

Perceptions of Generative AI for Literary Text Interpretation Among Pre-Service TESL Teachers in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) tools are becoming increasingly common in how pre-service English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers engage with literary texts. However, this usage creates a pedagogical tension with Reader-Response Theory (RRT) which advocates for authentic, learner-driven meaning-making rather than passive consumption. Drawing on the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) alongside RRT, this study examined how pre-service TESL teachers perceive the usefulness and ease of use of GenAI in literary interpretation. A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was employed at a Malaysian public university, involving a questionnaire with 125 TESL undergraduates and semi-structured interviews with eight purposefully selected participants. Survey findings revealed highly positive perceptions of GenAI's usefulness (73.6%–87.2% agreement), particularly for summarising texts into clear main ideas. Perceived ease of use was also positive but more cautious (64.8%–79.2%), with the lowest agreement regarding the idea that GenAI requires little mental effort. Thematic analysis of the interview data clarified these patterns. Participants valued GenAI as a bridge to decode complex language and cultural references, and to organise ideas, explore alternative perspectives, and validate interpretations. However, a profound tension emerged regarding authorship. While GenAI enhanced output depth, learners feared cognitive dependency and a loss of interpretive originality. Furthermore, while technically accessible, GenAI's effective application required iterative prompt engineering and introduced a substantial new cognitive burden of verifying hallucinated or superficial outputs. The study concludes that GenAI is most useful when treated as an interpretive scaffold rather than an absolute authority on literary meaning. Consequently, TESL teacher education should promote critical AI literacy so that GenAI supports, rather than replaces, learners' own meaning-making.

Keywords: Generative Artificial Intelligence, Reader-Response Theory, Technology Acceptance Model, Literary Interpretation, Pre-service TESL teachers

INTRODUCTION

In the context of Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) programme in Malaysia, modern literature pedagogy heavily emphasises the Reader-Response Theory (RRT) in the teaching and learning process of literature (Kamlun et al., 2026). This approach emphasises learners' active participation in the process of meaning-making or interpretation by drawing upon their own experiences, emotions and cultural background to respond to literary tasks (Rosenblatt, 1995). However, many of these ESL future teachers encounter challenges when engaging with literary texts due to their complex linguistic structure, implicit meanings and unfamiliar cultural contexts which may significantly diminish their confidence with the texts and hinder their ability to formulate independent interpretations (Jais & Ismail, 2023). Consequently, these learners may be reluctant to engage with literary texts that serve as a complex pedagogical instrument to develop critical thinking, cultural empathy, and interpretative skills (Dewi & Asrifan, 2024).

To address the existing pedagogical challenges, the rapid integration of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) presents both new opportunities and significant complexities. GenAI tools such as ChatGPT and Gemini employ large language models that can instantly generate summaries of difficult literary texts as well as explaining unfamiliar cultural context that help reduce learners' cognitive load and improve understanding of the texts (Bochra & Hatem, 2024; Chan & Wong, 2025). While these tools can effectively scaffold

comprehension, they also introduce a critical pedagogical paradox within the RRT framework. Uncritical use of GenAI in literary interpretations may recast reading as mere information retrieval than aesthetic reading which contradicts the core principle of RRT that posits learners' background, emotions and experiences to construct meaning (Ilyas et al., 2025; Rosenblatt, 1995). When students treat Artificial intelligence (AI) interpretations as substitutes for their own transactions with the text, their interpretive agency and independent thought may be diminished (Xu et al., 2025).

Recognising this tension, it is vital to understand how pre-service teachers who are also future educators navigate this issues as the current national policies like the *Rancangan Pendidikan Malaysia* (RPM 2026-2035) mandate the integration of AI in the learning and teaching process (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2026). While a growing body of research has examined the use of GenAI tools in tertiary level, existing research mainly focuses on overall language learning outcomes and students' perceptions of AI in general academic settings with limited attention given to literary interpretation activities (Marzuki et al., 2023; Şimşek et al., 2025). Guided by the Technology Acceptance Model and informed by Reader-Response Theory, this study addresses this empirical gap by examining learners' perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use of GenAI tools in engaging with literary texts, while considering how such tools can support literature learning without compromising interpretive autonomy, creativity or critical engagement. Therefore, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are pre-service TESL teachers' perceptions of the perceived usefulness of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) tools in supporting literary text interpretation?
2. What are pre-service TESL teachers' perceptions of the perceived ease of use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) tools in supporting literary text interpretation?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Role of Generative Artificial Intelligence in ESL Learning

GenAI tools such as ChatGPT, Gemini and Copilot can be defined as machines that rely on Large Language Models to implement Natural Language Processing, generating texts and answering inquiries that support language learning (Feuerriegel et al., 2023; Law, 2024). In recent years, these tools have become increasingly common in English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching and learning, offering learners more immediate and personalised language support (Al-Kadi & Ali, 2024). The use of GenAI tools among Malaysian ESL university students has also become increasingly prevalent for their ability to summarise readings, translate texts, brainstorm ideas and provide immediate feedback on writing and language usage (Ismail, 2024; Singh et al., 2024).

