

Reframing AI Literacy in MA TESOL Education as Co-Constructed

Rhian Webb

University of South Wales, UK

Correspondence

Email: rhian.webb@southwales.ac.uk

Abstract

This article argues for a reframing of AI literacy in MA TESOL education from a compliance-driven competency to a co-constructed process of inquiry, reflection, and critical engagement. The discussion is prompted by a classroom activity in which an AI-generated annotated bibliography, which contained entirely fabricated references, was initially judged by postgraduate students to be credible and academically appropriate. Whilst the exercise exposed challenges associated with verifying AI-generated academic content, it also highlighted broader questions about how AI literacy is conceptualised and developed within TESOL. Drawing on thematic analysis of interviews with two international MA TESOL students, the study explores how students understand, use, and evaluate AI following institutional guidance and targeted classroom input. Findings reveal emerging but cautious forms of AI literacy characterised by scepticism, risk awareness, verification practices, and anxiety regarding plagiarism and academic integrity. Despite explicit instruction, participants positioned AI primarily as a source of potential error rather than as a pedagogical resource. This article therefore proposes a co-constructed model of AI literacy that values dialogue, shared inquiry, scaffolded experimentation, and process-oriented assessment that enables students to develop reflective, context-sensitive, and professionally relevant AI practices.

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Introduction

In a lecture on research methods in 2026, I conducted a small experiment to explore how artificial intelligence (AI) might influence students' engagement with academic sources for research reading and referencing. I asked an AI tool to produce an annotated bibliography for a hypothetical MA TESOL research project, and before I

gave it to the students, I checked AI's output with Google Scholar to establish its authenticity. The output was, at first glance, entirely plausible. It included a series of APA formatted references accompanied by concise summaries that aligned closely with the proposed topic. The list resembled the kind of preliminary literature review that students are encouraged to produce at the outset of their dissertations.

I presented this bibliography to the students and invited them to comment on its structure, clarity, and relevance. The students evaluated it positively, noting that the abstracts were coherent and that the references appeared appropriate for postgraduate-level work. Only after this discussion did I demonstrate that none of the cited works existed. I showed them my Google Scholar research, which confirmed that the authors, article titles, and journals were entirely fabricated.

The purpose of the exercise was not to highlight student error but to illustrate a broader challenge emerging in MA TESOL education, which is the increasing difficulty of distinguishing between legitimate academic sources and AI-generated approximations of academic discourse. The activity also revealed an important dimension of AI literacy. Whilst students were aware that AI tools could assist with drafting or idea generation, many had not yet developed strategies for verifying the authenticity of AI produced academic content.

The article uses this classroom example as a starting point to examine emerging patterns associated with AI literacy development, pedagogical gaps and implications for teacher education. It highlights how institutional guidance is generic or insufficiently operationalised, and how teachers might respond to the evolving relationship between students, research practices, and AI technologies.

AI and AI literacy

The rapid emergence of AI has created change for MA TESOL education, where both teachers and students need to negotiate new expectations around research, writing, and professional practice. Over a short amount of time, AI tools, which are widely and easily accessible, can be used to produce fluent academic writing, generate lesson ideas, and summarise complex texts. The rapid adoption and often unregulated use of AI leave teachers with the task of how AI tools can be integrated into coursework and assessment.

AI literacy refers to the knowledge, skills, and critical awareness that language teachers need to use, evaluate, and teach with AI responsibly and effectively (Ng et al., 2021). There is a need to know its technical, cognitive, and socio-ethical dimensions which involves more than knowing how to operate tools (Zhang et al., 2026). Technical

knowledge raises awareness that AI generates probable language which can lead to errors, fabricated references and culturally inappropriate output. Cognitive and evaluative skills enable students to critically evaluate the accuracy, reliability, and pedagogical suitability of AI texts, explanations, and lesson materials. Socio-ethical awareness focuses on plagiarism, bias, data privacy, and the impact AI has on linguistic norms and classroom practices. Therefore, AI literacy is both an academic competency, which supports research, writing, and critical analysis, and a professional competency, which prepares future TESOL practitioners to guide students in navigating AI language use.

My Professional Role

In my role as a university course leader for the MA TESOL, I am responsible for designing, teaching and assessing the course modules. Notably, the assessed work is diverse with reflective, observational and personal story telling undertaken for some tasks whilst research is required for others. Therefore, the usefulness of AI changes with the tasks, which is intentional to encourage students to think critically and act ethically.

I am responsible for introducing the students to the institutional expectations of AI use in academic work. The university's official guidance consists of a PowerPoint and a five-level assessment framework (Perkins et al., 2024). The PowerPoint presents a broad overview of AI's capabilities, such as text generation, translation, and content creation and its limitations, which include the absence of contextual understanding, critical reasoning, and sensitivity to linguistic nuance. In addition, it highlights ethical risks such as plagiarism, bias, data privacy concerns, and AI hallucinations. It positions AI for complementary use (Li & Liu, 2026) which highlights the need for voice, authorship, stance and agency rather than as substitute use where work is outsourced and acts as a replacement for independent academic engagement.

