Beyond the Blank Page: Using AI Tools in Creative Writing to Cultivate Academic Buoyancy in Girls

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Abstract

This action research study explored the impact of introducing AI planning and writing tools in the classroom to facilitate the production of Year 9 English students' creative writing pieces. In my experience, students often struggled to initiate and sustain creative responses independently and my aim was to establish whether AI tools could aid students in improving this. A class of 20 girls was provided with access to three distinct AI tools during the planning and drafting of creative writing pieces across a unit of work. Throughout the unit, students were provided with explicit instructions on how to use the tools to assist them in their work. Using the tools, students produced three creative writing responses, two short descriptive pieces, and one extended narrative piece. Data collection techniques included student reflective journals, questionnaires, work samples, observations, and focus groups. Thematic analysis of the data revealed three main themes—using AI planning tools in creative writing tasks: increases girls' confidence in task initiation; improves girls' perceptions of their capacity to plan their writing effectively; and has a positive impact on girls' sense of confidence and control over the quality of their writing. The findings of this study are valuable to educators who wish to explore practical applications of AI writing tools in the classroom and who wish to further explore the potential impact of AI on girls' academic buoyancy, engagement, and performance.

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As a teacher of English, when the topic for the Global Action Research Collaborative was revealed as *Navigating the AI Frontier in Girls' Schools*, I was immediately drawn to exploring the relationship between the use of AI and students' perceptions of themselves as writers.

Firstly, it seemed that much public discussion of AI in relation to student writing concerned fears regarding authenticity of work, the possible replacement of students' voices, and independence of thought. I was also aware of a growing body of research suggesting that the AI frontier is a landscape in which women and girls are at risk of marginalisation and the subsequent need for cultivating girls' AI literacy. Reflecting on my own practice, I realised that I had only raised the topic of AI in my English classrooms when outlining what would be deemed as inappropriate or plagiaristic in students' writing and formal assessments. This was something that I was determined to move beyond in my classroom practice.

Secondly, I wondered if AI-assisted tools could be used to help address an issue that I was noticing ever more frequently in the classroom: students struggling to initiate and sustain extended creative responses without additional teacher intervention and reassurance. This ultimately led me to explore the topic of academic buoyancy in girls. Martin and Marsh (2008) define academic buoyancy as "students' ability to successfully deal with academic setbacks and challenges that are typical of the ordinary course of school life" (p. 54). In seeking to further define academic buoyancy, Martin and Marsh (2009) assert the distinct differences between academic buoyancy and academic resilience. Academic resilience is defined as "a student's capacity to overcome acute or chronic adversities that are seen as major assaults on educational processes" (p. 353). In this light, resilience applies to individual responses to severe, acute, threats and difficulties experienced by relatively few students. Academic buoyancy, by contrast, is required by many students in navigating instances of day-to-day academic difficulty, such as challenging classwork or a lower-than-expected grade.

My exploration of the literature led me to design a scheme of work in response to the question: *How does using AI planning tools to facilitate the production of Year 9 English students' creative writing responses impact girls' academic buoyancy?*

Within the unit of work, I created opportunities for the students to engage with AI-assisted planning and writing tools in the classroom and for them to reflect on how this engagement impacted on their confidence, efficacy, and achievements as writers in English. Guided by Mertler (2020), the action research methodology allowed me to use educational theory to inform my practice and provided me with a clear framework through which I could explore and reflect upon my findings.

Literature Review

In seeking to establish clear predicting factors of what was first defined as "academic resilience" (Martin & Marsh, 2006, p. 267) and later redefined as academic buoyancy (Martin & Marsh, 2008), Martin and Marsh established what is referred to as the 5C's: "confidence (self-efficacy), (coordination (planning), control, composure (low anxiety) and commitment (persistence)" (Martin & Marsh p. 267). Using this buoyancy model, Martin and Marsh (2008; 2010) and several subsequent studies (Collie et al., 2017; Hirvonen et al., 2020) establish clear links between academic buoyancy and "higher levels of motivation, engagement, well-being, and achievement" (Collie, et al. p. 364), as well as lower levels of test anxiety (Putwain et al., 2020). In addition, several studies (Aydin & Michou, 2020; Martin & Collie., 2022) identified increased academic buoyancy as having a positive impact on academic outcomes for girls.

