



DIGITAL HUMANITIES AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING: POSSIBILITIES AND PRAGMATICSⁱ

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Abstract:

The emergence of Digital Humanities (DH) has transformed the ways in which knowledge in the humanities is produced, organized, interpreted, disseminated, and accessed. Although digital technologies initially entered humanities research primarily as tools for increasing efficiency—through digitized catalogues, searchable databases, corpus analysis, and electronic archives—the relationship between technology and the humanities has subsequently become more constitutive. Its environment today shapes the questions researchers may ask, the methods they employ, and the forms of knowledge they produce. This transformation has significant implications for English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly because language itself is simultaneously an object of computational analysis, a medium of communication, and a socially situated practice. The article argues that DH should be understood as a critical and interdisciplinary orientation towards language, culture, texts, data, and knowledge production. It charts the movement from humanities computing and quantitative corpus-based approaches towards more qualitative, interpretive, multimodal, collaborative, and ethnographic forms of digital scholarship. It contextualizes these possibilities within India, where questions of infrastructure, multilingualism, accessibility, technological inequality, and institutional capacity are inseparable from discussions of DH.

Keywords: Digital Humanities, English Language Teaching, computational humanities, digital ethnography, digital pedagogy, India

Resumen:

El surgimiento de las Humanidades Digitales (HD) ha transformado las formas en que el conocimiento en el ámbito de las humanidades se produce, organiza, interpreta, difunde y al que se accede. Aunque las tecnologías digitales se incorporaron inicialmente a la investigación en humanidades principalmente como herramientas para aumentar la eficiencia —mediante catálogos digitalizados, bases de datos consultables, análisis de corpus y archivos electrónicos—

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, la relación entre la tecnología y las humanidades se ha vuelto posteriormente más constitutiva. En la actualidad, su entorno condiciona las preguntas que los investigadores pueden plantear, los métodos que emplean y las formas de conocimiento que producen. Esta transformación tiene importantes implicaciones para la Enseñanza del Inglés como Lengua Extranjera (ELT), especialmente porque el lenguaje es, simultáneamente, un objeto de análisis computacional, un medio de comunicación y una práctica socialmente situada. El artículo sostiene que las HD deben entenderse como una orientación crítica e interdisciplinaria hacia el lenguaje, la cultura, los textos, los datos y la producción de conocimiento. Asimismo, analiza el tránsito desde la informática aplicada a las humanidades y los enfoques cuantitativos basados en corpus hacia formas de investigación digital más cualitativas, interpretativas, multimodales, colaborativas y etnográficas. El artículo contextualiza estas posibilidades en el ámbito de la India, donde las cuestiones relacionadas con la infraestructura, el multilingüismo, la accesibilidad, la desigualdad tecnológica y la capacidad institucional son inseparables de los debates sobre las Humanidades Digitales.

Palabras clave: Humanidades Digitales, Enseñanza del Inglés como Lengua Extranjera, humanidades computacionales, etnografía digital, pedagogía digital, India

1. Introduction

Various shifts in technology have repeatedly altered the practices through which academic knowledge is produced. One quick example is the transformation of library research: the physical card catalogue that once mediated access to books and other resources has largely been replaced by searchable digital databases. Although such changes appear simply as matters of convenience or efficiency, the shifts also have consequences that extend beyond the replacement of one research instrument by another. When the means through which scholars encounter, organize, search, classify, and analyse materials change, the nature of research itself can also change.

Research in humanities has traditionally operated within material and logistical constraints. Literary scholarship, for instance, generally relies on relatively small selections of texts because the physical scale of literary production makes comprehensive examination practically impossible. Moretti (2007) famously illustrates the problem by observing that even a canon of two hundred novels would require an almost impossible length of time to read each text individually. This is further complicated if one considers the enormous number of novels, newspapers, journals, manuscripts, archival records, images, and other cultural artefacts now available in digital form. Digitization has therefore introduced what may be described as a new plasticity of research materials: texts and other cultural objects can be searched, reorganized, compared, visualized, modelled, and circulated in ways that were previously difficult or impossible.

