VATE

VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

The Victorian Association for the Teaching of English (VATE) submission to the inquiry into the use of generative artificial intelligence in the Australian education system undertaken by the House Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training.

Authored by: VATE Curriculum Committee

Correspondence about this submission should be sent to:

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About the VATE submission

VATE sent an online survey to its approximately 7500 members and asked a range of questions grouped under the following themes: The role of subject English; Attitudes toward the use of Generative AI (GenAI); Educational opportunities of GenAI; Educational challenges of GenAI; Ethical considerations of GenAI, Impact of GenAI on the education sector; Current English curriculum priorities; School policy.

We received 44 responses. Below is the breakdown of sectors, regions, and number of years teaching English.

Sector		
Government	22	50%
Independent	10	23%
Catholic	9	21%
Not applicable	3	6%
Total	**44**	**100%**

Region		
North-east	16	37%
South-east	15	34%
North-west	8	18%
South-west	4	9%
Not applicable	1	2%
Total	**44**	**100%**

Years teaching		
1 – 5 years	4	9%
6 – 10 years	10	23%
11 – 15 years	5	11%
16 – 20 years	8	18%
21+ years	17	39%
Total	**44**	**100%**

We reflected on the lower than expected number of responses and believe that the timeframe in which the submission was due impaired our ability to garner more responses from our VATE community as it coincided with the last two weeks of Term Two.

Since Generative AI gained popular media attention at the end of 2022 after the launch of ChatGPT, discussion on the VATE English, EAL, English Language and Literature networks has largely focused on the main points raised by the 44 respondents to this survey. The responses that have informed this submission were lengthy and fully engaged with the questions posed. They are demonstrative of the interest in and concern about Generative AI in Victorian schools.

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2

V A T E

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The role of subject English

VATE started the survey with a focus on the role of subject English in the 21st century and how it equips students to be engaged, responsive and ethically responsible digitally fluent citizens.

The predominant thread in the responses was that students need to be able to think critically and creatively in order to be active participants in a democratic society. English is a subject that is vital to fostering critical and creative thinking and it does so through the development of literacy skills, both oral and written, the exposure to a variety of text types and forms (including digital ones), and through the creation of a community of thinkers who can engage with the world around them. Specifically, English teachers noted the subject's ability to:

- Enable students to find and use their own voice.
- Foster empathy, understanding and perspective.
- Develop clear, effective, and precise communication skills.
- Nurture critical thinking, analysis, and ability to detect argument, bias, and positioning in a range of written, spoken, visual, digital, and aural texts.
- Understand the use of language in various forms, purposes, and contexts.
- Promote media literacy to assist students to navigate the complexities of the digital age.
- Foster active engagement to develop literate, socially conscious and deep-thinking democratic citizens.

The English teaching community has always been responsive to social, cultural and, increasingly technological changes which impact on the development of curriculum and pedagogies. In Victoria, English teachers recognise the importance of a profession teaching organisation such as VATE to provide collaborative spaces and promote relevant research to allow them to explore, critique and analyse such changes with a view to ensuring they contribute to productive, purposeful, and engaged learning.

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3

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Attitudes toward the use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI)

Do you currently use generative AI in your English classroom?		
Yes	20	46%
No	22	50%
No response	2	4%
Total	**44**	**100%**

Those respondents who answered 'Yes' were asked to elaborate on the types of GenAI tools they use in the classroom. Responses were:

Tools for generating text such as OpenAI (ChatGPT), Anyword, Copy.ai	17
Tools for generating video and speech such as DeepBrain, Synthesia, Runway	2
Tools for generating image such as DALL-E, MidJourney, Craiyon, Dream	4
Tools for generating music such as Amper, Soundful, Musico, MusicGen	1
Other	1

A breakdown of the ways in which English teachers use these tools demonstrates that teachers are using these tools 'experimentally' with a view to helping students understand the texts being studied or assessment tasks at hand. Many of the respondents cited OpenAI (mainly ChatGPT) as the tool they and their students are using the most in the classroom.

