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**| RESEARCH ARTICLE**

# Creative Catalyst or Cognitive Crutch? Moroccan EFL University Students' Perceptions of AI in Guided Reading

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**| ABSTRACT**
This paper explores the perceptions of Moroccan EFL university students regarding the adoption of AI as a cognitive partner in guided reading classes. The researcher examines whether AI tools, particularly ChatGPT, enhance or erode student's divergent thinking skills. A qualitative methodology was employed, using semi-structured interviews, to gather in-depth insights of 60 Moroccan EFL university students who have attended guided reading classes at the Faculty of Languages, Lettres and Art in Kenitra, Morocco. Following the survey, the researcher invited voluntary students for further exploration. 08 volunteers took part in a focus group interview to discuss their perceptions and perspectives in detail. The findings of the study indicate that students' perceptions regarding AI tools were favourable in terms of Creativity and Idea Generation, and Cognitive Support and Metacognition. However, some challenges are unavoidable when employing these tools, resulting from factors like Cultural and Literary Interpretation, and Ethical Awareness and Trust. In sum, this study contributes to the growing discourse on AI in EFL higher education by highlighting how AI can function as a cognitive partner in guided reading when its use is pedagogically guided, culturally sensitive, and critically framed.

**| KEYWORDS**

Artificial Intelligence; Guided Reading; Literary Analysis; Divergent Thinking; EFL Learners; Student Perceptions

**| ARTICLE INFORMATION**

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past decades, the academic spheres have witnessed successive waves of technological advances. Across the globe, early scholarly debates surrounding the implementation technological innovations and devices, and their transformative impact on the field of education, have gradually lost momentum. The central discussion has shifted to how artificial intelligence can be leveraged to transform teaching and learning. As AI becomes increasingly integrated into classrooms, it has caused excitement and scepticism, and affected how students learn, create, and solve problems (Slade, 2025 ; Bello, 2025; Crompton et al., 2022; Feng & Law, 2021 ; Alam, 2021). For instance, ChatGPT increasingly serves as a cognitive partner that supports Learners brainstorming, writing, and ideation tasks (Livberber & Ayvaz, 2023). While AI tools offer powerful opportunities for creativity, they also raise concerns about cognitive dependency and the potential erosion of divergent thinking skills, that is the ability to generate multiple, original ideas in response to open-ended problems. In this light, Alasadi & Baiz, (2023) Raise concerns including over-reliance, lack of critical thinking, and academic integrity these concerns suggest that while students may find AI helpful for comprehension and idea generation, they may also be cautious about trusting its output or relying on it too heavily. Although interest in AI-assisted learning is growing, empirical research investigating the impact of AI on divergent thinking, which is a fundamental aspect of creativity, remains limited. Existing studies (e.g. Azennoud, 2024 ; Lahoual et.all, 2025) predominantly address academic performance or productivity, rather than examining the deeper cognitive effects of collaboration with AI. Accordingly, this study examines Moroccan first-year EFL university students' perceptions of AI in higher education, focusing on its helpfulness in divergent thinking tasks, the difficulties or limitations students encounter, its impact on

creativity and idea generation, and students' recommendations for improving AI integration in learning activities, specifically in guided reading classes. This study brings to light students' perceptions of AI's role in the learning experience.It seeks to determine whether engaging with AI as a cognitive partner enhances or diminishes students' divergent thinking abilities in guided reading classes. The research explores how interacting with AI, whether working alongside it (i.e. collaborative) or relying on it to take over tasks (i.e. substitutive) affects students' creativity, originality, and problem-solving skills.
Therefore, the researcher addresses the following research questions :
(1) how does interaction with AI as a cognitive partner influence students' divergent thinking skills ?
(2) what patterns of AI use (i.e. collaborative versus substitutive) are associated with stronger or weaker creative outcomes ?
(3) how do students perceive the cognitive benefits and drawbacks of using AI in divergent thinking tasks ?
(4) what pedagogical strategies can optimize AI's role in enhancing, rather than diminishing, students' creativity?