A growing body of literature suggests a range of benefits to increased academic buoyancy in students but also highlights a possible gender gap. The 2022 GDST *Girls' Futures Report* notes a distinct dip in confidence in girls between the ages of 14 and 18 years old, from which many girls do not recover significantly. This is particularly pertinent to my study, as Year 9 marks the start of this age range, and confidence is a key component in academic buoyancy.

Furthermore, a recent meta-analysis of 52 journal articles by Yau et al. (2025) including data from a total of 173,665 students, explored links between gender and subjects' self-perceptions of general academic buoyancy. Their findings note "males report significantly higher academic buoyancy than females" (p. 7). In this light, the need for further research into teaching and learning approaches which cultivate girls' academic buoyancy is clear.

In exploring the impact of the introduction of AI tools in the classroom, it is important to consider the ways in which this may affect students' relationships with teachers, as well as the delivery of the lesson content. One study by Collie et al. (2024) reviewed survey responses of 1,254 female students from secondary schools across Australia over nine years and examined how three key factors (the relationships between students and the teacher, useful content, and engaging content) correlated to the students' academic buoyancy. The findings suggest, in both coeducational and all-girls' settings, there was a positive association between girls' learning strategies of control, memorisation, and elaboration, used as indicators of academic buoyancy, and their perceptions of these three key elements of the academic environment.

In response to their findings, Collie et al. (2024) provide several recommendations for cultivating girls' academic buoyancy pertinent to my research topic. Drawing upon the findings of Skinner and Belmont (1993), they stress the importance of building "strong teacher-student relationships ... showing interest in girls and their learning goals, ensuring that girls receive help and resources for their learning" (Collie et al. 2024. p. 382). In addition, in agreement with the research of Pintrich (2002) and Kitsantas & Cleary (2016), they note the importance of discussing and modelling learning strategies and providing clear feedback to help students develop their personal approach to learning. These recommendations highlight the possible ways in which the introduction of AI-assisted planning tools in the classroom may impact academic buoyancy due to possible changes in teacher-student relationships, alongside providing new opportunities to deliver targeted support for student learning.

More recently, there has been some burgeoning, small-scale research suggesting that the use of generative AI tools in the classroom may have a positive impact on student academic buoyancy, specifically in English and EFL/ESL teaching (Khasawneh et al., 2024; Sayed et al., 2024). In their metanalysis of international literature produced in the field of AI and Education (K1–K12 and higher education) between 2012 and 2021, Chiu et al. (2023) note that studies focused on the link between the use of AI chatbots and student motivation and engagement commonly found a positive impact on students' performance, engagement, motivation, and self-directed learning capacity. As confidence, commitment, and composure are all established indicators of students' academic buoyancy (Martin, et al., 2010), this may also suggest the potential for a positive impact of an AI tool in this study.

There is also some smaller-scale research that suggests the possible negative impact of using an AI planning tool in student writing. Fang and Vorfolomeyeva (2024), for example, studied 163 students aged 18-23 years old, including 28 neurodiverse students, to explore the impact of an AI-assisted mind-mapping tool on student creativity. Their findings note the positive effect of using a digital mind-map in planning student writing overall, and an even greater impact on neurodiverse students who engaged with AI prompts that suggested further subtopics to explore within the mind-map. However, the study also found that some students suffered from cognitive overload when using the AI-assisted mind-maps and experienced difficulties identifying inaccuracies in AI generated content. Considering the recommendations of Martin et al. (2010) and Collie et al. (2024), and the importance of both useful content and low anxiety in cultivating academic buoyancy, Fang and Vorfolomeyeva's study raises the prospect of the possible negative impact of the use of an AI planning tools on cultivating conditions for student academic buoyancy.