While the use of GenAI in ESL learning presents potential advantages, it also introduces significant academic and ethical challenges. These tools can ease learners' cognitive burden and boost their confidence when engaging with literary texts by providing instant feedback. However, researchers caution against excessive dependency on AI-generated responses, as it can lead to "intellectual laziness" and weaken students' critical thinking, creativity and independent analytical skills (Xu et al., 2025). Moreover, concerns regarding academic integrity, algorithmic bias and hallucination further suggest that GenAI should be used as a scaffold for learning rather than a replacement for students' own thinking and effort (Godwin-Jones, 2024; Tran et al., 2025).

Literary Interpretation and ESL Learners' Challenges

Within the TESL context, engagement with literary texts such as poetry, short stories and novels may help student teachers develop critical thinking, interpretive competence, cultural awareness and the pedagogical skills necessary to teach literature effectively in secondary ESL classrooms (Dewi & Asrifan, 2024; Ukat & Ismail, 2022). Despite its importance, many learners struggle to understand and interpret literary texts independently, as such texts are often dense and contain complicated language structures, figurative meanings, archaism and cultural references unfamiliar to learners (Jais & Ismail, 2023).

These linguistic and structural complexities impose a significant cognitive load, especially on those with lower English proficiency, often forcing them to focus entirely on surface-level decoding rather than engaging with deeper meaning (Xu et al., 2025). As both learners and future teachers, pre-service teachers' difficulties in comprehending texts are directly related to their professional readiness (Abdullah et al., 2023). In future classrooms, these potential teachers may tend to resort to teacher-centred explanations and fixed meanings, depriving literature of its exploratory and aesthetic qualities (Xu et al., 2025).

Reader-Response Theory and Its Relevance to AI Integration

Reader-Response Theory (RRT) shifts literary learning away from fixed meanings, highlighting learners' role as active meaning-makers. Rosenblatt (1995) explains that reading is a transactional process in which meaning is generated by the dynamic interaction between the text and the readers' personal, social and cultural experiences. A reader-centred approach is vital, as it promotes the use of personal experience and culture, making literary texts more approachable and personally relevant (Ilyas et al., 2025).

As the integration of GenAI becomes more relevant to reader-centred approaches, it presents both opportunities and challenges. From a positive perspective, GenAI can assist ESL students by addressing language and cultural hurdles that may hinder their meaningful engagement with a text (Dakamsih et al., 2025). However, RRT also emphasises the importance of meaning being created by the reader, which can be compromised when AI offers instant interpretations for learners. This may lead to a loss of genuine emotional, personal, and reflective engagement with literature (Chan & Wong, 2025; Godwin-Jones, 2024).

Generative AI in Literary Interpretation and Students' Perceptions

Recent studies show that learners and pre-service teachers tend to view GenAI in two contrasting ways when it comes to literary interpretation. On the positive side, GenAI can be perceived as a valuable assistant, particularly in engaging with challenging linguistic structures and complex concepts within literary works. Studies report that GenAI tools help break down complex sentences into manageable chunks, translate archaic vocabulary into modern English, and visualise abstract symbols for easier understanding when engaging with classic literary texts (Chan & Wong, 2025; Dakamsih et al., 2025; Xu et al., 2025). It can also offer learners alternative potential meanings and help them form a more reflective and evaluative reading process by comparing AI-generated ideas with evidence in the text (Bellot et al., 2025).

At the same time, learners are mindful of the limitations of GenAI in terms of originality, authenticity, and personal interpretation. While these learners recognise GenAI's potential to streamline and simplify literary analysis, they remain concerned about excessive reliance on the tool and becoming less confident in their own interpretive agency (Chung & Jeong, 2024; Pokrivcakova, 2023). AI-generated responses are often viewed as lacking the personal, cultural, and emotional depth central to reader-response interpretation (Godwin-Jones, 2024). While GenAI is found to be user-friendly for trainee teachers in the Malaysian context, they exhibit reluctance to fully trust GenAI's responses for more nuanced literary tasks (Chang et al., 2024). This leaves learners with mixed emotions — using GenAI as a valuable learning tool yet remaining wary of treating its output as a true reflection of their literary knowledge.