In response to how these GenAI tools are being used, the following specific comments were made:
- I ask students to complete a handwritten essay and to use the prompt "Improve my essay", to discover what they could utilise.
- I am experimenting with ChatGPT to generate stimulus material, activities, and essay samples for students.
- I've shown students how they might ask ChatGPT questions to help them narrow and generate their essay topic, a range of arguments, and make suggestions about making a draft paragraph more persuasive.
- We use Chat GPT to summarise key points or produce a plot summary related to a text.
- We use ChatGPT to generate analytical text responses.
- I've used ChatGPT to create summaries.
- ChatGPT is great as a research tool to jump start discussions. Students can also look up quotes easily using this programme.
- Students have experimented with getting the AI to write responses for them, then we critique the merits and shortcomings.
- I also used ChatGPT to come up with creative topics for an oral presentation.
- They have been useful for showing students how to summarise, and also for showing students how unreliable they can be.

In addition to ChatGPT, educators also explained their use of other GenAI tools:
- I have dabbled with using AI to stimulate a discussion of how language creates imagery or identifying distinguishing features of specific authors through recreation of their styles or entering text into apps and asking them to generate results based on the language in the text.

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4

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- The students had written poems with an emphasis on imagery. We put a stanza of each poem into the image generator to see what it produced. The images that were most like what the student imagined showed them how effective their words were. For the students who had strange images, we were able to look at how their attempts at imagery had been unclear or were lacking in adjectives.
- I also use Grammarly.
- We have totally normalised the use of spell check and grammar checks without explicitly recognising that we have been incorporating AI into our classrooms for some time.
- Using generative image tools to create images based on prompts provided by students (e.g., in the use of creative poetry).

Some respondents identified the ways in which they are using GenAI to assist with their planning, assessment and reporting responsibilities:
- I use ChatGPT to: suggest ideas for interesting lessons with disenfranchised students, cross-check to make sure my lesson plans have covered the Achievement Standards and Content Descriptors, make worksheets for scaffolding lessons/instructions for lower students, re-write harder texts so lower students can access them, suggest alternative ways to teach a topic.
- I am using AI tools such as ChatGPT to raise awareness of ethical concerns surrounding the use of these technologies, and to revisit definitions of plagiarism and academic integrity.
- I have been using them to help with ideas and brainstorming, with feedback, with how to use feedback and improve work, as well as example structures, paragraphs, or essays.
- Generating tests, lesson plans, rubrics, report comments.
- I have also experimented with it to generate feedback on student work and to offer improvements.
- Outside of the classroom I have used AI to develop rubrics and comments for reports.

Respondents also identified the shortcomings of GenAI for the use in the English classroom:
- Looking for quotes from certain texts was hilarious - ChatGPT is quite good at finding relevant, accurate quotes for the most common texts used in the English classroom, but it will simply make them up when the text is less familiar.
- We use ChatGPT to demonstrate the uses of AI and the complications that still require human agency in terms of vocabulary choices, accuracy of information, style, mood, tone, voice and so on.
- ChatGPT rarely seems to generate a model answer.
- I have used it to show students how not to write and to discuss gender and political bias in writing.

Those respondents who commented that they were not using GenAI in their classroom cited a lack of time, ongoing critical teacher shortage and burnout as barriers to their upskilling in the use of GenAI. Specific comments included:
- With the teaching shortage and burn-out, there is not much energy left for innovation right now. New things take work - and we do not have the time or, frankly, spirit.

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5

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- The lack of time to teach myself these skills is the biggest hurdle - also other teacher's perceptions of this area in particular those who have been teaching for years that consider this approach lazy.
- I don't have time to investigate ways to incorporate this into my teaching at this point. Teaching is a time poor profession, so the culture of schools needs to change and actually give teachers a workload that allows the capacity for this kind of research, professional development and curriculum development.

