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Why AI Literacy Matters in EAP: Lessons from Engineering Students' Homework Practices

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The rapid proliferation of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) in higher education has raised urgent questions about AI literacy and its integration into disciplinary curricula. This study examines how engineering students at a Romanian university engaged with GenAI tools when completing English for Academic Purposes (EAP) homework, in a context without institutional guidance, formal training, or clear curricular provisions. Framed within an action research approach, the study draws on student self-reports and survey responses to explore both practices and perceptions. The findings indicate that most students relied on AI tools—particularly ChatGPT—to refine language, clarify ideas, and enhance coherence in their writing. Students generally viewed these tools positively, valuing their contribution to efficiency, comprehension, and preparedness for future professional contexts. However, only limited evidence emerged of more advanced practices such as critical evaluation or iterative prompting. A smaller group preferred to work without AI, motivated by ethical concerns, self-reliance, or scepticism. The study argues for embedding AI literacy into EAP courses to foster equitable access, critical and ethical use, and pedagogical alignment with the evolving technological landscape.

Keywords: English for Academic Purposes (EAP), Generative artificial intelligence, AI literacy, Higher education, Action research

1. Introduction

The recent widespread adoption of GenAI tools for language learning in HE has spurred research focusing on its impact on curriculum design, teaching, learning and assessment (Lee et al., 2024). In the fields of professional communication and English for Academic Purposes (EAP), research shows that GenAI can enhance learning processes (Nelson et al., 2025) and autonomous learning (Ingley & Pack, 2023), can assist with personalized feedback (Mahapatra, 2024; Su et al., 2023), and can scaffold the development

of professional communication skills (Godwin-Jones, 2022; Khodi & Curle, 2025; Mahapatra, 2024; Su *et al.*, 2023).

Since the effective use of GenAI requires a deep understanding of its complex capabilities and prompting skills to leverage its full potential, HE institutions (HEIs) have to face a multifaceted challenge when adopting it for learning and teaching. Apart from the need to provide access to it for educators and students, HEIs need to provide regulations, training and awareness of capabilities, of potential and of contradictions (Chiu *et al.*, 2023; Darvin, 2025; Warschauer *et al.*, 2023; Yang *et al.*, 2025). The urge to integrate AI across the curriculum (Southworth *et al.*, 2023) spurs changes at disciplinary level, leading to research into innovative practices that integrate AI literacy with disciplinary skills. Nonetheless, both at programmatic and implementation levels, HEIs display a varied pace in change, due to lack of institutional policies or slow curriculum updates (Vettori & Warm, 2025). More and more, however, have started to launch initiatives and programs for AI literacy development that aim to equip students and staff with foundational knowledge about AI technologies, ethical considerations, and effective, responsible use of Gen AI tools (Vettori & Warm, 2025).

Against this general background, the present study examines how engineering students in a Romanian HEI engage with GenAI tools for EAP learning within a context of vague curricular provisions, no institutional guidelines, and no formal training on their pedagogical use. The study aims to assess local conditions that could justify the inclusion of AI literacy components in the EAP curriculum by investigating two key aspects: students' reported uses of GenAI when completing homework and their perceptions of its benefits and drawbacks for language learning.

2. AI Literacy as Component of Disciplinary Curriculum

The rapid expansion of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) in educational contexts has intensified calls for the systematic development of AI literacy as a core competency for learners. Warschauer *et al.* (2023) offer a comprehensive conceptualisation, identifying four interrelated competency areas: understanding AI (grasping core concepts, capabilities, and limitations), using AI (applying tools effectively in varied contexts), evaluating AI (critically assessing outputs for accuracy, bias, and appropriateness), and creating AI (designing or adapting systems or outputs for specific needs). This framework positions AI literacy as an interdisciplinary capability that integrates technical knowledge with cognitive, socioemotional, and ethical competencies, and it stresses the importance of equitable access to avoid exacerbating the digital divide. Education systems, the authors argue, should embed AI literacy through scaffolded, domain-specific instruction that develops learners' abilities progressively from basic familiarity to critical, reflective, and creative engagement, while recognising it as a lifelong learning process.

Complementing this broader conceptual framing, Chan and Hu's study (2023) captures higher education students' perspectives on using generative AI for learning and assessment in HE. Participants generally valued GenAI for its capacity to generate ideas, refine writing, and improve efficiency, particularly in language-related tasks. However, the study found considerable variation in how critically and ethically students engaged with AI outputs: while some used them as a springboard for further refinement, others relied on them with minimal modification. These findings underscore the need for explicit guidance and structured support in developing the critical evaluation and ethical use competencies central to AI literacy.