## 2. Literature Review

Artificial Intelligence (AI) refers to the branch in computer science that focuses on creating systems and machines capable of doing tasks that would otherwise require human intelligence. This includes a focus on designing intelligent agents that can sense their environment, learn from experience, reason about the environment they are in and to be able to act purposefully to achieve specific goals (Russell & Norvig, 2009; Poole & Mackworth, 2010). More than just problem-solving, AI involves the simulation of human thought processes, particularly reasoning, decision making, perception and language use via computational means (Coppin 2004 ; Wardat et al., 2023). Collectively, these views confirm that AI represents an extended form of human intelligence in machines. This echoes with Andy Clark and David Chalmers' groundbreaking 1998 paper "The Extended Mind" that indeed revolutionized how we think about cognition. They argue that cognitive processes aren't confined to the boundaries of our skull but can extend into the external world through tools and technologies. This perspective is particularly relevant to understanding AI's role in human cognition. The 1997 victory of IBM's Deep Blue over Garry Kasparov was indeed a pivotal "plot twist" that demonstrated AI's potential. This event was significant because it marked a public awakening to the potential of artificial intelligence, while simultaneously dispelling the long-held belief that chess represented the pinnacle of human intellectual achievement.
Therefore, Cognition is not limited to the mind alone, it can extend into the world around us through our interactions with tools, technologies, and environments.

### Artificial Intelligence in Applied Linguistics

From an applied linguistics perspective, AI is increasingly viewed as a language mediator rather than a replacement for human instruction. Sociocultural approaches to language learning emphasize the role of tools in mediating cognitive activity, and AI can function as such a tool by prompting reflection, offering alternative perspectives, and supporting idea generation (Vygotsky, 1978). This mediational role aligns with the concept of AI as a cognitive partner that supports learners' engagement in complex tasks such as divergent thinking and literary interpretation.
Research (e.g. Almogren et al., 2024) has highlighted several benefits of AI-mediated language learning, including personalization, scaffolding, and immediate feedback. AI tools can adapt to learners' proficiency levels and provide support tailored to individual needs, which is particularly valuable in heterogeneous classrooms (Godwin-Jones, 2018). Moreover, AI-generated feedback can encourage learner autonomy and metacognitive awareness by prompting students to reflect on their language use and thinking processes.
Despite these advantages, scholars have also raised important concerns regarding the limitations of AI in language education. Issues related to accuracy and reliability remain significant, as AI-generated responses may contain factual errors or culturally inappropriate interpretations (Bender et al., 2021). Additionally, excessive reliance on AI may reduce opportunities for independent thinking and meaningful interaction, potentially undermining learners' cognitive engagement. Ethical concerns, including data privacy, academic integrity, and responsible use, further complicate the integration of AI into language classrooms ( Liu & Zhao 2025).
In light of these considerations, applied linguistics research increasingly emphasizes the importance of guided and critical use of AI in language learning contexts. Rather than positioning AI as a substitute for teachers, recent studies advocate for its use as a supportive cognitive partner that complements pedagogical goals and teacher mediation. This perspective aligns with the present study, which investigates students' perceptions of AI in guided reading classes, espetially how it is viewed by students when used in divergent thinking tasks. That said, how AI can support idea generation while preserving learners' critical, creative, and culturally informed interpretation.
The evolution of AI in language learning highlights the potential of technology to act as a cognitive partner that supports language development, scaffolds learner thinking, and provides adaptive feedback (Beatty, 2013; Heift & Schulze, 2007; Liu, G. L., & Zhao, X. (2025).). While these tools offer new opportunities for interaction and personalized support, their effectiveness ultimately depends on how learners engage cognitively with the tasks they are asked to perform. In this context, divergent thinking emerges as a crucial aspect of language learning, as it involves generating multiple ideas, exploring alternative interpretations, and exercising creativity in expressing meaning (Guilford, 1967; Maley & Peachey, 2015). AI can potentially enhance divergent thinking by offering prompts, expanding ideas, and encouraging exploration, but its role must be carefully considered to ensure learners remain active

participants rather than passive recipients of information. This transition underscores the need to examine not only AI's technical capabilities but also its cognitive impact on learners' creativity and idea generation during language tasks.