A number of respondents identified their own lack of confidence and awareness of the potential of GenAI as well as the rapidly changing developments in GenAI as reasons that prohibited the use of GenAI in the classroom. Specific comments include:

- Not confident to use it. I would like to use it in a way that teaches students to use it as a tool rather than a replacement for their own work.
- I want to see how it evolves first. I want to use it to teach students to engage rather than to make things easy for myself.
- I'm too limited in my knowledge of this device to make a meaningful response.
- I am honestly very hesitant at the moment. I have not had a chance to experiment much with it or read much about its use in the classroom and I won't teach with something I am not sure I have a handle on.
- I need PD in using it effectively. We also need to have whole school discussions about it and share our hopes and reservations, and some strategies and establish more of a whole school approach.

Further, some responses outlined ethical concerns such as cheating, plagiarism and unfair equity of access as reasons why they were not adopting GenAI in their classroom pedagogy. Some respondents identified that they were yet to see GenAI offer alternative and meaningful opportunities to enhance the work that they are already doing. Specifically:

- Generative AI is currently blocked in Victorian government schools and is therefore very difficult to use in the classroom.
- It is cheating.
- It can assist but cannot replace the experiential process of attaining a skill.
- I'm not persuaded that AI generated material is useful in my classroom in that it doesn't enhance thinking and it doesn't produce authentic texts.
- It has been suggested that AI could summarize material for classroom use, but I am concerned that this type of use would compromise the value of the summarizing activity, in that by having an AI generate a summary, it is the AI which is making choices about what information is valuable and what information is not, rather than the student.
- What has ensued in too many instances is the temptation by many students to plagiarise or to blithely accept that which they access as the 'truth' about a text, argument, issue or key facet of learning.
- It does change what is or can be accepted as assessment of the students' work. It is difficult to authenticate the work as their own.
- I don't necessarily see the type of things they are currently doing with it in the classroom as particularly valid or contributing to the student's education beyond what we already do.
- It needs to be carefully implemented and teachers need support.
- I don't want AI to do course design or anything like that. I think the role of the teacher in that aspect of classroom practice needs to be preserved.

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6

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Educational opportunities of Generative AI

Respondents were asked to identify the opportunities of GenAI for students and educators in the English classroom. The following specific comments about the way that educators may benefit from the use of GenAI were:

- Generative AI, like other digital and multimodal technologies, offers affordances for the creation of texts such as: ease of use, access and accessibility, ubiquity of tools, ease of sharing and collaborating. In particular, English students and teachers might benefit from GenAI in the creation of digital and multimodal texts, lowering the "barrier to entry" for some forms, for example by making it easy for students to generate images and videos as part of broader projects, or allowing students to quickly brainstorm ideas so they can focus on other parts of an extended creative project.
- We are now only limited by our imaginations and our ability to form questions. AI makes my lesson planning easier and more exciting. It has made available new ideas that I have not seen before.
- At its best, AI supports the construction of the tedious aspects of writing, that which is repetitive and monotonous. These are the skills that every person needs to function as a member of society.
- I have used AI to retrieve information (such as curriculum) that has been made many times, and find the best existing version. In short, like a highly specific search engine.
- I really think above all there is the opportunity to teach students the value of sources and 'real' information and how to determine whether something is credible.
- One of the most obvious opportunities for educators is in the speed which it can create things like lesson plans, sample essays, develop assessment tasks, and even write feedback for students. I can imagine that future versions will be even more responsive and adaptable than the current iteration of ChatGPT and allow for the linking to other sources etc which would enable even more uses for educators.
- Learn how to craft effective prompts for an AI generator - I think this is an emerging text type that we should be teaching.
- That it is not the end product that is the measure of a student's ability but the way they work through the process of creating that product.
- This is an excellent opportunity to re-examine what we assess, what we are looking for when assessing it, and how we approach conceiving of text pedagogically. My thinking on this is, anything we ask students to do that an AI can do to a comparable level, isn't worth asking a student to do.