In the context of EAP and professional communication, the ever evolving affordances of Gen AI to produce text in multiple languages, to translate, to comprehend and control content, to adapt messages to a variety of audiences, and respond to numerous communicative demands in diverse contexts raised

concerns about language learners' use of such tools as substitutes for learning rather than assistance to learning.

Recognising the overlap between these skills typically taught in EAP courses and the capabilities of AI tools, Ngo and Hastie (2025) propose a framework for teaching AI literacy within EAP contexts. Building on this evidence of variable engagement and the need for structured support, Ngo and Hastie offer a more targeted definition of AI literacy relevant to EAP and English for Specific Purposes (ESP): AI literacy is "the ability to critically evaluate, use, and create AI applications effectively and ethically, supported by the necessary knowledge, skills, and awareness." This multidimensional framing emphasises three key competencies: critically evaluating AI output for reliability, bias, and appropriateness; using AI effectively and ethically in context; and creating or adapting AI applications to meet specific needs. While the last dimension is less immediately relevant to most EAP settings, the first two directly align with the communicative and academic demands of higher education. From an EAP and ESP perspective, AI literacy enables learners to engage with AI-generated text in ways that strengthen both language proficiency and disciplinary communication skills, provided they are explicitly taught to interrogate AI outputs, apply them appropriately, and acknowledge their use ethically.

The importance of this critical and ethical engagement is underscored by the findings of Nelson et al. (2025), which examined how learners use AI tools in academic writing tasks. The study found that while many students appreciate GenAI's ability to generate ideas, improve structure, and enhance language accuracy, their engagement often remains passive, with outputs accepted at face value and minimal evidence of systematic evaluation or adaptation. Ethical dimensions, such as correct attribution and awareness of AI's limitations, were inconsistently addressed, reflecting a lack of structured pedagogical support for these competencies.

Taken together, these studies highlight a significant gap between students' current AI practices and the fuller scope of AI literacy as conceptualised by Ngo and Hastie. Both point to the risk that, without deliberate and scaffolded instruction, learners will remain at a surface level of AI use, missing opportunities for deeper, more critical engagement. For EAP, this gap has direct implications: embedding AI literacy into the curriculum can ensure that students develop not only the technical capacity to use AI but also the reflective, ethical, and adaptive skills necessary for effective academic and professional communication in AI-rich environments.

Investigating a decade of AI literacy education, Yang et al (2025) underscored the need to embed AI literacy into curricular standards. Their study reveals that, for educational practices, one of the most effective ways of supplying AI literacy is creating opportunities for learners "to engage in hands-on activities and real-world application that enhance [their] ability to apply AI content in their lives and future career" (p.9). Thus, learners develop agency and can become responsible and informed AI users. In light of these findings and frameworks, the present study seeks to explore how such principles might be meaningfully applied in a local EAP context. By investigating engineering students' reported uses of GenAI for academic writing and their perceptions of its benefits and limitations, this research aims to inform the potential integration of AI literacy into the curriculum as a structured, pedagogically grounded practice.

3. Methodological Approach

3.1 Action Research Perspective

The main objective of the present study is to better understand how students use GenAI tools for independent work in their language learning, by analysing data collected from students I taught, within the context of an EAP curriculum I designed and implemented. Consequently, my work is situated in the tradition of action research (AR) in language education, a process of action and reflection on one's own teaching practices for the purpose of identifying what affects these practices and how they can be improved (Banegas & Consoli, 2020). Burns (2016) highlights the self-reflective, critical and systematic nature of AR, which renders it particularly suitable for practitioners who need to explore the impact of their pedagogical decisions on student learning and on educational processes so that they can take corrective measures or validate a course of action in their teaching.

Action research relies on three key elements: context, agents and issues. In language education, the context of action research may include, among others, the institution, the curriculum, various regulations and conditions that influence teachers and learners. These have "strong potential to shape and dynamically influence the practices of teaching and learning" (Banegas & Consoli, 2020: 177). The agents are understood as the active participants, who include the teachers and the learners. Teacher agency is apparent not only in their teaching and research but also in their engagement in reflection and self-reflection at every step of the research process. Action research in second/foreign language education concerns issues pertaining to learners' development of communicative competence or to teachers' professional development (Dikilitas & Griffiths, 2017).