Previous research on Moroccan EFL learners showed that students use a range of AI tools (from language learning apps to AI-powered writing assistants) and have diverse perceptions of their usefulness in learning English. These insights suggest that learners are actively engaging with AI to support language tasks, providing a useful comparison for investigating perceptions of AI in guided reading contexts." Recent research highlights a growing interest in the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Moroccan education, both from the perspectives of learners and educators. Douali et al. (2022) examine the duality of "fears and faiths" associated with AI in learning environments, noting that Moroccan students and teachers are simultaneously optimistic about AI's potential to enhance learning outcomes and cautious about its ethical implications and reliability. This dual perception mirrors the nuanced attitudes that students may hold toward AI in guided reading contexts, particularly in terms of its usefulness, trustworthiness, and support in learning comprehension.

Du Boulay (2023) further highlights the ethical dimensions of AI in education, emphasizing that the implementation of AI tools must consider fairness, transparency, and data privacy. These considerations are especially relevant in Moroccan classrooms, where AI adoption is still emerging and students' perceptions may be shaped by concerns about misuse or inequitable access. Incorporating ethical awareness into guided reading AI tools may therefore influence learners' acceptance and engagement.

Empirical studies in Moroccan contexts also show how adoption and engagement with AI are influenced by social and institutional factors. For example, Elkhatibi et al. (2024) identify that factors such as perceived usefulness, social influence, and facilitating conditions significantly impact the adoption of AI-powered chatbots in the Moroccan banking sector. While this study focuses on the financial sector, its findings can inform educational contexts by highlighting that Moroccan users, students included, consider both practical utility and supportive infrastructure when forming perceptions about AI tools.

Moreover, Fakhar et al. (2024) provide direct evidence from Moroccan educators, demonstrating that teachers generally hold positive attitudes toward AI, even when their knowledge is limited, and that perceptions are influenced by academic level and professional experience. This suggests that students' perceptions of AI in guided reading may also be shaped by the classroom environment, teacher guidance, and the extent to which AI is integrated into familiar learning practices.

When considered together, the previous studies indicate that Moroccan learners' and educators' perceptions of AI are shaped by a combination of optimism, caution, ethical concerns, and practical experience. For guided reading, this implies that students' engagement with AI is likely mediated by both the perceived cognitive benefits of AI tools, such as comprehension support and idea generation, and the broader socio-cultural and institutional context in which these tools are implemented.

**Divergent Thinking in Language Learning**

Divergent thinking refers to the ability to generate multiple, varied, and original ideas in response to open-ended problems and has long been recognized as a core component of creativity (Guilford, 1967). In applied linguistics, divergent thinking is closely linked to language use, as language learning involves meaning construction, interpretation, and flexible expression rather than the reproduction of fixed forms. Research suggests that tasks promoting divergent thinking, such as brainstorming, interpretive discussion, and literary analysis, encourage learners to explore multiple perspectives and develop deeper engagement with texts (Maley & Peachey, 2015). Within reading instruction, divergent thinking enables learners to move beyond surface comprehension and engage in interpretive processes such as inferring meaning, evaluating characters' motivations, and constructing alternative interpretations.

In EFL contexts, fostering divergent thinking is particularly important, as learners often experience instruction that prioritizes accuracy and correctness over creativity and idea generation (Richards, 2013). Studies have shown that learner-centered tasks that allow for open-ended responses can enhance students' confidence and willingness to express ideas in a second language (Swain, 2006). However, promoting divergent thinking also requires appropriate scaffolding, especially when learners engage with complex literary texts or culturally embedded meanings. Recent research suggests that digital tools, including AI-assisted technologies, may support divergent thinking by offering prompts, alternative viewpoints, and idea expansion opportunities. In the same vein, Abulibdeh, Zaidan, and Abulibdeh (2024) emphasize the importance of aligning the use of artificial intelligence in education with broader learning goals, including the development of critical thinking, creativity, and lifelong learning skills. Nevertheless, scholars, such as Moustaghfir and Chankob (2025), caution that such tools must be used critically to ensure that learners remain active meaning-makers rather than passive recipients of generated ideas, a concern directly addressed in the present study.