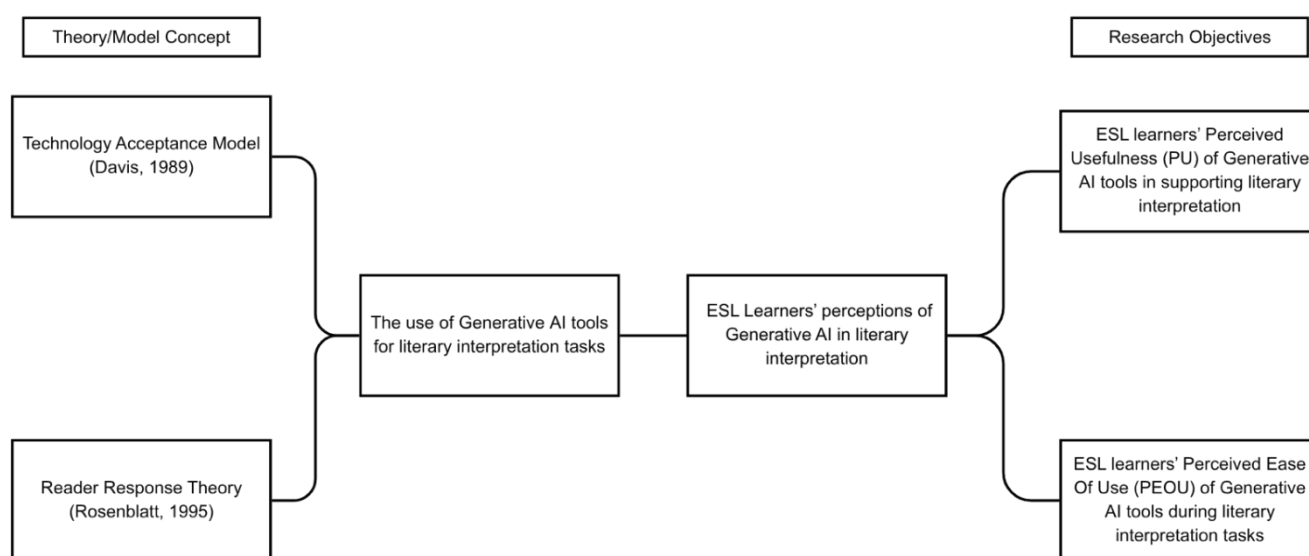
Technology Acceptance Model and Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), developed by Davis (1989), which explains individuals' inclination or reluctance to adopt new technology. According to TAM, user attitudes are driven by two main constructs: Perceived Usefulness (PU) and Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU). PU refers to the degree to which using a technology can enhance user performance, while PEOU refers to the degree to which users find the technology effortless to use (Davis, 1989). Recent studies in educational contexts validate the role of PU and PEOU as key determinants of GenAI adoption, significantly influencing learners' intent to use such tools for educational purposes (Alsakaker, 2025; Şimşek et al., 2025). Although extensions of TAM exist, the basic elements of PU and PEOU consistently influence students' initial perceptions of the relevance and usability of a technology.

In the context of literary interpretation, TAM provides a highly relevant analytical lens. For ESL learners, PU is linked to the ability to use GenAI tools to understand themes, symbols, figurative language, and cultural references. PEOU, on the other hand, represents learners' experiences regarding the accessibility and usability of such tools in performing complex interpretive tasks. Although TAM has been widely used in general educational technology studies, significant empirical gaps remain in its direct application to literature learning contexts.

To address this gap, the study's conceptual framework in Figure 1 below integrates TAM as the main analytical lens and RRT as the pedagogical context. While TAM evaluates learners' perceptions of GenAI's usefulness and ease of use, RRT positions these learners as active meaning-makers who rely on personal experiences, emotions, and culture to interpret texts. As linguistic barriers and cognitive overload tend to hinder independent interpretation, GenAI can help address these challenges, but at the same time, it also threatens learner autonomy and authentic meaning-making. Together, these integrated frameworks guide the investigation into how ESL learners navigate the opportunities and pedagogical tensions of AI-assisted literary interpretation.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework



Source: Author, adapted from Davis (1989) and Rosenblatt (1995)

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods single-case study design. According to Creswell (2021), mixed-methods designs help researchers capture extensive perceptual patterns alongside detailed contextual explanations. The design consisted of two phases. The study began with a quantitative phase to identify general trends in how participants perceived GenAI tools, followed by a qualitative phase designed to provide a deeper understanding of the findings and explain the patterns observed. The integration of both data types allowed the study to develop a more comprehensive and meaningful understanding of GenAI use within the context of a public university in Malaysia. This design, framed as a single-case study, was especially appropriate for examining how and why this phenomenon occurred within its particular educational setting (Yin, 2017).

