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AI-Assisted Reading and Interpretive Autonomy in the English Literature Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Digital tools are now common in university literature classes. Students often turn to them for summaries and ready-made interpretations, especially when reading in an EFL context. While these tools make difficult texts less overwhelming, they raise a serious question: when answers are just a click away, do students still learn to form their own interpretations? This article examines that tension. It reviews recent scholarly discussions on digital support in English literature education, focusing on critical reading, confidence, and learner autonomy. The study also reports on a pilot questionnaire involving twenty English literature students to explore how they use AI-assisted tools and how those tools shape their interpretive habits. The responses were analysed using an informal inductive thematic approach to identify recurring views on AI use and learner autonomy. The findings are mixed. Digital tools clearly help: they clarify vocabulary, untangle complex sentences, and keep students engaged with texts they might otherwise abandon. However, when students lean too heavily on automated explanations, something slips away. Without teacher guidance, the effort of building a personal reading can weaken. A balanced approach is essential; tools should not be banned nor used uncritically. They can be genuine supports only if pedagogy consistently pushes students toward their own learner autonomy. Grounded in student reports, this research offers a digital literacy perspective on integrating AI into literary interpretation, ensuring that teaching encourages students to develop their own critical voice.

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1. Introduction

For decades, close reading has been a cornerstone of English literature pedagogy, emphasizing slow, careful attention to language. Students learn to spot patterns of sound and imagery, to think about word choice, and to follow metaphors and allusions through stories, poems, and plays. Close reading builds a habit of mind: students learn to pause when things get hard, to ask what lies under the surface, and to sit with an unsure moment before understanding comes. In most literature seminars, teachers push students to unpack symbols, think about how characters are built, and follow the threads that connect a literary work to its cultural moment. The goal is not just comprehension but the creation of readers who can question an argument, form their own interpretations, and defend those readings with evidence from the text.

The way students actually do this interpretive work, however, has changed quietly. Over the past twenty years, digital tools have become part of everyday academic life. Online dictionaries have replaced heavy reference books; note-taking apps, searchable databases, and websites that summarise or explain literature are now so normal that students hardly think about them. More recently, artificial intelligence has emerged in a much more obvious way. AI platforms can now produce full plot summaries, rephrase passages with difficult or old-fashioned language, clear up unfamiliar historical references, and instantly list the main themes. For students who study English literature in a second or foreign language, where unfamiliar vocabulary, idioms, and cultural references can create real barriers, these tools may lower the sense of difficulty that often comes with first encountering a text, reducing the emotional and mental barriers that sometimes make students give up too soon.

It is easy to miss how fast this shift has happened. A large-scale study by Tyton Partners (2023) found that more than half of university students now actively use AI tools in their coursework. While recent research in educational technology has paid a lot of attention to AI's influence on general writing skills and second-language learning (Godwin-Jones, 2022; Warschauer et al., 2023), its specific role in literary interpretation is still very much understudied. A small but growing body of research has begun to examine the role of AI in literary interpretation, moving beyond concerns with factual comprehension to explore its effects on close reading, interpretive performance, student engagement, and collaborative meaning-making in literature classrooms (Bellot et al., 2025; Dagamseh et al., 2026; Sabdaliyeva et al., 2025; Zhi et al., 2026). However, important questions remain regarding the long-term impact of AI-assisted interpretation on students' independent critical judgment and discipline-specific reading practices. Automated summaries often overlook the unique features of literary texts, where ambiguity, tone, and style do not fit easily into short summaries. While an AI summary can explain what happens in a scene, it often misses the deeper elements of literature—such as how tone and rhythm affect the reader, how a single image connects different parts of a work, or how deliberate ambiguities encourage multiple interpretations.

This tension becomes clearest when thinking about learner autonomy—the ability to direct one's own learning, to check information independently, and to form personal judgments instead of just taking over what an authority hands out. Literary education has always placed a high value on this kind of independence. Making sense of a text is not about pulling out a single correct meaning that a teacher or a machine can give; it is a slow, messy, often frustrating process of building meaning through steady engagement. The difficulty of that process is not an accident; it is central to the intellectual growth that the discipline promises. When AI systems offer ready-made

interpretations at the click of a button, students face a real temptation to avoid the struggle completely. The risk is not that students will cheat deliberately, but that they may become less confident in their own ability to analyse a text without digital help. Studies have shown that overreliance on AI tools can lead to cognitive offloading and reduced critical engagement (Zhai et al., 2024; Gerlich, 2025), and some researchers have identified a pattern of "diminished cognitive effort" in learners who depend too much on AI (Ayasrah et al., 2026). Rather than developing a personal interpretive voice, students risk relying too much on automated tools simply because they offer an easier path.

This study focuses on a central question: how does the growing presence of AI-assisted reading tools affect English literature students' ability to interpret literary texts independently? It specifically examines students studying in a second language, who may rely on AI tools for both linguistic and interpretive support. Given the exploratory nature of the research and the limited existing empirical evidence, no formal hypothesis is proposed. Instead, the study operates on the assumption that AI tools have a dual potential: they can serve as scaffolds that support comprehension and engagement, but they may also weaken interpretive independence if used uncritically. The study therefore adopts a qualitative approach, using a small pilot questionnaire to gather students' reflections on their actual experiences with AI tools. The aim is not to test a hypothesis or to produce generalizable findings, but to explore how students themselves understand the relationship between AI assistance and their own interpretive practices. By analyzing students' lived experiences, this research provides university educators with a practical framework for integrating AI in ways that support, rather than sacrifice, critical thinking and interpretive independence.