Engaging in divergent thinking is particularly relevant in literary interpretation, where learners must navigate complex texts that often contain symbolic meanings and culturally embedded concepts. EFL learners, in particular, may encounter challenges when attempting to interpret literature that reflects unfamiliar cultural frameworks, requiring both creativity and critical reflection (Richards, 2013 ; Swain, 2006). While AI tools can assist in generating ideas and summarizing content, research indicates that they often struggle with the cultural nuances inherent in literary texts, such as symbols, metaphors, and culturally specific references (Bender et al., 2021 ; Kramsch, 1993). Therefore, examining students' perceptions of AI's ability to support divergent thinking must also consider its limitations in handling culture-bound literary elements. Linking cognitive support and cultural interpretation highlights the dual challenge of fostering creativity and ensuring culturally informed reading, which forms the focus of the present study.

**Cultural Dimensions of Literary Interpretation**

Literary interpretation is deeply shaped by cultural knowledge, values, and social practices, making reading an inherently culture-bound activity. From a critical literacy perspective, meaning is not fixed within a text but constructed through readers' interaction with linguistic, cultural, and ideological contexts (Luke, 2012). In EFL guided reading classes,learners often encounter literary texts that reflect cultural assumptions different from their own, requiring them to interpret symbols, metaphors, and themes that are embedded in specific sociocultural contexts. Hence, developing intercultural competence enables learners to recognize, interpret, and critically evaluate cultural meanings rather than relying solely on literal comprehension.

As a result, effective literary reading in EFL classrooms involves not only linguistic decoding but also culturally informed interpretation and critical reflection.

Symbolism in literary texts poses particular challenges for EFL learners, as symbols often draw on culturally specific histories, beliefs, and social experiences. Studies have shown that learners may struggle to interpret symbolic elements when they lack access to the cultural frameworks that inform those meanings (Kramsch, 1993). While digital tools and AI-assisted technologies can support surface-level comprehension, their capacity to engage with culturally embedded symbolism remains limited. AI systems primarily rely on pattern recognition and probabilistic language generation, which may result in generalized or culturally decontextualized interpretations (Bender et al., 2021). Consequently, AI-generated analyses may overlook nuanced cultural meanings or produce inaccurate interpretations of symbols and characters.

While AI offers valuable support for idea generation and comprehension, its limitations in cultural interpretation and its potential impact on independent thinking warrant careful investigation. This study addresses this gap by exploring students' perceptions of AI as a cognitive partner in guided reading tasks that involve divergent thinking and culturally complex literary analysis.

## 3. Methodology

### *3.1 Participants*

The present work aimed to investigate EFL university student's attitudes towards using AI tools, especially ChatGPT, in guided reading classes. The focus of this work was on first-year students enrolled in the Department of English Studies at the Faculty of Languages, Lettres and Art in Kenitra,Morocco. The study involved 60 first-year EFL students enrolled in guided reading classes. All participants acknowledged using AI tools to enhance their understanding of guided reading tasks. Following the survey, students were invited to volunteer for further exploration of their experiences. Eight students volunteered and participated in a follow-up focus group interview, providing more detailed perspectives on AI use in learning activities.

Participation was voluntary, and students were informed about the purpose of the study, confidentiality of responses, and their right to withdraw at any time. In this regard, the researcher employed seudonyms in transcripts and reporting to ensure anonymity.

### *3.2 Research Design*

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore Moroccan first-year EFL university students' perceptions of AI in guided reading classes. This work specifically examined how interacting with AI, either collaboratively (working alongside AI) or substitutively (relying on AI to complete tasks), affects students' creativity, originality, and problem-solving skills. The researcher selected a qualitative approach to gain in-depth insights into students' experiences. The adopted qualitative research approach allows the identification of patterns, themes, and recommendations for improving AI integration in higher education (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### *3.3 Data Collection Tools*

Data were collected using a qualitative questionnaire and focus group interviews. Firstly, the researcher distributed open-ended questionnaires to all 60 students to capture their initial perceptions of AI use, focusing on its helpfulness, challenges, impact on creativity, and recommendations for improvement. The questionnaire also included brief background questions (gender, level, years of English study, prior AI use) to contextualize responses. Questions were designed to elicit rich,descriptive responses to provide a foundation for deeper exploration during the focus group, enabling thematic analysis of students' experiences.

