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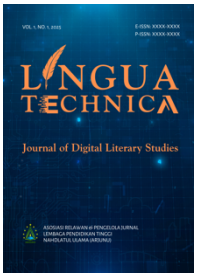

Digital poetics in the classroom: The role of *Taroko Gorge* in increasing students' engagement and critical thinking skills

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ABSTRACT

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The integration of generative e-poetry like *Taroko Gorge* into literary education addresses the growing need to bridge traditional and digital literacy in contemporary learning environments. This study aims to explore how *Taroko Gorge* enhances students' engagement and critical thinking, and to identify the possible strategies for its integration into curricula. Using a qualitative approach, this research combines observations, documentation, and interviews with 85 English Literature students at a university in East Java. The findings of this study reveal that *Taroko Gorge* fosters high levels of engagement and analytical rigor while challenging students to adapt to dynamic textual interpretations. Effective integration strategies include interactive discussions and scaffolded analysis, which align with its generative nature. However, limitations in interdisciplinary applications and sample diversity suggest the need for further research. This study contributes to pedagogical innovation by positioning e-poetry as a transformative tool for modern literary education.

Keywords: *critical thinking; engagement; hypertext fiction; navigation patterns; reader motivation*

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Introduction

In an era defined by digital interconnectivity, educators are challenged to bridge the gap between traditional literary pedagogy and the immersive, multimodal experiences students encounter daily. Nick Montfort's "*Taroko Gorge*," a generative e-poem, exemplifies the potential for digital poetics to engage students in innovative ways. The poem, generated algorithmically, challenges conventional notions of authorship, structure, and textual meaning, offering a dynamic entry point into literary analysis. Exploring such digital texts is crucial in developing students' critical thinking and interpretative skills, particularly as they navigate the intersection of digital literacy and traditional literary frameworks. By integrating *Taroko Gorge* into the classroom, educators can foster an environment where students not only appreciate literature but also critically engage with the technologies shaping contemporary culture. The exploration of this intersection underscores the urgent need for research into how e-poetry like Montfort's can transform literary engagement and pedagogy.

Previous studies have extensively explored the role of technology in enhancing literary education, examining the pedagogical potential of multimodal texts (Anstey & Bull, 2018; Cordero et al., 2014; Oakley, 2017). Generative literature, specifically, has been analyzed for its ability to disrupt traditional notions of narrative and authorship (Kourkoulou, 2023; Misseri, 2023; Perritt, 2023; Riedl, 2009). However, while the aesthetic and computational aspects of *Taroko Gorge* have been discussed in many studies (Grba, 2017; Kusmiatun et al., 2024), its application in educational contexts remains underexplored. Recent studies emphasize the importance of digital tools in fostering literary engagement (Hafner, 2020; Marlatt, 2018) but do not delve into specific e-poetry examples like *Taroko Gorge*. This research addresses the gap by focusing on how this generative e-poem can be utilized to enhance student engagement, critical thinking, and appreciation for both literary and computational creativity.

This study examines the role of Nick Montfort's *Taroko Gorge* in enhancing literary engagement within the classroom, focusing on its pedagogical potential. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions: How does *Taroko Gorge* influence students' engagement with literary texts? In what ways does its generative nature contribute to critical and creative thinking skills? Furthermore, how can educators effectively integrate such digital texts into curricula to bridge the divide between traditional and digital literacy? By addressing these questions, the study aims to develop a framework for incorporating generative e-poetry into literary education, ensuring it aligns with contemporary educational goals and caters to digitally native learners.

This study assumes that *Taroko Gorge*, with its generative and ever-changing textual nature, challenges students to rethink conventional literary concepts such as fixed authorship and static interpretation. This dynamic quality engages students in active meaning-making, encouraging critical inquiry and fostering creativity. The study posits that incorporating *Taroko Gorge* into literary education not only enhances engagement but also provides a platform for discussing broader themes like the influence of algorithms on culture and communication. If validated, these findings have significant implications for curriculum design, emphasizing the inclusion of digital poetics to bridge traditional and contemporary literacy practices. By leveraging texts like *Taroko Gorge*, educators can foster a nuanced understanding of literature and technology, preparing students to critically navigate the evolving digital landscape. This approach underscores the transformative potential of e-poetry in shaping the future of literary education.

