Rethinking Language Assessment in the AI Era

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Abstract

The rapid integration of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) in higher education (HE) has exposed the need for significant changes in academic assessment and instructional practices. Due to its focus on linguistic competencies, language education in general, and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in particular, is potentially more at risk of misuse of GenAI by students. This involves obscured evidence of learning and makes assessment of academic progress and language acquisition more challenging. It is, therefore, essential to integrate AI literacy into language education and reconsider the nature of language assessment in alignment with the new teaching and learning context. This would equip students with the necessary skills to engage with GenAI tools more critically, supporting their language acquisition rather than bypassing it, and better prepare them for future employment in the AI era. The paper reports on strategies designed to develop AI literacy and applied to EAP assessments with the aim of preserving the integrity of language education at university. The context of the study is a university in Vietnam with English as a medium of instruction (EMI) and a top-down AI acceptance policy. Experiential learning theory has been used as the major framework, where all suggested interventions followed the experiential learning cycle, inviting students to continuously reflect on their learning experience and to take accountability for learning outcomes. Students' reflections have provided a substantial pool of qualitative data, whose analysis indicates a more critical approach to AI use by students and an overall positive reception of the new AI-friendly assessment format.

Keywords: GenAI, AI literacy, EAP, EMI, language assessment

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Introduction

The emergence and prompt spread of AI has exposed multiple issues with academic integrity and its interpretation in the new teaching and learning context. The response of higher education institutions has not been homogeneous. While some discuss students' non-compliance with guideline and policies, express ethical concerns and potential negative impact of AI use on students' critical thinking skills development (Gonsalves, 2025; Khatri & Karki, 2023), others talk about changes in students' interpretations of academic integrity and highlight the necessity of guidelines for ethical GenAI use (Lund et al., 2025; Perkins, 2023; Zlotnikova et al., 2025). This informed the relevant actions taken by HE institutions with some introducing AI checkers and others experimenting with AI policies and frameworks.

The integration of GenAI seems to also depend on the nature of a discipline- if some knowledge-based disciplines are more likely to be among the first to integrate AI use into their curricula, skills-based discipline such as EAP are more prone to potential misuse of AI.

The rationale for the current study stems from the teaching context, which is an international university in Vietnam, that provides British curricula through EMI. Most students come from local monolingual high schools with very limited previous exposure to instruction through English, which often hinders their access to learning. Additionally, there are new academic genres and tasks that students encounter at university, which they may not be familiar with. This creates a gap in linguistic and academic skills which often leads to overreliance on AI-powered tools for translation, task completion, and text creation. This obscures evidence of learning and makes assessment of academic progress more challenging, especially in the context of the top-down AI acceptance policy, which encourages AI use for teaching and learning. The current context has informed the rationale for introducing critical AI literacy into the EAP curriculum and reconsidering assessment to respond to the AI-inclusive learning environment.

AI in Language Education: Opportunities and Threats

With AI-powered tools gaining popularity and a more extensive use in HE in general and language education in particular, it is important, therefore, to analyse the benefits and potential detriments they bring to the process of language acquisition. Such tools have the functions of automated speech recognition, machine translation, natural language processing which are already employed in various aspects of language teaching and learning (Zhu & Wang, 2025). Automated feedback and assessment (Fu et al., 2024) is one of the common ways of incorporating AI-powered tools into language education, which allows for almost immediate personalised and precise feedback on students' performance. Besides, AI generated content can become a source of individualised learning, in the form of tutoring (Pokrivcakova, 2019) where AI acts as a teaching assistant and guides a student through their specific learning needs. Such a personalised approach has the potential to scaffold learning and prompts differentiation, allowing each student to develop their language skills at their own pace. Current AI tools cover the entire range of language systems (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, discourse) and skills: speaking, reading, writing, and listening (Huang et al., 2023; Rentier, 2024).

Gen-AI opens unlimited possibilities for students' language systems development in EAP, for example, when it comes to vocabulary it can support the development of lexical resource by providing synonyms; register (formal/informal) variations; collocations; academic vs general vocabulary; discipline specific vocabulary etc. On the grammatical level, AI can support with

proofreading and accuracy checking as well as making the structures more complex or impersonal to align them with the conventions of academic writing. Students can improve their use of discourse markers such as linking words, hedging, or cohesive devices by incorporating AI in their language learning.