The second phase was mainly focus group interviews. Eight volunteer students participated in a semi-structured focus group interview, which allowed the researcher to explore themes in greater depth and clarify survey responses. The interview focused on the following key areas :

- Collaborative vs. substitutive AI use
- AI's impact on creativity, originality, and divergent thinking
- Challenges and limitations experienced
- Recommendations for improving AI integration in guided reading tasks

While the semi-structured format provided flexibility to probe participant responses while maintaining alignment with the research objectives, the interview was audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim for thematic analysis.

***Data Analysis***

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved systematically coding and grouping data into patterns and themes. The process included:

Open Coding : Reading transcripts line by line and assigning descriptive codes to meaningful statements.

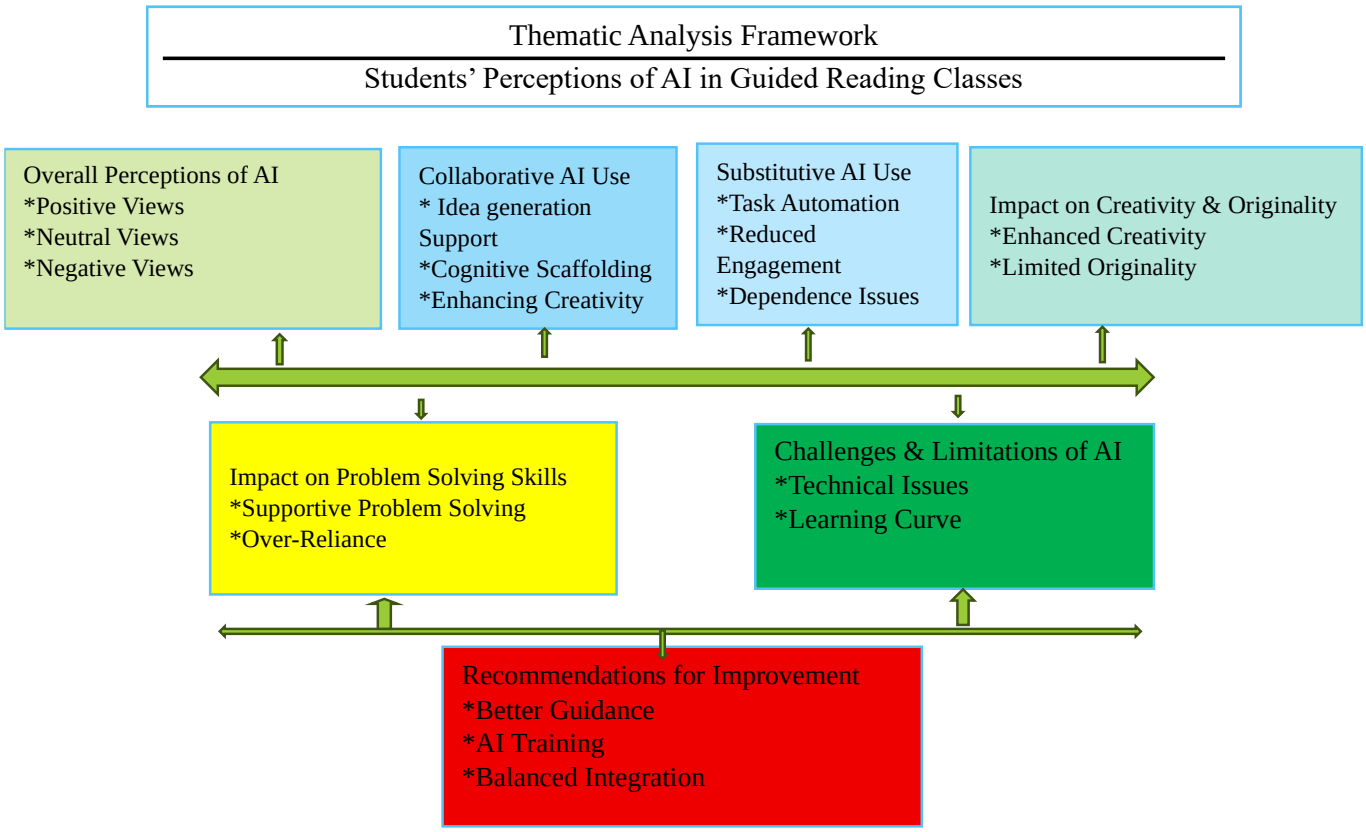
Axial Coding: Grouping similar codes into sub-themes based on common patterns.

