relational Turn

The most consequential challenge to the textual tradition came from Widdowson (1978), who drew a fundamental distinction between genuineness and authenticity that this paper treats as its principal theoretical anchor. Genuineness, in Widdowson's account, is a property of the text: a text is genuine if it was produced for real communicative purposes

in a natural discourse community, without instructional intent. Authenticity is not a property of the text at all, but of the interaction between a reader or listener and that text. This distinction decouples pedagogical value from provenance: a genuine text may fail to generate authentic engagement if the learner cannot access its meaning, while a pedagogically constructed text may generate authentic engagement if it draws the learner into meaningful interpretive activity. As Widdowson (1990, p. 45) put it, "authenticity lies in the nature of the interaction between the reader and the text."

Subsequent scholars developed this relational perspective further. Lee (1995) introduced learner authenticity, emphasizing that what matters for acquisition is the learner's psychological and communicative engagement with input, not its origin. Clarke (1989, p. 36) observed that authenticity "has become increasingly relative, being increasingly related to specific learner needs and less and less concerned with the authentic nature of the input materials themselves." Breen (1985) distinguished authentic communication tasks, which require genuine meaning-making activity, from language learning tasks, which focus attention on linguistic form — placing task quality, not text origin, at the center of authentic pedagogy. Van Lier (1996) situated authenticity within learner autonomy and awareness, while Amor (2002) argued that authenticity is shaped as much by the learner's experiential and cultural background as by textual properties. Together, these contributions constitute a relational turn — a shift from asking "is this text authentic?" to asking "under what conditions does authentic engagement with this text become possible?"

2.3 The Three-Stage Process Model as Analytical Foundation

The most recent systematic synthesis of the relational tradition is the three-stage process model proposed by Esfandiari and Gawhary (2026), which provides the theoretical foundation for this paper. The first stage — interaction with the text — involves learners engaging actively with input in ways that approximate real-world communicative encounters, negotiating meaning and drawing inferences. The second stage — decoding and interpretation — entails active cognitive and social processing: extracting explicit information, inferring pragmatic intent, and recognizing socio-cultural nuance. The third stage — production of contextually appropriate responses — involves learners generating communicative output that reflects the norms and purposes of the target situation. Authenticity is realized only when learners move through all three stages in a sustained and purposeful manner; the framework foregrounds sequence and scaffolding as central to authentic pedagogy and positions technology as a mediational tool supporting movement across stages.

Esfandiari and Gawhary (2026) developed their framework in relation to human-produced texts and called for future research to test and extend it. The present paper responds to this invitation by examining what happens when the model is applied to a category of text the authors did not explicitly consider: AI-generated language.

The present paper builds on this theoretical foundation while situating it within a rapidly expanding body of scholarship on AI in language education. Godwin-Jones (2023) has argued that generative AI tools require a fundamental reorientation of language acquisition frameworks, positioning AI not merely as a delivery mechanism for practice activities but as a transformative mediational resource that reshapes the conditions under which learners encounter and produce language. Research on AI-mediated interaction has similarly challenged the assumption that authentic communicative engagement requires a human interlocutor, documenting learner willingness to engage communicatively with AI systems across a range of task types and proficiency levels (Chun, Kern, & Smith, 2016). Emerging work on critical AI literacy in language education has begun to identify the specific competencies learners require to engage productively and critically with AI-generated texts — competencies that extend the critical language awareness tradition (Van Lier, 1996) into a domain it did not originally anticipate (Godwin-Jones, 2023). This paper draws on and contributes to these emerging conversations, using the relational authenticity framework as an analytical lens through which the pedagogical implications of AI-mediated language engagement can be more precisely theorized.