With AI having advanced features as speech recognition, it can facilitate speaking skills development (He et al., 2024; Zou et al., 2020), including presentation skills that are key in HE. If approached critically, Gen-AI could scaffold the development of such academic reading skills as identifying key and supporting ideas in a paragraph or identifying the purpose of a text as well as summarising. The critical point is for students to attempt the task themselves before resorting to AI for checking their work or error correction.

When working on their academic writing skills, students could potentially use AI as a co-pilot or a teaching assistant for proofreading, text organisation, paragraph structure or genre awareness. Such student –to-AI collaboration needs guidance to preserve academic integrity and ensure skills development.

With the availability of AI-powered transcription tools, scaffolding academic listening skills has become more accessible as students can focus on the challenging part of the text and address a specific issue of a linguistic or a content nature.

Academic skills development also can be supported by AI, such as summarising, paraphrasing, note taking or following genre conventions. Their effectiveness, however, is subject to students' critical use of AI, instead of overreliance. Such overreliance may be caused by several reasons. Kim et al. (2025) identify several student-AI interaction (SAI) patterns, which are the ways EAP students interact with AI when doing a task.

In the teaching and learning context of the current research, several factors affecting SAI have been observed, mostly among pre-sessional or Year 1 undergraduate students, all Vietnamese studying in an EMI environment.

Firstly, it is their proficiency level of English, higher level students (B2 and above) tend to collaborate with AI and use it as a co-creator or an assistant. They ask AI to proofread their work or scan it for errors, as well as to check the register or genre conventions. Lower-level students (B1 and B1+), however, are more prone to over rely on AI for text creation, task completion or translation without any critical involvement with the output.

The second factor is the language of SAI, students with higher level of English usually prompt in L2 which contributes to the quality of SAI and is more likely to produce a desirable output. Lower-level students, however, have a tendency to interact with AI in their L1 when doing an EAP task, which affects the quality of the output product.

Thirdly, it is students' prompting skills that could significantly influence SAI and output. It appears that students who use *structural prompting* receive a better-quality output than those who use *conversational prompting* techniques. An example of a structural prompt could be:

"Structure and introduction to an essay titled 'Evaluate advantages and disadvantages of globalisation of education' with a clear background statement, some contextualisation, a rationale and an impersonal thesis statement". A conversational prompt may be presented as:

"Hey, I need an introduction to an essay titled 'Evaluate advantages and disadvantages of globalisation of education.'"

This may lead to the following undesirable outcomes, which will hinder language acquisition instead of scaffolding it. Firstly, both lexical and grammatical resources of the output are likely to be above a student's proficiency level. Secondly, the paragraph structure and organisation of the output may be unfamiliar to the student. Thirdly, academic skills of paraphrasing or summarising are not developed if these tasks are performed by AI. Finally, it obscures evidence of learning and makes it challenging to measure the degree of skills acquisition when it comes to assessment.

Thus, AI creates limitless opportunities for academic and language skills development provided it is integrated into the course critically with proper guidelines and support to avoid its misuse, overreliance, and obscured evidence of learning.

Critical AI Literacy: Definition

The changing landscape of language education, informed by the integration of AI, has created an imperative to cater for "emerging digital needs" (Darvin & Hafner, 2022) of language learners, EAP learners inclusive. These needs extend beyond unethical or uncritical use of digital tools and cover a range of literacies. In the context of this research, AI literacy (Kim et al., 2025; Ngo & Hastie, 2025) is seen as a part of digital literacies, which is a broader term. With AI being increasingly integrated into the workplace, AI literacy has become a key graduate attribute (Ngo & Hastie, 2025).

AI literacy can be defined as a foundational conceptual understanding of AI and it covers knowledge, critical thinking, and ethical awareness rather than just technical skills (Chiu et al., 2024). Chiu et al. (2024) differentiate between AI literacy and AI competency, where the latter covers practical proficiency in using, engaging, interacting, developing, or managing AI systems in real-world contexts.

Ngo and Hastie (2025) discuss the importance of including AI literacy in EAP curricula, in the form of AI for Academic Purposes or AIAP. The current research supports the need for such inclusion but with a strong emphasis on criticality, i.e. critical AI literacy.