The present study is set against the context of a HE institution that offers EAP courses to second-year engineering students, as part of their mandatory curriculum. The course spans over fourteen weeks with a two-hour weekly face-to-face session. Class sizes are large and vary between eighty to one hundred students per class. These conditions pose serious constraints on two important aspects of learning: student engagement in class and individual feedback. The course requires students to do two graded assignments as homework. Students are encouraged to work autonomously. Direct, formative feedback before submission of homework is impossible due to the same contextual constraints mentioned above. Course requirements do not include specific provisions for the use of GenAI tools. General provisions on plagiarism and other unethical behaviour apply, however. Writing assistance tools such as grammar, style or punctuation checkers or automatic correction have never been banned or restricted for homework completion.

The use of AI tools with enhanced performance in language comprehension and text production remains somewhat unacknowledged in the particular institutional context. Since the advent of LLM-based chatbots such as ChatGPT-3, their presence as actors involved in educational processes (planning curricula, teaching, learning and assessment activities) has become more frequent at all levels. Institutions, however, are slower at embedding the multitude of uses into formal policies and procedures, often limiting their efforts to preventing the potential negative impact of GenAI, rather than providing guidelines, instruction or training to teachers and learners on how to use these fast-developing technologies to enhance learning and teaching in ethical and effective ways.

Employing an AR-grounded approach, the study collected quantitative and qualitative data from the engineering students who took the EAP course in order to address the following research questions (RQ):

- RQ1: How do students report using GenAI tools for completing EAP homework assignments?
- RQ2: What are the students' perceptions of the benefits and drawbacks of using GenAI tools for EAP homework?

3.2 Participants and Data

The participants in this study are second-year engineering students who took the EAP course in the summer semester of the 2024/25 academic year. A total of 160 students (NT=160) did their homework, filled in the AI Tools Declaration of Use (AID) and submitted it with the assignment. This was mandatory, and the declarations were signed by students. From the total number, 23 declared they had not used any AI tool while doing the assignment (NT0=23), while 137 mentioned the use of AI tools for completing the assignment (NT1=137). After the final submission, all students were invited to complete a survey, which was anonymous. Only 49 students responded to this post-activity survey (SR=49), which represents 30.69% of the total number who did their homework.

The data collected consist of two types of student responses: the AIDs (NT = 160) and the survey responses (SR= 49). Both sources are multiple-choice questionnaires which can provide insights from a quantitative perspective. The post-activity survey also contained an open-ended question, which provides qualitative data. The quantitative data are analysed here using descriptive statistics, while the qualitative data have undergone a thematic analysis. Both sources contribute synergistically to a better understanding of the students' perspective on using AI tools for learning and doing homework in EAP.

The first data collection tool was a three-section document signed by the students and submitted together with the homework assignment (see Annex). The first question asked students to state whether they used any AI tool when doing the homework. Those whose answer was yes were asked to move on to the next section. This part focused on the tool used, the purpose and method of use, how the students' work was integrated with the AI contribution and how the students validated the final version before submission. The final part of the form required the students to acknowledge the ethical implications of working with AI and confirm that the work was original and a personal contribution.

The second data collection tool was a survey with seven statements to be evaluated on a five-point Likert scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree) and one open-ended question. The purpose of the questionnaire was to investigate students' perception of using AI tools for EAP homework and was adopted from the AI Motivation Scale (AIMS) instrument by Li et al. (2025). Their AIMS questionnaire is a multi-dimensional instrument designed and validated for gauging students' motivation to learn with AI in higher education. My adaptation consisted of selecting seven items consistent with the design and objectives of the current study. An open-ended question was added to allow students to detail their personal experiences of doing homework with or without AI assistance. These provided more qualitative data and were used for within-data triangulation to contextualise, nuance or confirm the quantitative responses from the surveys and the AIDs. The data underwent a thematic analysis to reveal perspectives on the themes convergent with those targeted by the multiple choice questions from the survey and the topics of the AIDs. Due to the small size of the collected corpus (just over 1000 words), I performed the coding myself, iteratively, and extracted the relevant instances.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 RQ1: How do Students Report Using GenAI Tools for Completing EAP Homework Assignments?