3. AI-Generated Language: A New Category of Text

3.1 What Large Language Models Produce, and Why That Matters Theoretically

Large language models are trained on vast corpora of human-produced text to predict and generate statistically plausible continuations of linguistic input, calibrated to a prompt's content, register, and genre. Contemporary LLMs are capable of producing language that is, in many contexts, indistinguishable in surface form from human-authored text: grammatically well-formed, stylistically appropriate, and pragmatically coherent across extended discourse (Bender, Gebru, McMillan-Major, & Shmitchell, 2021).

Human communication is grounded in intentionality: a speaker means something, intends to convey it to a particular interlocutor, and makes communicative choices in light of that intent. LLMs have no such grounding; their output reflects statistical regularities derived from training data, not communicative intention directed at a real interlocutor. Bender et al. (2021) characterize this as the "stochastic parrot" problem — LLMs generate text that resembles meaningful communication but is, at a fundamental level, form without meaning.

This critique deserves more than acknowledgment because it is frequently treated as though it settles the authenticity question by itself. It does not, and the reason is instructive. Bender et al.'s argument is directed at the tendency to attribute understanding, intent, or accountability to the model itself. That argument is sound; however, the stochastic-parrot critique is a claim about the status of the text's production, not about the status of the learner's engagement with it. Under Widdowson's relational theory, authenticity was never claimed to reside in the text's production in the first place, but in the interaction between text and reader. A "form without meaning" is not thereby a form without interpretive possibility — meaning, on the relational account, is something the learner constructs through decoding, inference, and response. The stochastic-parrot critique correctly denies that LLMs communicate, while leaving entirely open whether learners can communicate — through engagement with what LLMs produce.

3.2 AI-Generated Language and the Existing Authenticity Taxonomy

Positioned within the textual tradition, AI-generated language presents an unambiguous classification problem: it is not produced by native speakers — indeed, by speakers of any kind — and it is not created for a real communicative purpose in a natural discourse community. Under Wallace's (1992) definition, it would be among the least authentic forms of language input available to a learner.

Positioned within the relational tradition, however, the picture changes substantially. If authenticity is not a property of texts but of the interaction between learner and text, then the question of whether AI-generated language can be authentic is not settled by asking who produced it but by asking what learners do with it. A text may lack genuineness while still generating authenticity in the sense of eliciting genuine engagement, interpretation, and response — suggesting that the absence of a human author does not, in itself, preclude authentic engagement.

3.3 Origin Authenticity versus Engagement Authenticity

To clarify the conceptual terrain, this paper proposes a distinction between two modes of authenticity that the existing literature has not made fully explicit. Origin authenticity corresponds to the textual tradition: a text possesses origin authenticity when produced by human speakers for genuine communicative purposes in a real discourse community — what Wallace (1992) and Nunan (1988) had in mind, and what Widdowson (1978) would call genuineness. Engagement authenticity corresponds to the relational tradition: it is realized through the learner's active, purposeful, communicatively oriented engagement with a text, regardless of that text's origin — what Esfandiari and Gawhary (2026) operationalized through the three-stage model.

Situating engagement authenticity within the broader landscape of authenticity constructs clarifies both its novelty and its debt to established notions in the field. Textual authenticity locates authenticity in the provenance of the text, treating genuine communicative origin as its defining criterion (Wallace, 1992; Nunan, 1988); engagement authenticity departs from this by relocating the criterion from text to process, making origin irrelevant and foregrounding the quality of the learner's encounter. Learner authenticity, as theorized by Lee (1995), anticipates this move by emphasizing the learner's psychological investment and communicative orientation; engagement authenticity extends it by specifying the processual conditions — interaction, interpretation, production — under which that investment is realized. Task authenticity, associated with Breen (1985), focuses on the communicative genuineness of the activity rather than the text or the learner alone; engagement authenticity is compatible with this but operates at a different level, specifying what authentic engagement requires of the learner across the full arc of a task. Communicative authenticity — the degree to which classroom language use approximates real-world communicative purposes (Guariento & Morley, 2001) — names the goal that engagement authenticity specifies the learner-side conditions for achieving. Together, these constructs address different facets of the same concern; engagement authenticity contributes a process-oriented account that remains coherent and productive even when applied to text categories earlier constructs were not designed to accommodate.