Critical digital literacies (Darvin & Hafner, 2022; Hagel, 2015; Pangrazio, 2016) (AI literacy inclusive) can be taught either formally or acquired through independent practice (Darvin & Hafner, 2022), the former would be a top-down approach with a great degree of guidance and control, whereas the latter would present a more empirical, trail-and-error (bottom-up) approach. It does not appear possible to fully separate one from the other as students' online identity would be an integral part of their learner identity in the current digitalised learning and teaching environment.

Top-down and bottom-up approaches to developing critical AI literacy in EAP classes will be explored below.

Critical AI Literacy in Eap: Approaches to Development

To fully engage with and benefit from the opportunities presented by AI tools as well as promote collaboration with them and create a space for co-learning, it is essential to provide

students with clear guidelines on critical AI use for EAP. This would be a more controlled, top-down approach to the development of critical digital literacy.

The guidelines should scaffold the following:

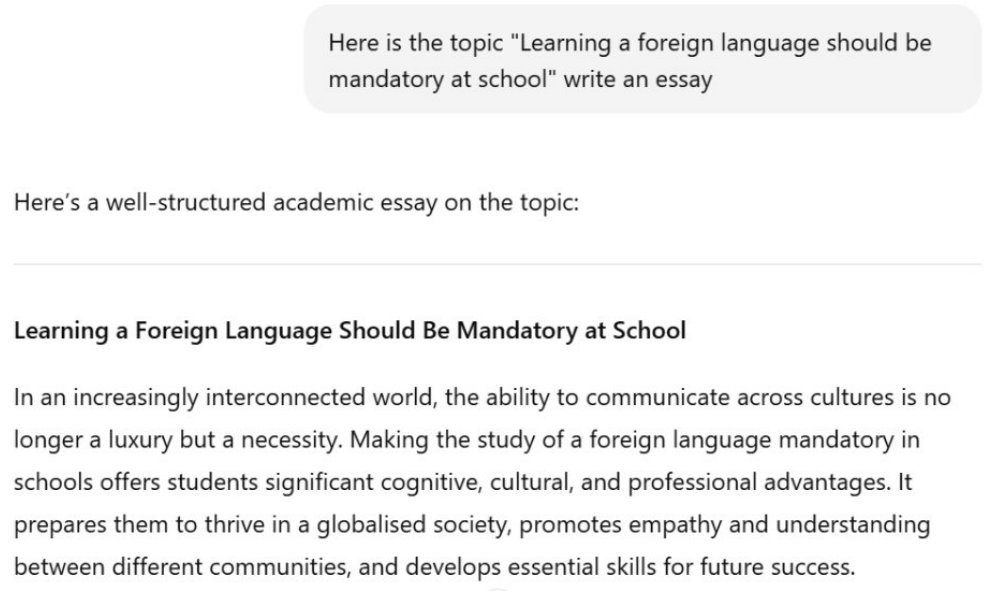
- maintenance of academic integrity at all levels of task completion;
- suitable prompting;
- appropriate use of AI to support learning not bypass it;
- critical engagement with the output.

The bottom-up strategy, in contrast, may result in a complete ban of AI tools for learning and integrating AI detection tools into assessment. Such an approach is unlikely to fully prevent students from using AI, rather prompt ineffective use of AI without them benefiting from its potential.

The top-down approach, on the contrary, provides clear guidance on Gen AI use and facilitates learning. It does not obscure evidence of learning and sets clear expectations through academic misconduct policies. An example of that could be the AIAS-EAP assessment scale (Roe et al., 2026), designed to facilitate effective learning in EAP classes. The scale offers five levels from "No AI" e.g. paper-based exams to "Full AI" e.g. using AI for data analysis.

Below is an example of the bottom-up approach applied by a B1 CEFR level student, whose task was to write an essay:

Figure 1
The Bottom-up Approach: Example



As can be seen from the screenshot, the prompt used by the student is conversational and aimed at receiving a full essay (bypassing learning). Secondly, the output is significantly above the student's proficiency level (B1) and it obscures the evidence of learning, i.e. it may be challenging for an EAP lecturer to understand to which extent the target skill (writing) has been acquired.