Participants

The survey respondents and interview participants of this study were TESL pre-service teachers or TESL undergraduate students from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). In the first quantitative phase, purposive

sampling was used to specifically select Year 2 and Year 3 students enrolled in the TESL programme who studied literature as a minor in the Faculty of Education. As Etikan et al. (2016) noted, purposive sampling helps researchers obtain relevant and insightful data to achieve study objectives. Using the sample size determination guidelines of Krejcie and Morgan (1970), a final sample of 125 respondents was successfully achieved.

For the qualitative phase, purposeful maximal variation sampling was used to select eight participants (coded P1–P8) from the survey respondents. The selection criteria included being an undergraduate TESL student at UKM, having prior experience using GenAI tools to interpret literary texts, and being willing to reflect on their interpretive processes. This approach assisted in collecting a variety of responses, including typical, extreme and outlier cases (Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

Research Instruments

This study employed a structured questionnaire along with a semi-structured interview protocol based on the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) to collect data. The questionnaire used a 5-point Likert scale (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree) to elicit measurable responses. Items corresponding to the Perceived Usefulness (PU) and Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU) constructs were adapted from established TAM studies by Şimşek et al. (2025) and Hriňák (2024). A pilot test was carried out with 30 pre-service TESL students to test item clarity, response patterns and possible bias, after which necessary refinements were made. The anonymous online survey further minimised response bias. The reliability of the instrument was measured using Cronbach's alpha, with a minimum acceptable value of 0.70 (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). The pilot study revealed high internal consistency, with alpha coefficients of 0.931 for PU and 0.822 for PEOU. For the qualitative phase, the semi-structured interview protocol was used to further explore the patterns identified in the survey findings.

Data Collection Procedures

Before data collection, ethical principles were observed and informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring anonymity and the right to withdraw at any time. The quantitative questionnaire was distributed online via Google Forms and remained accessible for two to three weeks, with reminders sent to optimise response rates. Following preliminary analysis of the survey data, the eight selected interview participants were contacted. The semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face or online for 30–45 minutes each. Each interview session was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim immediately afterwards to ensure accuracy and facilitate data analysis.

Data Analysis Techniques

The quantitative data were analysed using SPSS software to generate descriptive statistics of frequencies and percentages. The qualitative data were analysed using the six-phase thematic analysis framework of Braun and Clarke (2006). To ensure methodological rigour and trustworthiness, the instrument was initially reviewed by three tertiary-level experts in TESL and literature pedagogy. Qualitative credibility was established through data triangulation, member checking and the maintenance of a detailed audit trail throughout the coding process. Finally, the quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated at the interpretation stage, allowing the study to develop a more complete understanding of participants' acceptance of GenAI tools.

Research Ethics

Prior to the data collection and analysis, all procedures involving human participants were conducted in accordance to UKM ethical conducts. All participants were given consent forms and reminded of their rights to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. All quantitative data were collected anonymously by using an online survey platform to ensure privacy and confidentiality. During the qualitative phase, pseudonyms (e.g., P1, P2) were assigned to all interview participants to protect their identities and any potentially identifying information was redacted from the verbatim transcripts. In addition, all digital data such as survey answers and audio recordings were kept on password protected files that could only be accessed by the researchers.

FINDINGS

Demographic Profile of Participants

The quantitative phase of this study involved 125 pre-service TESL teachers from UKM. The demographic data showed that the majority of the cohort was female (74.4%). The respondents were Year 2 (59.2%) and Year 3 (40.8%) undergraduates with the majority aged 19 to 23 years (86.4%). Crucially, all participants reported completing at least one literature-related course with half (50.4%) completing one to two courses and the remainder completing three or more. This guaranteed that all samples had sufficient academic experience to make meaningful assessments about the meaningful use of GenAI in literary interpretation.

Within this sample, eight participants were purposefully selected for the qualitative phase to provide maximal variation in linguistic background, academic standing, and AI integration practices. The subset comprised six local Malaysian students and two international students from China with various points of view on cross-cultural and cross-linguistic literary decoding. Their engagement with GenAI ranged from occasional, highly selective use to extensive reliance across multiple platforms (e.g., ChatGPT, Gemini, DeepSeek and NotebookLM). Table 1 presents the demographic and usage profiles of the subjects who were interviewed.