AI-generated texts score low on origin authenticity, as they are produced by no human author for no genuine communicative purpose. They may nonetheless score high on engagement authenticity, provided learners are given tasks that support meaningful interaction, active decoding, and genuine communicative production. The critical variable is not the text but the task: a poorly designed task can drain origin-authentic materials of their pedagogical value, while a well-designed task can generate substantial engagement authenticity with AI-generated input.

The distinction also illuminates a tension present in the authenticity debate for decades. The ELF literature has long challenged the native-speaker standard embedded in origin authenticity (Canagarajah, 2007; Widdowson, 1994). AI-generated language, trained on corpora encompassing both native and non-native production, dissolves the native-speaker boundary still further — it is a statistical distillation of collective human language use rather than the expression of any individual speaker's competence. This makes the native-speaker-origin criterion not merely inadequate but theoretically incoherent in the contemporary ELT landscape, whereas the engagement authenticity framework remains coherent across all varieties of English and all categories of text.

4. Applying the Three-Stage Model to AI-Generated Texts

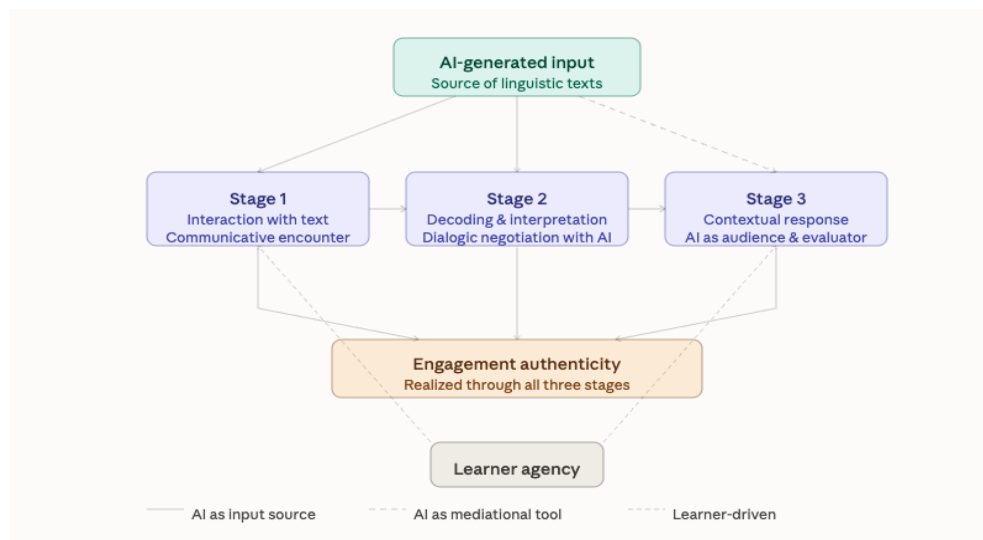


Figure 1. The three-stage engagement model applied to AI-mediated input

Figure 1 summarizes how the three stages operate under AI mediation, and how AI's dual role — as source of input and as responsive interlocutor — cuts across all three. As can be seen, AI functions as both a source of texts (Stages 1–2) and a responsive communicative partner (Stages 2–3); engagement authenticity is realized only through sustained movement across all three stages, not through any single stage in isolation.