The five-level assessment framework (Perkins et al., 2024) attempts to regulate students AI usage for assessed work through a continuum from complete prohibition (Level 1) to full integration (Level 5). While conceptually useful, the framework raises pedagogical tensions when applied to MA TESOL. Level 1 may lead to false submissions which aim to assess students' work without AI support. Level 2 prohibits AI in final submission but allows it for brainstorming, creating structure and generating ideas. Level 3 requests AI references because it allows assisted editing. However, whilst this promotes transparency it may encourage a superficial engagement as a proofreading tool rather than a resource for exploring discourse or genre. Level 4 assesses the critical evaluation of AI content and needs to be referenced, which is more aligned with reflective TESOL pedagogy. However, Level 5's allowance

for unrestricted AI use without disclosure raises concerns about authorship and authenticity.

My Current AI Teaching

My role extends beyond simply relaying AI institutional policy and guidelines. MA TESOL students work at the intersection of language, culture, and pedagogy and therefore require a discipline-specific understanding of AI. Therefore, my teaching explicitly addresses the challenges students are likely to encounter. As previously mentioned, the unreliability of AI's fabricated references becomes an important foundation for developing academic integrity and research literacy.

I encourage students to prioritise meaning and personal voice in their writing. Whilst AI can support grammatical accuracy, I emphasise that clarity of argument and authenticity of perspective are central to postgraduate work in TESOL. To help students recognise AI-generated writing, I draw attention to common linguistic markers such as the dash (-), which is used instead of a comma or a connecting part of speech (and, or). The overuse of the present participle, which often replaces defining and non-defining relative clauses. Outdated language, for example 'since time in memorial' to articulate historical facts. Generic phrasing that is often environment based, for example, 'in this vast ecosystem / diverse landscape' instead of a more appropriate phrase like 'in the wider disciplinary context'. Finally, long lists of examples associated to one area, when three examples are used in traditional grammar structures, which they probably studied in school. These discussions help students develop a critical awareness of AI's stylistic tendencies.

Practical engagement is also addressed. We work together on crafting effective prompts that explore how being specific and detailed influences the quality of AI outputs. I demonstrate how vague prompts produce generic responses, which may offer positive reinforcement even when output is incorrect. To develop students' evaluative skills, I ask them to critique AI-generated lesson plans alongside published TESOL materials. This comparison helps them identify weaknesses in pedagogical reasoning, sequencing, and learner appropriateness. For example, whilst published materials were pitched at an appropriate level, provided clear grammar explanations, challenged students cognitively and provided ready to use materials, AI-generated activities were often overly simplistic with inappropriate language levels. AI reading-comprehension answers could be lifted from texts and activities were suggested without resources, which created additional work for teachers.

I point out that AI cannot replace experiential learning. For example, in a module to develop intercultural communicative competence, I explain that fabricated scenarios

generated by AI lack the depth, unpredictability, and insight that come from genuine human engagement. I reinforce this by questioning students about the procedures used to set up their intercultural exchange, where students need to justify and demonstrate authentic research.

Finally, I encourage students to consider the environmental implications of AI technologies. This includes, the building of data centres, the electrical energy needed to run them and the water needed to cool them. As Li et al. (2025, p. 56) observe, "*GPT-3 needs to 'drink' (that is, consume) a 500ml bottle of water for roughly 10–50 medium-length responses, depending on when and where it is deployed.*" Therefore, the students are encouraged to critically reflect on the sustainability of AI in educational practice.

Through these practices, I introduce the institutional guidelines but also AI traits that aim to help students understand a little more about what AI does. However, I need to question whether my input helps students develop AI literacy which is suitable for MA TESOL education and their future careers.

Student AI Literacy Development: What I Taught Versus What They Learned

Two international MA TESOL students from Georgia (S1) and Bangladesh (S2) were selected purposively for interview. Both had experienced the same AI input, which provided a context for a comparison of their perceptions and experiences of AI use. Although the sample was small, I aimed to generate detailed insights into the students' experiences and perspectives to understand more about their AI literacy development. Students received the following questions before a 40-minute online interview, where ethical permission to record and use their responses for research purposes was gained.

1. What do you know about AI?
2. What can you do with AI?
3. What can't you do with AI?
4. How do you use AI?
5. How does using AI make you feel?
6. Why do you use AI?
7. What do you consider when you use AI?
8. How confident are you about your AI use?
9. Has your use of AI changed since you started using it?
10. What guidance do you think you need for using AI?
11. What is an example of good use of AI for you?

