

**AI-Mediated Third Spaces: Inclusion and Critical Literacy in Blended  
English Education**

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**Abstract**

The integration of generative AI into English classrooms has raised a long-standing, unresolved question: What does inclusion really mean for a learner? Most frameworks answer this by access, meaning give students the tools and the problem is solved. The paper argues that access is not enough, particularly when students face a version of English that is not just a school subject but a socially meaningful language, where the inequalities of class and region are reproduced through the very norms that dominant datasets encode. This conceptual paper draws on Freirean critical pedagogy and Third Space theory developed by Gutierrez et al. (1999) and Moje et al. (2004) to propose the AI-mediated Third Space as a way of rethinking inclusion in blended English classrooms. At the heart of the argument is the premise that true inclusion requires epistemic participation: students' ability to interrogate and co-produce meaning, including the algorithmically generated knowledge that AI increasingly adds to the discourse of the classroom. This paper explores the ways in which generative AI can both facilitate and restrict participation, offering scaffolding for language production and more general access, but also entrenching particular linguistic standards in its training data. Fluent AI-generated text has the power to work subtly against the very learners it claims to support. The framework instead positions AI outputs as texts to be read critically, engaging in the same analytical practices that critical literacy applies to any other text, rather than treating AI as a tool students just use. In the context of NEP 2020's

focus on critical thinking in Indian secondary education, the paper contributes to the field of Inclusion Studies by extending Third Space theory to include AI-mediated learning spaces, and provides a conceptual model for educators designing blended English classrooms where all learners are recognized as knowledge-makers.

**Keywords:** critical literacy, blended learning, AI-mediated Third Space, epistemic participation, generative AI, English language education

## Introduction

If a Grade 9 child in a CBSE classroom asks ChatGPT to explain a poem and receives back a paragraph that is grammatically polished and confidently stated, pedagogically something important has happened. What it precisely means, however, depends on your point of view. For those who prioritise access and efficiency, this is scaffolding: a student who might have struggled to frame an interpretation now has a starting point. The question for educators in the Freirean tradition is more uncomfortable: whose interpretive framework does that paragraph carry, and what happened to the student's own encounter with the text?

This paper concerns itself with this specific type of tension. Large language models, adaptive writing tools, and the like have become an integral part of how both teachers and students perform tasks. In India, the use of such technologies has been influenced by post-pandemic digitization and NEP 2020's focus on theories of integrated pedagogy and on the development of critical thinking (Ministry of Education, India, 2020). However, the primary approach to analyzing these technologies in the context of education has been through the lens of efficiency and measurable results. In their systematic research on AI in higher education, Zawacki-Richter et al. (2019) noted that a lot of literature on the field's technologies has been produced, but pedagogy and ethics have been largely ignored. This concern has been extended by Moorhouse (2024) in the context of English language teaching.

In secondary schools in India, the consequences of inequitable access to quality education become much more tangible. For example, English holds a great deal of social capital in CBSE (Central

Board of Secondary Education) schools and the cities in which they operate (e.g., nearly all urban areas); thus making it a means of social mobility and political power for multilingual students attending school in those places. Sah (2022), who examined the use of English medium instruction in South Asian multilingual settings, noted that English is used as a form of linguistic capital, and that the standards for that capital are shaped by largely Western, dominant norms. Therefore, when AI-based educational systems go into classrooms where students already have to deal with using English as a medium of social mobility and institutional power, the unintended consequences of adopting AI without critical consideration are quite evident.

The objective here is not to oppose the use of AI in English classrooms. Instead, I present a different way of relating to AI through pedagogically engaging with generative outputs produced by the use of AI technology i.e., treating generative outputs of AI as texts to be critically read rather than simply accepted as knowledge. The model I refer to is called the AI-mediated Third Space and builds upon Freire's (1970) theory of critical pedagogy and the Third Space theories developed by Gutierrez et al. (1999) and Moje et al. (2004); this model creates a blended learning environment that allows students to develop critical thinking skills about AI-generated outputs rather than passively accepting AI-generated outputs as knowledge.

Epistemic participation, which refers to the role that learners play as 'producers of knowledge' in the classroom, are central to this conceptual framework. Treating students' framework as a pedagogical goal in itself, one means of achieving this is by building students' inquiries into algorithmic-based knowledge production as an outcome of this experience.