4.1 Stage One: Interaction with AI-Generated Texts

The first stage requires learners to engage actively with input in ways that approximate real-world communicative encounters. Contemporary LLMs can support this across a wide range of genres, registers, and text types — a generic flexibility that addresses a persistent challenge for teachers using authentic materials: finding texts at precisely the right level of difficulty on precisely the right topic. Stage One engagement, however, requires language that is communicatively dense and that rewards close reading. Generic AI output produced from a bare prompt often fails this requirement, tending toward formulaic language that is coherent but communicatively inert. Achieving textual richness requires AI prompting literacy — the ability to elicit high-quality, contextually situated texts through detailed specification. A prompt requesting simply "an email" yields something markedly different from one specifying "a tense email from a junior employee to a skeptical senior manager, arguing for a project extension on grounds of resource constraints, in a formal but diplomatically urgent register." The latter embeds purpose, social relationship, power differential, and genre constraint in ways that support genuine Stage One engagement — implying a new professional competency that ELT teacher education will need to address.

4.2 Stage Two: Decoding and Interpretation of AI-Generated Language

The second stage involves active cognitive and social processing: extracting information, inferring pragmatic intent, recognizing genre conventions, and navigating socio-cultural meaning. Consider a learner working with an AI-generated op-ed arguing for stricter AI regulation. The text embeds an authorial position, deploys rhetorical strategies — evidence, concession, rebuttal, evaluative language — and reflects the conventions of argumentative journalism. Interpreting it requires identifying argument structure, evaluating evidence, and situating the argument within broader policy discourse. None of this interpretive work is diminished by algorithmic authorship; the rhetorical complexity and inferential demands are genuine.

What is distinctive about AI-generated texts at Stage Two is the possibility of dialogic engagement with the source itself — a possibility no human-authored text affords. A fixed newspaper article can be annotated, discussed, and interpreted, but not interrogated; an AI-generated text remains accessible and responsive. Learners can ask the system to elaborate a point, supply a counter-argument, explain an unfamiliar reference, or rephrase a passage more simply — turning Stage Two from a one-directional interpretive act into an iterative process of meaning negotiation. From a Vygotskian perspective, the AI here functions as a mediational tool within the learner's Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978), scaffolding access to meaning slightly beyond independent capacity and adjusting its support dynamically in response to the learner's interpretive moves.

Effective Stage Two engagement also requires critical AI literacy — awareness of how AI language is produced and

what that implies for its epistemic status. Learners who understand that AI-generated texts reflect statistical patterns in training data, rather than a particular author's situated knowledge and perspective, are better positioned to engage critically: to ask whose voices are reflected in the training data, notice where the AI hedges or overgeneralizes, and evaluate its claims against other sources. This dimension represents a form of critical literacy increasingly essential in contemporary information environments, extending the critical language awareness tradition in ELT (Van Lier, 1996) into a domain it did not originally anticipate (Godwin-Jones, 2023).

4.3 Stage Three: Production of Contextually Appropriate Responses to AI-Generated Input

Before addressing the question of communicative stakes, a terminological clarification is necessary. Throughout this paper, AI has been referred to as a "communicative partner" and a "responsive interlocutor" in the context of Stage Three production. These formulations require qualification. AI-mediated interaction is not equivalent to human interpersonal communication: as established in Section 3.1, LLMs lack communicative intention, genuine understanding, and the social accountability that characterizes human communicative acts. When this paper describes AI as a communicative partner, it does so in a specifically functional and pedagogical sense — the AI functions as a partner in that it produces responses calibrated to learner input, creates conditions for turn-taking and meaning negotiation, and generates the kind of communicative pressure that purposeful language production requires. This is, in Widdowson's terms, a simulated rather than a genuine communicative situation — but simulation, as task-based language teaching has long recognized, can generate authentic engagement even in the absence of fully authentic communicative conditions (Breen, 1985). The position this paper defends is that AI-mediated interaction occupies a theoretically distinct but pedagogically productive space between fully authentic communication and purely formal language practice — a space that the engagement authenticity framework is specifically equipped to analyze.