Selective Coding: Organizing sub-themes into broader themes aligned with the research objectives.

The thematic framework, shown in Figure 1, highlights the main themes and sub-themes emerging from the data, including:

- Overall perceptions of AI
- Collaborative AI use
- Substitutive AI use
- Impact on creativity and originality
- Impact on problem-solving skills
- Challenges and limitations of AI
- Recommendations for improvement
- Ethical Considerations

*Figure 1: Thematic Analysis Framework*




***Results***

The results were organized thematically to capture students' perceptions of AI use in guided reading and divergent thinking tasks. Themes were identified through a thematic analysis of questionnaire responses and focus group interview data, in accordance with the framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

The thematic analysis of the survey responses and focus group interview revealed seven main themes, reflecting students' perceptions of AI in guided reading classes. The themes highlight students' experiences with AI as a collaborative or substitutive tool, its impact on creativity and problem-solving, the challenges they encountered, and their recommendations for improvement. The results indicated that AI can both enhance and hinder divergent thinking in guided reading classes. Collaborative use generally supports creativity, problem-solving, and engagement, whereas substitutive use may limit originality and understanding,

particularly when AI provides inaccurate or culturally insensitive information. Students emphasized the need for critical use, teacher guidance, and improved AI capabilities to maximize its educational benefits.

As shown in table1 below, the thematic analysis revealed that Moroccan first-year EFL university students hold diverse and sometimes contrasting perceptions of the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in guided reading classes. Students' responses reflected a range of positive, neutral, and negative views. Many participants perceived AI as a useful tool for brainstorming, idea generation, and organizing responses; however, others expressed concerns regarding the accuracy and reliability of AI-generated content, particularly when it provided incorrect character names or omitted important story details. A clear distinction emerged between collaborative and substitutive uses of AI. When used collaboratively, AI was perceived as a supportive cognitive partner that facilitated creativity, divergent thinking, and active engagement. In contrast, substitutive use was associated with reduced cognitive involvement, superficial comprehension, and limited originality, especially when students relied on AI outputs without critical evaluation. Participants also highlighted AI's difficulty in interpreting culturally embedded symbols and context-specific meanings, which constrained its effectiveness in literary analysis

*Table 1: Themes, Sub-Themes and Sample Students quotes*

| Theme | Sub-Theme | Illustrative Student Quotes |
|---|---|---|
| Overall Perceptions of AI | Positive perceptions | "AI helps me quickly come up with ideas for summaries or discussion questions. It makes brainstorming easier." |
| | Neutral perceptions | "Sometimes AI is helpful, but other times I don't trust the answers, so I check them myself." |
| | Negative perceptions | "I noticed that AI gives wrong names for characters or misses important details in the story. I can't fully rely on it." |
| Collaborative AI Use | Idea generation support | "AI suggested possible themes and questions, but I had to decide which ideas made sense for our class discussion." |
| | Cognitive scaffolding | "It helps me organize my thoughts. For example, AI provided outlines for summaries that I could adapt." |
| | Enhancing creativity | "Sometimes AI gives ideas I wouldn't think of myself, which helps me be more original." |
| | Positive engagement | "When I use AI alongside my own thinking, I feel more confident and motivated." |
| Substitutive AI Use | Task automation | "I let AI generate a summary for me, but then I realized I didn't fully understand the story myself." |
| | Reduced engagement | "When AI does most of the work, I stop thinking deeply about the text." |
| | Impact on originality | "Relying on AI sometimes limits my creativity because I just accept its ideas instead of generating my own." |
| | Dependence issues | "If AI gives wrong information, it can mislead me because I relied on it too much." |
| Impact on Creativity and Originality | Enhanced creativity | "AI suggested questions and connections I hadn't considered, which inspired new ways to interpret the story." |
| | Limited originality | "I noticed that AI sometimes repeats generic ideas, and I feel my own thoughts are influenced by it." |
| | Mixed impact | "It can help with brainstorming, but I still need to think critically to make my ideas original." |
| Impact on Problem-Solving / Divergent Thinking | Supportive problem-solving | "AI gave me different ways to summarize the story or explain characters' motives, which helped me consider multiple solutions." |
| | Over-reliance | "When I depend on AI too much, I don't think of alternative interpretations myself." |
| | Cognitive stimulation | "AI challenges me to justify my answers and think more deeply, especially when I notice mistakes." |
| Challenges and Limitations | Technical/reliability issues | "AI sometimes provides wrong names for characters or misses details in the story." |
| | Interpretation limitations | "It struggles to understand symbols and cultural references that are important for the story's meaning." |
| | Overdependence | "I realized that relying too much on AI can reduce my own engagement and understanding." |
| Recommendations for Improvement | Teacher guidance | "Teachers should show us how to use AI critically, not just accept its answers." |
| | Balanced integration | "AI should assist our thinking, not replace it. We need to use it as a partner." |
| | Task-specific adaptation | "AI could be programmed to better recognize cultural symbols and context-specific meanings in stories." |
| | Training for students | "Workshops on effective AI use would help us take advantage of its strengths without relying blindly on it." |