Table 1

Themes and Direct Quotes that Emerged from S1 and S2 Interview Transcripts

Theme	S1	S2
Conceptual Understanding	Shows <i>surface-level</i> conceptual knowledge which is descriptive rather than analytical. • Defines AI as “artificial intelligence... there are different types and large language models” • Mentions environmental impact: “it uses a lot of water... consumes a lot of energy.”	Demonstrates <i>general</i> <i>functional</i> understanding. • Describes AI as “artificial intelligence... to make life easier... it helps everyone to solve their own problems.” • Differentiates AI from search engines: “AI tries to answer specific things... we can personalise, customise our queries.”
Perceived Usefulness	Views AI as extremely fast and efficient: • “in seconds it can generate anything,” • “the fastest machine ever,” • “least time consuming.”	Views AI as helpful mainly for small tasks (translation, vocabulary). Not positioned as a productivity tool for academic work.
Critical Evaluation	Highly sceptical of outputs: • “it might just lie to you,” • “you never know whether it’s true,” • “it’s almost never reliable because it’s biased.” Emphasises verification: • “double check with valid and reliable sources.”	Strong verification habits: • “I should look for it in other articles... I do not completely trust the AI.” Checks translations: • “I go to Cambridge dictionary... then I match the definition.” Recognises hallucinations: • “no references are found on Google Scholar.”
Dependence on Prior Knowledge	Strong constructivist stance: • “you need general knowledge,” • “if you don’t know anything, you just won’t know,” • “I find a lot of mistakes.”	Less explicit but checks outputs because he lacks trust. Relies on external sources rather than prior knowledge.
Academic Use of AI	Very limited: • “in academia, it can’t do much,” • “just proofreading... that’s it.” • Rejects research and lesson planning as “terrible” and “completely stupid.”	Avoids academic writing: • “I am very much afraid of using AI while I am doing my academic work.” • Avoids research tasks because “it might lead to some wrong ways.”
Risk Awareness	Fears misinformation, bias, and cognitive decline: • “people... started to think like AI,” • “less analytical and logical.”	Strong risk sensitivity: • “it cannot thoroughly realise the human condition,” • “I was told that I had plagiarised... but I didn’t use AI,”
Emotional Orientation	Strong negative affect: • “it makes you feel lazy,” • “it makes you feel low,” • “I’m scared of AI”	Cautious and anxious: • “in the past I didn’t want to use AI... now I am being more confident... but I avoid using AI.”
Guidance Needs	Prefers human mediation: • “I’d rather a person explain it to me,” • “personal guidance is much better,” • “you need human guidance.”	Explicitly requests teacher guidance: • “teachers should give proper guidance... what you can accept and what you cannot.”

The interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data were read to identify initial patterns of meaning. Segments of text relevant to the research focus were then assigned descriptive codes (for example; distrust of AI outputs, verification practices, fear of plagiarism, and need for teacher support). Then, the codes were compared across the two transcripts and grouped into broader categories based on conceptual similarity. Through an iterative process, eight themes captured how the students understood, used, evaluated, and responded to AI. Table 1 presents the eight themes, which are supported by direct student quotes.

S1 and S2 indicate emerging but cautious AI literacy development, albeit with different development profiles. **S1** is a highly critical, emotionally resistant, selective user. Her strong scepticism limits her integrating AI in academic studies. Alternatively, S2 is cautious, risk-aware and verification-oriented. He lacks confidence and avoids using AI for academic studies because he fears error and being accused of academic misconduct.

Findings demonstrate that from my instructional input, neither S1 nor S2 developed confident or pedagogically grounded AI literacy for MA TESOL, which highlights a gap between my teaching intentions and learner outcomes. The students did not internalise AI as a pedagogical tool but as a risk-laden technology that required avoidance. This mismatch highlights the need to move from compliance of university regulations and critical evaluation of AI outputs to a more pedagogically grounded approach that helps students develop AI literacy, which is informed, reflective, and context-sensitive.

Reframing AI literacy in MA TESOL

Reframing AI literacy in MA TESOL requires shifting from a compliance-driven, risk-averse model toward a more negotiated, emergent, and co-constructed understanding of how teachers and students learn to work with AI.

Co-constructed AI literacy can reframe development not as something delivered to students, but as something built with them through shared inquiry, dialogue, and reflective practice. The interview findings make this need clear. Both S1 and S2 demonstrate emerging but cautious AI literacy, shaped not by empowerment but by fear, mistrust, and uncertainty. S1's belief that AI "might just lie to you" and S2's fear of being accused of plagiarism "I was told that I had plagiarised... but I didn't use AI" show that students are not just lacking skills but believe that they are working in a high-stakes environment.