The next example demonstrates the top-down strategy: a B1+ student asks AI for feedback on the paragraph they have written with the focus on academic vocabulary.

Figure 2
The Top-Down Approach: Example 1

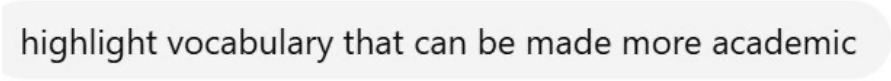
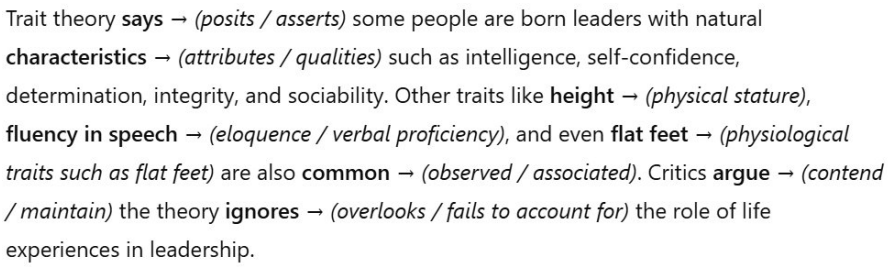


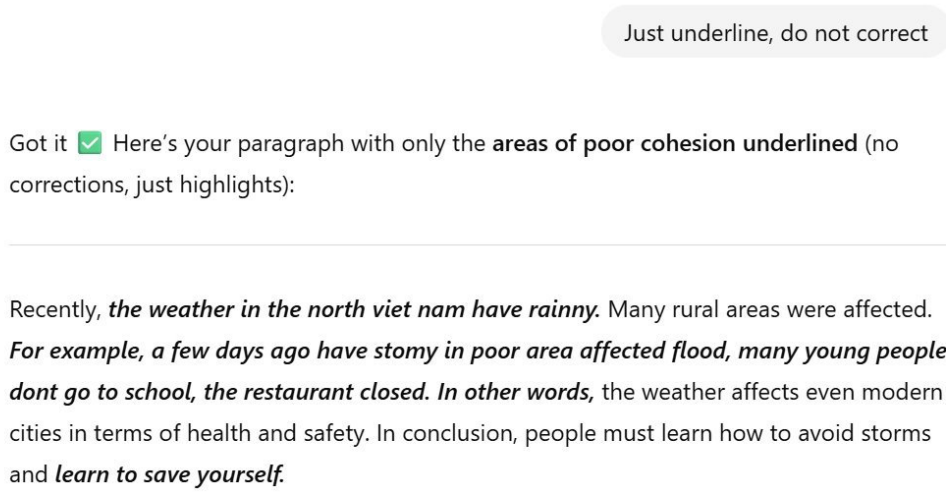
Figure 3
The Top-Down Approach: Example 2



Although the prompt was structural and more precise, the output provided not only highlighted words but also their more academic synonyms, which the student did not request. Next step for the student could be to refine the prompt and to edit their text using one of the suggested lexical items. Such an approach still facilitates learning. Firstly, it was the student, not AI, who wrote the paragraph. Secondly, the student critically approached AI use by focusing on vocabulary only and asking to highlight, not edit.

The next example of the top-down approach will demonstrate how a B1 student refines the prompt to achieve the desirable outcome of having highlighted parts of their essay with poor coherence and cohesion.

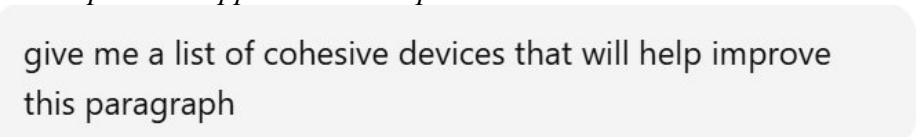
Figure 4
The Top-Down Approach: Example 3



Despite the grammatical errors and repetitions in the paragraph, the student focuses on cohesion and AI helped them identify areas for improvement. The next step for this class was to re-write the paragraphs with their own ideas for improvement and then check them with AI.