The implications of this transformation are particularly important for the study and teaching of English. Empirical methods and technology have mediated, for instance, corpus linguistics in English language studies. A researcher may ask how frequently a particular lexical

item occurs across genres, how collocations differ between varieties of English, how grammatical structures are distributed, or how discourse patterns change over time. Such questions can be investigated systematically through large datasets. Technology also allows for spoken language to be recorded and transcribed, while developments in video technology have facilitated multimodal corpora that preserve not only linguistic forms but also gestures, facial expressions, prosody, spatial relations, and other dimensions of interaction.

These developments suggest that technology has moved through at least two related stages in humanities research. In the first, technology functioned principally as an instrument: it enabled scholars to store, retrieve, organize, and process information more efficiently. In the second, technology became constitutive of the research process. Digital environments began to influence the questions scholars could ask, the evidence they could assemble, the methods available to them, and even the kinds of objects that could become objects of study.

This shift is particularly significant for English Language Teaching (ELT). If language is understood not merely as an abstract system but as a socially and culturally situated practice, then digital environments become important sites for observing and participating in language use. Learners communicate through social media, messaging platforms, discussion forums, collaborative documents, video-sharing environments, gaming platforms, and other digital spaces. Consequently, contemporary English language education cannot be confined to the printed textbook or classroom interaction.

Nonetheless, the presence of digital technology in education cannot be solely equated with innovation. The crucial question is not simply whether teachers and learners use digital tools, but how these tools transform pedagogical practices, knowledge, participation, and understandings of language. This article therefore explores Digital Humanities as a critical and pedagogical possibility for ELT. It considers the historical movement from humanities computing to contemporary DH, examines digital ethnography as a methodological approach, and investigates the opportunities and challenges presented by DH in the Indian context. The central argument is that DH can make English language teaching more empirical, collaborative, multimodal, culturally situated, and critically reflective, but only when technology is understood as part of a broader social and epistemological infrastructure rather than as a collection of neutral tools.

2. From humanities computing to Digital Humanities

Digital Humanities is notoriously difficult to define in a singular or restrictive manner. Rather than constituting a stable discipline with a universally accepted methodology, it may be more useful to understand DH as a field of practices, communities, methods, and academic affiliations. Alvarado (2011), for example, proposes that DH should be understood genealogically, through a network of related schools of thought, methodological interests, and tools. Such an approach is useful because it prevents Digital Humanities from becoming reduced to a particular software package, research method, or technological trend.

In its earlier manifestations, the field was frequently associated with what was called humanities computing. Computational technologies were employed to facilitate activities such

as textual encoding, concordance, corpus construction, bibliographic management, and quantitative textual analysis. In language studies, computational analysis enabled researchers to examine large bodies of texts for recurring linguistic patterns. Corpus linguistics is therefore an important precursor to contemporary DH.

The transition to contemporary DH, however, involves an expansion beyond quantitative efficiency. Schnapp and Presner's *Digital Humanities Manifesto 2.0* describes an earlier quantitative phase characterized by databases, automated corpus linguistics, and search-and-retrieval systems, while emphasizing a subsequent phase that is qualitative, interpretive, experiential, emotive, and generative. The distinction is important because it suggests that computational methods need not displace traditional humanities interpretation. Instead, digital methods can complement close reading, contextual analysis, historical investigation, cultural critique, and interpretation.

This produces a useful tension within DH. On one hand, computation permits scholars to work at scales that were previously unattainable. On the other, the humanities remain concerned with ambiguity, historical situatedness, cultural specificity, contradiction, interpretation, and human experience. The challenge is therefore to bring computational and interpretive modes of inquiry into dialogue rather than treating them as mutually exclusive alternatives. For ELT, this development is particularly valuable. A language classroom can employ quantitative data while simultaneously asking qualitative questions about why particular linguistic choices occur, what social meanings they produce, and how speakers position themselves in particular contexts. Students can, for example, investigate a corpus for patterns in the use of a particular expression and subsequently examine examples in their cultural and communicative contexts. Computational evidence can become the starting point for interpretation rather than the endpoint of learning.

