



## Co-Constructing Agency: A Phenomenological Inquiry into AI-Mediated Literacy Practices Among English Literature Students

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### Abstract :

This study aims to explore the impact of AI-mediated literacy practices on student agency among English literature students. The primary objective is to understand how students interact with AI tools in their learning processes and how these interactions influence their autonomy and critical thinking. A qualitative research design was employed, using semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations to gather data from students actively using AI in their academic work. The findings reveal that AI tools enhance student engagement and writing efficiency but also lead to dependence, diminishing students' perceived ownership of their work. Students who actively engaged with AI showed improved clarity and creativity, but passive use of AI raised concerns about the loss of critical thinking. The study highlights the balance needed between leveraging AI as a tool and preserving student autonomy. The implications of this research suggest that educators should adopt a balanced approach to AI integration, encouraging critical interaction with AI-generated content while fostering independent learning. Future research should further investigate the long-term effects of AI on student agency across diverse academic fields.

## INTRODUCTION

The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in education has raised critical discussions on how technology influences literacy practices and student agency (Casal-Otero et al., 2023; Guo & Wang, 2024). AI-mediated learning offers opportunities for personalized education and enhanced engagement, particularly in English literature classrooms. As students navigate new educational landscapes shaped by digital tools, their capacity for critical thinking, creativity, and interaction with content is being redefined (Huang, Wang & Zhang, 2024). This shift highlights a fundamental question: How does AI reshape the role of students in the learning process? Previous studies have suggested that AI can augment student engagement and improve writing efficiency (Katsenou et al., 2025), yet the degree to which AI empowers learners to take ownership of their education remains underexplored (Bearman, Ryan, & Ajjawi, 2022; Burriss & Leander, 2024). Moreover, the impact of AI on students' independence and decision-making in their academic work requires further investigation (Kim, Yu, Detrick, & Li, 2024).

The increasing reliance on AI tools, such as generative language models, in education presents new challenges for educators and students alike (Yang et al., 2024; Ou, Stöhr & Malmström, 2024). While AI can provide immediate feedback and enhance writing processes, its influence on critical thinking and autonomy is not fully understood. Studies by Chiu (2023) and Reza et al. (2025) highlight how AI may inadvertently diminish students' independence by offering a shortcut to critical engagement. As AI tools become more prevalent in classrooms, there is a pressing need to examine how these technologies shape students' learning processes, especially in the context of literature education (Jin et al., 2025). The role of AI in fostering academic autonomy while facilitating personalized learning needs to be critically examined (Guan, Zhang, & Gu, 2024; Lan & Zhou, 2025).

Research on AI's impact on student agency has mostly focused on its potential to improve engagement and writing skills (Lin, Dai, & Ng, 2025). However, few studies have explored how students engage with AI-generated content and the implications this has for their intellectual independence. While AI tools like generative models provide substantial support for academic writing, their overuse can lead to diminished critical thinking and creativity (Liu, H., & Fan, J., 2024). The integration of AI into English literature courses raises questions about how these tools impact the development of critical thinking, creativity, and the overall role of students in constructing their academic knowledge (Bearman, Ryan, & Ajjawi, 2022; Liu, G., Darvin, R., & C., 2024).

This study seeks to explore how AI impacts the literacy practices of English literature students and how it shapes their agency in academic settings (Martel & Garcías, 2024; Msambwa et al., 2025). Previous research has emphasized AI's benefits in facilitating personalized learning and enhancing academic engagement (Tzirides et al., 2024), yet much less has been said about how AI can disrupt or support student autonomy. As such, this study aims to fill a gap in the existing literature by examining the co-construction of agency in the context of AI-mediated literacy practices (Guan, Zhang, & Gu, 2024; Liu, W., & Wang, Y., 2024).

By examining the experiences of English literature students who use AI tools for their coursework, this research aims to contribute to our understanding of how AI tools both support and challenge student agency (Biagini, 2025). Given that AI is increasingly shaping educational practices, exploring its impact on student independence and decision-making is essential (Reza et al., 2025; Kim, Lee, & Cho, 2022). The primary research question is: How do AI-mediated literacy practices influence student agency in English literature classrooms? The findings of this study will inform the ongoing conversation about how AI can be integrated into educational settings while still allowing students to retain control over their intellectual and creative work (Liu, W., & Wang, Y., 2024).