Specific comments about the opportunities for students who use GenAI included:

- There can then be some similar opportunities for students, especially in doing some of the more lower level thinking tasks that we currently expect from students such as regurgitating summaries of texts or using formulaic structures for essay writing.
- Opportunities to teach students to use it as a tool to enhance their learning for personalised tuition.
- It may provide some input into the structure and construction of more complex writing responses; increased vocabulary, more in depth in perspective.
- AI generated texts provide good models of correct expression, but also show students that they can do better than the relatively superficial text essays that AI produces.

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7

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- It provides a chance to see the basics of essential text forms, and gives students the chance to experiment with them in a safe space. They can also see the flaws in its implementation, and thus develop their critical and analytical thinking.
- A new resource at students' fingertips, a new source of feedback on their work, a new ability to save time.

Other comments about the opportunities for use of GenAI included those about its reliability and credibility. A few respondents were highly critical of the reliance some students have on electronic devices and the Internet already. The following specific comments were made:
- In my uses I have found it a false economy. By the time I have corrected it, I have spent as much time as I would have used to just do it myself from scratch.
- To analyse the potential knock on effects of this technology on the world and humanity in all aspects going forward. To warn about the moral boundaries that may be crossed unless humanity doesn't operate with the very best of intentions in placing legal safeguards around this technology.
- Students are using generative AI for their extended responses. This is evident when details in a text response are inaccurate; also, when formative writing does not suggest the degree of structure and vocabulary use in the student's work for a summative piece.
- It does have some potential to be used for quick feedback, though teachers must be careful not to put it in the minds of their students that a bot is a capable replacement for a teacher. I would not trust AI to provide meaningful feedback about ideas, but it can provide very quick feedback around accuracy of expression.

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8

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Educational challenges of Generative AI

Respondents were asked to identify the educational challenges of GenAI for students and teachers of English. Below is a summary of the main challenges:

- Authenticating student work and differentiating student's own work from AI generated work.
- Plagiarism and academic integrity.
- Bias.
- I'm afraid it will make their phrasing more homogenous – e.g.: more American and white.
- Victorian government school students (and staff) do not have access to these tools via school servers. We are also often dealing with the most socially and economically disadvantaged students in the state, many of whom do not have viable and consistent internet access in their homes, especially those in rural settings.
- That like many new technologies and innovations, some teachers and schools will invest heavily in AI and other will not. Having the time, money and opportunity to invest in these things is generally what sees them being used to good advantage in schools. In other circumstances, AI is likely to be used haphazardly and less than successfully.
- The challenges are the 'new' ethical considerations of authorship.
- Outcome focused education means students are tempted to use it to get high marks.
- The need to understand the 'generative' nature and from where the materials produced are sourced.
- Students may become too tempted and reliant on generative AI that they won't have confidence in presenting work that is entirely original.
- Removes students' ability to actually critically think and cognitively work through the process of a task.
- I am concerned that students with dyslexia or other reading/writing barriers may be drawn to AI for its simplicity but are not able to read a text generated by AI to fact check or look for implied meaning.
- It poses the risk of muddying the skills English is centred around.
- Over-reliance on this technology is one of my concerns. Students who are not confident in English expression (language use) students may use it to write for them. Non-English speaking background students may develop a dependence on it.
- Teacher professional judgement may be under attack. A parent at our school recently contacted us challenging a SAC score because they had typed up their child's SAC into ChatGPT and asked the AI to score the essay and the AI gave it a higher score than we did, leading the parent to believe we had been unfairly harsh in our marking.

One respondent observed:
- I do not see any challenges. Students should be completing assessments in class by hand. Previously, tasks sent home were often done by parents or tutors. This is no different. Until students are sitting their VCE exam at computers, we should be focusing on handwritten assessment tasks. (Except for students with adjustments, of course.)

