

Using Artificial Intelligence in EFL Reading Classes: A Case Study of Three Preparatory Class Learners

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Abstract

The use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in education is constantly evolving, including the pedagogical practices that support language learning, more specifically, reading instruction. This qualitative case study examines how three EFL learners in a university preparatory programme used AI tools in reading classes. Furthermore, this study examines how the EFL learners benefited from AI-assisted reading activities in reading classes, and if the use of AI tools encouraged a deeper reading comprehension process. Data were gathered from weekly journals, learner reflections, AI engagement logs, and semi-structured interviews. The findings indicate that while AI tools facilitated personal support and motivation; problems were identified with students regarding overreliance on AI-generated summaries. While AI can enhance EFL reading instruction, AI should be administered with scaffolded instruction and critical digital literacy to equip the learners with an ability for deep reading rather than superficial reading.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence, reading, digital literacy, EFL, language learning, technology

Introduction

The use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools in language learning contexts has attracted much attention and support in recent years because they can adapt to the needs of the learner as well as support learner independence. While language learning with AI tools may support

new forms of access to texts and meaning-making opportunities, it raises a range of pedagogical issues regarding the depth of learners' processing, their use of the AI, and whether their deep reading practices are diminished (Wolf, 2018). In reading, we often talk about reading as careful or deep reading, which requires cognitively and emotionally engaged interaction with a complex text and characterises traits such as taking time to remember and attend to the details, making inferences, and critically evaluating the text (Alderson, 2000). Several scholars and researchers have highlighted how digital reading (for example, reading with AI tools) and practices associated with it may lead to superficial reading instead of in-depth involvement with the content (Liu, 2005). This can be especially problematic in EFL contexts, where learners are building both their linguistic skills and critical reading habits. For these reasons, this study seeks to understand learner experiences of using AI in their reading classes.

Literature Review

In language courses, learners primarily use AI tools for self-assessment and automated feedback on their assignments, as well as for vocabulary support and text-to-speech features (Rukiati et al., 2023). These tools facilitate personalised instruction by employing algorithms that analyse a student's previous performance to provide tailored practice exercises and adaptive learning pathways that match their specific proficiency level (Rukiati et al., 2023; Woo & Choi, 2021). Learners may use AI-powered platforms and applications to facilitate their reading and cognition in several ways. Through AI tools, learners can access and comprehend difficult texts, locate errors, receive comments on their performance as well as assessment of their language skill levels (Woo & Choi, 2021). AI-powered platforms and applications also provide interactive activities for students to access the material in innovative ways, provide students with immediate feedback on their pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary, and assess students' performance by recording, analysing and providing a recommendation for the next lessons (Rukiati et al., 2023).

Multiple studies verify that AI-assisted reading modes are effective in language learning classes (Feng & Wang, 2023; Zafar et al., 2025). The AI-assisted class, for example, showed greater improvement in bilingual development than the paper book class (Feng & Wang, 2023). In another

study (Zafar et al., 2025) using multiple AI tools in reading classes at a university in Pakistan, reading fluency, comprehension, and self-regulation all improved significantly.

With respect to learner perceptions, many studies have reported that students were generally positive about their experience, with many reporting greater confidence and motivation (Daweli & Mahyoub, 2024; Shafiee Rad, 2025; Zafar et al., 2025). However, it is essential to note that relying on AI for immediate comprehension may encourage a passive approach to reading, where students prioritise convenience over critical evaluation. This might lead to overreliance on AI tools, which could undermine deeper cognitive engagement with texts, as indicated by Fu and Hiniker (2025).

Since many studies focus on teacher practices, but very few on learner experiences, the current study aims to investigate technology-enhanced reading instruction by focusing on learner engagement with AI tools during reading activities in a Turkish university prep class.

In line with this aim, the following research questions guided the study: How do EFL learners perceive and use AI tools in their reading classes? What benefits and challenges do learners report in using AI tools for reading comprehension?

To what extent do AI-supported reading practices foster or hinder deep reading?

