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Eighth-Semester EFL Students' Views on the Use of Artificial Intelligence in Research Projects at the University of Benghazi

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines how AI affects eighth-semester English Language students at the University of Benghazi during their research projects. To explore how AI supports their research, ten students participated in semi-structured interviews. Through thematic analysis, two primary concerns emerged: difficulties with topic selection and challenges with the literature review. The findings, organized into two themes and nine sub-themes, show that AI helps students focus on topics, streamline literature reviews, and enhance writing. Overall, the study finds that AI is essential to academic work and offers strategies for effectively embedding it into research.

Keywords*: research topic, artificial intelligence, literature review, thematic analysis, interviews*

Abbreviations Used: *S - Students, R - Researcher, EFL- English as a foreign language*

ملخص الدراسة

تناول هذا البحث النوعي تأثير الذكاء الاصطناعي على طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية في الفصل الثامن بجامعة بنغازي أثناء إعدادهم لمشاريع التخرج. شارك عشرة طلاب في مقابلات شبه منظمة لمعرفة كيف يدعم الذكاء الاصطناعي الطلاب خلال بحثهم و أظهر التحليل الموضوعي أن الطلاب يواجهون صعوبة في اختيار الموضوع ومشكلات في مراجعة الأدبيات. كما توضح نتائج البحث، التي قُسمت إلى قسمين رئيسيين وتسعة أقسام فرعية، أن الذكاء الاصطناعي يساعد الطلاب في تحديد مواضيعهم بشكل أفضل.

الكلمات المفتاحية: موضوع البحث، الذكاء الاصطناعي، مراجعة الأدبيات، التحليل الموضوعي، مقابلات

1. Introduction

The research project is a required course for all eighth-semester students at the University of Benghazi before graduation. Many students struggle with choosing a topic, gathering sources, and writing literature reviews. In Libya, access to up-to-date research is often limited. This restricts the research process and makes it hard to produce accurate research (Elashhab, 2018). AI can also help improve students' language skills, such as writing and grammar, and enhance vocabulary (Ma et al., 2024). Building on these challenges, previous research has investigated how AI can specifically assist students in overcoming academic obstacles. Previous research indicates that AI supports students in developing their research projects, from topic selection to literature review writing (Ma et al., 2024; Ramadhanti & Anjaniputra, 2025; Sarıca & Deneme

Gençoğlu, 2025). This study considers eighth-semester students' views on how AI improves their research.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

1. To explore students' views on reliance of AI in choosing their research topic.

2. To investigate their views on using AI to write up their literature review section in research.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Libyan EFL students at the University of Benghazi Faculty of Languages must complete a research project before graduation, usually in the eighth-semester. These students often lack knowledge of research methods because there is no preparatory course. They are told to choose a topic and read about it, but facilities are lacking. This lack reduces student innovation.

1.3 Limitation of the Study

This study explores the views of eighth-semester EFL students in the English Department using a qualitative, non-interventional approach. Because the sample includes only these students, the results apply only to this group and therefore cannot be generalised.

1.4 Contribution to Knowledge

This research provides insight into how eighth-semester EFL students in the University of Benghazi use AI in research projects. For the first time in this context, it explores how AI affects student performance in research projects. Previous studies have not explored this specific impact. Understanding these contributions requires reviewing related literature, which will be addressed in the next section.

2. Literature Review

However, the recent innovation in Artificial Intelligence (AI) has had a significant impact on research by scholars, especially in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) study. Most studies have examined students' perceptions of the usefulness of AI tools, such as ChatGPT, in their research. The results indicate that students studying in a foreign context believe that AI software is beneficial in the research process, especially for those who are not trained in academic writing (Sarıca & Deneme Gençoğlu, 2025; Ramadhanti & Anjaniputra, 2025). Studies on the research process have shown that AI can support academic writing and structure ideas, for EFL students who are willing to start their projects (Ma et al., 2024). Additionally, research indicates a high demand for AI in the literature review section, where students generate ideas, organise main points, and develop their language skills (Ramadhanti & Anjaniputra, 2025; Sarıca & Deneme Gençoğlu, 2025). AI minimises stress in writing and enhances students' confidence. However, ongoing concerns remain about whether AI negatively affects students' critical thinking skills (Zhang, 2025).

3. Methodology

The interview questions covered two main themes: students' reliance on artificial intelligence in selecting research topics and composing literature reviews. These two main themes encompass nine sub-themes, including resistance tools, institutional & moral concerns, assisting tools, ideas for generation, methods for maintaining academic integrity, reliance on ChatGPT, an assisting way to find information, an assisting way in APA citation and reliance on traditional teaching.

The qualitative method of thematic analysis is grounded in a constructivist or interpretivist approach, which holds that individuals' experiences are shaped by their social environment (Burr, 1995). This philosophical basis supports the use of thematic analysis, as the method specifically seeks to understand the social and cultural environment rather than individual feelings. Building on this foundation, this method seeks to explain the environment for the benefit of individuals and follows a systematic framework for identifying themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, as cited in Elashhab, 2018).