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9

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Ethical considerations of Generative AI

Respondents were asked to elaborate on the ethical considerations of GenAI for students and educators in the English classroom. Some broad ethical considerations can be summarised as:

- Plagiarism and authenticating student work,
- Bias and discrimination,
- Equity of access and fairness,
- Dishonesty and academic integrity,
- Intellectual property and copyright concerns,
- Datafication,
- The concerns of the impact of AI systems on the environment, and
- Privacy and security.

Specific comments and questions about the use of GenAI include:

- What values, behaviours and attitudes do we teach when we allow the use of generative AI?
- Do we all fall victim of a narrow interpretation of ideas and facts?
- Does the AI system have the capacity to create multiple points of view?
- Can unethical parties create a situation where bots reproduce misinformation as factual without users knowing/understanding?
- Does it make teachers redundant?
- There are insufficient boundaries to make this program trustworthy. Has the tool been validated and to what extent?
- Asking GenAI to write in the style of an author or create artwork in the style of an artist is essentially stealing their intellectual property.
- The injustice of not having completed their own work - and belittling the work previously undertaken by the individual.
- VCE requires us to rank students based on the work that they produce - it will become very unclear how to do so if some students are using AI heavily and others are not.
- Students need to be given the opportunity to learn how to use AI well, to be competitive in the workforce.
- It only presents one worldview. It does not represent all voices in our world.
- ChatGPT reflects the views and values of an American minority. The ideas are not always fact checked and this can lead students to believe things that are not true. Facts are also easily manipulated to appear neutral despite having a political bias.
- We need to teach students to use any technology appropriately. This can only be done by modelling and discussing its appropriate use.

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10

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Impact of Generative Artificial Intelligence on the education sector

Respondents were asked to consider the impact of GenAI on the education sector.
Responses about the ways in which GenAI would impact educators are as follows:

- I predict the continuing of engagement with and resistance to an examination-based learning model, which will increase teacher workload by having to run AI detection software and fulfilling authentication requirements.
- Automation of grading and marking and reporting.
- The role of teachers evolving to be even more about curation, differentiation and goal setting.
- Need to think about consistent and equal approach across education sector to avoid unfair advantages.
- Future impacts could include larger classrooms as the evolutions would be considered as tutors or teachers' aides.
- The inability of the AI to cater for differentiated learning styles within the classroom and therefore behaviour management issues.
- I believe that ultimately these technologies will recede into the background of systems and platforms we already use, and we will "stop noticing" that we are using AI. That presents both benefits and concerns. The multimodality of GenAI will also continue to develop and improve.
- Support with administration tasks keeping track of student task completions. Immediate feedback for students on practice tasks. These aspects of generative AI will mean the core business of building relationships between students and teachers can have more time and focus.
- Clearly AI which eventually (or quite quickly) be able to complete writings tasks to a very high standard which means that English teachers need to consider quite carefully what it is that they're really teaching. If an AI can complete writing tasks, then English teachers need to find other ways to verify that learning (about texts) has happened for students.
- Quite probably, at some point, politicians looking to save money will insist AI replace some education staff.
- I also suspect that these AI corporations will begin charging high fees for certain features, which elite private schools will pay and other schools will not. The elite private schools will, as they always have, spoon feed their students and allow them to use AI to achieve very high marks, while the rest of the segregated school system struggles along.

Comments regarding the impacts of GenAI on individual students were as follows:

- Students will not value learning, will not see the point in reading and writing, will become even more socially isolated and anti-social.
- AI proliferation can/could see a continued dumbing down of our student cohorts as they rely on apps to produce work and cannot think and work independently on set tasks and challenges.
- I think it will become more sophisticated and the robotic element of it will eventually be lost making it sound 'more human'.
- It worries me that future learners may be reliant on these technologies in a way that previous learners haven't been.
- I think the focus really needs to be on students acquiring the skills themselves that can later be supported or supplemented by the technology.

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11

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Current English curriculum priorities

Respondents were asked to outline whether or not the current English curriculum equips students with the necessary knowledge and skills to ethically and responsibly engage with GenAI.