Table 1. Profile of Interview Participants

Participant	Year of Study & Background	Self-Reported GenAI Proficiency	Primary AI Tool Used
P1	Year 3, International (China)	Advanced	ChatGPT, DeepSeek
P2	Year 2, Local (Malaysia)	Beginner	ChatGPT
P3	Year 3, Local (Malaysia)	Intermediate	ChatGPT
P4	Year 3, Local (Malaysia)	Intermediate	ChatGPT
P5	Year 3, Local (Malaysia)	Advanced	ChatGPT
P6	Year 2, Local (Malaysia)	Advanced	ChatGPT, Gemini
P7	Year 2, Local (Malaysia)	Intermediate	ChatGPT, NotebookLM
P8	Year 2, International (China)	Advanced	ChatGPT, Gemini

Perceived Usefulness of GenAI Tools in Literary Text Interpretation (RQ1)

Table 2 presents the quantitative responses to the nine Perceived Usefulness (PU) items (N = 125). Overall, the data indicate a highly positive perception of the tools. Combined “Agree” and “Strongly Agree” responses ranged from 73.6% to 87.2% across all items.

The highest agreement was recorded for GenAI’s role in summarising texts into clear main ideas with 87.2%. Agreement of 82.4% was recorded for understanding complex literary language, identifying themes, interpreting texts more quickly, and exploring alternative interpretive perspectives.

Agreement of 80.0% was recorded for understanding symbolism/implicit meaning and for increased confidence in literary interpretation. The lowest agreement (73.6%) and highest neutrality (19.2%) were recorded for the accuracy and reliability of GenAI-generated information.

Table 2. Frequencies and Percentages for Perceived Usefulness of GenAI Tools (N = 125)

No.	Items	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	Using GenAI tool helps me understand complex literary language such as metaphors and figurative expressions.	3 (2.4%)	5 (4.0%)	14 (11.2%)	57 (45.6%)	46 (36.8%)
2	Using GenAI tool helps understand the cultural or historical context of the literary texts.	3 (2.4%)	4 (3.2%)	20 (16.0%)	53 (42.4%)	45 (36.0%)
3	Using GenAI tool helps me summarise literary texts into clear main ideas.	3 (2.4%)	2 (1.6%)	11 (8.8%)	58 (46.4%)	51 (40.8%)
4	Using GenAI tool helps me identify themes in literary texts more effectively.	4 (3.2%)	5 (4.0%)	13 (10.4%)	60 (48.0%)	43 (34.4%)
5	Using GenAI tool supports my understanding of symbolism and implicit meanings in literary texts.	1 (0.8%)	5 (4.0%)	19 (15.2%)	52 (41.6%)	48 (38.4%)
6	Using GenAI tool allows me to interpret literary texts more quickly.	1 (0.8%)	3 (2.4%)	18 (14.4%)	56 (44.8%)	47 (37.6%)
7	Using GenAI tool helps me explore alternative interpretive perspectives when analysing a literary text.	4 (3.2%)	5 (4.0%)	13 (10.4%)	61 (48.8%)	42 (33.6%)
8	Using GenAI tool increases my confidence when engaging in literary interpretation tasks.	2 (1.6%)	8 (6.4%)	15 (12.0%)	54 (43.2%)	46 (36.8%)
9	Using GenAI tool provides me with accurate and reliable information regarding literary texts.	3 (2.4%)	6 (4.8%)	24 (19.2%)	45 (36.0%)	47 (37.6%)

To explain this statistical pattern, the qualitative interview data provided deeper explanatory insights. Specifically, three distinct qualitative themes emerged regarding how pre-service teachers navigate the usefulness of these tools.

The first emerging theme was Theme 1: Simplifying Complex Language and Cultural Context. Participants described how they utilised GenAI to clarify challenging vocabulary, figurative language and unfamiliar cultural or historical references. P1 stated that AI could “break down the difficulties in many ways and explain them to us in an easier way”. Likewise, P7 commented that AI provided meaning explanations “in a more modern and relatable manner”. P6 and P8 reported using GenAI to access cultural background and native-speaker perspectives, while P8 also used GenAI for translation support due to limited English vocabulary. Some participants (P2, P5, P8) reported instances where GenAI’s cultural or emotional interpretations were inaccurate.

The next theme was Theme 2: Validating and Expanding Interpretive Ideas. Participants described using GenAI to organise their ideas, explore alternative viewpoints, and confirm their own interpretations. In this sense, GenAI functioned as a form of structural scaffolding, perspective expansion, and idea validation. For example, P5 used GenAI to structure “messy and not organised” ideas on one of the literary text that they needed to study,

The Kite Runner, while still adjusting the output “to fit my own understanding”. P6 said that GenAI minimised “tunnel vision” in analysis. Meanwhile, P3 described GenAI as reconfirming pre-existing ideas, while P2, P6, and P8 described using GenAI as a “discussion partner” through follow-up questioning.

