

Formal Language Education in the Age of AI and the Digital Wilds: What Do We Do Now?

Formal language educators are caught in a bind. On one hand, institutions increasingly emphasize assessment, standards, and certification to assert legitimacy and control over language learning. On the other, ubiquitous AI-enhanced informal resources in the digital wilds now allow individuals to pursue highly personal language learning goals beyond institutions. These goals are often humanistic and self-actualizing—driven by play, exploration, affiliation, and socialization—activities that resist assessment and credentialization.

In an era when AI can translate, correct, and even simulate conversation, and when digital media can connect anyone with the most engaging teachers in the world, the purpose of formal language education cannot merely be to train learners to use technology. Rather, it must be to cultivate the self-reflective, intercultural, and aesthetic capacities that make human multilingualism worth pursuing. As machine translation becomes increasingly efficient, the pragmatic impetus to learn another language may fade, leaving emotional, relational, and identity-based motives as the most compelling reasons to learn languages.

To frame this challenge, I contrast humanistic and credentialist understandings of language education and outline theoretical and pedagogical frameworks aligned with a technology-enhanced humanistic perspective—drawing on theories of self-regulation (Henry & Liu, 2023), learner autonomy (Teng, 2019), and motivation (Dörnyei, 2020; Ushioda, 2020), as well as relational/humanistic pedagogies (Kern, 2024; Amini et al., 2025; Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008). I argue that the key to language education's relevance is teaching learners to use technology not simply to acquire an L2, but to cultivate and transform their own humanity in the process.