## **Review of Literature**

### **Critical Literacy and the Politics of Reading**

To read a text is also to read the context in which that text was created. Language, through texts, reflects the values/ideologies of those who create them. And those values/ideologies become perceived as 'natural' and 'neutral' because they are the dominant ideologies of a society. Scholars

of Freire's theory put that idea into action in classrooms. For example, Luke and Freebody (1999) defined literacy as a collection of social practices in which learners have a variety of epistemic authorities (who can create knowledge and have it recognised), while Janks (2010) created a framework for looking at text from the perspective of power, access, diversity, and design. Both frameworks explore the role that text plays in creating power-relations between readers and writers, and how students can create their own meanings.

These approaches to critical literacy have direct ties to AI-generated text. AI creates a text that appears coherent and has fluency in writing style, and critical literacy is concerned with the power structure associated with the creation of any text. Because AI-generated text is produced using data that has been trained into the AI rather than being publicly stated, and thus students are unable to evaluate epistemologically the 'confidence' of the style that the AI uses to produce text until they have evaluated that text. When a student uses ChatGPT's interpretation of a poem instead of her own, she doesn't know whether the ChatGPT version is correct. Their use is due to the superior authority of the ChatGPT text as compared to any other version of the poem. Most teachers use a comprehensibility/ correctness assessment method so the student doesn't know how to challenge the ChatGPT text.

### Third Space Theory and Hybrid Learning Environments

The theory of Third Space originates from Homi Bhabha's (1994) investigation into Cultural Hybridity that identifies the derivation of meaning through processes of negotiating the interstitial spaces between fixed identities, instead of deriving meaning solely from one binding identity. When researching education, researchers have heavily adapted this theory. For example, Gutierrez (1999) used the Third Space to explain the very nature of classrooms in which academic discourse meets students' out-of-school knowledge and creates a condition of knowledge creation that could not occur independently of each other. Moje et al. (2004), through Content Area Literacy, demonstrated how teachers build social bridges with funds of knowledge to create a blend of

students' funds of knowledge and disciplinary modes of thought, and did so in a way that did not subjugate either party in the process.

Blended learning environments are designed to create hybridized spaces (or Third Space) for learning, by blending synchronous and asynchronous means of instruction; as such, blended learning environments provide hybridized spaces in which multiple modes of constructing knowledge can exist (Means et al., 2013). Because they are hybridized in nature, they also provide the natural frameworks to be used for Third Space thinking. However, the existing literature has yet to examine the epistemic role of AI as an entity within the hybridized learning environments mentioned above in terms of creating language, framing a body of knowledge, and framing the ways that students represent their ideas. The framework that follows in this paper will add further detail, and help to clarify the roles that exist in a Third Space.

#### AI in Language Education: Affordances and Unanswered Questions

The use of AI in Education has made it an attractive area for research; however, Zawacki-Richter et al. (2019) indicated that there has been much more emphasis on technical capabilities than on pedagogy and/or ethical considerations in existing research. Language Education has begun to engage more with discovering what integrating AI means for teaching and learning. Kohnke et al. (2023) conducted a review of the affordances of ChatGPT as a tool for language teaching; they identified many potential uses for it that would support students and provide them with feedback on their writing. However, both teachers and students will need some level of critical digital literacy to use this tool responsibly. Javier and Moorhouse (2023) designed activities to promote positive and critical engagement of ChatGPT amongst Secondary English Language Learners, and found that students would benefit from more explicit pedagogical scaffolding to help them move beyond surface use of the tool. Moorhouse (2024) argues that the field of ELT requires additional frameworks that go beyond purely listing ways in which AI may be used to looking at how

Generative AI will affect literacy practice and the conditions under which language learning will take place.

The relevant literature on AI literacy provides additional useful models; Ng et al. (2021) have developed an exploratory literature review that includes a four-dimension model of: (a) knowing and understanding AI; (b) using and applying it; (c) evaluating and creating something with it; and (d) dealing with ethical issues. The evaluative dimension and ethical dimension of this model show significant overlap in the conceptualization of the terms evaluative and ethical for both the AI literacy research and critical literacy scholarship; however, the fields have, for the most part, evolved in parallel to one another, rather than in a conversation with each other. Critical engagement in AI literacy research is seen as a means of improving how users can make use of tools; critical literacy scholarship defines critical engagement as the basic orientation to language and power. The AI-mediated Third Space is suggested to serve as a link between the two conceptualizations provided above.