It is important to note that there is very little established research exploring the impact of the use of AI on student academic buoyancy. Lo et al. (2024) reviewed 70 empirical studies from across the globe, each exploring the use of Chat GPT in EFL/ ESL education from its release in

2022 to 2023. Their findings highlight that, whilst many studies focused on the impact of this AI tool on the quality of student writing, “few studies have quantitatively examined its effects on students’ performance and motivation” (Lo et al., 2024, p. 1). They also note a lack of research completed in the K-12 education setting. Furthermore, the UK Department for Education (2024) recently stressed “a growing need to build the evidence base to help educators to make informed decisions about which GenAI tools to use based on efficacy” (p. 29). This is supported by Eager and Brunton (2023) in their detailed commentary on the use of AI in higher education. They acknowledge the need for a greater depth of understanding of AI tools that can be used both in the classroom and in assignment creation. In addition, Collie (2024) and Yau et al. (2025) identify the need for further subject domain specific studies of academic buoyancy. In this light, a study exploring how the use of AI planning tools to facilitate the production of Year 9 English students’ creative writing impacts girls’ perceptions of their academic buoyancy responds directly to the need for further subject specific research in this field.

Research Context

Blackheath High School is an independent girls’ day school, located in southeast London. Founded in 1880 as part of the Girls’ Day School Trust, the school’s focus is on cultivating girls’ courage and intellectual curiosity as they prepare for the future.

The research was conducted across 14 weeks of the autumn term and the participants in the project were Year 9 English students, aged 13–14 years old. I had taught this group in a previous academic year and, therefore, had established a strong rapport with the students. This year group was also selected as girls in this age range can often experience a dip in confidence in their abilities, making the research topic of academic buoyancy particularly relevant to these students. Year 9 also marks the end of Key Stage 3 and so provides a fantastic opportunity to allow students the additional responsibility of engaging in the research before the start of their GCSE course, where the curriculum affords less flexibility.

Parent consent and student assent to participate in this project was gained from an “opt out” letter summarising the project and how all data gathered would be used. Parents and students were assured that all data would be anonymised to maintain confidentiality throughout the process. As this class was one of three in this academic cohort, I shared the scheme of work and resources created with English department teaching staff so that no student would be disadvantaged.

The Action

The research project took the form of a series of lessons designed to develop students’ creative writing skills. To capture baseline data, students were asked to plan and write an initial short story at the start of the unit. I then introduced the three AI planning and drafting tools: a task chunking tool, a sentence starter tool, and a tool which asked them five questions in response to their ideas, designed to push them in their thinking when drafting their writing. All students were allowed to practise working with these tools in planning and drafting two shorter creative pieces. Once students had familiarised themselves with the tools, all students completed an extended narrative writing piece in response to a given set of themes. All students were allowed access to the tools whilst planning and drafting their final piece and were given the freedom to choose which tools to engage with, and the extent to which they used the tools throughout the process. At the end of this process, students were asked to complete a final piece of descriptive creative writing without access to the tools in class, to establish a final data point for comparison.

Data Collection

Throughout the twelve weeks of my action, I used a mixed methods approach in collecting data relating to the twenty student participants in this study. Narrative, qualitative data were obtained through both structured and unstructured lesson observations, teacher and student journals, classroom artifacts, field notes, and focus groups. I also included some relevant quantitative data from Likert scale surveys, and formative and summative writing

assessments from across the research period. Using a variety of data collection methods, I was able to polyangulate the data in accordance with Mertler (2020) to ensure my results were credible and trustworthy.