While previous studies have examined the effects of AI on general literacy, writing skills, and reading comprehension (Godwin-Jones, 2022; Liu, 2005; Mangen et al., 2013; Warschauer et al., 2023), and more recently its role in literary engagement and performance (Bellot et al., 2025; Sabdaliyeva et al., 2025; Zhi et al., 2026; Dagamseh et al., 2026), several important gaps remain. First, most of this research has focused on measurable outcomes such as comprehension scores or engagement levels, rather than on the interpretive processes themselves—how students engage with ambiguity, tone, and stylistic nuance when AI-generated interpretations are readily available. Second, very few studies have examined AI-assisted literary reading from the perspective of second-language (L2) learners, who face distinct linguistic and cultural challenges. Third, although the importance of teacher guidance has been discussed theoretically (Benson, 2013; Selwyn, 2016), little empirical attention has been given to how students themselves perceive the role of pedagogy in shaping their use of AI. The present study addresses these gaps by investigating L2 literature students' experiences with AI-assisted reading tools and exploring how teaching can support rather than undermine interpretive independence.

Two research questions guide the inquiry:

Research Question 1: How does the use of AI tools influence English literature students' comprehension of literary ambiguity, tone, and nuance?

Research Question 2: How does reliance on AI-generated interpretations affect English literature students' development of interpretive autonomy?

2. Review of Literature

Digital environments reshape literary reading, challenging slow, reflective close reading with rapid access and automated assistance. Liu (2005), Mangen et al. (2013), and Carr (2010) ask whether such tools transform interpretive processes, enhancing accessibility while potentially limiting independent interpretation. Little (1991) defines autonomy as "detachment, critical reflection, decision making, and independent action" (p. 4), concluding that genuine autonomy means taking responsibility for one's own reflective, critical learning.

Early inquiry focused on the reading medium. Liu (2005) found screen reading encouraged browsing, keyword spotting, and selective navigation rather than sustained linear reading, reducing the recursive attention literary analysis requires. Carr (2010) argued the internet encourages rapid processing through scanning and multitasking, weakening deep interpretation: "We are not only what we read. We are how we read" (p. 91). Kress (2010) saw multimodal literacy as an expansion of communicative competence, not a decline. Thomas (2011) found online discussion and annotation strengthen collaborative interpretation. Mangen et al. (2013) showed print readers reconstructed narrative structure better than screen readers, concluding the medium is not cognitively neutral. Benson (2013) argued digital tools strengthen or weaken autonomy depending on pedagogical integration: scaffolding independent learning when used to compare interpretations, but discouraging critical inquiry when supplying ready-made answers.

Beach and O'Brien (2015) found collaborative digital annotation tools encouraged students to record interpretations, respond to peers, and participate more actively in literary discussion, though benefits depended on pedagogical design: without explicit guidance, platforms generated isolated comments rather than sustained dialogue, concluding that technology alone cannot improve literary learning. Greenhow and Lewin (2016) argued online environments expand collaboration and knowledge construction beyond the classroom, but increased accessibility alone does not guarantee meaningful learning; careful pedagogical guidance remains essential to strengthen learner autonomy rather than passive dependence. Selwyn (2016) warned that many digital systems simplify learning by reducing cognitive effort, encouraging passive knowledge consumption and discouraging the productive intellectual struggle through which literary understanding develops, concluding that educational technologies should be evaluated for their influence on independent thinking and critical judgment.

Luckin et al. (2016) argued intelligent technologies reduce learner anxiety, provide immediate feedback, and individualize learning, making AI a valuable assistant for vocabulary, grammar, and language practice—yet literary interpretation demands sensitivity to ambiguity, symbolism, tone, and multiple meanings beyond linguistic accuracy. Wolf (2018) described deep reading as slow, effortful, and requiring tolerance of ambiguity, concluding that automated interpretations should not replace the cognitive effort that constitutes literature's educational purpose. Holmes et al. (2019) found AI can personalize feedback and support learning, but successful integration requires attention to ethics, learner agency, and pedagogy, not technological capability alone.

Tyton Partners (2023, 2024) found generative AI adoption among university students rose from nearly half to more than half within a year, with students valuing its speed and clarity while fearing weakened independent thinking. Sabdaliyeva et al. (2025) found ChatGPT-assisted students produced more coherent, evidence-based literary interpretations than independent workers, but AI worked best as collaborative support rather than a substitute for students' own analytical reasoning.

Bellot et al. (2025) found that AI-generated alternative endings stimulated classroom discussion, increased curiosity about authorial choices, and encouraged analytical comparison, concluding that generative AI enriches literary engagement when its outputs become objects of analysis rather than unquestioned authority. Zhi et al. (2026) showed limited exposure to AI interpretations improved understanding and enjoyment, but greater dependence reduced personal involvement in meaning-making and intrinsic satisfaction, concluding that excessive reliance may undermine independent interpretation. Dagamseh et al. (2026) found students developed stronger critical engagement when guided in prompt design, evaluating AI responses, and reflectively comparing machine-generated and personal interpretations, concluding that generative AI supports literary interpretation only with explicit pedagogical strategies encouraging reflection, evaluation, and learner autonomy.