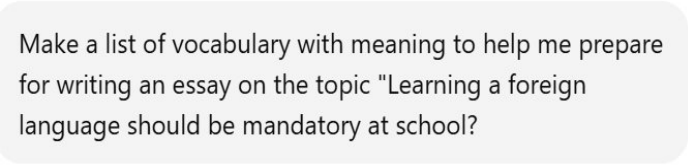
Higher proficiency level EAP students (B2 and above) invite AI for collaboration at the editing stage by uploading their paragraphs and asking for an input e.g. identify the weaknesses and provide options:

Figure 5
The Top-Down Approach: Example 4



Apart from the editing stage, AI support is used at the planning stage by asking for vocabulary lists or collocations:

Figure 6
The Top-Down Approach: Example 5



Thus, the top-down approach to critical AI literacy encourages students to collaborate with AI more sensibly and benefit from its potential, rather than using AI to complete a task instead of students and bypass learning.

Critical AI Literacy in EAP Assessment

Following the demands of the AI mediated teaching and learning reality, language assessments have created a need for transformation. The task of adapting EAP assessments to an AI-assisted environment, however, may present its own challenges. If classroom AI application is often welcome and seen as development of key graduate attributes, university assessments, particularly, language assessments, remain rather rigid and inflexible. Most are still pen and paper based, and/or need to be strictly aligned with external frameworks and policies.

At British University Vietnam, an institution with a top-down AI acceptance policy, the need to reconsider the nature of assessment became evident immediately. While the implementation of AIAS (Perkins et al., 2024) has scaffolded the transition for many disciplines, EAP is still in the process of searching for the most appropriate solution. Regular AI guidance and the application of EAP-AIAS (Roe et al., 2026) to classroom assignments create a strong foundation for development of AI literacy and foster a more critical approach to student AI practices. This, however, leads to a conflict between classroom AI-based interventions and summative assessments, which are predominantly still traditional and do not allow utilisation of AI. Such an imbalance exposes the need for EAP assessment to be redesigned in accordance with the new AI-mediated teaching and learning reality.

As part of the current research, several AI-assisted assessment strategies have been tested on the population of approximately 350 pre-sessional EAP students. The starting point for assessment modification was the alignment of innovative strategies with the learning outcomes of the EAP course. For example, for productive skills such as academic writing, which appears to be the most vulnerable to AI misuse, the learning outcomes often require the ability to produce a well-structured paragraph. For the purposes of the current experiment, students were allowed to use AI for the parts of the task that are not directly tested, such as vocabulary and grammar range in a paragraph writing task. One of the tasks was for students to construct an introduction to a research paper with a clearly stated background sentence, topic contextualisation, rationale for the paper, and an impersonal thesis statement. Students were allowed to use AI to check their accuracy, and they were instructed to identify and highlight the relevant parts of the introduction. The instruction to the task was:

Figure 7
AI-Mediated Assessment: Example 1

Write an introduction to your research paper.

The introduction should include:

-a background statement;

-a contextualising statement;

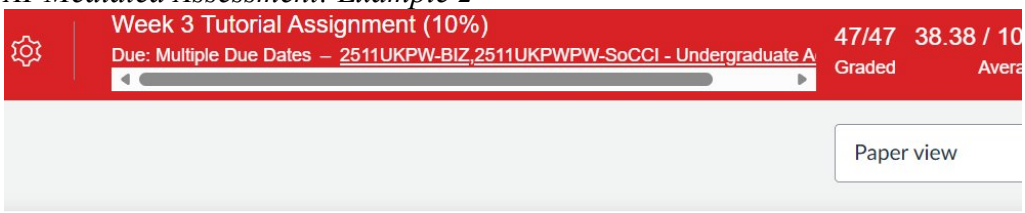
-a rationale;

-a thesis statement.

Highlight these parts in your introduction; explain where necessary.