The third theme was Theme 3: The Tension Between Synergy and Loss of Originality. The theme revealed that GenAI enhanced interpretive and creative processes for participants by allowing them to develop their interpretations collaboratively, but it also highlighted issues related to overreliance, cognitive dependency, and ambiguous ownership over the outputs. P4 stated that GenAI use produced more “depth” in their writing. Conversely, P1 reported that overreliance “spoils my motivation or curiosity,” while P2, P5, and P8 expressed concerns about reduced creativity or critical thinking. There was also a range of participants' perceptions regarding authorship. P4 and P2 preserved a feeling of ownership by means of active prompting and revision. P5 stated, “I can't fully say that it's 100% mine,” while P7 reported that “interpretations feel more like AI” for them.

Perceived Ease of Use of GenAI Tools in Literary Text Interpretation (RQ2)

Table 3 presents the quantitative responses to the six Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU) items (N = 125). Overall, the data indicates a positive perception, though slightly more tempered than perceived usefulness. The highest agreement was recorded for the clarity of interaction (79.2%), followed by the ease of formulating prompts (77.6%), the ease of learning (76.0%), and the ease of becoming skilful (76.0%). Agreement was noticeably lower regarding the ability to use GenAI without technical assistance (71.2%). Crucially, the lowest agreement (64.8%) and highest neutrality (24.8%) were recorded for the assertion that using GenAI tools does not require a lot of mental effort.

Table 3. Frequencies and Percentages for Perceived Ease of Use of GenAI Tools (N = 125)

No.	Items	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	Learning to use GenAI tools for literary text interpretation is easy for me.	1 (0.8%)	4 (3.2%)	25 (20.0%)	55 (44.0%)	40 (32.0%)
2	Interacting with GenAI tools during literary interpretation tasks is clear and understandable.	1 (0.8%)	4 (3.2%)	21 (16.8%)	63 (50.4%)	36 (28.8%)
3	I find it easy to formulate prompts or questions when using GenAI for literary text interpretation.	1 (0.8%)	5 (4.0%)	22 (17.6%)	59 (47.2%)	38 (30.4%)
4	It is easy for me to become skillful at using GenAI tools for literary interpretation.	1 (0.8%)	4 (3.2%)	25 (20.0%)	59 (47.2%)	36 (28.8%)
5	Using GenAI tools for literary interpretation does not require a lot of mental effort.	5 (4.0%)	8 (6.4%)	31 (24.8%)	46 (36.8%)	35 (28.0%)
6	I can use GenAI tools for literary text interpretation without needing technical assistance.	6 (4.8%)	10 (8.0%)	20 (16.0%)	50 (40.0%)	39 (31.2%)

To better explain these statistical trends, especially the more nuanced responses related to mental effort and technical limitations, the qualitative interview data offer three distinct explanatory themes.

The fourth theme that emerged was Theme 4: The Necessity of Iterative Prompt Engineering. While the survey results indicated that participants perceived prompt formulation as easy, the qualitative data indicated that learning how to prompt effectively involved a gradual process of moving from general to more specific instructions. Participants noted that the quality of the responses from GenAI heavily relied on the amount of detail and clarity in their prompts, frequently needing to revise their prompts multiple times to get the desired result. P1 emphasised that using the tools effectively required asking “in the right way,” while P5 stated that “the more detailed your prompt is, the more detailed the answer will be”. Interestingly, most participants developed their prompting skills on their own or learned them informally through peers and social media platforms such as TikTok and YouTube (P1, P3, P5, P7, P8). This suggests that, within the TAM framework, the perceived “ease of use” of GenAI is not entirely automatic. Instead, it is based on an acquired and iterative skill set.

Moreover, the fifth theme was Theme 5: Shifting Cognitive Effort to Verification. The quantitative finding that using GenAI still demands significant mental effort is explained by a shift in where cognitive load is applied. The participants reported that GenAI helped decrease the initial effort required for understanding and planning the task, but it also added an additional burden of critically reviewing and assessing the content. P5 and P6 described the initial generation stage as requiring “almost no effort” and said that it helped reduce the burden of lesson planning. However, P3 and P5 stressed the need to “double-check everything,” while P8 stated that the overall process “is not very easy” because of the continuous need to evaluate the responses. This ultimately led to P1 and P3 feeling the verification process was “mentally draining.” This highlights that GenAI does not eliminate the cognitive effort in literary interpretation. Rather, it shifts the effort from the early stage of meaning-making to the later stage of critical appraisal.

The last theme that emerged was Theme 6: Navigating Technical Hallucinations and Limitations. The participants' experiences with system limitations and fabricated content were a clear indicator of the lower survey agreement for technical independence. P3 gave an example where GenAI invented a non-existent character from the original literary text, while P8 reported receiving broken reference links and outputs containing “something right, something wrong, and something fake”. P6 also noted that the tool was less effective when working with local or lesser-known literary texts, as it generated far fewer insights. The practical issues also influenced the perceptions of ease of use. P1, P2, P4, and P5 experienced slow response time, buffering, or reduced output quality during free-tier use. Despite these challenges, participants showed strong technological resilience. Rather than stopping their use of GenAI, they adapted their prompting strategies and continued using the tools.