#### Epistemic Participation and English Medium Instruction in Indian Classrooms

From the outset, epistemic participation reflects the capacity to make a meaningful contribution to the production of knowledge within a collective learning environment; however, this goes well beyond mere access. An example would be a student being physically present in a classroom setting with access to both technology and tools for learning; yet they remain epistemically excluded; the student holds a position of receiving information rather than creating knowledge. With AI-enhanced classrooms, the increased likelihood of students being epistemically excluded from knowledge production will be particularly pronounced if their relationship to the language of instruction is influenced by structural inequality.

Research by Sah (2022) on English language instruction in multilingual South Asian countries directly relates to this issue. Sah has noted how policies regarding English Medium Instruction are

frequently framed as tools to help provide access to both economic and social opportunities; however, these same policies also reproduce social hierarchy and privilege dominant linguistic norms over multilingual learners by viewing multilingual individuals and their associated dialects/languages as being deficient rather than differently resourced. Therefore, AI systems that primarily have access to standard English written material will perpetuate this same issue. Without designing and implementing pedagogical intervention in utilizing these systems, it will be necessary to reinforce the notion that the form of English produced by the AI system represents the only legitimate form; thus diminishing the authority of a learner's independent and autonomous application of knowledge from multiple languages and dialects.

An important counterpoint is provided by the New Educational Policy (NEP 2020), which aspires towards participatory education through its commitment to critical thinking and less rote learning (Ministry of Education, India, 2020). However, this aspiration happens in the context of examination structures and institutional pressures that tend to reward performance rather than promote inquiry.

Educators working within the constraints imposed by these systems are provided with the AI-mediated Third Space framework as a resource in helping them achieve the pedagogical goals outlined in the policy.

This paper addresses the gap between four different areas of scholarship that all study related problems, including critical literacy; Third Space theory; AI literacy research; and English medium instruction in multilingual contexts. No one body of scholarship has integrated all four areas as one. The AI-mediated Third Space is presented as that integrated body of research.

## Research Questions

The focus of this paper is on 3 key questions:

1. In what ways does the use of generative AI in cross-curricular learning contexts impact the conditions for participating epistemically (i.e., gaining new knowledge)?
2. How can we further develop Third Spaces to account for the influence of generative AI within blended learning (learning that occurs through both face-to-face and online media)?
3. How will we design Third Spaces that enable true inclusion (i.e., classroom spaces that support and welcome all learners) within varied schooling contexts?

## Methodology

This research has a conceptual design as its foundation. Conceptual research focuses on systemically analyzing and integrating collected data from theoretical sources to create new conceptual insights that augment or combine with existing knowledge (Jaakkola, 2020). The methodology encompasses documentation from different academic disciplines, including critical pedagogy, literacy, educational technology, AI literacy, and applied linguistics, considering in detail literature regarding the Indian and South Asian context where appropriate. There are three stages to the conceptual analysis: (1) Analysis of major theoretical frameworks (critical literacy; Third Space Theory) pertaining to the research topic, (2) A synthesis of the empirical and theoretical literature pertaining to generative AI, education, and English Medium Instruction, and (3) The development of a framework based on combining the findings of (1) and (2) as being part of the construct of an AI-Mediated 3rdSpace.

## Conceptual Framework: The AI-Mediated Third Space

### Defining the Space

The AI-mediated Third Space refers to hybrid learning places where AI-generated output is considered as a text rather than an answer that is tentative and subject to being questioned. In this space, students hold an active relationship with AI, neither simply accepting nor rejecting what is generated. Rather, they engage in a dialogic fashion; by reading the AI output against their own



interpretation of the text and the cultural knowledge they bring into the interaction, in a space that is a product of the teacher's own choices.

This distinction sets the AI-mediated Third Space apart from a traditional hybrid classroom. In most descriptions of hybrid instructional approaches, the digital component provides a means to deliver video content and adaptive practices for teaching; the digital component does not produce knowledge claims that students are expected to evaluate. AI-generated text does create knowledge claims. When AI generates an interpretation of a work of literature, AI makes an epistemic claim. When AI generates a paragraph that is representative of social issues, it encodes assumptions about what is significant and whose point of view matters. The AI-mediated Third Space is the educational environment to which these perspectives are made evident, and examined with equal scrutiny as the critical literacy that would be applied to any other form of text.