Analysis of the questionnaire data (n = 60) revealed that 63.3% of students perceived AI as helpful in enhancing creativity and idea generation during guided reading tasks. Students reported that AI supported brainstorming and offered alternative perspectives when used collaboratively.

However, concerns regarding AI reliability were also prominent. 48.3% of respondents reported encountering incorrect information, such as wrong names of main characters or inaccurate details related to the story. In addition, a substantial proportion of students (68.3%) indicated that AI failed to accurately interpret symbols and meanings deeply rooted in cultural context, limiting its usefulness for literary analysis.

Percentages in table 2 were used to indicate the prevalence of key perceptions identified in the questionnaire data, while focus group data provided deeper qualitative insights into these perceptions.

*Table 1: Percentages of key perceptions*

| Finding | Percentage |
|---|---|
| AI helps creativity and idea generation | **63.3%** |
| AI provides incorrect information | **48.3%** |
| AI fails to interpret cultural symbols accurately | **68.3%** |

Overall, these findings indicate that AI's influence on creativity, originality, and problem-solving is largely shaped by pedagogical use rather than the technology itself. This complexity underscores the need to examine the instructional implications of AI integration in guided reading, which is addressed in the following Discussion section.

***Discussion***

This study examined Moroccan first-year EFL university students' perceptions of AI use in guided reading classes, with particular attention to creativity, divergent thinking, and the distinction between collaborative and substitutive interactions. The findings reveal that AI's pedagogical value is not inherent but contingent upon how it is integrated into learning tasks, a conclusion that aligns with and extends existing research on AI in higher education.

Consistent with prior research, students in this study perceived AI as most beneficial when used collaboratively, functioning as a cognitive partner rather than a task substitute. Similar to Liu (2025) concept of human–AI co-creation, students reported enhanced idea generation, improved organization of thoughts, and increased engagement when they actively evaluated and adapted AI-generated suggestions. These findings support Loglo & Zawacki-Richter (2023) systematic review, which emphasizes that AI is most effective when it augments human cognition rather than replaces it. This means that AI puts students on the cusp of turning from average to exceptionally performing and fully engaged as it doesn't do the task for them but with them.

In the context of guided reading, collaborative AI use appeared to support divergent thinking, enabling students to explore multiple interpretations and alternative perspectives. This corroborates Darwin et al. (2023), who found that EFL students perceived AI as a useful tool for stimulating critical thinking when accompanied by reflective and evaluative practices. The present study adds to this literature by demonstrating that such benefits extend specifically to literary interpretation tasks, provided students maintain agency over meaning-making.

In contrast, substitutive AI use was associated with diminished engagement, superficial understanding, and reduced originality. Students who relied on AI to complete tasks independently reported disengagement from the reading process, echoing concerns raised by Kasneci et al. (2024), who warn that uncritical reliance on generative AI may undermine deep learning and intellectual autonomy. Similarly, Akgun and Greenhow (2021) caution that excessive dependence on AI can weaken learners' ethical reasoning and cognitive responsibility. These findings also resonate with Alam's (2021) argument that AI should not replace teachers, or by extension, learners' thinking, but should instead be strategically mobilized to support learning processes.