Taken together, two patterns emerge. Early research focused on physical and cognitive effects of digital reading (Liu, 2005; Mangen et al., 2013), while recent scholarship examines integrating digital and AI tools into literary pedagogy to support engagement, collaboration, and critical thinking (Beach & O'Brien, 2015; Greenhow & Lewin, 2016). Despite growing research on AI in education (Holmes et al., 2019; Luckin et al., 2016), few studies directly examine AI in literature classrooms (Bellot et al., 2025; Sabdaliyeva et al., 2025; Zhi et al., 2026; Dagamseh et al., 2026), and none explore how AI-generated interpretations affect second-language students' interpretive processes or how students perceive the balance between AI support and interpretive autonomy. This study addresses these gaps.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study builds on the idea of learner autonomy. In language education, autonomy does not simply mean studying alone. Little (1991) describes it as the ability to step back, think critically, make decisions, and act independently. Later, Benson (2013) added something important: autonomy is not fixed. It can grow or shrink depending on the learning environment, the tools that learners use, and the way teachers guide them. This matters for the present study because it shifts the question away from "Is AI good or bad?" toward a more useful one: Under what conditions does AI support independent thinking, and under what conditions does it quietly reduce it?

In literature courses, autonomy takes a special form. Understanding a poem, a novel, or a play is not about finding one correct answer. It asks for slow, patient attention to things like unclear meanings, tone, and figurative language. Wolf (2018) calls this "deep reading"—a set of careful mental acts: following a long argument, accepting that you do not understand everything right away, and trying to see the world from another person's point of view. An autonomous literature student does not simply accept an interpretation that a teacher or a machine gives them. Instead, they build their own reading, based on evidence from the text, and they are ready to defend it. This personal "interpretive voice"—the ability to construct, articulate, and defend one's own reading of a text based on textual evidence rather than relying on externally provided interpretations—is a key goal of literature teaching. AI-assisted tools can both threaten this voice and, under the right conditions, help it grow stronger.

To understand this double possibility, the study uses the idea of scaffolding. In education, scaffolding—a concept rooted in Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development—means giving learners temporary support so they can do something that is just beyond their current ability. For example, when an AI tool explains an old or

difficult word, untangles a complex sentence, or gives background about a historical event, it works like a scaffold. It reduces the mental load and helps students stay with a difficult text. In such moments, the tool supports autonomy because it lets learners keep reading long enough to form their own understanding. But scaffolds also carry a risk: if the help is never taken away, it does not create independence. Instead, it creates a new kind of dependence (Hammond, 2014). When ready-made summaries and themes are always just a click away, students may skip the hard, productive work of thinking through a passage on their own. Empirical studies have documented this tendency: research on AI summarisation tools found that students who relied on AI-generated summaries reported feeling less engaged, retained less information, and produced less distinctive work (Melumad & Yun, 2025). A case study of EFL literature students similarly showed that a student used ChatGPT as a substitute for reading the novel itself, memorising AI-generated answers instead of engaging with the text (AlAli, 2025). In critical theory education, researchers have observed that ChatGPT "fostered algorithmic dependence, replacing interpretive struggle with a fluent but uncritical understanding" (Chakraborty et al., 2026). The scaffold then risks turning into a replacement, and over time students may lose the habit of sitting with confusion and trusting their own thoughts.

Recent theoretical work has extended these concerns to generative AI. Panadero and Broadbent (2025) introduce "decremental research"—a framework for investigating not only what AI enables in learning, but also what it may prevent, bypass, or render obsolete. Drawing on cognitive offloading theory, they argue that GenAI tools can displace essential cognitive, affective, and self-regulatory processes, leaving learners less capable of independent thinking. This perspective reinforces Benson's (2013) emphasis on the pedagogical frame: if AI is used uncritically, it does not just support learning—it actively replaces the very processes that literary education is meant to build. The present study adopts this lens to examine how second-language literature students navigate the balance between AI support and interpretive independence.

Taken together, these four concepts—learner autonomy, scaffolding, cognitive offloading, and decremental research—form a coherent framework for understanding the double-edged nature of AI in literary education. Learner autonomy (Little, 1991; Benson, 2013) provides the overarching goal: the capacity for critical, independent judgment. Scaffolding (Hammond, 2014; Vygotsky, 1978) offers the pedagogical mechanism: temporary support that should gradually fade as competence grows. Cognitive offloading describes the psychological process through which learners shift mental effort onto external tools—a process that becomes problematic when it replaces rather than supplements internal reasoning. Decremental research (Panadero & Broadbent, 2025) reframes the question: instead of asking only what AI enables, it asks what AI may prevent, bypass, or render obsolete. Within this unified view, AI tools are acceptable scaffolds only when they support autonomy without encouraging cognitive offloading to the point of dependence. When scaffolds become permanent, they no longer enable autonomy—they undermine it.

To explore this tension clearly, the study follows Benson's (2013) distinction between two kinds of tools. Some tools work as one resource among many—students learn to question them, compare them with other sources, and check them against their own thinking. Other tools become an unquestioned authority. An autonomous learner keeps a critical, questioning relationship with information: they cross-check claims, test AI outputs against the original text, and treat automatically generated suggestions as

temporary ideas, not final truths. So interpretive autonomy is not measured by how often a student avoids AI. It is measured by the quality of thinking students bring to their use of AI: how thoughtfully they prompt, how well they notice mistakes, how carefully they compare answers, and how firmly they hold on to their own judgment.

Benson's (2013) framework shapes the whole study. It explains why the research does not only ask whether AI helps comprehension (Research Question 1) but also how it affects students' interpretive voice and their willingness to build their own meanings (Research Question 2). It also brings attention to the role of teaching. If autonomy grows or shrinks depending on the learning environment, then teachers have a central part to play—by showing students how to prompt thoughtfully, by teaching them how to evaluate AI answers, and by making the use of AI an open topic for discussion. The framework gives a clear, logical foundation for the mixed picture that appears in both the literature review and the pilot responses: AI tools can act as real supports that open up complex literary works, but without a careful, autonomy-focused teaching approach, they risk turning support into dependence.

