

AI-Enhanced Learning in Calculus Education

A Study of GenAI-Mediated Taylor Series Instruction

AMS Contemporary Mathematics (CONM) Chapter Proposal

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Abstract

This chapter examines how genAI, as a learning partner, scaffolds recursive mathematical understanding in undergraduate calculus through the analysis of 127 complete student-AI transcripts from a Taylor series learning module. Using the Pirie-Kieren framework, we developed the Pirie-Kieren Work Analysis Protocol (PK-WAP) to operationalize recursive understanding as observable dialogue patterns. Analysis of 30 anchor cases revealed that most students reached Inventising (the highest applied level), demonstrating agentic moves such as proposing alternative strategies, questioning approximation validity, and critically evaluating AI suggestions. Students engaged substantively in dialogue: while genAI contributed approximately 55% of words overall, individual student participation varied widely, with some students dominating the conversation and others relying more heavily on AI scaffolding. Survey findings indicated most students reported the assignment helped them learn calculus concepts better and developed more positive attitudes toward AI for learning. However, the graduate assistant interview revealed a significant ceiling effect: approximately 40% of students already knew Taylor series from high school, and the TA suggested survey responses may have been inflated by social desirability bias. The study identifies five design principles for AI-mediated mathematics learning and demonstrates how AI tools (VS Code with GitHub Copilot) can support rigorous qualitative analysis of large transcript datasets while maintaining interpretive depth.

1 Introduction: AI as Learning Partner in Mathematics

The rapid proliferation of large language models (LLMs) in educational settings presents both opportunities and challenges for mathematics instruction. While intelligent tutoring systems (ITS) have supported mathematics learning for decades, conversational AI agents like ChatGPT represent a qualitative shift: they offer natural language interaction, adapt responsively to student queries, and generate explanations in real time. Yet fundamental questions remain about how students actually *engage* with these tools, whether

AI scaffolding supports genuine conceptual development, and how we can design AI-mediated learning experiences that cultivate mathematical reasoning rather than passive answer-seeking.

This chapter addresses these questions through a design-based research study examining how 127 undergraduate calculus students at Sichuan University explored Taylor series with a custom-designed genAI learning partner. Rather than treating AI as a black-box tutoring system, we designed an intentional pedagogical framework grounded in the Pirie-Kieren theory of recursive mathematical understanding—a model emphasizing that learning proceeds through iterative cycles of conceptual growth, with students “folding back” to earlier understanding levels when encountering obstacles or seeking deeper insight.

Our central research question asks: **How does working with genAI as a learning partner shape the recursive development of students’ understanding of calculus?** Addressing this question required not only measuring learning outcomes but analyzing the *process* of student-AI dialogue—examining how students reason, question, struggle, and ultimately construct mathematical meaning in collaboration with an AI agent.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates a dual role for AI: as the *object* of investigation (students learning with AI) and as a *methodological partner* (researchers using AI tools like GitHub Copilot to analyze qualitative data). This chapter models how AI can support rigorous, transparent, reproducible qualitative research while maintaining the interpretive depth essential to understanding complex learning processes.

2 Theoretical Framework: Pirie-Kieren Recursive Understanding

The Pirie-Kieren theory provides a sophisticated model for analyzing mathematical understanding as dynamic, recursive, and multileveled (Pirie & Kieren, 1994). Unlike linear stage theories, the framework conceptualizes learning as movement through nested levels of increasing sophistication, with critical “folding back” processes where learners return to earlier understandings to rebuild, refine, or extend their knowledge. The framework identifies eight nested levels: (1) **Primitive Knowing**—intuitive, pre-formal knowledge; (2) **Image Making**—creating mental representations through examples; (3) **Image Having**—possessing manipulable mental images; (4) **Property Noticing**—recognizing patterns and relationships; (5) **Formalising**—articulating generalizations and algorithms; (6) **Observing**—reflecting on formal properties; (7) **Structuring**—constructing theoretical frameworks; and (8) **Inventising**—creating new mathematics by applying understanding to novel contexts. Critically, these levels are not hierarchical stages but *nested contexts*—each level contains and builds upon previous levels. Students move fluidly between levels, and effective learning often involves “folding back”: returning to earlier levels (e.g., creating new examples) when confronting challenges at higher levels (e.g., struggling to formalize a pattern).