The concept of third space is helpful because it challenges the binary nature of authority and student knowledge. Gutierrez and collaborators' original form of third space (1999) described a third space created when teachers and students collaboratively disrupted the institutionalized academic script to allow for students' legitimate home knowledge to be utilized in/authored milestone of copyright law. In the third space created by artificial intelligence, an additional source of knowledge has arrived: the algorithmic source. The instructor's goal within this third space is to ensure that neither of the other two sources of knowledge is silenced by the algorithmic source.

### Three Dimensions of the Framework

There are three main components of the Third Space created through AI. One of these components involves students developing critical thinking skills when encountering AI-produced materials and developing a set of tools to do so. When looking at an AI generated paperback page the student will need to use the same analytical tools they would when reviewing another form of written text, example would include looking at AI generated comprehension questions as opposed to the student's generated comprehension question, students will then state what each text does and does

not do, and why the text was designed the way it was designed based on the kind of reader that it was originally intended to address. This directly relates to Janks' (2010) conceptual framework that can be used to illustrate power and design.

The second layer of the two-dimensional model for critical literacies is the idea of 'epistemic voice': i.e., the conditions under which learners' observations are granted evaluative significance, or weight. This occurs when learners rely more upon what 'authoritative' text suggests about meaning than on what their own experience of the text is. The advent of AI enhances this deferral because the product of AI is portrayed with the same characteristics as writing done in a traditional educational environment, namely, fluency and coherence, both of which are valued by the educational system as indicators of quality. Epistemic voice develops through having learners clearly communicate to an AI the information it is unable to derive from their experiences of the text as well as producing alternative interpretations/meaning from their own readings of the text, which would be informed by their individual/cultural backgrounds. In multilingual learning environments, it also enables multilingual students' home languages to serve as epistemically valuable learning tools rather than simply being considered non-standard forms of language use.

The third dimension of teacher role in facilitating the critical interaction is to provide sustained pedagogical design in order for AI-mediated Third Space to occur; teachers must construct the critical interaction between what students already know and the output of the AI algorithm, i.e., the teacher must model and structure critically reading the AI output and what that means to their students. In order to do this, it is necessary for teachers to create what is referred to in this paper as epistemic hospitality, i.e., by making a commitment to recognise that students from a linguistically diverse/co-educational classroom will possess various interpretative resources that will not be reflected or validated by the AI systems that are predominantly based on written texts in standard English. This is a demanding task for the teachers, as it requires an understanding of the AI literacy competencies identified by Ng et al. (2021), particularly in terms of the evaluative and ethical dimensions, as well as a critical pedagogical orientation described by Freire (1970) in which teachers function as co-inquirers rather than as transmitters.

## The Framework in the Indian Classroom

The impact of the framework is especially pronounced in the Indian context. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 identifies critical thinking and the development of higher order cognitive skills as two of the principal goals of education and therefore signifies a conscious movement from rote learning toward a more participatory model of education (Ministry of Education, India, 2020). The Third Space framework based on AI directly relates to these objectives. It seeks to interpret the expectations of the NEP 2020 regarding critical thinking in relation to a blended English classroom that incorporates generative AI systems.

The reality of multilingualism for most CBSE Schools makes it more relevant to have a framework for students who have their first language as either Kannada or Hindi and are developing their English skills through formal education. While developing a working relationship with the language they are learning (English), there is a risk associated with students using an AI-based tool that produces data in standard, confident English. This is because, in using the AI-based tool, students may rely on the technology rather than utilizing their own interpretation, thereby reinforcing the idea of whose language represents valid knowledge. Conversely, the AI-Mediated Third Space counteracts this message by providing students with access to AI-based tools, which create a different view of the AI output compared to the student, and by prioritizing the way students have interpreted themselves as the key priority in teaching/learning.

Consequently, the framework does not supersede Third Space theory; it builds upon it with the idea that the most productive learning environments “are those that maintain the tension between two types of knowledge (as opposed to trying to resolve it; (Gutierrez et al., 1999)” applies to the AI classroom. The AI classroom as a Third Space does not attempt to combine algorithmic knowledge with student knowledge; rather, it uses the tension between them to create productive outcomes.