4. Methods

This study takes a qualitative approach. Its main body is a critical interpretive synthesis of recent scholarly discussions about digital and AI-assisted tools in literature education. The aim is not to test a hypothesis with numbers. Instead, the aim is to examine key tensions recurring in the literature: the conflict between comprehension and interpretive independence, and the divide between support and dependence. These tensions are then framed through the lens of learner autonomy.

Alongside this main work, a small pilot questionnaire was given to a convenience sample of twenty English literature students. The questionnaire was never meant to produce a standalone data set or to support statistical conclusions. It was included as a simple supplementary check: a way to see whether the themes and concerns that emerged from the scholarly literature genuinely resonate with how real learners describe their own experiences. The real argument of the study still rests on the critical review and synthesis; the student responses add a thin layer of lived, first-hand detail, but they do not drive the conclusions.

4-1. Research Design

This study uses a **critical interpretive synthesis (CIS)** approach, a method first introduced by Dixon-Woods et al. (2006) for bringing together different kinds of evidence in a more interpretive way. Unlike a standard systematic review that tries to cover everything, CIS is more flexible. It works through the literature iteratively, questions assumptions, and tries to build theory rather than just summarise. This fits well with the aim of this study: to identify the main tensions in the research on AI and literary interpretation—between comprehension and independence, and between support and dependence—and to connect them to the idea of learner autonomy.

Alongside this synthesis, a small pilot questionnaire was administered to twenty English literature students. The questionnaire was not intended as an independent data source but as a form of triangulation—providing a second layer of evidence to check whether the themes identified in the literature resonate with learners' experiences. By bringing student voices into conversation with the scholarly literature, the questionnaire adds empirical grounding and strengthens the trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln &

Guba, 1985). While the sample is small and the findings are not generalizable, the data offer concrete texture and lived perspective to the analytical argument.

The real backbone of the study remains the critical review and the ideas that come out of it. The questionnaire data simply helps to illustrate and support an argument that was already built on the literature.

4-2. Participants

Twenty students from English literature programs at two comprehensive state universities in Iran (Shahid Bahonar University of Kerman and Valiasr University of Rafsanjan) volunteered for this study. The group included final-year undergraduates and first- or second-year Master's (MA) students, ensuring that all participants had already completed their mandatory coursework in "Literary Criticism" and "Literary Theory."

All participants were native Persian speakers, studying English as a Second Language (L2 learners). This group was chosen because they represent the specific challenge of interpreting complex literary texts while simultaneously using AI tools in a non-native language.

A convenience sample of twenty students was considered appropriate for this study for three main reasons. First, given the exploratory and qualitative nature of the research, the aim was not to produce statistically generalizable findings but to generate in-depth insights into students' experiences and perceptions. In qualitative research, sample size is determined not by statistical power but by the richness of the data and the purpose of the inquiry (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Second, this study is part of a larger critical interpretive synthesis of the literature, and the pilot questionnaire was designed as a supplementary reality check—a way to see whether the themes identified in the scholarly literature actually resonate with real learners. For this purpose, a small but purposeful sample was sufficient to identify patterns and generate hypotheses for future research. Third, the participants were carefully selected from a specific population—L2 literature students who had already completed coursework in Literary Criticism and Theory—which ensured that they possessed the relevant background knowledge to reflect meaningfully on AI-assisted literary interpretation. While the findings are not generalizable, they offer valuable contextual insights that can inform both pedagogical practice and future larger-scale studies.

Table 1

Profile of Participants

Participant Characteristic	**Details**
University Type	Comprehensive State Universities
Native Language	Persian (L2 English Learners)
Academic Level	Final-year Undergraduates; 1st and 2nd-year MA Students
Prior Knowledge	Completed courses in Literary Criticism & Theory
Selection Criteria	Voluntary participation; Active users of AI tools

4-3. Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected via a two-section online questionnaire designed to capture both demographic background and qualitative reflections. Section A (Demographic and Background Information) required participants to specify their level of study (undergraduate, graduate, or other), report the frequency of their digital or AI-based tool usage (ranging from 'never' to 'very often'), and select their most frequently used tool types from a provided list (including dictionary platforms, AI text generators like ChatGPT, summary websites, translation tools, and annotation apps).

Section B comprised six open-ended questions, inviting students to reflect on the influence of AI tools on their interpretative approach. The complete questionnaire is provided in Appendix A. The open-ended questions were designed to align directly with the two research questions, as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Alignment of Open-Ended Questions with Research Questions

Question	Focus	Aligned RQ
Q4	General influence of AI on interpretation	RQ1 & RQ2
Q5	Specific experience of AI affecting engagement	RQ1 & RQ2
Q6	Instructor guidance for maintaining interpretive voice	RQ2
Q7	Challenges or concerns about AI use	RQ1 & RQ2
Q8	Ideal balance between AI support and autonomy	RQ2
Q9	Additional experiences or insights	RQ1 & RQ2

The instrument was intentionally kept concise, framing the tasks as a reflective exercise rather than a formal research assessment, which helped create a more open environment for participant responses.