DISCUSSION

How Do Pre-Service TESL Teachers Perceive the Usefulness of GenAI Tools in Literary Text Interpretation?

The findings suggest that GenAI is perceived as useful mainly for its ability to scaffold literary interpretation, rather than as an authoritative source of meaning. The consistent level of agreement across items related to summarisation, language clarification and theme identification indicates that GenAI can significantly alleviate the cognitive burden of linguistic and cultural barriers in literary texts. This aligns with previous findings of how GenAI simplifies the understanding of figurative language and unfamiliar cultural contexts (Chan & Wong, 2025; Xu et al., 2025). Theme 1 from qualitative findings complements this understanding. The participants did not use GenAI just to find definitions. Rather, they employed it to interpret cultural messages, to make sense of ambiguous expressions and to translate ideas from the English language to their own native languages. This indicates that GenAI’s role as a “linguistic bridge” is not experienced in the same way by all learners. Instead, the usefulness of GenAI largely depends on the learners’ background and personal reading needs.

The findings in Theme 2 also build on Bellot et al.’s (2025) argument that GenAI can foster a more evaluative reading process. While earlier studies often describe this support as giving students access to alternative interpretations, the present findings show that participants did more than simply receive these interpretations. They compared, selected, adjusted and evaluated ideas generated by AI with their own understanding of the text. In this context, GenAI was not used passively among these future teachers. Instead, they engaged with tools by constantly questioning and refining the AI generated responses. This suggests that its usefulness was shaped through iterative dialogue with the tool, rather than through direct acceptance of its responses.

Furthermore, the most theoretically significant finding lies in the tension demonstrated in Theme 3 and the relatively lower agreement with the PU item related to the accuracy of GenAI which recorded 73.6% agreement. This aligns with the concern highlighted in the conceptual framework, that GenAI could replace personal, experience-based meaning-making with retrieval of information in literary reading when used uncritically. This would contradict RRT which suggests that meaning is created through transactional process of reader's dynamic interaction with the text (Rosenblatt, 1978). The risk was also recognised by the participants themselves, with some noted that it may result in “losing critical thinking” (P1) or becoming “lazy” (P8). This echoes previous concerns regarding intellectual dependency in GenAI usage by Xu et al., 2025.

At the same time, the data show that interpretive autonomy was not simply either maintained or lost. Rather, it was on a continuum. Participants who actively prompted, revised and selectively incorporated AI suggestions like P2 and P4 retained a stronger sense of ownership of their own interpretations. In contrast, P5, P6 and P7 who seemed to rely more on AI responses as final and complete answers, showed more signs of dependence on the tool. This suggests that, within TAM, Perceived Usefulness in literary interpretation is not a single, straightforward construct. It includes several different functions, such as linguistic and cultural support, analytical scaffolding, and collaborative idea generation. Each of these functions has different implications for learner autonomy. This distinction is particularly noteworthy as it is not usually highlighted in broader TAM research on educational technology (Şimşek et al., 2025). Overall, the findings of the study conclude that pre-service TESL teachers viewed GenAI as a helpful scaffolding tool to facilitate the understanding of texts but not as a definitive interpreter and unquestionable authority on literary meaning.

How Do Pre-Service TESL Teachers Perceive the Ease of Use of GenAI Tools in Literary Text Interpretation?

The findings suggest that participants generally perceived GenAI as accessible and easy to use, although effective use required a certain level of competence. The strong agreement on items related to clear interaction and prompt formulation, ranging from 77.6% to 79.2%, suggests that participants generally found GenAI tools easy to access and use at the interface level. This is consistent with a previous study by Al-Kadi & Ali (2024) that noted the tools to be non-technical and user friendly among ESL learners. However, Theme 4 provides a more nuanced view of Davis's (1989) original idea of ease of use, which mainly focuses on the effort needed to operate a technology. There was a clear difference between its use and effective use between participants. A key challenge with GenAI was that it was easy to use but it also depended on users' prompt literacy which include the skill to effectively ask clear, specific and purposeful questions. Importantly, this skill is mostly acquired informally, through peers, trial and error, and social media tutorials rather than formal instruction. This implies that the ease of use in literary interpretation is not just inherent in the tool. Rather, it is gradually built up by experience.