Methodology

Research Design and Setting

The study followed a qualitative research design to explore and interpret in-depth learner experiences in classroom setting and focused on three students who volunteered to participate in the research. Qualitative case studies emphasise on getting a 'thick description' of the subject under study in its natural setting (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This small sample size permitted intensive triangulation of multiple data sources, such as weekly journals and logs of the AI interactions to trace the nuanced developmental trajectory of digitally and linguistically diverse learners. While it is impossible to generalise the findings to the larger population of learners, careful 'analytical generalisation' can be made about the challenges and benefits of integrating AI in a university-level English as

a foreign language (EFL) learning programme with a focus on reading skills.

The research was carried out in an English preparatory Reading Course programme of a public university in Türkiye, for which classes were held three times a week during an eight weeks period. The programme is obligatory for students who do not have desired English competencies or required proficiency levels in their undergraduate departments. The syllabus materials consisted of academic level graded texts (B1–B2 proficiency level). The course focused on critical reading strategies with vocabulary supplements and involved discussions in relation to the texts. The choice of texts aimed at exposing learners to more complex linguistic constructions related to academia in order to prepare them for the cognitive demands of higher education.

Participants

The participants were three 18-19 years old, first-year university students taking the preparatory English Reading Course. Names of participants in this study have been replaced with pseudonyms to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. The first student Lale, demonstrated a B1 proficiency level and relied heavily on AI tools for translation and for learning new languages. Zeynep, who was also at B1 level, was more familiar with AI tools and had previously used ChatGPT and QuillBot for other academic assignments. Mehmet, the third student in the study, had a lower proficiency level (on the A2-B1 scale) and demonstrated average digital literacy with little exposure to AI-related resources. All three participants volunteered for the study after an initial information session about it and consented to share their reflections and logs.

Data Collection

The students' journals were collected weekly comprising learners' reflections on their reading tasks, their use of AI, obstacles faced and lessons learnt. AI interaction logs (including screenshots and copied AI output, e.g., from ChatGPT) showed the frequency and nature of participants' use of AI. Finally, semi-structured interviews were conducted at the end of the eight weeks period to elicit detailed responses from the participants. Sample interview questions, a representative AI interaction log, along with a sample learner journal have been provided in Appendix A for reference.

During each of the eight weeks period of the research, participants were encouraged to select two AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT, QuillBot, or ReadTheory) to facilitate their reading of academic-level graded texts (B1–B2). After independent AI sessions, participants came to the reading class with interaction logs, AI-generated summaries and comprehension-centred activities and exercises. These outputs were integrated into the learning process through text-based discussions and ‘AI-verification’ tasks. In these sessions, learners compared their own as well as their peers’ interpretations of texts and tasks with AI-generated outputs to pinpoint any inaccuracies, gaps or oversimplifications and thus turned the algorithmically generated contents into objects of inquiry rather than solutions. Thus, the technology-assisted output led to real-time collaborative meaning-making inside the classroom. These weekly activities were documented in the participants’ journals and in the final week, semi-structured interviews were conducted to reflect on this integrated process.

Data Analysis

All qualitative data were analysed using thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Transcripts and journals were coded inductively, with themes emerging around learner autonomy, reading depth, tool efficacy and concerns. An external reviewer with expertise in Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) was consulted to ensure intercoder reliability.

Findings

Learners’ Use of AI Tools and Perceived Benefits and Challenges

Table 1 below outlines participants’ familiarity with AI tools, usage patterns and their perceptions about the importance of integrating AI in reading classes. All the participants provided positive feedback on the benefits of using AI tools to comprehend complex texts, develop vocabulary and avail real-time feedback. Lale and Zeynep demonstrated a higher level of digital literacy and reported more frequent and strategic use of AI tools like ChatGPT and QuillBot. Mehmet, on the other hand, was unfamiliar with AI at first but adopted it slowly and used it mostly for writing summaries and clarifying vocabulary-related doubts. All participants viewed AI tools as helpful in facilitating comprehension and promoting autonomous learning. Their reported experiences were

in line with previous research regarding the emerging role of AI in scaffolding and facilitating learner autonomy and personalised support (Daweli & Mahyoub, 2024; Shafiee Rad, 2025; Zafar et al., 2025).