A learner who has read an AI-generated professional email, analyzed its register and pragmatic strategies, and is now tasked with writing a reply is engaged in precisely the kind of purposeful communicative production authentic language use requires — and the AI recipient can respond in turn, accepting the argument, raising an objection, or escalating the stakes, simulating the unpredictability of real communication in ways static prompts cannot. When the AI interlocutor is positioned as a realistic and demanding audience, when the communicative situation is richly specified, and when feedback addresses pragmatic as well as linguistic dimensions, Stage Three production in AI-mediated environments can approach the communicative depth the relational model requires.

Beyond direct response, Stage Three can take several other forms: learners submitting original texts to AI for feedback on genre appropriateness and pragmatic clarity; live conversation practice across simulated social and professional contexts; and multimodal production combining written language with audio, visual, and interactive elements (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). Each, when grounded in prior interaction and interpretation, contributes to authentic communicative development in the sense the three-stage model specifies.

5. Pedagogical Implications: Designing for Engagement Authenticity with AI

5.1 Principles for AI-Mediated Authentic Task Design

The analysis above suggests four principles for integrating AI-generated language into ELT task design.

Context over origin. Task design should prioritize the contextual richness and genre specificity of AI-generated texts over concern with their provenance. A carefully prompted AI text embedding a realistic communicative situation is, from the perspective of engagement authenticity, more pedagogically valuable than a genuinely authored text presented without contextual scaffolding.

Sequencing across all three stages. AI-generated texts used only for comprehension capture a fraction of the framework's pedagogical potential. A task sequence might begin with reading an AI-generated text (Stage One), move to collaborative discussion interrogating its claims (Stage Two), and culminate in producing a response that takes a position relative to the text's argument (Stage Three), with the AI reintroduced at each stage as source, dialogic partner, and audience.

Dialogic exploitation of AI's responsiveness. Teachers and learners should deliberately exploit the fact that AI-generated materials remain engageable at every stage — requesting alternative registers, counter-arguments, or clarification of cultural references — while approaching AI responses with the same critical literacy they would bring to any communicative source.

Critical AI literacy as an integral component of Stage Two. Learners should be explicitly supported in developing awareness of how AI texts are produced, where they are characteristically hedged or formulaic, where they may reflect biases embedded in training data, and where their genre approximations succeed or fall short of human communicative practice.

5.2 An Illustrative Classroom Scenario

To make the four principles concrete, consider the following illustrative scenario from an upper-intermediate ELT context. A teacher working with adult learners preparing for professional communication wants to develop their ability to write and respond to formal emails involving disagreement or negotiation.

At Stage One, the teacher uses a carefully prompted AI-generated email — from a fictional project manager to a team member, expressing dissatisfaction with a missed deadline in a formally polite but implicitly pressuring register — as the input text. The prompt specified sender seniority, project stakes, and required tone, producing a text with the communicative density Stage One requires: embedded power relations, implicit face-threats, and genre-specific hedging strategies that reward close reading.

At Stage Two, learners work in pairs to analyze the email — identifying the sender's implicit position, mapping rhetorical strategies, and discussing cultural assumptions embedded in the approach to conflict. The teacher then invites learners to interrogate the AI directly — requesting a more aggressive version, a more conciliatory one, or a version from a different cultural context — creating the iterative, dialogic meaning negotiation that distinguishes AI-mediated Stage Two engagement from engagement with a fixed text. Learners are also encouraged to evaluate outputs critically, considering whose communicative norms are reflected in each version.

At Stage Three, each learner drafts a reply — managing face, taking a position, deploying appropriate register — which is submitted to the AI for feedback on pragmatic appropriateness. The AI's response is used as the basis for a second draft, which the teacher uses as a springboard for whole-class discussion.

This scenario illustrates all four principles in practice: context over origin, sequencing across stages, dialogic exploitation of AI responsiveness, and critical AI literacy as an integral component of Stage Two engagement.

5.3 Cautions and Limitations, Including Equitable Access

This paper does not argue that AI-generated language should replace human-authored texts, nor that engagement authenticity is equivalent in all respects to origin authenticity. Several cautions are in order.