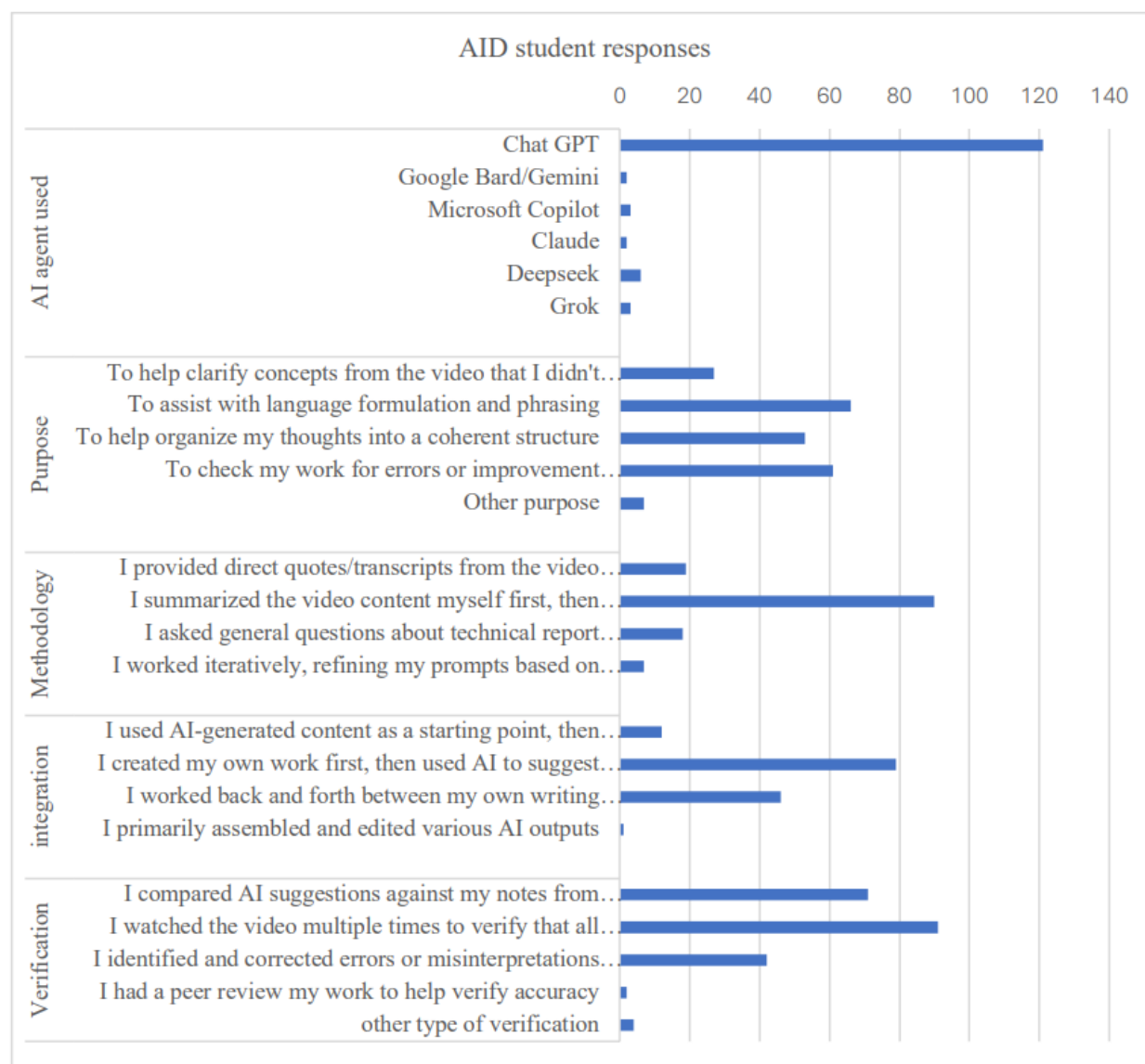


Figure 1. Students' responses from the AI Tools Usage Declaration (AID)

4.1.1 Choice of AI Tool

The findings from the AIDs are shown in Figure 1. A total of 137 (NT1=137) students used an AI tool to do their homework. By far the most used tool was ChatGPT (88.32%), confirming a recent study conducted by Yusuf et al. (2024), which showed that ChatGPT is the most widely utilised tool among both university lecturers and students. Six other different tools were used in much smaller proportions (e.g. DeepSeek=4.37%; Gemini, Claude=1.45%).