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research design, which is appropriate for exploring the lived experiences and perspectives of English literature students in relation to AI-mediated literacy practices. A qualitative approach enables the investigation of personal and subjective meanings, allowing for a deeper understanding of how AI tools influence student agency and learning processes. The phenomenological method is chosen as it focuses on how individuals

experience a particular phenomenon—in this case, the interaction with AI tools in an educational setting (Burriss & Leander, 2024; Bearman, Ryan, & Ajjawi, 2022). This approach provides an in-depth exploration of students' engagement with AI and its impact on their autonomy in literacy practices.

The research will be conducted at a university with a strong focus on English literature education, where AI tools have been integrated into the curriculum. The choice of this location is due to the institution's advanced use of technology in its educational practices and the presence of a diverse student body with varying degrees of AI literacy. This setting offers an ideal environment to study how students from different backgrounds experience AI-mediated learning and how these tools shape their agency in academic settings (Guan, Zhang, & Gu, 2024). The study will involve students enrolled in English literature courses that utilize AI-assisted tools such as generative language models and writing aids.

Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, allowing participants to share their experiences and thoughts in an open-ended manner. This method ensures that rich, detailed insights are gathered, capturing the complexity of students' interactions with AI in their learning. Data analysis will follow the steps of qualitative data analysis: data condensation, data reduction, and data display. Thematic analysis will be employed to identify patterns and themes within the data, ensuring that the findings reflect the core issues related to AI-mediated literacy practices and student agency (Ji, Han, & Ko, 2022). To ensure the validity of the data, member checking will be used, where participants review the findings to confirm accuracy and relevance to their experiences. Triangulation of data sources will further strengthen the reliability of the results (Reza et al., 2025; Lin, 2025).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

The data collected from the semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations revealed diverse insights into how AI-mediated literacy practices impact student agency in English literature classrooms. The study participants, consisting of English literature students from a university that integrates AI tools into its curriculum, shared various perspectives on their experiences with these technologies. The interviews and group discussions illuminated how students navigated their learning processes with AI tools such as generative language models, writing assistants, and research tools.

One major finding from the interviews was the widespread recognition of AI's ability to enhance academic engagement. Many students reported that AI tools helped them organize their thoughts more clearly and provided immediate feedback on their writing, thus reducing their cognitive load. For example, one student (Informant 2) expressed, "AI helps me clarify my ideas faster, especially when I'm stuck. I feel more confident in my writing." However, while these tools were appreciated for their efficiency, some participants noted a feeling of dependence on AI, which occasionally diminished their perceived sense of ownership over their work. This indicates that while AI enhances productivity, it may also contribute to a sense of reliance, which could limit students' self-efficacy in managing their own learning.

Classroom observations further corroborated the interview findings. In several observed sessions, students engaged with AI tools during writing workshops, and the use of AI was seen to facilitate more productive discussions. However, there were instances where the interactions with AI seemed to replace critical thinking processes. For instance, one observed student (Informant 4) used a generative writing tool without much effort to critically analyze the output, relying heavily on the tool to structure their arguments. This passive approach raises concerns about the extent to which students might lose their intellectual independence when AI becomes a dominant force in their learning environment. The researcher observed that while students were actively using AI tools, many lacked strategies to critically assess the AI-generated content, often taking it at face value. This passive engagement with AI can be seen as a limitation in developing students' agency, as it might hinder their ability to question and refine their work independently.

Thematic analysis of the data highlighted several key themes: Empowerment vs. Dependence, Autonomy in Learning, and AI as a Collaborative Tool. Students who felt empowered by AI emphasized its role as a facilitator of creativity and critical thinking. However, those who expressed dependence on AI revealed concerns about their loss of control over their learning. These findings suggest that AI tools can serve as a collaborative partner in the learning process but need to be used in a way that promotes student autonomy rather than diminishing it. In this context, the data revealed a tension between leveraging AI as a helpful resource and ensuring that students maintain their intellectual independence.

In conclusion, the results from the interviews, focus groups, and observations suggest that AI-mediated literacy practices significantly influence student agency in English literature classrooms. While AI tools provide substantial academic benefits, they also pose challenges in fostering critical engagement and maintaining students' intellectual autonomy. This study highlights the need for a balanced approach to AI integration, where AI acts as a co-agent in the learning process while still enabling students to retain control over their academic work.