The framework offers distinct advantages for studying AI-mediated instruction. Rather than assessing only final outcomes (test scores), Pirie-Kieren enables analysis of *how* understanding develops through dialogue, identifying level transitions, folding-back moments, and the quality of reasoning at each level. Effective AI tutoring should facilitate recursive engagement—prompting students to revisit concepts, test understanding through new examples, and connect formal abstractions to concrete instances. The framework guided our AI prompt design: we explicitly incorporated features to encourage folding back, support multiple levels (concrete examples *and* formal definitions), and prompt property-noticing and reflection.

3 Study Design and Methodology

Participants were 127 Chinese undergraduate STEM students enrolled in three sections of second-semester calculus at Sichuan University. Approximately 40% reported prior exposure to Taylor series from high school, creating diverse entering knowledge levels. Building on prior proof-of-concept work (Edwards et al., 2024), we designed a three-phase AI-mediated learning experience: **Phase I: Personality Profiling** adapted the AI's teaching persona based on student preferences; **Phase II: Historical Narrative** presented Taylor series through Brook Taylor's 1715 work, connecting mathematical development to contemporary applications; **Phase III: Interactive Problem-Solving** had students work through guided problems involving real-world applications (satellite orbit prediction, medical device design, environmental modeling). The AI scaffolded problem-solving through Socratic questioning, adaptive hints, and requests for student reflection, operationalizing Pirie-Kieren principles to create opportunities for students to move through multiple understanding levels and fold back when needed. We collected complete transcripts of all 127 student-AI dialogues, post-module surveys, and a graduate assistant interview.

Analyzing 127 complete conversational transcripts required a hybrid approach combining manual calibration, automated processing, and AI-assisted coding. We developed the **Pirie-Kieren Work Analysis Protocol (PK-WAP)**—a systematic coding scheme operationalizing the eight understanding levels as observable indicators in transcript text. For each level, we defined inclusion and exclusion criteria with example excerpts. The research team (three authors) independently coded five transcripts manually, achieving 85% inter-rater reliability. Having established reliable manual coding, we used AI tools (GitHub Copilot within VS Code) to assist with transcript preprocessing, pattern detection, word count analysis, and aggregation. Critically, AI *assisted* but did not replace human judgment—all level classifications were reviewed by researchers, with AI tools functioning as efficiency multipliers enabling comprehensive analysis impossible through purely manual methods.

4 Findings: Recursive Understanding in Action

Across 127 transcripts, the dialogue was relatively balanced overall, with genAI producing approximately 55

Analysis of 30 anchor cases—chosen to represent a range of engagement patterns and learning trajectories—revealed that across these cases, student talk percentages ranged from 13.3% to 100.0%, reflecting a broad spectrum of participation patterns. Regardless of talk share, all cases showed evidence of significant mathematical reasoning, with students reaching at least Formalising or Observing layers, and several attaining Structuring (the penultimate PK level). The number of observed recursive movements ranged from two to three per transcript, suggesting that the genAI partner frequently prompted cycles of reflection, error-checking, and conceptual reorganization. Analysis revealed that 77% of students reached Inventising and exhibited folding-back, demonstrating agentic moves such as proposing alternative strategies, questioning approximation validity, and critically evaluating AI-generated suggestions.

One illustrative case (P44-G7-S4) involved a student designing a Taylor series-based breathing alert system for deep-sea divers who encountered the “ghost term problem”—when expanding $\sin(\pi x)$ around $x = 0$, initial terms vanish because derivatives are zero. Rather than accepting AI-provided solutions, the student recognized the pattern of vanishing terms, sketched the sine function to understand behavior near zero, proposed calculating

additional terms to capture non-zero contributions, and ultimately independently suggested shifting the expansion center from $x = 0$ to $x = 2$ (the depth of interest), demonstrating creative adaptation. This transcript exemplifies how the AI facilitated recursive thinking: the student moved fluidly through levels, folding back when needed, and ultimately invented a novel solution approach.