The steps utilized in the thematic analysis framework are outlined in the following points:

Phase 1: Familiarize yourself with the data through reading and by noting initial ideas.

Phase 2: Identify key points within the data and group similar points together.

Phase 3: Consolidate codes into themes and collect all relevant data associated with each theme.

Phase 4: Check that your themes fit well with the data and make a map of the themes.

Phase 5: Define and describe each theme, linking them to the study's results.

Phase 6: Prepare the report, incorporating examples to support the findings.

3.1 Sample

Participants were recruited from the English Department at the University of Benghazi's Faculty of Languages. The initial aim was to interview 15 students; ultimately, 10 eighth-semester students in Benghazi City were interviewed.

3.2 Data Analysis and Discussion

The data from the semi-structured interviews were analysed using thematic analysis, based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. In the first phase, the researcher read the interview responses several times to become familiar with the data and note initial observations. In the second phase, initial codes were generated by manually identifying key parts of the data concerning how students use and view artificial intelligence (AI) in their academic projects. Coding was conducted systematically across the entire dataset.

Table 1.1

Students' reliance on AI when choosing their research topic

Theme	Theme description
Students' reliance on AI when choosing their research topic	How students rely on AI when choosing their topic

Responses from the eight-semester students' interviews provided sufficient information to determine whether students use AI in conducting their research in each semester. The analysis indicated that the students relied on AI when choosing their topic within this main theme. The theme of choosing their research topic in their research project comprised five sub-themes: resistance tools, institutional and moral concerns, assisting tools, ideas for generation, and a method to preserve academic integrity, as shown in Table 1.2. These sub-themes were generated thematically from the research questions and actual data.

Table 1.2

Eighth-semester sub-themes of theme one (Students' reliance on AI when choosing their research topic)

Sub-theme	Sub-theme description
RT	Resistance tools
IMC	Institutional and moral concerns
AT	Assisting tool
IG	Ideas for generation
MAI	Method to preserve academic integrity

Some students demonstrated resistance to AI tools (RT). When questioned about the significance of AI, they responded:

R: How did you find using AI to choose your research project? S1: *I don't use it at all.*

S 3: *I don't use it much*.

Additionally, institutional and moral concerns were prominent, particularly fears about accusations of academic dishonesty and discouragement from supervisors. Two students in their

eighth-semester reported that they do not use AI to select their research topics, citing Institutional and Moral Concerns (IMC). S:5 *My supervisor told me not to use it because it might look like cheating.* S:6 *No, I never use it.*

Conversely, some students perceived AI as an assisting tool (AT), primarily for dealing with writing challenges, rather than as a replacement for their own work, as indicated by their responses:

S3: *Yes, it is very useful. S4: It is important for my research topic.* S7: Yes, I use it even though I was told not to. I often *struggle to write, so I ask ChatGPT for help.*

When asked about the use of AI for generating ideas (IG), students responded:

S3: *It helps me find topics and ideas*.

The analysis indicated that some students were aware of strategies to maintain academic integrity. They considered AI to be essential in the current research process, a method to preserve academic integrity (MAI). They provided the following responses.

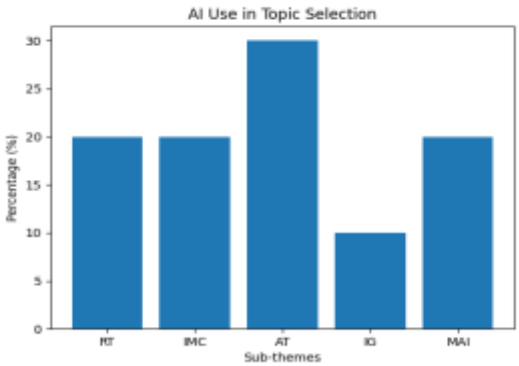
S 9: *Yes, I do, and then I rephrase it as I was advised to in our courses*.

S:10 *Yes, I do. Who doesn't use AI nowadays*?

These results align with previous research by Sipayung et al. (2025) who found out that many students considered AI as a useful tool, but emphasized the importance of using it judiciously. Most students (30%) use AI as a supportive tool, while ethical concerns and resistance remain significant (40%) as demonstrated in the following (Figure 1.0) below:

Figure 1.0

AI use in choosing a topic



Responses from the eight-semester students' interviews provided sufficient information to determine whether students in eight -semester use AI in writing up their literature review. The analysis indicated that the students relied on AI when writing their literature review within this main theme. The theme of writing their literature review (Table 1.3) in their research project

comprised four sub-themes: reliance on ChatGPT in academic writing, assists them to find information, assists them in APA citing, and rely on traditional research as shown in Table 1.4. These sub-themes were generated thematically from the research questions and actual data.