## Implications for Inclusive Pedagogy

Teachers and curriculum designers will have to change their approach to integrating AI into English classes based on this framework. One of the biggest areas of shifting is how AI-generated output is viewed when using it in an instructional context. In the AI-mediated Third Space, when introducing AI to students, it is no longer viewed as a reference source but rather as a text-based conversation partner; this indicates that AI has been trained on bodies of work with a specific set of assumptions embedded in them that students can analyze. This reframing allows for critical literacy tools to be immediately utilized and allows for teachers to support critical inquiry rather than model tool usage.

According to the framework for assessment, the focus of assessment needs to be changed from focusing on product quality to focusing on the quality of critical engagement. When a student is able to articulate, in her own words, how the interpretation created by ChatGPT reflects a specific cultural or ideological belief system, as well as generate an alternative reading based on her own experience with the text, she has displayed higher-level critical literacy than someone who has simply paraphrased ChatGPT's output fluently. This is aligned with NEP 2020's prioritization of critical thinking rather than rote performance (Ministry of Education, India, 2020) and with Javier and Moorhouse's (2023) conclusion that when secondary school-aged students are given explicit pedagogical scaffolding to help them use AI, they are able to engage in meaningful and critical ways with it.

According to curriculum designers and school administrators, AI integration should connect directly to existing critical literacy objectives in the curriculum rather than be added on as a separate strand of digital literacy. This is consistent with Kohnke et al.'s (2023) finding that teachers and learners need to develop critical digital competencies before using these tools responsibly. For Indian educators, this would mean connecting AI to the critical thinking objectives already included in CBSE curricula and to the aspirations of NEP 2020 as a whole, rather than being considered entirely separate from those goals.

The framework can also be applied to studies of inclusion; epistemic participation is one of the central concepts within the framework, and any definition of inclusion that ends at access cannot adequately explain the implications of our work. Selwyn (2022) has argued for a need to critically examine educational technologies politically and socially; the framework can therefore help translate that argument into classroom practice. The concept of inclusion is not a sufficient measure of whether or not an inclusion has occurred, but rather that each student is fully engaged with knowledge (including algorithmic knowledge) carries meaning.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

This paper does not contain any empirical data to support the theoretical notion of an AI-facilitated Third Space. This framework was developed through a theoretical synthesis; therefore, it requires empirical testing across various classroom contexts in order to determine its actual implications for practice. Multiple questions remain unanswered, including: How do students with different levels of proficiency in English respond when asked to critically examine the outputs produced by AI? What type(s) of professional development will teachers require before they are able to facilitate the type of critical engagement that is necessary for the implementation of this framework? And finally, what role do exam pressures and gap in infrastructure play in the feasibility of implementing this framework in Indian secondary schools?

The framework created requires some adjustment for use with other subjects outside of the area of English language learning. However, the fundamental principles of reading AI output as a text for critical analysis and evaluation apply across multiple disciplines. Additionally, most of the research supporting the created framework and how it relates to pedagogy is based on Western theorists; therefore, more research is needed to develop a more comprehensive view of critical pedagogy as it relates to South Asian philosophies of education. This will provide future researchers with an important opportunity to test the framework in different contexts, by comparing and contrasting how it works in different parts of the world with different epistemological frameworks.

To explore AI integration in English classes in CBSE schools, researchers should study how teachers understand and implement AI into their curriculum design so that they may facilitate the development of an AI-mediated Third Space when teaching. Conducting research with both secondary students and teachers is necessary to build upon the conceptual foundation of research provided in this paper.

## Conclusion

The use of AI-enhanced classrooms will not be realised simply by giving out tools. They will require the establishment of pedagogical conditions where students can engage, interrogate and reinterpret, both the AI generated texts and the curriculum generated texts. The AI-mediated Third Space, described within this paper, supports the creation of such pedagogical conditions in blended English classrooms, but it is particularly relevant to multilingual and socio-economically diverse contexts where the inequitable distribution of linguistic and epistemic authority makes the issue of inclusion highly relevant. By creating a dialogue between the concept of critical literacy, Third Space theory, research on AI literacy, and scholarship on EMI in the Global South, within the specific aims and challenges of Indian secondary English education, this paper defines a model of inclusion that is founded upon establishing a voice rather than just access. To establish a voice, the pedagogical conditions necessary for creating a voice are precisely those called for in NEP 2020's definition of critical thinking. The AI-mediated Third Space seeks to establish this voice through classroom practice.

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