Teaching Literature in the Age of Artificial Intelligence: Student Perceptions and Pedagogical Pathways for Interpretation and Critical Thinking

Waris Singh, Assistant Professor, MM College, Fatehabad

Abstract

The increasing presence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in higher education has transformed pedagogical practices in language and literature classrooms. While conceptual scholarship highlights its potential for enhancing interpretation and communication, empirical classroom-based perspectives remain limited. This study integrates theoretical analysis with student perception data to evaluate AI's role in literary learning. A survey of thirty postgraduate literature students was conducted to examine AI's impact on interpretation, critical thinking, writing development, classroom participation, and ethical awareness. Findings reveal strong student support for AI as a tool for contextual understanding and vocabulary development, alongside concerns regarding overdependence and originality. The study concludes that AI functions most effectively as a cognitive scaffold within human-guided pedagogy rather than as a replacement for traditional literary engagement.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Literary Pedagogy, Student Perception, Critical Thinking, Digital Learning

1. Introduction

The teaching of literature has historically emphasized close reading, interpretative dialogue, and reflective engagement. However, rapid technological advancement has introduced Artificial Intelligence into academic spaces, reshaping the modes through which students interact with texts. AI tools capable of generating contextual explanations, analytical prompts, and structured feedback now influence interpretative processes and communication practices. These developments raise crucial pedagogical questions: Can AI deepen literary interpretation? Does technological assistance enhance or weaken critical thinking? How should educators balance algorithmic support with intellectual autonomy?

This study addresses these concerns by combining conceptual reflection with empirical student feedback. By situating classroom perceptions alongside established pedagogical theory, the research seeks to provide a grounded evaluation of AI's place in literary education.

2. Review of Literature

Research on AI-assisted language learning demonstrates improvements in vocabulary acquisition, writing accuracy, and learner confidence through personalized feedback (Warschauer). Digital humanities scholarship similarly shows that computational tools facilitate thematic mapping and stylistic examination of literary texts.

Scholars have characterized AI as a "cognitive scaffold" enabling students to explore multiple interpretative possibilities and engage in reflective revision. Such support aligns with dialogic pedagogies that encourage participatory learning environments.

However, critical perspectives caution against technological determinism. Selwyn argues that uncritical adoption risks superficial engagement and reduced originality. Literature pedagogy, grounded in ambiguity and subjective meaning-making, requires guided mediation rather than automation.

Thus, existing scholarship highlights both potential and tension — a gap between conceptual advocacy and classroom-based validation that this study attempts to address.

3. Theoretical Framework

The study draws upon four interrelated perspectives:

Constructivist Learning Theory

Knowledge emerges through active engagement. AI enables exploratory interaction, supporting iterative interpretation.

Reader-Response Theory
Meaning is co-created by reader and text. AI introduces interpretative plurality without final closure (Fish).

Communicative Language Teaching
Meaningful communication fosters language competence. AI supports discussion, drafting, and articulation.

Digital Pedagogy
Technology should empower learners ethically and inclusively rather than replace human instruction (Freire).

4. Methodology

Research Design
Mixed conceptual–descriptive design integrating theoretical analysis and perception-based survey data.

Participants
Thirty postgraduate literature students.

Data Collection
Structured Likert-scale questionnaire examining five domains:

- Literary understanding
- Critical thinking
- Writing skills
- Participation
- Ethical awareness

Analysis
Frequency distribution analysis supported by interpretative discussion.

5. Results

5.1 AI and Literary Understanding

Statement	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
AI helps understand complex texts	27	3	0
Clarifies themes and symbols	30	0	0
Encourages multiple interpretations	24	6	0
Connects texts to context	30	0	0

Observation:
Students overwhelmingly view AI as beneficial for comprehension and contextualization, reinforcing theoretical claims regarding interpretative scaffolding.

5.2 Critical Thinking and Engagement

Statement	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Encourages critical thinking	21	9	0
Compare AI with own interpretation	27	0	3
Helps frame analytical questions	30	0	0
Builds confidence in opinions	27	0	3
Excessive use reduces deep reading	27	0	3

Observation:
AI fosters analytical engagement but students remain conscious of dependency risks, indicating reflective use rather than blind acceptance.

5.3 Writing and Communication Skills

Statement	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Improves writing skills	15	12	3
Helps essay organization	24	3	3
Improves vocabulary	30	0	0
Builds discussion confidence	24	3	3
Enhances clarity of expression	27	0	3

Observation:

Vocabulary development shows strongest impact, while structural writing improvement remains moderate.

5.4 Classroom Participation and Inclusivity

Statement	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Makes classes interactive	30	0	0
Encourages participation	21	0	9
Supports diverse learning styles	27	3	0

Observation:

AI promotes engagement but not uniformly across learners, highlighting pedagogical variability.

5.5 Ethical Awareness

Statement	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Teacher guidance essential	27	0	3
Overdependence harms originality	27	0	3
Encourages plagiarism risk	27	0	3
Aware of ethical guidelines	24	0	6
Institutional policy needed	30	0	0
AI should not replace teachers	30	0	0

Observation:

Students strongly position AI as supportive rather than substitutive, demonstrating ethical awareness.

6. Discussion

The empirical findings reinforce conceptual assumptions regarding AI's pedagogical utility. Students acknowledge AI's effectiveness in facilitating comprehension, vocabulary development, and contextual understanding. These outcomes align with constructivist and communicative frameworks emphasizing exploratory interaction and dialogue-based learning. Simultaneously, concerns regarding originality, dependency, and plagiarism validate critical perspectives within the literature. Such tensions highlight the necessity of guided integration. The data therefore suggests that AI functions most productively as an interpretative companion — not an authoritative voice — within human-centered pedagogy.

7. Pedagogical Implications

- Integration of AI literacy modules in literature curricula
- Reflective assignments comparing human and AI interpretation
- Process-oriented assessment emphasizing originality
- Institutional ethical guidelines
- Teacher training in mediated technological facilitation

8. Conclusion

Artificial Intelligence is reshaping literary pedagogy by expanding interpretative access and communicative confidence. Survey findings confirm its pedagogical value while emphasizing the indispensability of human guidance. Balanced integration — combining technological affordances with humanistic inquiry — offers the most sustainable future for literature education.

References

Bloom, Benjamin. *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*. Longman, 1956.

Fish, Stanley. *Is There a Text in This Class?* Harvard UP, 1980.

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Continuum, 1970.

Kumaravadivelu, B. *Understanding Language Teaching*. Lawrence Erlbaum, 2006.

Selwyn, Neil. *Should Robots Replace Teachers?* Polity, 2019.

Warschauer, Mark. *Technology and Social Inclusion*. MIT Press, 2004.