The questionnaire was developed as an exploratory qualitative instrument for this pilot study. Its items were designed in direct relation to the research questions and informed by the literature on AI-assisted learning, literary interpretation, and learner autonomy. Before administration, the questionnaire was reviewed for clarity and relevance by two researchers familiar with qualitative methods and literature pedagogy to improve its face and content validity. Because the instrument relied primarily on open-ended questions rather than multi-item Likert scales, conventional internal-consistency measures of reliability were not considered fully applicable. Instead, to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings—the qualitative equivalent of reliability and validity—several strategies were employed: a systematic thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006), inductive coding grounded in the data, reflexive journaling during the analysis, and peer debriefing to verify that the emerging themes were rooted in participants' responses rather than researcher preconceptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These procedures align with established practices for ensuring credibility and dependability in qualitative research.

4-4. Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire was shared online, so students could fill it in at a time and place that suited them. A short note accompanied the link. The note explained that the study was about students' learning experiences with digital tools, made it clear that taking part was fully voluntary, and assured everyone that their answers would stay confidential. No course credit, money, or any other reward was offered. This was done on purpose: the aim was to get responses from people who were genuinely interested, not from people who felt they had to take part.

Once the completed questionnaires arrived, they were not treated as a separate dataset that could stand on its own. Instead, they were read alongside the themes already identified in the literature review. When students' descriptions matched those themes, it gave the ideas a layer of real-world weight. When their answers went in a slightly different direction, that was also useful—it brought texture and small counterpoints into the discussion. Descriptive frequencies are reported only for contextual illustration in the Results section, not as generalisable statistics.. The whole point was to let student voices speak into the larger analytical argument, giving it more nuance and a firmer footing in actual classroom experience.

This study was conducted in accordance with standard ethical principles for educational research. As the study involved a non-invasive, anonymous online questionnaire, formal institutional review board (IRB) approval was not required. The research protocol was conducted in accordance with the institutional guidelines for educational research at the participating universities. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were informed of the study's purpose and the confidentiality of their data. Informed consent was obtained through the voluntary submission of the questionnaire, and all data were handled to ensure complete anonymity, with no personally identifiable information collected.

4-5. Data Analysis

The responses to the six open-ended questions from the 20 participants were analyzed using a step-by-step thematic approach based on Braun and Clarke (2006). All responses were read repeatedly, initially coded, grouped into broader themes, and checked against the original responses. The final themes were illustrated with representative quotations. The process was systematic but flexible. First, all responses were read several times to develop a general sense of the data. Then, meaningful parts of the responses—such as comments about AI as a helpful tool, concerns about becoming dependent on it, or ways of staying independent in interpretation—were highlighted and given initial codes. These codes were then grouped into broader themes. The themes were checked again against the original responses to make sure they reflected what the students had actually said. Once the themes were clear, they were named and defined. Finally, the findings were written up, using direct quotes from students to support each theme.

The analysis combined inductive coding with theory-driven interpretation. Initially, codes were generated inductively from the data, without imposing any pre-existing framework. This meant that themes such as "AI as a supportive tool" or "concerns about dependence" emerged directly from what students said. However, once these initial codes were identified, they were examined through the lens of Benson's (2013) framework of learner autonomy, which helped to refine, group, and interpret the emerging themes in relation to the study's theoretical concerns. In practice, this meant

that while the codes were grounded in the data, the final themes were organised and understood in terms of how they reflected or challenged the idea of interpretive autonomy. This combined approach—sometimes described as inductive-deductive or abductive—is common in qualitative research when the aim is to remain open to the data while also drawing on existing theory to make sense of the findings (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

To make the findings more trustworthy, a reflective journal was kept during the analysis, and the emerging themes were also discussed with a colleague to make sure they were grounded in the data rather than only in the researcher's own interpretation.

It should also be noted that the questionnaire was designed in a broad way. The open-ended questions asked about general use of AI tools, instructor guidance, and the ideal balance between support and independent thinking, but they did not directly ask about "ambiguity," "tone," "stylistic nuance," or "interpretive voice." This was a deliberate choice. The aim was to allow students to describe their experiences in their own words, without directing them toward the study's key concepts. The assumption was that if these ideas were important in students' actual experiences, they would appear naturally in the responses. This did happen. For example, when students referred to not knowing what a poem really meant or feeling unsure about hidden meanings, these responses were understood as related to ambiguity. Similarly, when they mentioned losing confidence in their own reading or depending too much on AI to shape their interpretation, these comments were linked to interpretive voice. The analysis identified these patterns and connected them to the study's theoretical framework. At the same time, it is acknowledged that more direct questions might have produced more focused responses. This limitation is acknowledged as a design feature of this exploratory study.

5. Results

The account that follows draws on the pilot questionnaire not as a body of proof in its own right, but as a thin layer of real, first-hand illustration The themes presented below emerged from a systematic thematic analysis of the six open-ended questionnaire responses, following the procedure described in Section 4-5. The analysis identified recurring patterns across participants' answers—such as references to AI as a help or a threat, concerns about dependence, and strategies for staying independent—and grouped these into broader themes. The themes were not pre-selected from the literature; they grew out of the data itself, while still being checked against the study's theoretical interest in learner autonomy (Benson, 2013). What follows is a summary of these themes, illustrated with direct quotations from the students.

To provide a clearer overview of the patterns found in the data, the main themes and sub-themes are summarised in Table 2 below, with sample quotations from students for each category.