Method

This study focuses on the e-poetry *Taroko Gorge* by Nick Montfort (as seen in Figure 1) as the material object of analysis. *Taroko Gorge* serves as an exemplary case of generative poetry, using algorithmic processes to produce a continuously evolving text. The research adopts a qualitative design in the form of a case study to explore the pedagogical potential of this e-poetry in enhancing literary engagement (Creely, 2019; Kalogeras, 2013). The participants consist of 85 students majoring in English Literature at a university in East Java. These students were selected as respondents due to their familiarity with literary analysis and their potential to engage critically with innovative digital texts. The study investigates how *Taroko Gorge* impacts their interpretative skills, critical thinking, and overall engagement with literature, providing insights into the broader implications of integrating digital poetics into classroom settings (Mora et al., 2020; Uddin & Bailey, 2024).

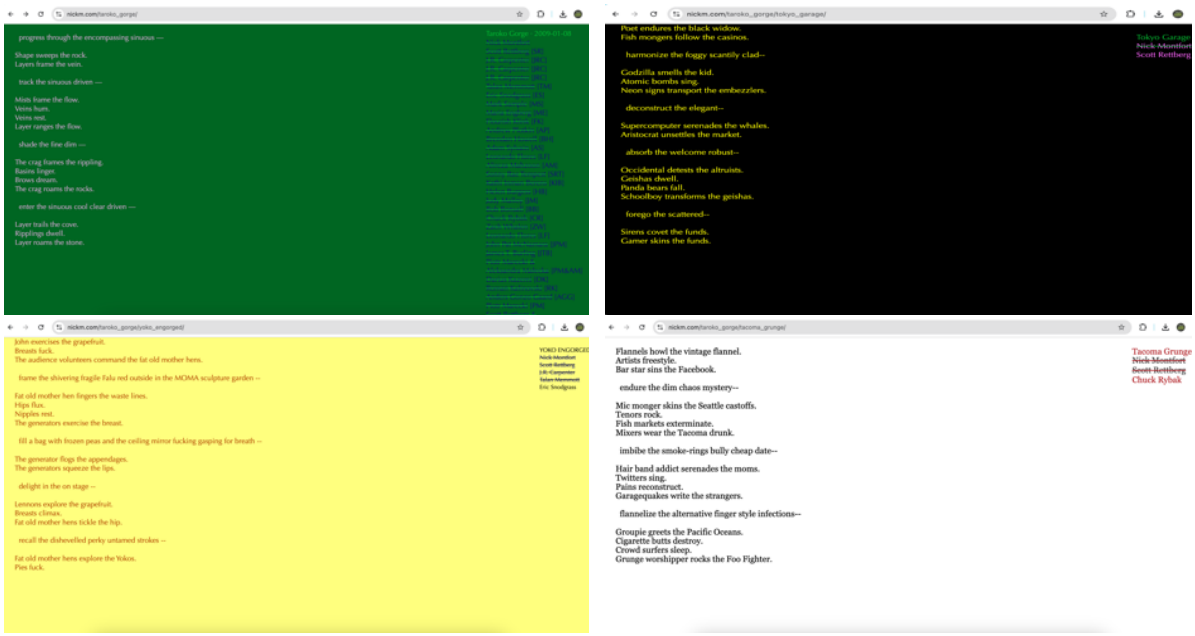

Figure 1. Some "generative e-poems" of *Taroko Gorge* by Nick Montfort (Source: https://nickm.com/taroko_gorge/)

The primary sources of information in this study are the 85 student respondents, whose perspectives and experiences form the core of the analysis. Data collection involves a triangulation method comprising interviews, classroom observations, and documentation of students' written and oral reflections on *Taroko Gorge* (Algouzi, 2021; Tsai & Chen, 2024). The analysis proceeds through three key stages: data reduction, where raw data are distilled into meaningful categories; data display, where findings are organized into coherent frameworks; and data verification, where the accuracy and relevance of insights are validated (Tsai & Chen, 2024). A meta-analysis method is employed to synthesize the collected data, enabling the identification of recurring themes and patterns in students' responses (Cheung & Vijayakumar, 2016). This comprehensive approach ensures that this study provides a nuanced understanding of how generative e-poetry can be effectively integrated into literary pedagogy, offering valuable implications for curriculum development in higher education (Kähkölä & Rättya, 2021; Selfa Sastre & Falguera Garcia, 2022).

Results

Students' engagement with e-poetry

Taroko Gorge by Nick Montfort offers an innovative approach to engaging students with literary texts through its generative and dynamic nature (T. Brown & Anton, 2011; Meacham, 2012). Unlike traditional literature, this e-poetry continually evolves, challenging students to interpret its text in real-time. This quality not only attracts attention but also encourages deeper interaction with literary concepts (T. Brown & Anton, 2011). Understanding its influence on student engagement can provide valuable insights into the integration of digital poetics into literary education. By observing students' behaviors and responses, this research identifies patterns of engagement in areas such as participation, interaction, and creativity, offering a framework for educators to assess the effectiveness of e-poetry in fostering literary appreciation.