Furthermore, Theme 5 helps explain the lowest agreement among PEOU items particularly on the idea that GenAI required little mental effort which reported only 64.8% agreement. Rather than removing cognitive effort entirely, GenAI seemed to shift it elsewhere. It significantly eased the burden on users for initial understanding and idea generation, but posed a new challenge for users to verify, assess, and validate the information it provided. This supports existing concerns that GenAI may appear simple on the surface while still requiring significant evaluative work to use responsibly (Godwin-Jones, 2024; Tran et al., 2025). It also resonates with findings that learner confidence in AI tools is balanced by their awareness of the tools' limitations (Chung & Jeong, 2024; Pokrivcakova, 2023). Interestingly, some of the participants, like P2 and P8, referred to this process as both exhausting and stimulating. This suggests that the effort involved in verifying GenAI's responses was not experienced only as a burden. Although it made the process more demanding, it also encouraged participants to think more critically about the accuracy, relevance and quality of the AI-generated responses. In this sense, the need to question and evaluate GenAI's output became part of their engagement with both the literary text and the tool itself.

Theme 6 further explains the sources of the verification burden. Participants identified several limitations, including hallucinated content, shallow responses to less well-known literary texts, and broader system constraints. However, what is notable is that participants did not simply abandon GenAI when they encountered these problems. Instead, they adapted their use of the tool by checking responses, modifying prompts and

comparing AI output with their own understanding. This suggests that acceptance is driven by pragmatic rather than blind trust. This also aligns with the results of the study conducted by Chang et al. (2024) which revealed that Malaysian trainee teachers tend to be confident of using GenAI but also have concerns about using it extensively to complete complex academic tasks. The results collectively indicate that pre-service TESL teachers perceived GenAI as easy yet conditional. In other words, the tool lowered the initial barrier to engaging with literary texts, but effective and responsible use still depended on the learner's willingness to question, verify, and refine its responses. This form of reflective engagement is in line with RRT which focuses on the reader's active role in making meaning of the text (Rosenblatt, 1995).

CONCLUSION

This study examined pre-service TESL teachers' perceptions of PU and PEOU of GenAI tools in supporting literary text interpretation. Guided by the Technology Acceptance Model and informed by Reader-Response Theory, the findings show that pre-service teachers generally viewed GenAI as both useful and accessible when engaging with literary texts. In particular, GenAI helped them simplify complex language, understand cultural contexts, summarise texts, identify themes, and consider different interpretive perspectives. However, while GenAI was seen as easy to learn and operate, using it effectively required more than basic technical ability. Participants still needed to formulate clear prompts, verify the accuracy of AI-generated responses and adapt to occasional inaccuracies or system limitations. In this way, the findings answer both research questions by showing that pre-service teachers' acceptance of GenAI depends on a balance between the convenience it provides and the need to maintain independent interpretive judgement.

Moreover, the study contributes to the field in several ways. Theoretically, it extends the Technology Acceptance Model beyond general educational-technology contexts by showing that, in literary interpretation, usefulness and ease of use are influenced by issues closely related to meaning-making. These include concerns about authorship, originality, and trust in AI-generated content. By placing TAM alongside Reader-Response Theory, the study offers a more nuanced understanding of technology acceptance, one that also considers the reader's interpretive autonomy. Practically, the findings highlight the need for TESL teacher education to move beyond simply warning students about AI misuse. Instead, teacher education programmes should help pre-service teachers develop critical AI literacy so that they can use GenAI as a dialogic partner, rather than treating it as an authority on literary meaning. Methodologically, the use of both survey and interview data demonstrates the value of a mixed-methods approach in capturing not only the extent of technology acceptance, but also the lived experiences and reasoning behind that acceptance in specialised academic tasks.

Several limitations should also be acknowledged. This study was conducted at one public university and involved only Year 2 and Year 3 TESL undergraduates, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to other institutions, programmes, or levels of study. In addition, the study relied on participants' self-reported perceptions rather than direct measurements of their interpretive performance. The qualitative phase, although rich in detail, also involved a relatively small number of participants.

Future research should extend this inquiry across multiple Malaysian universities to determine whether institutional or curricular factors shape perceptions of GenAI differently. Experimental designs are recommended to examine the actual effects of GenAI use on reading comprehension and thematic analysis, as well as on aesthetic and emotional engagement with texts. Research involving in-service teachers would help bridge the gap between teacher preparation and classroom practice, while studies evaluating structured AI literacy interventions would offer concrete evidence on how prompting, verification, and evaluative skills can be systematically developed among future educators.

In conclusion, this study affirms that GenAI holds considerable potential to support pre-service TESL teachers in overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers to literary interpretation, though this potential is accompanied by genuine risks of overdependence and uncertain authorship. The value of this study lies in showing that the future of literature education in an AI-mediated environment should not be defined by the replacement of the reader, but by the deliberate cultivation of readers who engage with GenAI critically, ethically and reflectively.

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