Table 3

Main Themes and Sample Student Quotations

Theme	Sub-theme	Sample Quotation	Participant
AI as a Supportive Tool	Decoding difficult language	"AI tools help me understand complicated texts in the area of literary theory in a much more comprehensive way. These tools clarify the nuances of meaning which	P14

		may escape my own understanding."	
		"When I read modern English poems, it's almost impossible to infer hidden interpretations of a short piece of poem, but AI shortens the distance between my mentality and the poet's."	P5
	Reading summaries before the text	"If there's a very long literary work, I use AI to summarize it and it saves time."	P13
		"AI gives outlines, theme lists, or discussion prompts—saving time and sparking deeper analysis while you still read."	P7
Concerns about Dependence	Weakening of independent thinking	"Using AI regularly weakens the ability to understand the texts independently."	P18
		"They lose their capability and faculty of creativity and uniqueness, instead they incessantly resort to AI for the result."	P12
	Fear of losing creativity and originality	"We'll stop thinking and start developing a dependence on a tool that can be taken away from us at any second."	P6
		"New generation use AI a lot and it makes their creative thinking weak. Each person has their own beliefs and ways of interpretation, but if they use AI, these different ideas will be lost and they all think the same way as AI tells them."	P19
Critical Digital Literacy	Cross-checking AI outputs	"I use AI as assistant, and don't trust it for everything. Finally I check the things and decide by my own thinking."	P19
		"I do not trust it for giving a correct analysis of a text (the free version, I mean)."	P2
	Using AI as a starting point, not a final answer	"Use brief, open-ended prompts that ask the AI to suggest ideas or highlight questions, then rewrite or expand those ideas yourself. This keeps your interpretive voice front and center."	P7
		"As a reader, one must first think about that literary work and have his or her own idea and interpretation and then use AI to see other opinions."	P3
Role of the	Guidance on	"The best thing I've learned about	P6

Teacher	prompt design	using AI was during translating courses. Our professor guided us to give proper prompts and ask for the specifics."	
	Using AI as a thinking partner	"Guidance that shows you how to use AI as a thinking partner, not a shortcut, so you can still add your own unique spin to things."	P17
		"Use AI as a tool, not as a source."	P1

Read together with the literature review, these comments echo tensions the scholarship has already named: between better access and interpretive dependency, between confidence and a quiet slide into self-doubt. The sample is too small to carry statistical weight; the responses offer concrete texture rather than numbers.

The twenty volunteers came from different academic levels: eleven graduate students, seven undergraduates, and two "other." Asked how often they used AI tools during literary reading, nearly everyone said at least now and then: eight (40%) "very often," three (15%) "often," four (20%) "sometimes," four (20%) "rarely," and only one (5%) avoided AI altogether. These figures are not generalisable but give a rough contextual picture. Even light users showed awareness that the tools were normal, fitting larger surveys (Tyton Partners, 2023, 2024).

Students described flexible, context-sensitive choices. No single platform dominated. Dictionary apps were mentioned far more than any other resource, lining up with the literature's point that unknown vocabulary is a main hurdle for second-language readers. After dictionaries, AI text generators—ChatGPT most often—were used to unpick tricky syntax or check early interpretations. Translation tools and plot summary websites formed another layer. Together, these choices show students building a personal "digital mosaic"—mixing and matching tools depending on what each text needs. This fits Benson's (2013) autonomy-friendly use of technology: learners actively assemble the tools they need rather than accepting one reading from a machine.

Two main strategies stood out. The first was decoding. Students turned to AI when a passage felt too dense—archaic words, winding sentences, unfamiliar cultural references. One explained: "AI tools help me understand complicated texts in the area of literary theory in a much more comprehensive way. These tools clarify the nuances of meaning which may escape my own understanding" (Participant 14). Another described poetry: "When I read modern English poems, it's almost impossible to infer hidden interpretations of a short piece of poem, but AI shorten the distance between my mentality and the poet's" (Participant 5). Here AI worked as a bridge, reducing the sense of being "lost" that can stop engagement altogether—echoing the access-giving role of technology noted by Warschauer (as discussed in Thomas, 2011) and Kress (2010).

The second strategy was reading AI-generated summaries before opening the real text. Several students first read a broad overview of plot or themes, shrinking the feeling of being overwhelmed and giving a mental map that made close reading easier. One mentioned: "If there's a very long literary work, I use AI to summarize it and it saves time" (Participant 13). Another added that AI "gives outlines, theme lists, or discussion prompts—saving time and sparking deeper analysis while you still read" (Participant 7). Students called these summaries starting points, not final truths, suggesting they do not

feel they are giving up their interpretive say—used with clear purpose, summaries act as supports, not replacements.

Students were not simply cheerful. Several said AI explanations can be wrong or "hallucinated," especially when the tool misreads a literary hint or flattens deliberate ambiguity. Others noticed output shifts with small changes in how a question is asked. Because of this, many described careful cross-checking against lecture notes, peer-reviewed articles, or their own first reading. This points to a critical digital literacy that, if encouraged, could support rather than hurt autonomy—chiming with Selwyn's (2016) point that the teaching frame around a technology decides whether it helps deeper learning or holds it back.

Opinions split as the study's central tension would predict. Of twenty responses, ten (50%) were broadly positive, emphasizing that AI helped them stay engaged. One said: "AI helped me get interested in short stories in English" (Participant 10). Five (25%) were worried that answers always at hand made them less willing to sit with confusing moments. One put it bluntly: "Using AI regularly weakens the ability to understand the texts independently" (Participant 18). Another warned: "We'll stop thinking and start developing a dependence on a tool that can be taken away from us at any second" (Participant 6). The remaining five (25%) were mixed. For the worried group, the "productive struggle" literary education values seemed at risk of being short-circuited by ease—a lived version of the double-sided nature of digital scaffolding.