As the focus of the research was to explore the impact of AI planning and task chunking tools on students' academic buoyancy in English, I needed to establish clear baseline data regarding students' perceptions of their academic buoyancy. I issued students with two closed-response Likert scale surveys designed to explore students' perceptions of the five factors of academic buoyancy as outlined by Martin, et al., (2010): confidence, coordination, commitment, composure and control. The surveys were issued to students again at the end of the action. This allowed me to compare student responses both before and after the intervention. I also made field notes and classroom observations of students during their completion of creative writing tasks, before and after the introduction of the AI tools to establish clear points of comparison.

Throughout the study, I provided students with regular, open-ended questions to be answered in their reflective journals, each aimed at gaining a greater understanding of students' perceptions of the usefulness of the AI tools and the key factors that influenced levels of academic buoyancy. In addition, all students were provided with the opportunity to participate in two focus groups, during which I used semi-structured questions to explore their perceptions of the different AI tools, the impact on their approach to learning, and the key qualities of academic buoyancy.

Data Analysis

I performed an inductive analysis, coding, organising, and describing the data to identify clear patterns and acknowledge any data which deviated from or contradicted these (Mertler, 2020). This allowed me to identify distinct themes in the data and ensure clear links to the focus of the research question. I then presented my results in a narrative form.

Discussion of Findings

I identified three distinct themes from the analysis of the data, which I developed into thematic statements to discuss my findings. These themes align with three of the key qualities of student academic buoyancy defined by Martin et al. (2010): confidence, coordination, and control.

Using AI Planning Tools in Creative Writing Tasks Increases Students' Confidence in Task Initiation

As Martin et al. (2010) note, students' confidence in their ability to initiate tasks, or self-efficacy, is one of the key predictors of academic buoyancy. During this study, there were notable improvements in several students' independent task initiation when drafting their creative writing using the AI-assisted planning tools. Initially, when given the task of composing a piece of narrative or descriptive writing in response to a stimulus, a high proportion of students sought immediate reassurance before beginning their responses. Students talked openly about their anxiety concerning making "mistakes" and acknowledging their "fear of failure," a sense of "struggle" and "stress." However, in lessons where the students were encouraged to use the tools, I noted that they sought less additional guidance and reassurance from me or their peers before beginning to write their plans. Colleague observations corroborate this finding, noting that students responded positively, working through their tasks with a high level of independence.

Furthermore, students also recognised their increased confidence in their reflective journals and comments in focus groups; several reported feeling that the tools provided a "small boost," a sense of "jump starting" or improvements in their "channelling" of ideas. Others shared how the tools allowed them to "start ideas flowing" without teacher intervention. With this "boost," students often then felt confident to move away from the initial guidance generated by their interactions with the tools. One student, who found narrative writing particularly challenging in the preintervention task, was able to produce a clear plot for a story and shape the opening

paragraphs. Being able to use the tools in class facilitated a significant step forward for this student, who noted feeling greater confidence and that, as she engaged with the tools more, it provided “more ideas to help start my paragraphs.”

While most students found value in the tool’s capacity to help them initiate their work, many were also keen to hold on to their creative autonomy over their writing and were confident in pursuing their own ideas. One commented: “AI really helped me with starting my story, something I usually struggle with most. However, I didn’t need it as much in the middle or the end.” This comment was of particular interest to me as it also spoke to the idea that students were keen to assert that the work produced was still their own and that they had continued in the task with a level of independence. This was also illustrated in students’ comments in focus groups. One student stated that the tool gave her greater confidence but also allowed her to write in her “own way … or recreate it in [her] own words.”