First, AI-generated texts, however skillfully prompted, reflect the statistical regularities of their training data rather than the situated knowledge, lived experience, and individual perspective of a human author. They may therefore lack the qualities of voice, cultural specificity, and affective investment that make human-authored texts pedagogically valuable. Overreliance on AI-generated input risks narrowing, rather than expanding, learners' encounter with that diversity.

Second, the communicative stakes of Stage Three production in AI-mediated environments remain reduced relative to genuinely consequential exchanges. Tasks developing the emotional and interpersonal dimensions of communicative competence — negotiating conflict, expressing care, managing face in sensitive situations — may be better served by interaction with human interlocutors. AI-mediated production is most valuable as preparation for such interactions, not a substitute for them.

Third, effective AI-mediated task design requires significant professional investment from teachers, who must develop prompting literacy, design multi-stage task sequences, and scaffold critical AI literacy alongside language instruction — demands that teacher education and professional development in ELT will need to address explicitly.

Last but not least, the pedagogical promise of AI-mediated authenticity is not equally realizable across learning contexts. Access to capable LLMs, reliable internet connectivity, and the institutional infrastructure to support AI-mediated tasks is unevenly distributed both within and across countries, and this unevenness tracks existing patterns of educational inequality rather than cutting across them (Warschauer & Matuchniak, 2010). Task designers and institutions adopting AI-mediated approaches should treat equitable access as a design constraint on a par with pedagogical soundness, and should develop low-bandwidth or offline-capable alternatives where AI-mediated tasks form part of a required curriculum rather than an optional enrichment.

6. Conclusion

This paper has examined the challenge that AI-generated language poses to existing frameworks of authenticity in ELT, and has argued that the relational, process-oriented model proposed by Esfandiari and Gawhary (2026) provides a theoretically coherent basis for addressing it. By distinguishing origin authenticity — the textual criterion historically dominant in the field — from engagement authenticity — the processual criterion grounded in the quality of learner engagement — the paper offers a framework that can accommodate AI-generated language without abandoning the principled commitment to authentic communication that has defined CLT from its inception.

More broadly, the AI challenge clarifies what authenticity in ELT has always fundamentally concerned: not the source of language but the conditions under which learners are invited to engage with it meaningfully. This should encourage practitioners to evaluate all language learning materials — AI-generated, human-authored, simplified, or genuine — not

by asking where they came from, but by asking what learners are enabled to do with them. Task design, contextual scaffolding, sequencing across stages, and the cultivation of critical literacy are the pedagogical levers that determine whether any material generates authentic engagement.

Future research should pursue several concrete directions opened by this analysis. Most urgently, the framework requires empirical validation: the theoretical account developed here anticipates but cannot itself supply the evidence base that classroom-based investigation would provide. A quasi-experimental study comparing learner engagement and communicative development in AI-mediated task environments against matched non-AI conditions — using pre- and post-measures of communicative competence alongside qualitative analysis of learner production across all three stages — would constitute a productive first empirical test of the engagement authenticity framework. Such a study is among the authors' research priorities for the near term. Beyond this, comparative studies examining learner engagement with matched AI-generated and human-authored texts on the same topics would help specify the conditions under which the two categories of input generate equivalent or differential engagement authenticity. Research on teacher development in AI prompting literacy and critical AI literacy integration would inform the professional preparation initiatives that effective implementation of the framework requires. Think-aloud protocols and interaction analysis of learner engagement at Stage Two would provide process data unavailable through product measures alone. And longitudinal studies tracking learners' communicative competence in AI-mediated task environments, across both well-resourced and under-resourced settings, would address the foundational equity question that Section 5 raises.

Acknowledgments

Not applicable.

Author contributions

Both authors, Mehran Esfandiari and Mirwais Gawhary, contributed equally to the study, read, and approved the final manuscript.

Funding

Not applicable.

Competing interests

Not applicable.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Redfame Publishing.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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