Across all answers, one idea came through with force: the teacher matters greatly. Students said repeatedly that AI should not work as an invisible, unguided presence. They wanted teachers to show them how to prompt AI thoughtfully, judge the trustworthiness of replies, and check automated claims against the real text. The shared view was that AI can act as a helpful extra scaffold, but only when its use is shaped on purpose by teaching—backing the study's core argument that the pedagogical frame, not the technology, decides whether AI deepens literary engagement or quietly waters it down.

6. Discussion

This study explored how AI-assisted reading tools relate to English literature students' interpretive autonomy, especially among L2 learners. It combined a critical reading of recent scholarship with a small pilot questionnaire, not to generalise but to read student voices alongside theory and draw out teaching tensions.

Both the scholarship and student replies point to the same tension: the AI tools that make difficult literary texts easier to reach also risk weakening the interpretive skills literary study is meant to build. Students often described how AI helped them with archaic words, complex sentences, and unfamiliar cultural references—for L2 readers, the difference between staying with a text and giving up. This lines up with access-focused views in the literature (Liu, 2005; Kress, 2010; Thomas, 2011): the tools act as a bridge into otherwise closed material.

On the other side, replies carry a quieter worry echoing Carr (2010), Selwyn (2016), and Wolf (2018): ready-made explanations always at hand may wear down students' willingness to sit with uncertainty and build trust in their own interpretive voice. Little (1991) and Benson (2013) describe autonomy not as working alone but as making one's own critical judgments. When an AI tool hands over an interpretation that a student accepts without question, that ability is set aside. The danger lies not in the technology itself but in the passive habits that grow around it.

Yet the findings do not let this become an either/or story. Even frequent AI users described keeping critical distance: cross-checking against lecture notes or peer-reviewed articles, treating summaries as starting points, returning to the original text. This fits Benson's (2013) point that technology supports autonomy when used as one resource among several, not as an unquestioned authority. If students already filter critically on their own, the classroom can make that filtering clearer, more open, and more careful.

The most forceful finding is the role of the teacher. Students stressed that AI should not work as an invisible, unguided force; they wanted teachers to show them how to prompt thoughtfully, judge trustworthiness, and check claims against the text. This echoes Beach and O'Brien (2015), who found collaborative annotation worked best with clear teacher shaping, and Selwyn (2016), who held that digital technologies are neither freeing nor limiting in themselves—their effects are shaped by teaching frames. For literature teachers, the question is not whether to allow AI but how to design learning that places it as a support rather than a stand-in.

On Research Question 1—engagement with ambiguity, tone, and nuance—the picture is mixed. Several students found AI flattened complex meanings: one noted it "gave a wrong interpretation and wrong background and story of the poem" (Participant 19); another observed it "has the tendency to make up things" (Participant 15). Yet others used AI to clarify surface-level difficulties and stay with a text long enough to notice deeper layers: "These tools clarify the nuances of meaning which may escape my own understanding" (Participant 14). One warned that "AI struggles with nuance, emotion, and cultural context" (Participant 7). AI can support engagement when students use it to get past linguistic barriers and then return to the text with their own questions; when outputs are treated as final, ambiguity is replaced with certainty. The crucial factor is interpretive awareness, not AI use itself.

On Research Question 2—development of an autonomous interpretive voice—about half expressed confidence they could use AI without losing their voice: "I use AI as assistant, and don't trust it for everything... finally I check the things and decide by my own thinking" (Participant 19); another advised "brief, open-ended prompts that ask the AI to suggest ideas... then rewrite or expand those ideas yourself" (Participant 7). About a quarter worried their voice was weakening: "Using AI regularly weakens the ability to understand the texts independently" (Participant 18); "We'll stop thinking and start developing a dependence on a tool that can be taken away from us at any second" (Participant 6); "if they use AI, these different ideas will be lost and they all think the same way as AI tell them" (Participant 19). Interpretive voice is not automatically lost or preserved; it is shaped by awareness and conscious strategy. The goal is not to keep students away from AI but to build the critical habits that protect their voice.

Critical digital literacy here means using AI outputs as provisional, questionable, revisable resources rather than final authorities—testing them against the original text, comparing sources, and reflecting on how the tool shaped one's reading. This aligns with Selwyn (2016) and Greenhow and Lewin (2016), who show that digital tools support participation when integrated thoughtfully but encourage passivity when used uncritically.

The L2 dimension adds a layer. For L1 readers, AI typically functions as interpretive support; for L2 readers, it is often a comprehension bridge before interpretation can begin. One student explained: "English is not my first language... I copy and paste the sentence and ask for explanation... It's a concept of sorts"

(Participant 6). L2 readers face a two-stage challenge: overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers, then building a personal reading. AI can help with the first but risks taking over the second. One said: "if you use the AI a lot, you are going to be addicted... we are going to be in trouble" (Participant 8); another admitted: "all my brain structures are dependent... Make us lazy and some how stupid for situations and thinking" (Participant 20). The L2 context intensifies both the need for AI and the risk of dependence, pointing to teaching that addresses language-specific and interpretive challenges together.

These findings align with and extend recent work. Sabdaliyeva et al. (2025) found ChatGPT collaboration supported more coherent literary analyses—consistent with roughly half our students using AI supportively. Bellot et al. (2025) reported AI-generated activities enhanced engagement, echoing AI as a "bridge" (Participant 14). But benefits are not automatic; they depend on critical awareness. Zhi et al. (2026) found limited exposure improved close reading while excessive reliance reduced satisfaction—paralleling our quarter of worried students. Dagamseh et al. (2026) showed explicit instruction in prompt design and source evaluation helped students use AI as a thinking partner, aligning with our emphasis on teacher guidance.