Table 1 summarizes the results of student interactions with *Taroko Gorge*. Engagement was categorized into four aspects: active participation, class interaction, critical questions, and creative interpretations. The majority of students demonstrated high engagement in active participation (75%) and class interaction (65%). Meanwhile, moderate engagement was more prominent in critical questions (30%) and creative interpretations (25%). Low engagement percentages were consistently low across all categories, indicating overall positive reception.

Table 1. Students' interactions with e-poetry *Taroko Gorge*

Engagement Aspect	High (%)	Moderate (%)	Low (%)
Active Participation	75	20	5
Class Interaction	65	25	10
Critical Questions	55	30	15
Creative Interpretations	60	25	15

Table 1 reveals distinct patterns in student engagement. Active participation, with the highest level of high engagement (75%), suggests that *Taroko Gorge* effectively draws students into interactive discussions and activities. Class interaction followed closely, highlighting the collaborative potential of exploring this text. While critical questioning and creative interpretations displayed relatively lower percentages of high engagement, the significant presence of moderate engagement suggests these aspects require more cognitive effort, which some students may find challenging. This distribution of engagement illustrates that *Taroko Gorge* stimulates both straightforward and complex forms of literary interaction.

The high levels of active participation and class interaction indicate that *Taroko Gorge* succeeds in creating an accessible entry point for students. Its generative nature captivates their interest and fosters collaboration, as the text's unpredictability prompts shared exploration. However, the relatively lower high engagement in critical questions and creative interpretations could stem from the complexity of interpreting an ever-changing text. This complexity likely pushes students to engage critically and creatively, but it may also require additional scaffolding from educators to maximize these outcomes. The data underscores the importance of guided facilitation in leveraging *Taroko Gorge* to enhance both foundational and advanced literary skills.

E-poetry and students' critical thinking skills

Nick Montfort's *Taroko Gorge* exemplifies how generative e-poetry can foster critical and creative thinking among students (Meacham, 2012; Tsai & Chen, 2024). Its evolving text structure challenges conventional literary analysis by requiring readers to engage with patterns, underlying algorithms, and thematic shifts dynamically. This aspect demands skills such as analyzing, synthesizing, questioning, and evaluating—key components of critical and creative thinking (Johnson, 2019; Zaky, 2022). By documenting student outputs and reflections, this study explores how the poem's generative nature contributes to their development in these areas. Understanding these contributions can provide educators with tools to integrate generative texts into curricula more effectively, emphasizing both analytical rigor and creative expression.

Table 2 summarizes the documented learning outcomes associated with critical thinking skills developed through "*Taroko Gorge*." High achievement was observed in analyzing text (70%) and synthesizing ideas (60%), indicating strong engagement with textual patterns. Moderate achievement was notable in questioning assumptions (35%) and evaluating arguments (30%), while low achievement remained consistently below 15% across all skills. These results suggest varied levels of mastery, with students excelling in straightforward analytical tasks but facing challenges in abstract reasoning and argument evaluation.

Table 2. Learning outcomes of critical thinking skills through *Taroko Gorge*

Critical Thinking Skills	High (%)	Moderate (%)	Low (%)
Analyzing Text	70	20	10
Synthesizing Ideas	60	30	10
Questioning Assumptions	50	35	15
Evaluating Arguments	55	30	15

Table 2 highlights clear patterns in students' critical thinking development. Analyzing text emerged as the strongest skill, likely due to the poem's visually and structurally stimulating nature, which encourages immediate interaction. Synthesizing ideas also showed a high percentage of achievement, as students integrated the generative text's themes into coherent interpretations. However, questioning assumptions and evaluating arguments, which require deeper cognitive engagement, presented more moderate achievements. This pattern suggests that while *Taroko Gorge* effectively nurtures foundational critical thinking, more abstract skills require additional instructional support.

The high achievement in analyzing and synthesizing reflects the accessibility of *Taroko Gorge* in engaging students with tangible textual elements. Its generative nature provides a constant stream of stimuli that invite observation and thematic integration, making these skills easier to develop. The relatively lower achievements in questioning assumptions and evaluating arguments point to the cognitive complexity of interpreting evolving narratives. Students may struggle with reconciling the fluidity of the text with traditional argument structures. These findings suggest that while *Taroko Gorge* offers a fertile ground for critical and creative thinking, its full potential is unlocked when educators provide scaffolding, such as guided questions and structured debates, to support higher-order cognitive tasks.