4.1.2 Purpose of AI Use

In terms of purpose, AI assisted mostly with language and formulating ideas more clearly or checking for errors and suggesting improvements. Students used AI tools to improve comprehension of video material as well as to organize their ideas and add coherence to their text. Other students mentioned assistance

with the layout and design of their output texts. These findings are consistent with reports such as Ngo and Hastie (2025), who show that students employ AI tools in EAP for a wide range of purposes, from those related to language mechanics to more EAP-specific ones, such as brainstorming and finding sources. Su et al. (2023) also found that collaborating with ChatGPT for writing increases the quality of ideas generated. My students displayed awareness of these capabilities and employed them in the process of solving the task, from the comprehension stage to the final decisions on the design and layout of the text they wrote. One student stated that 'doing my English homework was more manageable with AI assistance. I used it to help generate ideas, improve grammar, and structure my writing more clearly. It made the process faster and helped me learn by seeing better examples.'

The process of collaborating with the AI tools was broken down into three steps: methodology (how the AI tool was used), integration (how one's own work was integrated with AI-generated content and feedback) and verification (how accuracy and reliability of co-created content were ensured).

4.1.3 Methods of Engagement with AI Tools

The vast majority of students declared that they summarized the input material (video) themselves, seeking AI assistance to refine their work. A smaller number of students asked for support to understand the fundamental concepts of the lesson (technical report), and then they narrowed down the perspective they gained to the specific ideas from the video material provided by the teacher. In other words, students used AI to scaffold their comprehension of concepts before diving into more complex and specific aspects tackled in the EAP course. As one student put it: 'I enjoy doing homework with AI because it gives me the right information immediately instead of me searching for it; also, it can give me more specific explanations to help me understand better in all ways possible'.

Only a few students used an iterative process of evaluating AI and co-created work and refining prompts to get more specific results. Evaluation and iteration are crucial steps in working with GenAI tools to ensure accurate, specific and adapted output results (Schulhoff et al., 2025). This suggests that students may need training in order to be able to fully understand how GenAI works and can be used in most effective ways (Lee & Palmer, 2025), which supports the idea of integrating AI literacy and EAP in HE.

4.1.4 Integration of AI and Student-Generated Content

In terms of integration, students started from their own content and asked AI to suggest improvements or worked back and forth between their own writing and the AI suggestions, co-creating the final response. A small number of students used the AI-generated suggestions to build upon and refine for the final response.

4.1.5 Verification of Co-created Content

Fifty-seven students used multiple ways of verification to ensure the accuracy and reliability of co-created content. The most frequently used were watching the video multiple times to check own comprehension and fact-check AI summary, together with correction of own errors and those found in the AI generated content: 'I used AI to nitpick and make sure everything was all right.' and 'I used AI in correcting my grammar errors and to elevate my language by a slight margin.'

A few students appealed to a peer to check their work. One student reported that the only verification was asking the AI tool to check the final response for grammar or spelling errors. Integration and verification of co-created content are essential steps in completing EAP homework with the help of AI tools. The results offer only a glimpse of how students tackle them through self-reported practice, a limitation of the present study. However, they seem to indicate that students' engagement with the GenAI focuses less on their learning process and more on final output characteristics (e.g. style and punctuation). Leveraging GenAI potential for developing students' language learning process (e.g. iterative cycles of drafting that are critically evaluated) emerges as an important area of intervention when including AI literacy development in EAP curricula. Scaffolded and deliberate instruction on how to partner with AI tools throughout the learning process can empower students to become autonomous lifelong learners, fully aware of GenAI capabilities and limitations (Ngo & Hastie, 2025).