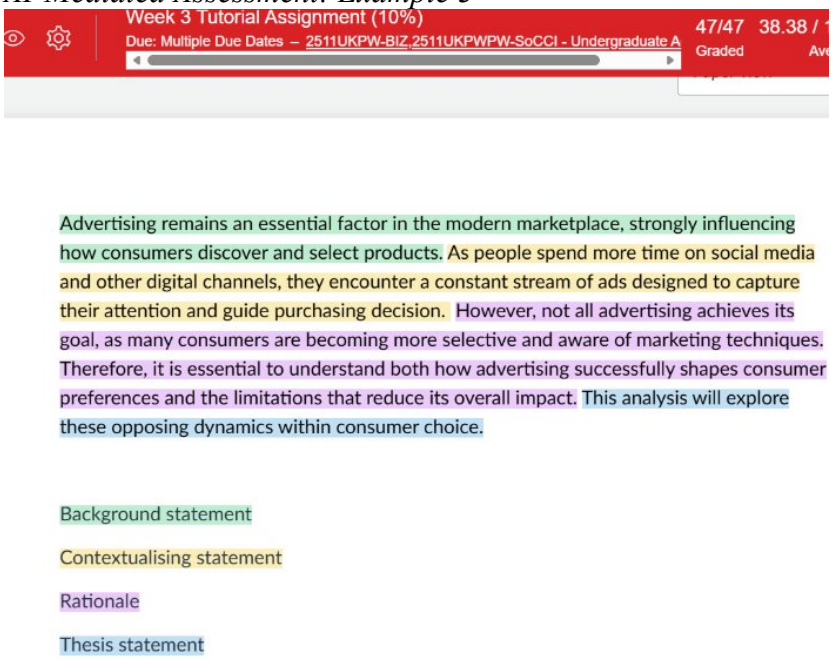
Below are some screenshots of students' submissions to the task above.

Figure 8
AI-Mediated Assessment: Example 2



Luxury fashion brands are now more popular by using the internet and social media. Social media is suitable for luxury brands or another way will helps luxury brands boost their reputation and luxurious. It is important to see which marketing strategies help brands attract more customers and stay popular in 2025. This essay will focus on what marketing strategies is suitable for luxury fashion brands and how well they can improve the brand image.

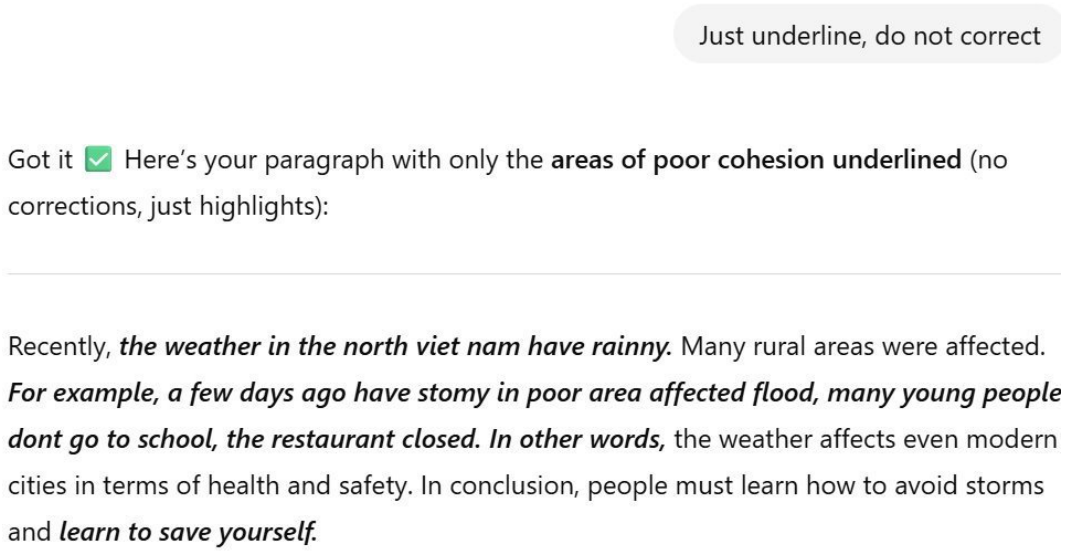
Figure 9
AI-Mediated Assessment: Example 3



As can be seen from the submissions above, the learning outcomes of an introduction structure have been achieved, and the students have demonstrated understanding of the relevant parts. Although it is not clear to which extent they will be able to write an introduction without relying on AI for grammar and vocabulary support, it is evident that they are able to identify and apply the structure – a skill, which possibly be more important in the AI-mediated work environment.