The idea of maintaining autonomy over the writing, beyond using the tool for the task initiation and initial planning, was something students explored further during both class debate and later focus groups. Nearly all students expressed the need to move away from the tool to more independent writing, with one student clearly explaining this sentiment in her focus group comment, arguing that, if you use the tool “just continually, then it can be bad because it's not like you're writing then.” In this light, many students appeared to value the tool in terms of its capacity to assist them in task initiation but also expressed the desire to continue to self-direct their learning and writing without the use of the tools. This echoes the findings of Chiu et al. (2023) in identifying the positive impact that AI tools can have on students’ self-efficacy and capacity for self-directed learning. However, class discussion and focus groups also suggested that this positive impact on confidence in task initiation was seen by students as limited to the specific task, and did not influence their overall confidence in task initiation in English lessons. In the focus group and class discussion, when asked what they would do when stuck on tasks in English, many students stated that they would still “ask the teacher” when unsure. However, the

student survey responses conflicted with this, providing an indication of a possible a longer-term shift in students' perceptions of self-efficacy. At both the start and end of the action, students were asked how far they agreed that: "If I run out of ideas, I know I will always think of something in the end". In the initial survey, ten of nineteen respondents either "strongly agreed" or "agreed". This rose to fourteen students in the closing survey, suggesting improvement in some students' longer-term perceptions of self-efficacy, central to academic buoyancy, across the study.

Use of AI-Assisted Planning Tools in Creative Writing Improves Girls' Perceptions of Their Capacity to Plan Their Writing Effectively

Using the AI-assisted planning tools in class creative writing tasks enhanced the students' view of themselves as writers who can plan and coordinate their ideas effectively. Prior to the intervention, students planned and composed a piece of narrative writing across two English lessons. It was notable that several students struggled with effective planning, often seeing the plan as a separate task, and moving on quickly to writing their pieces. Whilst many students completed initial mind-maps and bullet points, few revised or added to them as they continued their writing in lessons. With the introduction of the AI-assisted planning and drafting tools, I noted higher levels of student engagement in this planning process, with almost all students using the tools to add additional detail to their plans and further explore their ideas. In addition, most students spent significantly more lesson time developing their plans when they engaged with the AI tools than when planning without this intervention. This contributed to a notable shift in many students' views of their capacity to plan and structure their work. The change was noted by one student in her reflective journal, stating: "Usually I don't plan very much and want to launch straight into writing, but the tool helped me to create a plan for a more developed plot." Another student noted that the AI-assisted tools "helped me to organise my writing more carefully, and with the addition of a suggested route." This was also reflected in students' comments in focus groups, with students noting that they felt the tools had helped them improve the "structure" and clarified the "sense" of their work.

This positive change in students' views on the efficacy of their planning is further supported in analysis of the survey responses. I included three questions designed to explore students' attitudes towards their ability to plan their creative writing, which focused on overall plot planning, planning for clarity and engagement, and using mind-maps for idea organisation. In each of these three areas there was a distinct, positive shift in student responses in the closing survey. In the initial survey, no students strongly agreed with these statements; however, in the closing survey three students strongly agreed with the first and second questions, and five students strongly agreed with the third. Moreover, the number of students who disagreed with each statement also reduced across the class. These findings support those of emerging small-scale studies, such as the work of Fang and Vorfolomeyeva (2024) regarding the positive impact many students perceive in their ability to structure their writing and their capacity to organise their thoughts when using AI tools in planning and drafting their work.

However, a small number of students found that the amount of information and guidance produced by the AI tools in the planning process created a feeling of cognitive overload. In reflective journals, observations and focus groups, three students reported feeling "overwhelmed" and "confused" when the tools produced what they perceived as "large chunks of text" which created a feeling of "AI fatigue." This ultimately led to them either reducing their engagement or disengaging with the tools. This is particularly pertinent when considering the use of such tools in supporting students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). For a small number of students, the lack of clarity in the tools' modelling and feedback, due to the length of the output, may have a possible negative impact on their levels of academic buoyancy (Pintrich, 2002; Kitsantas & Cleary, 2016; Collie et al., 2024). This again suggests the need for further research in this field.

Using AI Tools Improves Students' Sense of Confidence and Control Over the Quality of Their Writing

Out of the 20 participants, 10 improved in their assessment grading by at least 5%, with key areas of improvement being fluency and vocabulary. In the narrative written with access to the AI tools, there was clear evidence of improvement in the frequency of higher tier vocabulary across a range of students' work. This improvement was also noted by several students in the study. During a focus group, one student stated that the tools: "definitely helped me make my writing longer … make more sense" and added improved "creative detail" and "vocabulary." Another student echoed this sentiment in her reflective journal stating that "it improves the quality" and "helps me use more interesting vocabulary and phrases."