Practically, three principles emerge: build tasks that highlight the interpretive path, not just the answer (e.g., reading logs recording when and why students turned to AI); widen critical digital literacy to include self-aware use of generative tools; and make the ethical tensions students already feel a shared, teacher-guided conversation.

Theoretically, the study adds to rethinking learner autonomy in digital settings. Autonomy, as Benson (2013) argues, grows or shrinks depending on tools and structures. What counts most is not how much a student uses AI but the quality of reflective thinking that accompanies that use. A student who turns to AI regularly but questioningly may be practising a real form of autonomy—different from the lone, unaided reader of older literary teaching, but still involving critical judgment and personal ownership of meaning.

The limits are plain: the main work is a critical reading of scholarship; the pilot (twenty participants, many graduate students) is illustrative only; data rely on self-report. Next steps include larger surveys across universities and language levels, qualitative work using interviews or think-aloud tasks, and longitudinal studies tracking whether checking habits grow stronger or fade as AI becomes ordinary.

In closing, AI-assisted reading is best understood not as a replacement for literary interpretation but as a tool whose value depends on how critically students use it. For L2 learners especially, the teacher's role is central: guiding students to use AI for access without letting it substitute for interpretation.

7. Conclusion

This study investigated how AI-assisted tools affect English literature students' engagement with literary ambiguity, tone, and nuance (RQ1), and how they shape the development of an autonomous interpretive voice (RQ2). The findings, drawn from a pilot questionnaire with twenty L2 literature students, provide a mixed but revealing answer to both questions.

Regarding RQ1, AI tools can serve as a helpful bridge into difficult texts, particularly for L2 readers who need support with archaic vocabulary, complex syntax, or unfamiliar cultural references, enabling students to stay with a text long enough to notice its deeper layers. However, when students treated AI-generated explanations as

final interpretations rather than starting points, the tool tended to flatten ambiguity, miss tone, and overlook stylistic nuance—sometimes producing incorrect or misleading readings. The effect of AI on engagement with ambiguity is therefore not fixed; it depends on whether students use the tool as a support or a replacement.

Regarding RQ2, interpretive autonomy is not automatically lost or preserved. Roughly half of the students maintained their interpretive voice by cross-checking AI outputs, treating summaries as provisional guides, and returning to the original text, demonstrating that AI can be used critically without surrendering personal judgment. However, about a quarter expressed concern that regular reliance on AI was quietly weakening their confidence and originality, replacing their own thinking with machine-generated content. The remaining responses were mixed. Interpretive voice thus depends less on AI use itself than on students' critical awareness and the strategies they employ to maintain distance from automated interpretations.

Unlike previous research largely examining AI's effects on comprehension or performance (Bellot et al., 2025; Sabdaliyeva et al., 2025; Zhi et al., 2026), this study shifts focus to L2 literature students' perceptions and strategies. By giving voice to their actual experiences, it reveals that AI's impact on interpretation depends on students' awareness and strategies—and highlights the central role of teacher guidance, a point often discussed theoretically but rarely explored through student voices (Benson, 2013; Selwyn, 2016).

AI-assisted tools are best understood not as a simple threat or solution, but as a pedagogical challenge that must be deliberately managed. For L2 learners, such tools can expand access to literary texts, but they may weaken interpretive independence when machine-generated explanations replace students' own engagement with ambiguity and nuance. Literature teaching must therefore emphasise guided interpretation, critical comparison, and reflective digital judgment. Learner autonomy should no longer be understood as reading in isolation, but as the ability to use digital support critically, selectively, and self-reflectively.

Although exploratory, this study points toward further work: larger surveys to test generalizability, qualitative studies using interviews or think-aloud tasks, longitudinal research to track changes over time, and comparative L1–L2 studies to clarify whether these challenges are specific to second-language contexts. These directions would build on the present findings and help develop more effective pedagogical approaches for integrating AI into literature education without sacrificing interpretive independence.

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Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Disclosure of AI Use in Manuscript Preparation

DeepSeek was used only for language editing while this manuscript was prepared. Every suggestion was checked and adjusted where needed. The author takes full responsibility for the final content.

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Appendix A

Pilot Study Questionnaire: AI Tool Use and Autonomous Literary Interpretation Section **A: Demographic Information**

1. What is your level of study?

☐ Undergraduate

☐ Graduate

☐ Other

2. How often do you use digital or AI-based tools when reading English literary texts?

☐ Never

☐ Rarely

☐ Sometimes

☐ Often

☐ Very often

3. Which types of tools do you use most frequently? (Select all that apply)

☐ Dictionary platforms

☐ AI text generators (e.g., ChatGPT)

☐ Summary or explanation websites

☐ Translation tools

☐ Annotation or reading apps

Section B: Open-Ended Questions

4. In your own words, how do AI tools influence your approach to interpreting literary texts?
5. Describe a situation where AI assistance either improved or weakened your independent engagement with a literary work.
6. What type of instructor guidance helps you use AI tools without losing your own interpretive voice?
7. What challenges or concerns do you think students may face when using AI tools for literary interpretation?
8. In your opinion, what is the ideal balance between using AI support and maintaining personal autonomy as a reader?

9. Is there anything you would like to add about your experiences with AI tools when reading literature?