Another strategy that has been applied for EAP assessment was when AI was allowed to be used as an assistant to identify areas for improvement and students were asked to rework those areas and submit all paragraphs – their original, highlighted by AI and the one they improved. This proved to be an effective task as it allowed students to edit their own work without "outsourcing" the task to AI. Additionally, students refined their prompting skills as they had to get the desired (highlighted not edited) output. Here is one of the examples.

Figure 10
AI-Mediated Assessment: Example 4



The example above demonstrates that a student had to make a specific prompt and refine the prompt to achieve the output they needed. As students were submitting screenshots of their entire interaction with AI, it provided some evidence of their critical approach to the AI-produced output and their effort to improve the paragraph after receiving it.

At each stage of the research, students were invited to reflect on their learning experiences and some of their reflections are presented and analysed in the following part of the paper.

Critical AI Literacy: Students' Reflections

Experiential learning theory (Kolb, 2014), where learning is seen as a cyclical process and reflection plays a crucial role, has been applied to inform the research. All AI-mediated classroom interventions follow the experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 2014): *experience-reflect-evaluate-act,* which invites students to continuously reflect on their learning experience and take accountability for their learning outcomes. Two types of reflections were incorporated into the teaching and learning process – guided and unguided. The former was a set of questions scaffolding students' reflection process and the latter was merely an invitation to reflect on an activity or a learning experience and students were free to focus on a specific point or to reflect generally or structure their reflections according to their preferences.

Below are some examples of unguided reflections of B1 CEFR level EAP students of the foundation year. The reflections presented here have not been edited; this is the original work of students and their choice of grammatical and lexical means.

"AI helped me to do my homework, it gives me a lot of ideas. Sometimes I think I abuse AI because I don't check what it gives me. And now I think it will have a bad impact on my skills."

"In the past I have used AI to check my grammar but now I think I did not use it correctly because it corrected my mistakes and I don't remember anything. The teacher showed us how to use it to learn grammar better. It takes more time but I think I remember more now."

"I have used AI for summarising and I think it is helpful, but I don't think I have improved my skills. If the teacher asks me to summarise, I think it will still be difficult for me. We did some exercises in class when AI helped us check our summaries but not summarise for us, I think it's better."

"I can now use AI better, I can ask to explain not just give the correct answer. We do this in our EAP class I can now ask AI to help me with other subjects."

"I always used AI to translate from VNese into English, and I thought I was learning English. Now I must try to write myself and ask AI to check."

"Our EAP teacher showed us how to use AI to help with writing. It is very useful, it gives step-by-step explanation. It helps me improve sentence structure, make it more English. And I feel like I am learning a lot form it."

"We did a new test in our EAP class, the teacher said we could use AI to find mistakes but not correcting. We should correct. I think it was a good test. I felt more confident and I asked the teacher about the mistakes I couldn't correct. Without AI I wouldn't know where I made mistakes."

As can be seen from these students' reflection, the AI literacy tasks are overall well received and appreciated. Students acknowledge the limitations of their past AI use practices and seem to understand the importance of a more critical approach. An interesting comment was made about feeling more confident when using AI to highlight errors in an assignment. This possibly contributes to the fact that this gives students a feeling of complying with the academic integrity principles than when they let AI improve their work or complete a task for them which is seen as cheating.

Preliminary Results

The research is still in progress, and a larger population of students of various proficiency levels needs to be involved to obtain more comprehensive data, however, the preliminary results indicate an overall positive reception of critical AI literacy activities in EAP classes and assessments incorporating AI.

The qualitative analysis of students' reflections has identified several areas for future focus. Firstly, the suggested AI-literacy activities seem to have been well received and are seen as helpful. Therefore, their integration into the curricula seems necessary. Secondly, a controlled use of AI in assessments is seen as a positive change and helps build confidence, which means more redesigned assessment types need to be introduced and trialed. Additionally, students' reflections have also confirmed that they are aware of the limited to undesired effects on language acquisition of their previous unguided AI practices, and more guidance is expected.

Conclusions

It is, therefore, essential not only to incorporate critical AI literacy into the EAP curriculum through a top-down approach; but also, to adapt assessments in alignment with the new teaching and learning context.

Such an initiative would equip students with the necessary skills to engage with GenAI tools more critically, thereby enhancing their language acquisition, academic and study skills, whilst maintaining academic integrity.

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