In addition, there was a significant change in student responses in the pre- and post-intervention surveys. In the pre-intervention survey, only four students agreed that they can "choose the right words and techniques to make writing effective." No students strongly agreed with this statement; nine students either strongly disagreed or disagreed. These responses suggested quite low overall confidence in their ability to control the quality of their writing in terms of their vocabulary. However, in the closing survey, two students strongly agreed; six agreed and only four either strongly disagreed or disagreed, suggesting an improvement in confidence in a significant proportion of students. As students' perceptions of control over the quality of their work and their capacity to improve is an indicator of academic buoyancy (Martin et al., 2010), this suggests that using the AI tool in planning and composing their written work had a positive impact in this context.

When asked about how they felt regarding feedback and grades on work produced using the planning tools, a significant number of students argued that they still felt they had ownership of their work. In her reflective journal, one student argued: "I still wrote the story and spent days creating it. It was still my effort." Another stated: "It's not really that different to getting help from a teacher or writing structure." For some, however, there was a feeling that the tools may

be impacting on ownership of their work, arguing: “the machine seemed to do most of the heavy lifting.” This was echoed further in one reflective journal: “The tool changed how much I feel like I deserved a (maybe) good grade, as the AI maybe limited my abilities … I leant on it too much.” Two students in the study disengaged with the AI-assisted tools almost immediately after the introductory lesson, with one asserting that she felt it produced “empty words and empty ideas” and that in using it “you don’t know how much of the work you would have done yourself.” For these students, the use of the tool undermined the legitimacy and their sense of control over the quality of their work. As Otis et al. (2024) note, the perception of the use of AI as cheating or unethical remains a very real barrier to the engagement of some women and girls in this field. Whilst some students’ perceptions changed over time, moving from seeing AI as a “no go” as one student put it, to “more of tool,” it is important to acknowledge that further research is required in order to establish whether students’ sense of control over the quality of their writing remains higher when they return to writing without the AI-assisted tools.

Conclusions

This study found using AI planning tools in creative writing tasks with Year 9 English students generally increased girls’ confidence in task initiation; improved their perceptions of their capacity to plan their writing effectively and had a positive impact on their sense of control over the quality of their writing. However, the study also revealed the potential for the use of AI tools in writing to cause cognitive overload in some students, due to both the amount of output it can generate and its capacity to continually regenerate feedback. Due to the limited time frame, I was unable to determine whether this would lead to further disengagement from the students or whether, as their proficiency with the tools developed, they, and I, would be able to shape the feedback in a way that better suited their approach to learning. I was also unable to determine whether the positive overall impact of the tools on these key factors of academic buoyancy would sustain as we moved onto other writing opportunities across the academic year. This is an area for further study.

Introducing the tools not only had a positive impact on the key factors of academic buoyancy during the study but also provided the opportunity to develop girls' AI literacy and to explore their perceptions of its use in the classroom. In response to these findings, I have been able to lead on a schoolwide initiative in which all teachers across departments have been invited to trial a selection of AI-assisted tools in their classrooms across the academic year and share their observations and reflections. We have also invited all students to share their feedback in response to the introduction of these tools, and I am looking forward to reviewing the data later in the year.

Reflection Statement

As an English teacher, I am passionate about promoting the value of literacy, and I feel it is our duty as teachers to be flexible in our views of what literacy entails and how we may need to adapt our approach to this as we prepare young people for a future in which AI literacy may play a significant role. There have been many highlights to this project, and seeing the students grow in confidence in their use of the AI tools, think deeply about their experiences as learners and reflect on their perceptions of themselves as writers has been incredibly rewarding.

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