3. Digital Humanities as a change in knowledge production

One of the most consequential aspects of DH is the transformation of the relationship between materials, processing, and presentation. Conventional humanities research often begins with relatively stable objects: books, manuscripts, photographs, archival documents, maps, or recordings. Digital environments transform these materials into data that can be encoded, classified, searched, processed, visualized, and recombined. The transformation may be conceptualized through three interconnected stages:

Materials → Processing → Presentation

Digital materials may include textual documents, images, maps, audio recordings, video files, three-dimensional models, datasets, or combinations of these forms. The processing of these materials may involve digitization, transcription, annotation, statistical analysis, data mining, modelling, visualization, or algorithmic analysis. Presentation may involve digital editions, websites, interactive maps, visualizations, repositories, exhibitions, multimedia projects, or other forms that do not conform to the traditional printed article or monograph.

However, the process is not neutral. Once a cultural object is transformed into digital data, decisions are made concerning what is included, what is excluded, how it is categorized, what metadata accompanies it, what can be searched, and which relationships can be computationally identified. Digital mediation therefore influences the object itself.

For English language teaching, this means that the text itself can no longer be assumed to be a stable and exclusively linguistic object. Contemporary language use frequently occurs through combinations of written language, image, sound, emoji, typography, hyperlinks, video, gesture, and interface design. Consequently, digital humanities approaches could encourage ELT to move from an exclusively text-centred conception of language towards multimodal understandings of communication. This does not mean abandoning traditional literacy. Rather, it means expanding what literacy entails. Learners increasingly need to understand not only how to read and write English but also how meaning is produced through digital platforms, computational systems, multimodal resources, and networked communication.

4. Digital ethnography and the study of language in context

Digital ethnography offers a particularly productive bridge between Digital Humanities and ELT. Ethnography traditionally emphasizes the situated study of social and cultural practices. In language research, this orientation is especially important because language does not exist independently of the social contexts in which it is used. Blommaert and Dong (2010), for example, emphasize that language resources acquire meaning through their deployment within social and cultural contexts. Language is therefore consequential in use. Understanding language requires attention to meanings, functions, its performativity, and the situated conditions in which communicative practices occur.

This perspective resonates strongly with linguistic ethnography. Creese (2010) describes linguistic ethnography as an approach that brings together linguistic and ethnographic attention to social interaction. Hymes (1996), similarly, emphasizes the importance of understanding language in relation to communicative contexts and social inequality.

Digital environments extend these concerns. Communication increasingly takes place in spaces that are simultaneously technological and social. A WhatsApp conversation, online classroom, discussion forum, social media post, or collaborative platform is not merely a container for language. Each environment has its own conventions, expectations, restrictions, and forms of participation.

Digital ethnography can therefore ask questions such as:

- How do English learners communicate outside formal classrooms?
- What linguistic resources do multilingual speakers use in digital interaction?
- How do learners move between English and other languages?
- How do platform conventions influence linguistic choices?
- How do participants construct identities through digital language?
- How do learners negotiate formality and informality?
- How are humour, disagreement, politeness, authority, and solidarity communicated online?

- How do multimodal resources contribute to meaning-making?

Such questions can substantially enrich ELT research because they position language learning within the everyday communicative practices of learners.

The digital ethnographic approach also encourages methodological reflexivity. Hine (2013) notes that digital methods create opportunities for researchers to interrogate their own methodological assumptions. This is crucial because neither online nor offline environments can automatically be treated as transparent representations of authentic behaviour. Let us consider classroom observation: a researcher observing learners may assume that the classroom provides direct access to their ordinary language use. Yet learners may modify their behaviour because they know they are being observed. Digital recording introduces a comparable problem. Participants may speak differently when they know that interactions are being recorded or archived. Varis (2020) therefore emphasizes that online and offline spaces should be treated as social spaces with their own practices and normativities. The distinction between “real” and “digital” communication is consequently less useful than an approach that examines how particular environments shape communicative action.