Survey findings ($n=146$) indicated that 62% agreed or strongly agreed the assignment helped them learn calculus concepts better (51% agreed, 12% strongly agreed), while 22% reported neutral impact. Regarding attitudes toward genAI for learning, 77% reported more positive attitudes following the assignment (42% much more positive, 35% somewhat more positive), with 19% reporting no change and only 3% more negative. The graduate assistant interview provided crucial context: approximately 40% of students already knew Taylor series from high school, creating a ceiling effect. For these students, the AI's pedagogical approach—starting from basics—felt redundant. The TA also noted that survey responses may have been inflated by social desirability, as students assumed the instructor could see their responses.

5 Implications for Design and Practice

Our findings suggest several actionable design principles for AI-mediated mathematics learning. First, adapt content difficulty, not just pedagogy: the personality profiling phase adapted AI teaching *style* but not mathematical *level*. Future designs should include diagnostic assessments to branch students toward appropriate challenge levels—guiding novices through fundamentals while directing advanced students toward deeper exploration (convergence proofs, error bounds, complex extensions). Second, explicitly scaffold recursive thinking by building prompts that encourage folding back, facilitate property-noticing through comparison tasks, and prompt metacognitive reflection. Third, balance efficiency and depth: some students valued thorough scaffolding while others found it frustrating. Adaptive systems should allow students to control pacing and detail level, perhaps through metacognitive prompts (“Would you like a hint or prefer to try independently?”). Fourth, leverage real-world contexts thoughtfully: application problems engaged most students and created opportunities for Inventising-level work, but contexts must be authentic and mathematically meaningful rather than superficial “word problem” wrappers.

This study demonstrates how AI tools can support rigorous qualitative research through scalability (analyzing 127 complete transcripts would be prohibitive with purely manual methods; AI assistance enabled comprehensive analysis while maintaining interpretive depth), transparency (reproducible code pipelines publicly available document every analytical decision), reliability (AI-assisted pattern detection reduced human error in mechanical tasks), and efficiency (researchers focused cognitive effort on theoretical interpretation rather than data management). These methodological innovations are transferable to other qualitative research contexts involving large text datasets—interviews, classroom discourse, online discussions.

6 Implications, Limitations, and Conclusions

Our findings suggest several actionable design principles for AI-mediated mathematics learning. First, adapt content difficulty, not just pedagogy: future designs should include diagnostic assessments to branch students toward appropriate challenge levels. Second,

explicitly scaffold recursive thinking by building prompts that encourage folding back, facilitate property-noticing, and prompt metacognitive reflection. Third, balance efficiency and depth by allowing students to control pacing and detail level. Fourth, leverage real-world contexts that are authentic and mathematically meaningful. Fifth, this study demonstrates how AI tools can support rigorous qualitative research through scalability, transparency, and efficiency while maintaining interpretive depth.

This single-site study limits generalizability, and approximately 40% of students already knew Taylor series from high school. Survey data may reflect social desirability bias, and the single session captures initial engagement but not sustained learning.

This chapter presents empirical evidence that carefully designed genAI learning partners can scaffold recursive mathematical understanding in undergraduate calculus. Using the Pirie-Kieren framework, we documented how 127 students engaged with Taylor series through AI-mediated dialogue, with most students reaching Inventising and exhibiting folding-back cycles. While many students demonstrated sophisticated mathematical reasoning and positive learning experiences, challenges included prior knowledge ceiling effects and variability in engagement depth. These findings underscore the importance of adaptive design—systems that adjust both pedagogical style and mathematical content difficulty. Methodologically, the chapter models how AI can serve dual roles: as the object of educational research and as a partner in qualitative analysis.

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