The results suggest that without pedagogical scaffolding, substitutive AI use may impede the development of creativity and problem-solving skills rather than enhance them.

Although a majority of students reported that AI enhanced creativity, the thematic analysis revealed a nuanced picture. While AI introduced novel ideas and perspectives, students also noted that AI-generated responses were sometimes generic or repetitive, influencing their thinking and limiting originality. This concern aligns with Moustaghfir and Chankob (2025), who argue that AI-driven creativity risks becoming standardized if learners uncritically adopt machine-generated outputs. That said, When AI outputs are accepted without interrogation, the learner's role shifts from creator to curator. Thus, AI-driven creativity carries a quiet paradox in that tools meant to expand creativity may, if uncritically embraced, begin to narrow it into something smaller and more predictable

At the same time, the findings corroborate Bello and Aubert's (2025) view that AI can democratize access to ideas and intellectual support, particularly for novice learners. The challenge, therefore, lies in balancing AI's creative affordances with instructional strategies that preserve originality and critical engagement.

A significant contribution of this study lies in highlighting students' awareness of AI's reliability limitations, particularly in literary analysis. Nearly half of the participants reported encountering incorrect information, such as wrong character names, while a larger proportion emphasized AI's inability to interpret culturally embedded symbols and context-specific meanings. These findings extend Kasneci et al.'s (2024) discussion of AI risks by illustrating how inaccuracies and cultural blind spots directly affect learning in humanities-based disciplines.

Zawacki-Richter et al. (2023) similarly note that current AI systems struggle with contextual and cultural sensitivity, an issue that is especially salient in EFL and literary studies. In the Moroccan context, where texts may draw on culturally specific symbolism, AI's limitations underscore the necessity of human interpretation and teacher mediation.

Students' recommendations strongly support a guided and balanced integration of AI, emphasizing teacher support, critical evaluation, and task-specific adaptation. These suggestions align with Abulibdeh et al. (2024), who argue that sustainable AI integration in education requires ethical awareness, pedagogical alignment, and learner training. Likewise, Slade et al. (2025) stress the importance of preparing students to engage critically with AI rather than treating it as an authoritative source.

Taken together, the findings suggest that AI can enhance creativity and divergent thinking in guided reading classes when positioned as a supportive, dialogic tool within a structured pedagogical framework. Without such guidance, however, AI risks fostering dependency, reducing originality, and reinforcing surface-level learning.

Summary of Contribution

This study contributes to the growing body of research on AI in higher education by offering context-specific insights from Moroccan EFL learners and by foregrounding students' own perceptions of AI reliability and cultural limitations. It reinforces the view that AI's educational value depends less on technological sophistication and more on pedagogical design and critical engagement.

**Conclusion**

This study examined Moroccan first-year EFL university students' perceptions of artificial intelligence (AI) in guided reading classes, focusing on its impact on creativity, divergent thinking, and the distinction between collaborative and substitutive use. The findings introduced a three-level framework : AI helps creativity and idea generation, AI provides incorrect information, and AI fails to interpret cultural symbols accurately. Results revealed that AI can serve as a valuable cognitive partner, particularly when integrated collaboratively into learning activities, while substitutive use, where AI completed tasks independently, was associated with reduced originality, superficial understanding, and over-reliance on machine-generated content. Furthermore, the study highlighted reliability and cultural limitations, with students noting instances of incorrect information and AI's inability to interpret culturally embedded symbols, which constrained its effectiveness in literary analysis.

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings imply that effective AI integration requires teacher guidance, and critical engagement by students. AI should function as a supportive tool to initially generate prompts, and serve as an initial stage

This study contributes context-specific insights from Moroccan EFL learners, showing that the educational value of AI depends on instructional design and learner agency rather than the technology itself.

Ultimately, the educational value of AI in guided reading must extend beyond technological novelty to pedagogical responsibility.That said, AI will either amplify students' creative and cognitive capacities or subtly standardize their thinking, and the difference lies in how thoughtfully, critically, and ethically it is embedded within guided reading practices.

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