For ELT, this has an important pedagogical implication: learners can themselves become researchers of language. Rather than receiving language data exclusively from textbooks, learners can investigate real communicative practices, subject to appropriate ethical safeguards. They can collect publicly available examples, categorize linguistic patterns, examine multimodal features, and reflect upon the relationship between language and context.

5. Digital Humanities and English Language Teaching

As discussed above, Digital Humanities (DH) uses computational and digital methods to examine language, literature, culture, texts, and data. Digital pedagogy, on the other hand, is largely concerned with the integration of digital technologies into teaching and learning processes. The integration of DH and digital pedagogy in ELT can be understood through several possibilities where the two have complementary yet distinct roles. Some of these are discussed below.

5.1 Corpus-based language learning

An immediate connect may be corpus linguistics. Digital corpora enable learners to investigate authentic language use rather than relying exclusively on prescriptive examples. Students can examine frequency, collocation, grammatical patterns, lexical bundles, discourse markers, and register. Such activities can transform grammar and vocabulary learning. Instead of presenting language as a collection of rules, teachers can encourage learners to investigate patterns inductively. A learner may discover how a particular verb behaves across contexts or compare its use in academic writing, conversation, journalism, and informal digital communication. It is an approach that also promotes learner autonomy. Learners are not simply consuming linguistic information supplied by the teacher; they are participating in the production and interpretation of evidence.

5.2 Digital archives and literary-linguistic learning

Digitized archives provide another important resource. Digital collections can bring together manuscripts, literary works, newspapers, photographs, historical documents, recordings, and other materials. Such archives can be particularly valuable in multilingual and postcolonial contexts because they can expose learners to diverse forms of English and to historical interactions among languages and cultures.

For students in India, digital archives can also provide opportunities to explore the relationship between English and Indian languages, literature, colonial histories, regional cultures, migration, and multilingual identities. Projects such as the *Bichitra Online Tagore Variorium*, the Allama Iqbal Urdu Cyber Library, the Digital Himalaya project, and the 1947 Partition Archive illustrate how digital environments can preserve and make accessible cultural materials that might otherwise remain dispersed. The pedagogical value of these resources lies not merely in their availability. Teachers can design inquiry-based activities in which students investigate how language, culture, memory, and identity intersect. A historical newspaper archive, for example, can become a site for examining vocabulary, discourse, representation, colonial ideology, or changing varieties of English.

5.3 Multimodal language learning

Digital Humanities also expands the concept of the text. Video corpora and multimodal archives allow students to study spoken interactions together with gestures, gaze, posture, prosody, facial expressions, and other semiotic resources. This has direct relevance to language teaching. It may help to cite a study to illustrate this point: Ajeesh and Rukmini (2021) discuss the impact of integrating digital, “hyperreal,” literary materials with Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) in an engineering college in India. They undertook a qualitative and empirical study involving 150 undergraduate students of engineering who were given two assignments which involved science fiction movies and hyperreal literature combined with CALL. The authors locate their work in relation to the growth of DH and technology in English language classrooms to argue for the integration of technology, literary materials, language learning in order to favourably impact student outcomes. They point out, in their discussion of students’ perceptions of technology and multimedia in language classrooms, that instead of considering technology as a functional tool, it may need to be reconsidered as a critical tool in language classrooms. While more work on the possibilities of interactions between the two domains is needed, it may nonetheless be argued that DH in ELT classrooms may benefit learners understand how meaning is constructed beyond words. A request, disagreement, apology, or expression of irony may depend on intonation, gesture, facial expression, or the relationship between speech and visual context. Digital pedagogy could thus encourage a more comprehensive understanding of communicative competence.