4.2 RQ2: What are the Students' Perceptions of the Benefits and Drawbacks of Using GenAI Tools for EAP Homework?

4.2.1 Perceived Benefits and Drawbacks of AI Tools Use

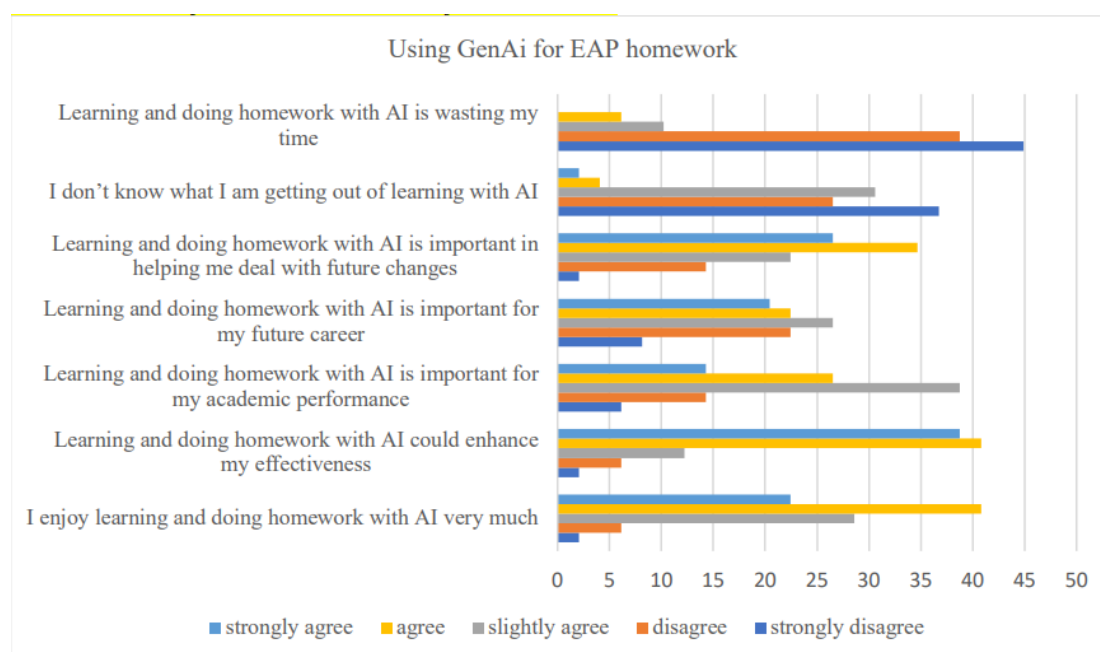


Figure 2. Students' perception of using GenAI for homework in EAP

Figure 2 summarizes the students' perceptions of the benefits and drawbacks of using GenAI for homework in EAP, based on the results of the post-activity survey. Only 49 students responded to this anonymous, non-mandatory questionnaire.

The survey results suggest a generally positive attitude toward learning and doing homework with AI. A clear majority of respondents expressed agreement or strong agreement with the statement that they enjoy using AI in this context, and similar support was evident for the view that AI could enhance their effectiveness. These responses indicate that many students not only recognise practical benefits but also experience genuine engagement and satisfaction when integrating AI into their academic work.

When asked about the importance of AI for their academic performance, future careers, and ability to adapt to future changes, the pattern remained favourable, albeit slightly more mixed. While a substantial proportion agreed or strongly agreed, a noticeable share of respondents chose "slightly agree" or lower levels of endorsement, suggesting that for some, the perceived value of AI is more tentative or conditional. This may reflect varying levels of familiarity, trust, or direct experience with AI's potential applications.

In contrast, negative perceptions—such as seeing AI as a waste of time or being unsure of its benefits—were less common but still present. Around one-third to nearly half of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with these negative statements, but a small percentage aligned with them. This minority may represent students who are either sceptical about AI's relevance or have not yet seen tangible benefits in their learning. Overall, the data points to a predominantly positive but not uncritical stance toward AI in academic contexts, with room for further confidence-building and practical demonstrations of its value.

4.2.2 Avoiding Engagement with AI Tools

This perspective on using GenAI for homework in EAP should be considered alongside data from the AIDs. Although only a minority (just over 14% of $N = 160$), some students reported not using any AI tool for their homework. Regardless of their reasons, this group preferred to work independently, avoiding AI assistance in their language learning process. Whether due to ethical concerns, confidence in their own language proficiency, technical difficulties, fear it would impede on their learning process ('I believe that, especially with writing in English, AI is very prone to replacing human input, and I try to develop this set of skills myself as much as possible'), or other factors, their motivation to abstain from AI use merits closer examination.

Existing research warns that the rapid proliferation of AI in education could deepen the digital divide (Beckman et al., 2025; Warschauer et al., 2023). Paywalls and other accessibility barriers can make AI tools unattainable for some students, preventing them from becoming as AI-savvy as their peers without such social, economic, or personal constraints.