Table 1. *Learners’ Perceptions and Use of AI Tools*

<i>Partici- pant</i>	<i>Familiarity with AI Tools</i>	<i>Usage Patterns</i>	<i>Perceived Value</i>
Lale	Moderate to High	Used AI to explain complex texts, generate questions, and paraphrase	“It’s like having a tutor that explains things simply.”
Mehmet	Initially Low	Used AI for summaries and vocabulary clarification	“At first, I didn’t trust it, but now I use it for difficult parts.”
Zeynep	High	Used AI to compare summaries, rephrase texts, and ask inferential Qs	“I sometimes disagree with AI and that makes me read more carefully.”

All the learners demonstrated a significant initial curiosity regarding the adoption of AI softwares in their reading practices. Lale and Zeynep, who were already acquainted with generative AI tools, immediately incorporated ChatGPT into their reading to help understand complex paragraphs and unfamiliar words/phrases. Mehmet who was hesitant in using AI tools, started using QuillBot to write answers in simple paragraphs and used ChatGPT for answering comprehension questions. The varied AI use among the three participants emphasises the significant role of digital literacy in learners. The level of digital literacy (familiarity with the purposes of AI) also influences learners’ use of AI. In this study, participants used AI not merely for comprehension purposes but also for analysing and comparing concepts and ideas. For example, Zeynep stated, “Sometimes I do not agree with the answer AI gives. I then read the text again to see who was right,” thus conceptualising AI as a metacognitive tool rather than an answer book. Hockly (2023) advocates such “critical digital literacy”, wherein the learner views technology as an object of inquiry rather than the ultimate answer.

Additionally, Mehmet’s experiences with AI assisted reading reveal a more tentative but developing engagement, reflecting autonomous and critical use of AI as learners gain more confidence when enabled by developmental pathways and teacher scaffolding. In this study, teacher scaffolds took the form of procedural modelling and strategic

prompting. For instance, the instructor showed learners how to progress from simple AI directives like 'summarise this' to Socratic prompting such as: "What are the three complex arguments in this text, and what evidence does the author cite for each?". This cognitive bridge enabled the learners to progress from simple usage of AI like summarisation to more nuanced usage like analysing arguments.

Lale explained her usage of AI, "When I read a difficult text, I ask ChatGPT to explain it to me as if I were a high school student. That helps me understand things much better than rereading the text again and again." Zeynep, a student who relied heavily on AI-powered paraphrasing, wrote, "I like Quillbot to re-write paragraphs. Then I read them both. It helps me to notice the sentence structure." Mehmet, a later adopter, commented, "First, I didn't trust it. However, when I saw it provides good summaries and examples, I began using it more often. Especially when the text is highly academic."

Table 2 shows the benefits experienced and the challenges learners encountered in using AI tools to improve their reading skills. Vocabulary enhancement was identified as the most frequent positive effect of AI incorporation in reading-related tasks. All the learners stated that the AI tools, primarily ChatGPT, provided explanations that are not just faster but also more relevant than those acquired from a conventional dictionary. With this immediacy, comprehension is made easy and cognitive load associated with the reading of unfamiliar words is reduced. AI also helped with text comprehension. Participants found that AI-generated summaries and explanations supported their understanding of the main ideas and helped them navigate through the complex sentence structures. These tools provided a cognitive scaffolding to access more advanced content. There were also motivational and autonomy related benefits of AI. The learners indicated autonomy as described by Zeynep who said, "I don't have to wait for a teacher. I ask ChatGPT and it's like having a tutor." The statement demonstrates that AI can complement personalised support and learner agency that is not always readily available in physical learning environments. We see similar sentiments expressed by Lale, who commented that it (AI) was "like having a tutor who can break things down in a simple way." This comment also captures both the cognitive and affective support AI tools offer learners, specifically EFL learners reading academically complex texts. This has been indicated in Feng and Wang (2023) who have

reported how readers in AI-supported reading classes outperformed readers in typically conventional reading classes, especially in bilingual development programmes.