Bridging traditional vs digital literacy into curricula

Integrating digital texts such as Nick Montfort's *Taroko Gorge* into educational curricula is vital for bridging the divide between traditional and digital literacy. These texts, with their dynamic and interactive features, provide unique opportunities to engage students with both classic literary concepts and contemporary digital tools (Rifqi et al., 2022; Widodo, 2023). However, effective integration requires thoughtful strategies that align digital poetics with pedagogical goals. By analyzing interview data from educators, this study identifies key methods and their effectiveness in fostering both traditional and digital literacy skills. The findings aim to guide educators in leveraging digital texts to enhance learning outcomes and prepare students for a digitally infused academic and professional landscape.

Tabel 3 summarizes strategies identified through interviews with educators and their reported usage and effectiveness. Interactive discussions were most frequently used (80%) and deemed highly effective (85%), highlighting their role in engaging students with digital texts. Scaffolded analysis, utilized by 70% of educators, also scored high in effectiveness (80%). Project-based learning, though used less frequently (60%), demonstrated strong effectiveness (75%). Cross-disciplinary approaches were least utilized (50%) and had lower effectiveness (65%), suggesting potential challenges in broader implementation.

Table 3. Effectiveness of using e-poetry *Taroko Gorge* into curricula

Integration Strategies	Frequency of Use (%)	Effectiveness (%)
Interactive Discussions	80	85
Project-Based Learning	60	75
Scaffolded Analysis	70	80
Cross-Disciplinary Approaches	50	65

Table 3 reveals that interactive discussions and scaffolded analysis are the most favored strategies for integrating digital texts into curricula. These methods likely thrive because they directly address students' need for guided exploration and active engagement with the evolving structure of digital texts. Project-based learning, while less commonly implemented, provides a structured yet flexible framework for students to explore and produce creative outputs, reflecting the moderate usage but strong effectiveness scores. Cross-disciplinary approaches, with lower frequency and effectiveness, highlight the challenges educators face in coordinating across subjects, despite their potential to enrich learning through diverse perspectives.

The dominance of interactive discussions and scaffolded analysis reflects educators' focus on creating an accessible yet rigorous framework for engaging with digital texts. These strategies provide students with immediate, clear pathways to explore and interpret complex generative works like "*Taroko Gorge*." Project-based learning's moderate usage suggests that time and resource constraints may limit its application, despite its potential for fostering creativity and collaboration. Cross-disciplinary approaches, though promising, face barriers such as curriculum rigidity and a lack of interdisciplinary training for educators. These findings emphasize the importance of tailored professional development and institutional support in equipping educators to fully integrate digital texts into their teaching, bridging the gap between traditional and digital literacy.

Discussion

This research revealed that Nick Montfort's *Taroko Gorge* significantly enhances student engagement with literary texts by fostering active participation and collaborative interaction. This finding aligns with previous studies which demonstrate that digital texts with interactive elements increase learner motivation and involvement (Bakla & Demiröz, 2024; Kallinikou & Nicolaidou, 2019). The implication is profound: generative e-poetry like *Taroko Gorge* not only revitalizes interest in literature but also prepares students to engage critically with evolving textual forms (Azizi et al., 2022; Norton & Gregson, 2020). It bridges the gap between static literary traditions and the dynamic nature of digital media, a critical skill in a digitally pervasive world. By engaging students in real-time interpretation, the poem cultivates a deeper understanding of narrative fluidity and authorship, which are becoming increasingly relevant in a media-rich society (Douthwaite, 2019; Karjagdi Çolak, 2024). Thus, integrating such texts in literary curricula offers a pathway to foster digital literacy alongside traditional literary analysis.

The high levels of student engagement with *Taroko Gorge* can be attributed to its generative nature, which challenges traditional reading paradigms by providing an ever-changing textual experience. This result is in line with the studies which highlight that such generative texts engage readers on multiple cognitive levels, as they must continuously adapt their interpretations to new textual configurations (J. E. Brown & Harrison, 2013; Johnson, 2019; van den Broek & Helder, 2017). This dynamic interaction stimulates curiosity and promotes collaborative discussions, as observed in the classroom. Furthermore, the underlying structure of generative texts mirrors the non-linear, fragmented nature of modern communication channels, making them inherently relatable to digitally native students (Gilreath, 2024; Lagerkvist & Ghajargar, 2020; Lu, 2024; Wang, 2024). This correlation suggests that *Taroko Gorge* is not just a literary tool but a medium that resonates with students' digital experiences, allowing them to engage with literature in ways that are contextually and culturally relevant.