5.4 Collaborative knowledge production

A significant feature of DH is its collaborative orientation. Digital projects frequently bring together teachers, learners, researchers, librarians, archivists, programmers, designers, community members, and cultural institutions. Such a collaborative model challenges the

conventional distinction between the teacher as knowledge provider and the learner as knowledge recipient.

Learners may collectively create a digital archive, annotate texts, develop a corpus, document oral histories, produce a digital exhibition, map linguistic landscapes, or construct a multimedia project. A DH classroom can thus function as a small research laboratory or studio in which learners contribute to the creation, organization, analysis, and presentation of knowledge. Moreover, such activities may help develop linguistic abilities alongside research, technological, collaborative, and critical skills.

6. Beyond ICT skills: Digital literacy and digital *Bildung*

It is tempting to equate DH with digital literacy or ICT competence. However, the distinction is important: an ability to operate a particular software does not necessarily mean one understands the cultural and epistemological implications of digital technologies.

Berry (2012) argues for reconsidering what reading and writing mean in a computational age. Earlier concepts such as information literacy and digital literacy sometimes retained assumptions inherited from the literary model of the university, while emphasizing technological competence and employability. A more critical conception of digital education requires learners to understand how computation itself structures knowledge. This may be described as a form of critical digital *Bildung*: an education that enables individuals to understand, question, interpret, and participate in a world of digital culture.

This idea of digital competence in the domain of ELT should involve more than knowing how to use presentation software, learning-management systems, or online dictionaries.

Researchers need to be able to ask:

- Who produced this digital resource?
- What assumptions are built into its design?
- What data does it use?
- Whose language is represented?
- Which varieties of English are privileged?
- What forms of communication are excluded?
- How does an algorithm classify or rank information?
- What happens to linguistic data once it is collected?
- Who has access to the resulting knowledge?

Such questions would turn digital pedagogy into critical pedagogy.

7. From consumers to producers: A DH Model for ELT

One of the strongest pedagogical implications of DH is its emphasis on production. Instead of using technology merely to deliver pre-existing content, learners can participate in creating digital knowledge. A DH-oriented ELT course could, for example, include a semester-long project in which students document aspects of contemporary language use. They might collect publicly available examples of English from digital environments, develop categories for

analysis, annotate selected examples, identify linguistic patterns, and present their findings through a digital exhibition or report.

Another project could involve oral history. Researchers could interview members of their communities about language, migration, education, work, or cultural change, subject to informed consent and appropriate ethical procedures. Recordings could be transcribed, translated where necessary, annotated, and contextualized. The resulting collection would function simultaneously as a language-learning activity and a cultural archive.

Yet one more possibility is linguistic landscape research. Researchers could document English and other languages appearing on signs, advertisements, public notices, transport systems, educational institutions, and commercial spaces. They could analyse patterns of multilingualism and consider questions of audience, identity, power, and language policy.

Such activities encourage students to develop several forms of competence simultaneously:

- linguistic competence;
- communicative competence;
- research competence;
- digital competence;
- multimodal competence;
- critical thinking;
- collaborative skills; and
- cultural awareness.

The teacher's role also changes. Rather than functioning exclusively as a transmitter of linguistic knowledge, the teacher becomes a facilitator, researcher, editor, curator, and methodological guide.

8. Ethics, privacy, and the digital classroom

The use of digital data in ELT also creates ethical responsibilities. Digital ethnography, corpus construction, recording, and online observation can involve personal information and potentially sensitive communication. The fact that information is technically accessible does not automatically mean that it is ethically appropriate to collect, reproduce, or publish it. Teachers and researchers must therefore distinguish between public availability and ethical consent. This is especially important when working with learners, who may inadvertently disclose personal information while producing digital materials. Audio and video recordings may capture identifiable individuals. Online interactions may contain information that participants did not expect to become part of an educational archive.

A responsible DH pedagogy should therefore include instruction in:

- informed consent;
- anonymization;
- privacy;
- responsible data storage;
- copyright;

- attribution;
- ethical use of online material; and
- community ownership of cultural records.