Table 2. *Benefits and Challenges of AI in Reading*

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Benefits Experienced</i>	<i>Challenges Encountered</i>
Lale	– Enhanced understanding through simplified explanations – Faster access to vocabulary definitions – Increased autonomy	– Tendency to ask for summaries before attempting comprehension – Overreliance on AI input
Mehmet	– Motivation to engage with difficult texts – Improved vocabulary retention via contextual examples	– Passive reading when relying solely on AI – Misinterpretation due to oversimplified responses
Zeynep	– Deepened engagement through comparison of AI and self-generated responses – Greater awareness of text structures	– Occasionally accepted AI explanations uncritically – Difficulty in identifying misleading or vague responses

Among the three participants, Lale demonstrated a growing deep reading behaviour by showing a shift from looking up for meaning of every word to inferring and using AI to generate questions. Zeynep, on the other hand, demonstrated critical reading behaviour by reassessing AI results according to her own answers. Mehmet initially concentrated on summarising texts with the help of AI but gradually turned to reflective strategies that enabled him to identify misinterpretations and oversimplifications in AI generated content. However, all three participants demonstrated limited reading strategies while using AI tools such as prioritising efficiency over comprehension.

Several other challenges were also highlighted by the participants which are mirrored in the literature of digital reading (Liu, 2005; Wolf, 2018). Firstly, a common issue was over-dependence on AI. Participants confessed to using ChatGPT to get a summary of an entire text and seeking answers prematurely from AI, thus working without reading the original text. For instance, Mehmet stated that, “Sometimes I feel lazy... Then I realise that I didn’t really learn”, which demonstrated

the struggle between resorting to easy-to-use resources and deeper cognitive engagement. Mehmet's admission of 'laziness' provides an illustration of the "passive approach to reading" cautioned by Fu and Hiniker (2025). His reflection also validates Liu's (2005) concerns that the convenience of digital tools can prioritise "efficiency over interpretation", leading to a decline in the sustained cognitive effort required for deep comprehension.

Another issue was inherent trust in AI outputs. Inaccurate and oversimplified answers generated misconceptions for learners who, many a time, failed to verify the information given to them. This makes a case for the danger of naïve trust in AI. Finally, the study unearthed the practice of surface reading as opposed to critical analysis of AI-generated outputs. This finding raises concerns about AI affordances resulting in passive reading (Liu, 2005; Fu & Hiniker, 2025) and superficial engagement rather than the desired level of deep engagement with texts. Kessler and Plakans (2008) make a case that despite confidence in technology, its pedagogical use cannot be taken for granted.

Evidence of Deep Reading or Surface-Level Engagement

To find out if learners engaged in deep reading, journal entries, AI log usage, and class participation were examined. Data analysis revealed that all three participants used AI tools, employing both surface-level and deep reading practices at varying levels. First, they used AI to summarise texts, to clarify lexical terms and to seek comprehension support. Later on, they demonstrated more reflection in their dialogic reading of AI texts. They crosschecked AI output against their interpretations of the texts, generated questions, and gathered evidence from the texts (Alderson, 2000; Wolf, 2018); these are crucial factors when defining deep and critical reading. Lale was a consistent user of AI-generated comprehension questions, which she answered and brought to class discussion. She also highlighted paragraphs and asked questions based on inferences. Zeynep used AI summaries and compared them with her summaries and clearly stated, "Sometime I disagree with the AI answer. Then I check again by reading the text thoroughly. That works my brain more." Mehmet, who was initially slow at observing the working of AI, responded, "Now I use ChatGPT only after I try answering myself. I want to see if I can find the answer on my own." Surface-level engagement was Mehmet's initial "shortcut"

strategy when he used AI primarily for seeking summaries so that he could bypass reading the original text altogether. On the other hand, Zeynep demonstrated a dialogic engagement with AI apparent in her questioning of the AI-generated content. Meanwhile Lale used AI to generate inference questions, representing higher-order thinking skills.