This study also underscored *Taroko Gorge*'s role in developing critical and creative thinking skills, with students excelling in text analysis and idea synthesis. These findings resonate with other studies who emphasize the potential of digital texts to enhance higher-order thinking by challenging students to interact with non-traditional narratives (Caratozzolo et al., 2020; Chen & Pan, 2024; Zarei et al., 2021). The generative nature of the poem demands active interpretation, fostering analytical rigor and creative exploration. The implication for educators is clear: digital poetics like *Taroko Gorge* serve as a transformative pedagogical tool that goes beyond literary engagement to equip students with critical skills needed for broader intellectual and professional pursuits (Meletiadou, 2022; O'Halloran, 2020). This shift not only redefines how literature is taught but also prepares students to think critically and creatively in a rapidly changing world.

The generative aspects of *Taroko Gorge* are the key drivers behind its effectiveness in fostering critical and creative thinking. By presenting texts that are never identical upon rereading, the poem forces students to move beyond passive consumption and actively construct meaning. Previous studies showed that such texts encourage divergent thinking, as students must continuously reconcile evolving patterns and themes (D. G. Dumas et al., 2021; Zappone & De Matia, 2013). This requirement for constant engagement with novelty stimulates both critical questioning and imaginative interpretation. The structural complexity of *Taroko Gorge* also parallels real-world scenarios where information is dynamic and multi-faceted, reinforcing its relevance as a tool for developing practical analytical skills (Hollett & Cassalia, 2022; Yanovski et al., 2017; Zamani et al., 2023). Consequently, the poem's generative nature acts as a bridge between traditional literary competencies and the demands of contemporary problem-solving environments.

The results of interviews with educators also revealed a preference for interactive discussions and scaffolded analysis when integrating digital texts like *Taroko Gorge* into curricula. These strategies, identified as both frequently used and highly effective, highlight the poem's adaptability to traditional teaching frameworks. This finding supports the results of other studies which argued that guided pedagogical approaches are essential for unlocking the potential of digital media in education (Faifman & Goldfarb, 2014; Greve et al., 2022; Rossitto et al., 2015). The implication here is twofold: first, *Taroko Gorge* can serve as a conduit for bridging traditional and digital literacy, and second, its successful integration depends heavily on the instructional design (Grassinger et al., 2022). Educators must therefore develop and employ strategies that balance the dynamic nature of digital texts with structured learning objectives, ensuring students gain meaningful insights while adapting to new forms of literacy.

The effectiveness of interactive discussions and scaffolded analysis in integrating *Taroko Gorge* stems from their ability to provide students with structured yet flexible frameworks for exploring complex digital texts. Students engage more effectively with digital media when guided through activities that combine discovery with reflection (Chen & Pan, 2024; Kim & Li, 2021). These strategies leverage the collaborative and adaptive nature of generative poetry, allowing students to articulate their interpretations while accommodating the text's dynamic features (Kangasharju et al., 2022; Peters, 2020). The lower effectiveness of cross-disciplinary approaches, as indicated in the interviews, reflects challenges in aligning diverse academic fields with the poem's unique requirements. This finding underscores the importance of professional development for educators, enabling them to design interdisciplinary curricula that harness the full potential of digital texts like *Taroko Gorge* while addressing the practical challenges of implementation.

Conclusion

The study's most significant finding is the transformative potential of generative e-poetry, such as Nick Montfort's *Taroko Gorge*, in bridging traditional and digital literacy. It demonstrates how such texts can enhance literary engagement and develop critical and creative thinking skills by encouraging students to navigate dynamic, algorithmically driven content. This research contributes to the academic discourse by introducing an innovative approach to literary pedagogy, combining traditional analytical methods with interactive, digital frameworks. It also refines existing methodologies by incorporating multi-dimensional analysis of engagement, critical thinking, and curriculum integration strategies, offering educators a comprehensive model for employing digital texts. By framing generative poetry as a tool for both literary and digital competencies, the study renews perspectives on how technology can transform the teaching of literature, positioning e-poetry as a bridge between classical and contemporary literacy paradigms.

Despite its contributions, the study has limitations that invite further exploration. First, the research primarily relies on a case study of a single generative text, which may not fully capture the diversity of digital poetics. Additionally, the sample size, though sufficient for qualitative insights, limits the generalizability of the findings across broader educational contexts. Future studies could expand the scope by analyzing multiple e-poems and involving a larger, more diverse cohort of participants. Furthermore, exploring interdisciplinary applications of generative poetry and assessing its long-term impact on learning outcomes could deepen our understanding of its pedagogical value. Addressing these gaps will strengthen the integration of digital poetics into education, paving the way for more inclusive and innovative teaching practices.

Declaration

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this article.

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