

Language Education in the AI Era: Digital Literacy as a Key Competency

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Why AI literacy cannot be missing from language education

The rise of generative AI is disrupting the way pupils find, evaluate and use information. Where language education used to revolve around critically approaching *human-made* texts, pupils now also have to deal with synthetic information: text, images and sound generated by AI that is often indistinguishable from “genuine” sources. This raises three urgent questions:

How do pupils recognise truth in a post-truth era? Emotional narratives and personal beliefs win out over facts (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). Social media reinforce *echo chambers*, in which pupils only see information that confirms their existing views. AI adds a new layer to this: hallucinations (AI presenting inaccuracies as facts) and *deepfakes* make it even harder to trust sources.

How do pupils critically evaluate AI output? Recent research (Boetje et al., 2026) shows that pupils often see AI as a substitute for thinking rather than as a tool. They accept outputs uncritically, fail to verify sources and jump too quickly to content generation — without reflection.

Which competencies are missing? Pupils have knowledge gaps (how does AI actually work?), skills shortfalls (effective prompting, authenticating sources, synthesis with human insight) and attitude problems (overconfidence, cognitive inertia, a lack of scepticism).

AI literacy as an extension of digital reading

Being digitally literate used to mean: searching, evaluating and synthesising online information (Kiili et al., 2018). With AI, a new layer is needed. The DIPS model (Digital Information Problem Solving) by Boetje et al. (2026) shows how experts and novices differ in their use of AI:

Experts	Novices
Use AI as a collaborative tool	See AI as a substitute for thinking
Integrate AI into their workflow	Use AI in isolation
Critically interrogate AI output	Accept outputs uncritically
Combine AI input with traditional sources	Use only AI-generated sources
Invest in problem definition	Jump straight to content generation

AI literacy therefore comprises three pillars:

- 1. Knowledge:** Understanding how AI works, including its limitations and ethical issues (privacy, bias).
- 2. Skills:** Effective prompting, verifying sources, synthesis with human insight.
- 3. Attitudes:** Healthy scepticism, a *control-oriented mindset* and the ability to regulate AI.

The recently launched AILit Framework (EU & OECD, 2026) offers a practical framework with four dimensions for classroom use:

Engage with AI — Pupils learn to understand the role of AI in their lives.

Create with AI — AI as a creative partner, not a replacement.

Manage AI — Responsible and ethical use.

Shape AI — Pupils learn to influence AI development.

A possible approach: from theory to practice

How do you translate these insights into language teaching? Four key strategies:

1. Process-focused assessment

Why? Traditional assessment looks only at the end product, but misses whether pupils actually understand *how* they used AI.

How?

- Scenario-based tasks: “Solve this problem using AI, and explain which steps you took.”
- Screencast think-alouds: Pupils explain *why* they use AI, which alternatives they consider and how they evaluate outputs.

2. Model expert behaviour

Why? Pupils lack *metacognitive awareness* of how to regulate their use of AI.

How?

- Live demonstrations: Think aloud while using AI: “I’m revising this output because it lacks depth on topic X.”
- Peer demonstrations: More advanced pupils show their process.
- Highlighting mistakes: Show what goes wrong with poor AI use and discuss what went wrong.

3. Guided AI practice with scaffolds

Why? Novices skip critical stages (evaluation, synthesis). Scaffolds force them to slow down and think.

How?

- AI intention journals: Before using AI, pupils write down: “I’m going to use AI for X, because Y, and I’ll check Z.”
- Planning checklists: “Have I defined my problem? Have I considered alternatives to AI?”
- Reflection prompts: Afterwards: “Did this help? What did I learn? What would I do differently?”

4. AI as a first draft, not a final answer

Why? Pupils rely too heavily on AI and miss out on the deep learning that comes from *grappling with the process*.

How?

- The Draft Rule: “AI gives you a first draft — you improve it.”
- Critical synthesis tasks: “Combine this AI output with 2 human sources. What's missing?”
- Revision exercises: Have pupils rewrite AI text in their own words, with proper attribution.

Examples: directly applicable in the classroom

Source evaluation: quick checks with 'Rules of Thumb'

Teach pupils to spot red flags in AI output:

- **“Too Perfect” test:** If the answer is flawlessly written, be sceptical.
- **“No Source” test:** If AI cannot cite specific, verifiable sources, don't trust it.
- **“One-Sided” test:** If there are no counterarguments or nuances, it is probably biased.
- **“Jargon Overload” test:** Excessive technical language without explanation can indicate fabrication.

Practical assignment: preparing a debate with AI

1. Pupils are given a proposition (e.g. *“Social media do more harm than good”*).
2. They use AI to gather arguments, but must:
 - Verify at least 3 sources.
 - Add 1 counterargument that was not generated by AI.
 - Explain how they checked the reliability of each source.
3. Reflection: *“Which AI outputs did you reject, and why?”*

Lesson module: 'Verify Before You Trust'

- **Step 1:** Pupils are given 5 news items (some genuine, some AI-generated).
- **Step 2:** They must check the authenticity of the source (does the author exist? Is the website reliable?).
- **Step 3:** They evaluate the content using the Rules of Thumb.
- **Step 4:** Class discussion: “Which signals indicated that a source was unreliable?”

Use the AILit Framework

The free AILit Framework (ailiteracyframework.org) offers ready-made lesson examples for primary and secondary education, covering the 19 competencies. For example:

- **Engage:** Have pupils keep track for a day of how often they encounter AI (e.g. chatbots, recommendation algorithms).
- **Create:** Use AI to write a poem, but pupils must evaluate and improve it.
- **Manage:** Discuss ethical dilemmas: “Are you allowed to use AI for your homework? Why or why not?”
- **Shape:** Have pupils write a letter to an AI developer with suggestions for improvement.

Conclusion

AI is changing not only *what* we learn, but also *how* we learn. Language education must prepare pupils for a world in which information is no longer static, but dynamic and sometimes synthetic. By placing critical thinking, verification skills and a healthy dose of scepticism at the centre, we give pupils the tools to engage with AI autonomously and responsibly. The key? Model, guide and let them practise — because AI literacy is not learned from a book, but by *doing* it.

Select bibliography

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