A summary of the elaborations provided, including interpretations of the current English curriculum's capacity to facilitate the teaching of GenAI and considerations for the future of the English curriculum is below.

- The English curriculum has always been quite adaptable - it is up to the individual teacher to ensure that aside from exploring text forms, they also recognise the different means by which those forms can be created.
- I think, as with many things, a lot of the responsibility for teaching students to ethically engage with AI will fall to English. I think the responsibility needs to be shared a bit wider than that.
- At the moment I imagine it largely comes down to teachers' own knowledge and skills with AI. It ranges from teachers who are creating, questioning and constructing AI, to those who may not have heard of it yet. I believe there is scope to teach students to use AI effectively in the curriculum; however, I'm concerned about the additional area for us to focus on, when so many other literacy skills are not well-developed.
- On paper, there are points in the curriculum which attend to digital literacy and multimodality. However, there is a lack of clarity around the metalanguage for studying multimodal texts, and little support in reality for teachers adapting to digital texts.
- To some extent in terms of the skills required. Students should probably have explicit activities to address this concern so they can actively participate in forming views rather than stumbling into it as they do with social media.
- It does if it is introduced like any other multimodal source of input and production: critical analysis, acknowledgement of sources, discussions around reliability and validity, aesthetics.

Of the 39 responses to this question, 26 educators (66%) said that the current English curriculum does not equip students with the knowledge and skills to ethically and responsibly engage with GenAI. A summary of their reasoning highlights the following common threads:

- Lack of clarity and understandable definition of plagiarism is needed.
- The current English curriculum's definitions of 'interpretation' and 'communication' will need to change to accommodate AI.
- No specific mention of AI in the curriculum at present.
- Onus on individual teachers to make AI a focus.
- The curriculum is already full with topics that are unable to be explored in-depth.
- We are still working out what appropriate use of AI looks like and what that means for us.

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12

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School policy

The final question of the survey asked respondents whether their school has a policy or is developing a policy about the use of GenAI in their context.

There were 39 responses to this question. 25 (64%) respondents said their school does not have a policy about the use of GenAI in their context.

- 2 respondents indicated that their school has a policy about the use of GenAI.
- 2 respondents indicated that their school is using their existing plagiarism policies are being used to cover the use of GenAI.
- 6 respondents indicated that their school is developing a new policy about the use of GenAI.

Two additional comments spoke to the lack of guidelines and leadership from educational bodies around supporting the challenges of GenAI use in the classroom:

- I would like some really clear guidelines on how these technologies can be used because my understanding is that there are age limits on who can access these.
- We are in the process of writing one, as VCAA or DET have, of course, not been any use at all in providing leadership or guidance. As always, schools are left on their own to figure things out, which is terribly inefficient.

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13

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Conclusions

VATE would be very interested in further opportunities for consultation with the committee overseeing the inquiry into the use of Generative AI in the education system. The best contact details are on the cover page of the submission.

Below are the key conclusions and recommendations to be surmised from the respondents to the VATE survey:

- Victorian English teachers from all sectors are interested in the affordances of Generative AI and its capacity to enhance English teaching and learning in the classroom.
- Teachers acknowledge the benefits of utilising these tools to stimulate conversation about the use of English language – rather than being a mechanism for replacing their own and students' original thoughts.
- However, Victorian English teachers noted that currently there is insufficient support and direction available in curriculum documentation for them to confidently engage with and use Generative AI in the English classroom.
- In addition, teachers noted that there are few policies in place in their teaching context, nor direction or guidance from key leadership bodies around the use of Generative AI, for them to confidently engage with the use of these tools in the English classroom. This raises concerns about the ethical and just use of these tools.
- English teachers are concerned about the way Generative AI can be consciously or unconsciously misused by students, adversely impacting their literary competence and development and the joyful experience of learning.
- English teachers see their role in the classroom as integral to the development of civic-minded, critical-thinking, confident, and compassionate young people; Generative AI in its current form is viewed as a tool not able to replicate the role of the classroom teacher.

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14