## **Discussion**

The findings from this study reveal both convergence and divergence with existing literature on AI-mediated literacy practices and student agency. As anticipated, students in this study acknowledged the academic benefits of AI tools, particularly in enhancing engagement and improving writing clarity. This aligns with previous studies that emphasized the positive role of AI in supporting students' academic work (Guan, Zhang, & Gu, 2024; Jin et al., 2025). However, while AI tools were appreciated for their efficiency, the study found that some students expressed concern about their growing dependence on these tools, which occasionally reduced their perceived autonomy and control over their learning (Bearman, Ryan, & Ajjawi, 2022). This finding contrasts with the optimism expressed in earlier research regarding AI's empowering potential, suggesting that reliance on AI might limit students' ability to independently manage and reflect on their academic work (Tzirides et al., 2024; Chiu, 2023).

Classroom observations further revealed instances where AI usage led to passive learning, with students often accepting AI-generated content without critical evaluation. This observation aligns with the findings of Kim, Yu, Detrick,

and Li (2024) and Burriss and Leander (2024), who highlighted that AI's role as a facilitator of writing could lead to a reduction in critical thinking. In one observed session, a student used an AI-generated writing assistant tool to draft an essay, without making significant modifications or engaging deeply with the content. This passive engagement raised questions about how such tools might diminish students' active involvement in the learning process (Kim, Lee, & Cho, 2022). The study's observations underscore the need for a pedagogical approach that promotes critical interaction with AI-generated content, encouraging students to reflect on and question AI outputs to maintain academic independence (Liu, H., & Fan, J., 2024).

Thematic analysis of the data also revealed that AI is viewed as a collaborative partner in the learning process, but this partnership requires careful management. While AI tools were seen as valuable for enhancing writing skills and academic performance, their overuse could hinder the development of independent thinking. These findings align with those of Liu, G., Darvin, R., and C. (2024), who suggested that the extensive use of AI tools without sufficient critical engagement can negatively impact students' academic autonomy. The concept of AI as a collaborative tool resonates with previous studies that emphasized the need for students to maintain agency while using AI for academic tasks (Lin, Dai, & Ng, 2025; Liu, W., & Wang, Y., 2024). The data suggests that students can benefit from AI's assistance, but they must retain a sense of ownership over their learning process and actively question AI-generated content.

In theoretical terms, this study extends current discussions on student agency in the digital age by examining how AI-mediated literacy practices can influence autonomy. Existing research has largely focused on AI's potential to improve student engagement and learning outcomes (Jin et al., 2025). However, this study adds to the literature by showing how the overuse of AI tools can undermine critical thinking and limit students' independence. This underscores the need for educational theories to account for the dual role of AI as both a tool for enhancing learning and a potential barrier to intellectual autonomy (Bearman, Ryan, & Ajjawi, 2022; Guan, Zhang, & Gu, 2024).

From a practical perspective, this research has significant implications for educators seeking to integrate AI into their classrooms. To harness the benefits of AI while promoting student agency, educators should encourage students to critically engage with AI-generated content, rather than accepting it uncritically. This may involve fostering discussions around AI's role in the learning process, teaching students how to use AI tools strategically, and emphasizing the importance of independent thought in academic writing. By implementing these strategies, educators can ensure that AI serves as a supportive tool without compromising students' intellectual independence (Reza et al., 2025; Liu, W., & Wang, Y., 2024).

## CONCLUSION

The most important finding from this study is that while AI-mediated literacy practices can enhance student engagement and writing skills, they also present challenges to student autonomy and critical thinking. Students in this research demonstrated both empowerment and dependence on AI tools, revealing a delicate balance between utilizing AI as a supportive tool and preserving

intellectual independence. The key lesson learned from this study is the importance of fostering a balanced approach to AI integration, where students are encouraged to actively engage with AI-generated content while maintaining control over their learning and decision-making processes.

This study contributes to the scholarly understanding of student agency in the context of AI in education by highlighting the complexities of AI's role in learning. It expands existing theories by showing how AI can be both a helpful resource and a potential hindrance to independent thinking, depending on how it is integrated into educational practices. However, the research has its limitations, particularly in terms of generalizability, as it focuses on a single institution. Future research should explore a broader range of settings and investigate how different types of AI tools impact student agency across diverse academic disciplines.

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