Table 1.3

Students*' reliance on AI when writing their literature review*

Theme	Theme description
Students' reliance on AI when writing their literature review	How students rely on AI when writing their literature review

The thematic analysis of students' responses identified four main themes regarding the use of ChatGPT in academic work. Firstly, eight-semester students often relied on ChatGPT in their academic writing and research. Many said they used it to improve their writing, organise their research, and handle complex tasks (RACS). For example, one student said, "I couldn't have done it without ChatGPT," and another stated that it helps "to summarise long paragraphs and improve writing quality." Second, students used ChatGPT to find information and clarify concepts (AFI). They said it helped them understand research ideas and access academic information. For example, one student asked ChatGPT about a "research gap," while another used it to look up definitions and past studies. Third, some students used ChatGPT to help with APA-style referencing and citations, demonstrating its usefulness for academic tasks (AAPA). Finally, a few students did not use ChatGPT, preferring traditional sources such as journals over general internet searches (RTR).

Table 1.4

Eighth-semester sub-themes of theme two (Students' reliance on AI when writing their literature review)

Sub-theme	Sub-theme description
RACS	Reliance on chat GPT in academic writing support
AFI	Assist them to find information
AAPA	Assist them in APA citing
RTR	Rely on traditional research

The results suggest that two students in their eighth-semester reported relying on AI for their literature review chapter (RACS). For example, S: 1 said, *yes, it helps me overcome problematic areas in research*. Student 4 also mentioned, *I just asked it to help me with the framework, and it did a great job. For example, the factors affecting speaking fluency*. This supports the students' encouragement of this sub-theme. Moving to another sub-theme, some students perceived AI as assisting them to find information (AFI), as revealed by their responses. When the researcher (R) asked the interviewees (S) about the importance of AI in writing their literature review section, they responded:

R: How does AI help you write up your literature review?

S5: *When my supervisor asked me to search for definitions and previous studies in teaching grammar, I just went to ChatGPT.*

S8: *It summarizes long paragraphs and improves the quality of my writing*

S10: *My supervisor mentioned the term "research gap." I asked ChatGPT.*

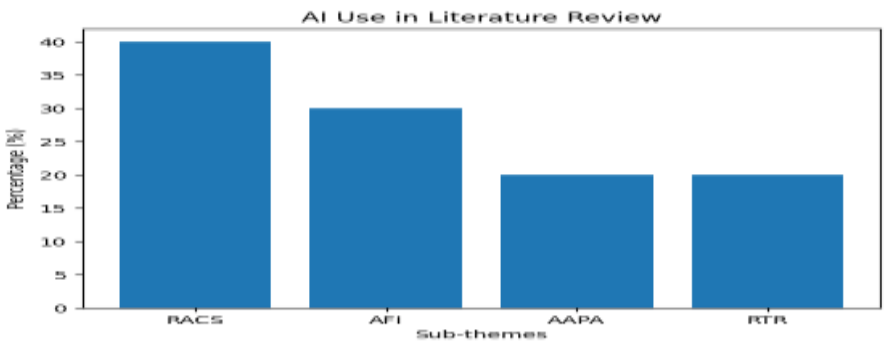
This demonstrates that students use ChatGPT to improve clarity, accuracy, and correctness in academic writing. Moving forward to the next sub-theme (AAPA), students described how AI assists them in APA citing. Two students mentioned that it is essential to verify the accuracy of the referencing and citation system, as outlined in the following responses. S2 stated that: *It is definitely important to find out if my references are ok.*

S9: *I look up the correct APA citation format and use it*.

In the fourth sub-theme, rely on traditional research (RTR), some students denied using AI in their literature chapters and instead preferred searching the web and consulting field journals. For example, S3 explained that she never uses ChatGPT. Student 7 prefers searching for journal articles. These responses show that some students do not trust ChatGPT. AI is widely used for academic support (70%), particularly for writing and finding information. In summary, many students rely on AI for academic, technical, and conceptual support, while a few prefer traditional approaches (figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2

AI use in literature review



4. Conclusion

The thematic analysis of the data shows that Libyan EFL learners in their eighth- semester of study at the University of Benghazi, Faculty of Languages, English department have different views towards artificial intelligence in their research project. A number of them discourage its use due to concerns about academic dishonesty, while others are in favor of AI due to their inexperience in conducting a research project and insufficient research methodology skills.

5. Recommendations for Future Practice

The findings indicate that the English Department in the faculty of languages should provide more intensive research methodology courses and training sessions prior to students' final semester. Organising workshops focused on ethical considerations related to the use of artificial intelligence (AI) is also recommended. Course instructors should likely encourage students to use AI judiciously to address concerns about plagiarism and academic misconduct. Encouraging responsible AI use enables students to benefit from these tools without becoming overly reliant on them. Finally, more research with larger, more diverse groups is needed to better understand how AI influences students' research performance in the eighth-semester.

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Appendix

Do you think AI can help you with your research project?

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How did you find using AI to choose your research project? Do you use it when you are choosing your research topic?

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Can you explain further?

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What about your literature review ?

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How does AI help you write your literature review?

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