In light of these concerns, higher education institutions bear a responsibility to mitigate inequities in access by ensuring that all students are provided with the requisite technology, training, and support. Integrating AI literacy into disciplinary curriculum, such as EAP courses, would not only address disparities in access but also equip students with the critical understanding and practical skills necessary to engage effectively with these rapidly evolving technologies.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to investigate how engineering students in a Romanian higher education institution use GenAI tools in the context of an EAP course, with the broader aim of assessing whether AI literacy should be embedded into the curriculum. Framed within an action research approach, the study not only documents student practices and perceptions but also serves as a structured reflection on the curricular conditions in which it takes place. The findings show that the vast majority of students who completed the AI Tools Declaration of Use had engaged with at least one AI tool—most often ChatGPT—primarily to refine language, clarify ideas, and ensure coherence in their work. Survey responses further revealed generally positive attitudes towards AI in learning, with students recognising its potential to enhance effectiveness, academic performance, and career preparedness. Nonetheless, a small but notable

minority preferred to work without AI assistance, highlighting diverse learner preferences and the need for a nuanced approach to AI integration.

The results also suggest that while students can employ AI effectively for language-related tasks, few demonstrated advanced practices such as iterative prompting or critical evaluation of AI output. This gap points to a lack of structured guidance and training, particularly in areas of responsible use, verification, and integration of AI-generated content. From an action research perspective, this insight functions as a call to refine both pedagogical strategies and curricular provisions to ensure that students not only access AI tools but also learn to use them critically and effectively. The presence of students who abstain from AI use—whether due to access, skills, or values—underscores the importance of equitable provision of both technology and AI literacy instruction, a responsibility that falls to higher education institutions. These results resonate with conclusions from Ngo and Hastie (2025) and Chan and Hu (2023), among others, who highlight that deliberate instruction should prepare all students to critically leverage GenAI potential for developing language skills and disciplinary communication while ethically acknowledging co-created content.

In keeping with the cyclical nature of action research, these findings will inform the next stage of my practice: adapting the EAP course to incorporate targeted AI literacy components that address the identified gaps while respecting diverse learner needs. This process of observing, analysing, and responding to classroom realities transforms the research into actionable change, aligning institutional goals with the evolving technological landscape (Vetter et al., 2024; Vettori & Warm, 2025). By systematically integrating these insights into future course iterations, the pedagogical and institutional context can evolve to support more equitable, informed, and effective engagement with GenAI in language learning.

While the findings provide valuable insights into students' engagement with GenAI tools, the study is limited by its reliance on self-reported data, which may not fully capture actual practices. The absence of observational or performance-based measures means that reported behaviours could not be independently verified. Future research could strengthen validity by incorporating task-based assessments or classroom observations alongside surveys, providing a more comprehensive picture of AI use in EAP contexts.

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Annex: AI Tools Usage Declaration

Student Information

Name: _____

Group: _____

Declaration

I hereby declare the following regarding my use of AI-assisted tools in completing this assignment:

- ☐ I have NOT used any AI-assisted tools in completing this assignment.
- ☐ I HAVE used AI-assisted tools in completing this assignment, and I provide details below:

1. Tools used (select all that apply):

- ☐ ChatGPT
- ☐ Google Bard/Gemini
- ☐ Microsoft Copilot
- ☐ Claude
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____

2. Purpose (select all that apply):

- ☐ To help clarify concepts from the video that I didn't understand
- ☐ To assist with language formulation and phrasing
- ☐ To help organize my thoughts into a coherent structure
- ☐ To check my work for errors or improvement suggestions
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____

3. Methodology (select one):

- ☐ I provided direct quotes/transcripts from the video and asked AI to summarize them
- ☐ I summarized the video content myself first, then asked AI to help refine my work
- ☐ I asked general questions about technical report writing and integrated the AI's responses with the video content
- ☐ I worked iteratively, refining my prompts based on initial AI responses

4. Integration (select one):

- ☐ I used AI-generated content as a starting point, then substantially revised and added my own contribution
- ☐ I created my own work first, then used AI to suggest improvements or alternative phrasings
- ☐ I worked back and forth between my own writing and AI suggestions, creating an integrated final product
- ☐ I primarily assembled and edited various AI outputs

5. Verification (select all that apply):

- ☐ I compared AI suggestions against my notes from the video to ensure accuracy
- ☐ I watched the video multiple times to verify that all key points were included correctly
- ☐ I identified and corrected errors or misinterpretations in the AI-generated content
- ☐ I had a peer review my work to help verify accuracy
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____