In a co-constructed model, students' existing beliefs, emotions, and experiences become starting points rather than obstacles. S1's insistence that "you need general knowledge" and S2's habit of verifying definitions through the Cambridge Dictionary show that students already possess evaluative strategies that can be used, shared, and refined. Scaffolding is needed to design structured, supported learning experiences that help students gradually move from uncertainty and avoidance toward confident, reflective, and pedagogically informed engagement with AI. Classroom activities could involve collective use, where AI-generated explanations are compared, hallucinated references evaluated and prompts revised to improve outputs. The activities would position the development of AI literacy as emergent and negotiated rather than prescriptive.

Co-construction also requires bottom-up, context-sensitive pedagogy. MA TESOL students bring diverse linguistic identities, cultural backgrounds, and teaching philosophies, all of which shape how they interpret and use AI. Instead of imposing generic institutional rules, teachers can facilitate discussions where students articulate their own ethical boundaries, reflect on risks relevant to their contexts, and co-design classroom norms for AI use. This approach could transform AI use from a risk-laden technology into a pedagogical object of inquiry.

Finally, co-constructed AI literacy development aligns with process-based assessment, which recognises the process of learning rather than the product or final revised version for submission. Therefore, assessment can focus on students' reasoning by using annotated prompts, verification logs, reflective commentaries, and decision-making rationales about AI outputs. This would legitimise experimentation, and support the development of reflective, confident, and ethically grounded AI practices.

Implications for Teachers and Institutions

The reframing of AI literacy, which is negotiated, emergent, and co-constructed, has implications for both teachers and institutions. For teachers, the findings suggest a need to rethink assumptions about what it means for MA TESOL students to use AI effectively rather than expecting students to adopt institutional practices. Teachers need to create spaces where students' existing beliefs, anxieties, and evaluative habits become legitimate starting points for learning. Teachers can make collaborative inquiry a lesson focus by modelling strategies to evaluate AI outputs, encourage students to collaboratively analyse them and make critical reasoning visible. For example, students can create annotated prompt journals that document AI use, which include prompt development and reflections on their usefulness. Through discussion students and teachers can co-construct a criterion for effective academic prompting in

MA TESOL. Secondly, students can produce AI verification logs that document the accuracy of AI-generated summaries by cross-checking and recording outputs against academic sources. From this, common inaccuracies can be identified that evaluate and validate AI outputs. Another example is that students can share and discuss their reflective commentaries with peers and teachers to examine how subject specific knowledge shapes responses to AI outputs. A final example is that students can discuss their decision-making rationales that explain how and why AI outputs were retained, adapted, or rejected. The discussions can support the co-construction of AI literacy that develop a shared understanding of critical judgement, ethical decision-making, and the appropriateness of AI in academic work.

For institutions, the findings discourage over-standardisation. Uniform rules, rigid prohibitions and acceptable use statements reinforce the sense of assessment in higher education as being high-stakes that shape students' behaviour. However, the generic guidance is broad and needs to be applied to all subject areas. If value was placed on the process of learning rather than the final product then institutions could legitimise experimentation and help students develop reflective, ethically grounded AI practices. Institutions need to consider bottom-up, context-sensitive, guidance that has been developed by MA TESOL students and teachers. Guidance could then acknowledge the pedagogical realities of MA TESOL education.

Closing Reflection

In the introduction of this article, when an AI-generated bibliography appeared authoritative enough to convince postgraduate students that it was suitable for use, it becomes clear that the challenge facing MA TESOL education is not technological but epistemological. The fabricated references were reminders of how convincingly AI can imitate the surface features of academic discourse whilst bypassing the intellectual work that underpins it. The students became unsettled, not because the references were false, but because they seemed so real. The example justifies the findings from S1 and S2. Both students navigate AI with caution, not because they reject its usefulness, but because they sense the fragility of the boundary between credible knowledge and plausible invention.

Their responses highlight an uncomfortable truth. Despite structured teaching, institutional frameworks, and explicit warnings about hallucinations, some students still experience AI as a high-stakes, ambiguous space, where a misstep could compromise academic integrity or undermine their confidence as emerging professionals. This suggests that AI literacy cannot be reduced to rules, prohibitions, or technical demonstrations. It must instead be cultivated through shared inquiry,

reflective dialogue, and pedagogical practices that focus on uncertainty as much as competence.

As AI becomes increasingly embedded in academic and professional life, the MA TESOL field must ask not only how students can learn to detect fabricated outputs, but how teachers can help students develop the intellectual resilience to navigate a world where the line between the authentic and the artificial is no longer stable. The question I ask is: What forms of knowledge, judgement, and pedagogy does MA TESOL education need to develop to respond meaningfully to the evolving dynamics of AI-supported language education?

ORCID

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1495-0010>

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The participants were informed about the purpose of the study and gave their voluntary consent. The final paper was checked and approved by the participants.

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