Surface engagements such as paraphrases being copied verbatim or accepting AI explanations at face value did not disappear completely, it was not always a linear or guaranteed move towards deeper reading. It required metacognitive awareness and scaffolds from the teacher. These classroom scaffolds included verification tasks in which students were required to cross-reference the text produced by AI summarizers and identify possible ‘hallucinations’ or oversimplifications. This ‘adversarial’ AI-usage forced learners to return to the original text several times, in the process inculcating deep reading habits that AI is often accused of killing. There was also comparative scaffolding with the instructor asking the class why the interpretation that a peer gave of a passage was better or worse nuanced than a version given by AI. Without these supports, learners risk, usually unwittingly, being passive consumers of AI and masking deeper intelligence of texts. It is similar to the cautioning presented by Fu and Hiniker (2025) and presents the broader concerns of the digital learning context about the impact of convenience and superficiality in processing information.

This study is an important and unique contribution that demonstrates how AI risks can be reduced through learners’ reflections and continued pedagogical intervention, neither of which has been deeply explored in language learning research so far. By referencing the micro-trajectories of the individual participants to broader theoretical perspectives of digital reading, these findings fit the framework that contextualises AI’s role as dualistic, serving both as an impediment as well as a scaffold of deep literacy in the EFL classroom. The results of this research have a number of pedagogical implications. Firstly, explicit instruction on AI literacy needs to be integrated into pedagogical practice. Educators must prepare learners to use AI as an object of inquiry, look for faults and inaccuracies, and negotiate the tension between relying and not relying on assistance—echoing calls for critical use of digital tools in ELT and EAP (Hockly, 2023; Moorhouse & Wong, 2025). Secondly, reading instruction should become more inclusive of metacognitive scaffolding. For example, use prompts with reading material, such as “What do you

think of AI's explanation?" or "How would you improve this summary?" These prompts can help learners to reconstruct their reading experience away from passive use of AI to critical and active meaning-making. The learners can also compare their peers' interpretations with those generated by AI and support the practice of dialogic and social literacy in collaboration with others. Thirdly, the participants need a reasonable balance of integrating AI tools in reading and (where appropriate) their reading engagement as part of the process of developing transferable reading skills across the contexts in which they are using AI tools. Teacher modelling should include specific techniques such as 'AI-Think-Alouds,' where the instructor projects an AI interface and thinks aloud while refining prompts to show how to narrow an inquiry or correct a misleading AI output. Another effective scaffold is the use of 'Prompt Templates' that guide learners to ask for 'counter-arguments' or 'alternative perspectives' rather than just 'the main idea'. Such scaffolds position the AI tool as a dialogic partner to think with, rather than a digital authority to think for the student.

Conclusion

This qualitative case study presents a detailed analysis of the benefits and drawbacks of AI-assisted reading activities as experienced and reported by three EFL learners at the tertiary level. The findings indicate that while AI tools provided cognitive and affective support and motivation to learners, they also led to overreliance and superficial engagement with reading texts that could only gradually be overcome through learner introspection and teacher scaffolds thus highlighting the significant role of scaffolded instruction and critical digital literacy in higher education.

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Appendix A: Sample Data Collection Instruments and Raw Data Excerpts

1. Semi-Structured Interview Guide (Sample Questions)

How frequently did you use AI tools during your out-of-class reading assignments this semester?

Which specific AI features (e.g., summarisation, vocabulary explanation, paraphrasing) did you find most helpful for understanding academic texts?

Can you describe a time when you disagreed with or questioned an output provided by AI?

In what ways, if any, do you feel that using AI tools changed the way you approach a difficult reading passage?

Did you ever feel that relying on AI made you less likely to read the text closely? Please explain.

2. Sample AI Interaction Log (Participant: Lale)

User Prompt: I am reading a text about climate change. Can you explain the following paragraph like I am a high school student? [Text of paragraph pasted]

AI Output: Sure! Basically, this paragraph is saying that while the earth has always had temperature changes, the current warming is happening much faster because of human activity like burning coal and oil...

3. Sample Learner Journal Entry (Participant: Mehmet, Week 5)

Today I felt slightly tired and the text about Economics was very hard. I used ChatGPT to summarise the whole thing before I even tried to read it myself. Later, I realised I didn't actually learn any of the new words from the text. I felt lazy, so next time I will try to read first and use AI only for the parts I don't understand.

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