These are not merely administrative concerns. They are part of digital literacy itself.

9. Sustainability and the future of Digital Humanities in ELT

Another challenge concerns sustainability. Digital projects often require continuing maintenance, server space, software updates, metadata management, institutional support, and preservation strategies. A project may be innovative when launched but become inaccessible if its technological infrastructure is not maintained. This problem raises an important distinction between producing a digital resource and sustaining a digital knowledge environment. For ELT institutions, small-scale sustainable projects may sometimes be preferable to ambitious projects that cannot be maintained. Open standards, institutional repositories, interoperable formats, and careful documentation can contribute to longevity.

Sustainability also has a pedagogical dimension. Learners need to bear in mind that digital knowledge is not immaterial. Servers, storage systems, networks, devices, labour, electricity, and institutional infrastructures all support digital environments.

Thus, a mature DH pedagogy should address not only what digital technology enables but also the material conditions upon which it depends.

10. Toward a critical and collaborative model of Digital ELT

The discussion so far suggests that DH can contribute to ELT most effectively when it is understood as a layered practice rather than a technological package. At a first layer, digital tools provide efficiency: search engines, databases, corpora, transcription systems, archives, and other resources make information more accessible.

At the second layer, digital technologies enable new methodologies. Large-scale corpus analysis, multimodal research, visualization, digital mapping, and digital ethnography allow researchers to ask questions that would otherwise be difficult to investigate. At the third layer, digital environments become objects of study. Students can examine how language itself operates in social media, online communities, digital classrooms, and other technologically mediated spaces. At the fourth layer, DH becomes a critical practice. Learners and teachers interrogate the assumptions, values, exclusions, inequalities, and power relations embedded within digital systems. Finally, at the fifth layer, DH becomes collaborative and public. Knowledge is produced with and for communities rather than exclusively within academic institutions.

This layered model corresponds with the development of DH from quantitative computation towards qualitative, interpretive, experiential, and generative practices. It also reflects Gold and Klein's (2019) argument that Digital Humanities has an orientation towards the world beyond the academy. For ELT, the implications are substantial. Language education can become connected to cultural institutions, archives, community organizations, libraries,

digital humanities centres, and public-facing projects. Students can become researchers and knowledge producers whose work has audiences beyond the classroom.

11. Conclusion: Infrastructure, access, and the pragmatics of DH

The word “possibilities” in the context of Digital Humanities, as suggested through the discussion above, needs to be balanced by “pragmatics.” On the one hand are the challenges of infrastructure; however, access alone may not guarantee meaningful participation. It also requires further support as well as social and cultural familiarity with technology. Hence, DH-based ELT needs to be designed around realistic institutional conditions.

A pragmatic model might adopt several principles:

1. Use accessible technologies wherever possible.
2. Avoid designing pedagogy around expensive proprietary platforms.
3. Provide alternative offline or low-bandwidth activities.
4. Recognize multilingual digital practices rather than assuming English-only participation.
5. Develop teacher training alongside technological infrastructure.
6. Teach critical digital literacy rather than merely technical operation.
7. Build institutional partnerships with libraries, archives, and cultural organizations.
8. Treat learners as contributors to knowledge rather than passive users of technology.

Thus, a pragmatic, critical approach would take into account the material and local conditions under which projects must operate.

In the field of English Language Teaching, it may also allow for a movement from language learning as the acquisition of a predefined linguistic system towards language education as participation in situated communicative, cultural, and knowledge-making practices. Learners may read texts and at the same time build corpora. They could analyse language, but they can also collect and curate linguistic data. They could be consumers of archives, but they can also contribute to them. They may learn to use digital tools, but they can also question the assumptions embedded in those tools. Digital Humanities thus offers ELT not merely a new collection of technologies but a new intellectual possibility: to rethink what counts as a text, what counts as language, who counts as a producer of knowledge, and what it means to read, write, communicate, and learn English in a computational age.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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