

AI AS A WRITING ASSISTANT: UNDERSTANDING EFL LEARNERS' ACCEPTANCE AND CHALLENGES IN ACADEMIC WRITING

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Abstract: Artificial Intelligence (AI) has revolutionized the education sector, providing transformative tools for academic writing, particularly for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. This study explores EFL learners' acceptance of AI-powered writing tools, such as ChatGPT and Grammarly, and the challenges they face. Utilizing a qualitative research design, semi-structured interviews with five university students revealed key insights into their experiences. The findings highlight the dual nature of AI tools, offering benefits like improved grammar and coherence while presenting challenges such as over-reliance and difficulties in interpreting AI feedback. The study concludes that strategic integration of AI tools, combined with digital literacy training, can maximize their potential while fostering independent writing skills. Recommendations include encouraging students to draft manually before refining with AI tools and providing institutional support to ensure equitable access. This research contributes to the discourse on AI's role in enhancing EFL academic writing and underscores the need for balanced implementation.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, artificial intelligence (AI) has rapidly transformed various sectors, including education, offering new opportunities to improve both teaching and learning processes. Among the various applications of AI in education, AI-powered writing tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, and other generative AI technologies have shown significant potential in assisting students, particularly those learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). These tools provide real-time feedback on grammar, vocabulary, and writing structure, which can significantly enhance students' academic writing skills. However, despite the promise of AI as a writing assistant, the extent to which EFL students accept, utilize, and benefit from these tools remains an area of concern, requiring further investigation.

Academic writing is an essential skill for EFL learners, yet many students face significant challenges. Issues such as grammar, vocabulary, coherence, and the ability to effectively organize and present ideas are common hurdles (Bulqiyah et al., 2021). These

difficulties are particularly pronounced in the context of English academic writing, where clarity, precision, and structure are paramount. The need for effective strategies to assist learners in overcoming these challenges has led to the integration of AI tools in the writing process. Previous studies, such as those by (Joo, 2024), have shown that AI can support second language learners in enhancing writing proficiency by providing immediate and context-specific feedback.

AI tools in education have gained traction for their potential to improve student engagement and learning outcomes. (Campbell & Cox, 2024) highlights the role of generative AI in facilitating the research writing process, emphasizing its capability to aid students in generating ideas and improving their writing fluency. Similarly, studies by Nolan and Vang (2024) have explored automated essay scoring systems, suggesting that AI-driven feedback can accelerate students' learning curves in writing. However, while these tools are often seen as helpful, they also introduce complexities, such as students' trust in AI-generated feedback and their ability to use it effectively (Burkhard, 2023).

Moreover, previous research by (Thangthong et al., 2024) and (Joseph et al., 2024) has examined EFL students' experiences with AI tools. These studies suggest that while students acknowledge the benefits of AI, such as enhanced writing accuracy and the ability to correct errors quickly, they also face challenges such as overreliance on technology and a lack of understanding regarding AI's suggestions. These findings underscore the need for more in-depth qualitative research to explore EFL students' perspectives on AI tools as writing assistants.

While the effectiveness of AI tools has been examined from a quantitative perspective in various studies (Burkhard, 2023), few studies have qualitatively explored EFL students' experiences with these tools. Most existing research focuses on the technical and pedagogical aspects, such as AI's impact on writing quality or its role in assessment. However, little attention has been paid to the personal and contextual factors that shape students' acceptance and use of AI in their writing process. This research aims to fill this gap by investigating how EFL learners perceive and adapt to AI tools, as well as the challenges they face when integrating these technologies into their writing practices.

This study seeks to explore the following objectives to acceptance of AI Tools to understanding how EFL learners accept and utilize AI-powered writing tools in their academic writing. Challenges in using AI to identify the challenges EFL learners encounter when integrating AI into their writing process. By using semi-structured interviews with five EFL

students, this research will provide insights into the personal experiences, perceptions, and barriers associated with AI tools, ultimately contributing to a more nuanced understanding of how AI is shaping the writing practices of EFL learners.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore EFL students' perceptions and experiences of using AI-powered writing tools in academic writing. Following (Creswell, 2018) emphasis on qualitative inquiry, this approach facilitated an in-depth understanding of students' interactions with AI tools within a real-world educational context. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow participants to articulate their experiences while providing the researcher with flexibility to probe deeper into relevant topics.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring they met specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. The participants were EFL university students who had engaged with AI-powered writing tools such as Grammarly, ChatGPT, or similar platforms in their academic writing tasks during the previous semester. Five participants, deemed sufficient for a qualitative study, were chosen to gather rich and meaningful data, as supported by (Ary et al., 2010).

Data collection involved individual interviews, each lasting between 30 and 45 minutes. The interviews were guided by a protocol informed by prior studies, such as (Campbell & Cox, 2024), (Thangthong et al., 2024), and (Utami et al., 2023), which explored AI integration in EFL and academic contexts. The interviews focused on eliciting participants' perceptions of the advantages, challenges, and learning outcomes associated with AI tools in their writing process. Responses were recorded with participants' consent and transcribed for analysis.

The analysis of the data drew upon interpretative strategies informed by existing literature on qualitative methodologies. Patterns and themes were identified from the data to highlight the perceived effectiveness of AI tools, the challenges faced by students, and their broader implications for academic writing. To ensure rigor, member checking was employed, allowing participants to review their responses for accuracy. Ethical considerations, including confidentiality, informed consent, and voluntary participation, were strictly adhered to throughout the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive overview of EFL students' perceptions and experiences with AI-powered tools in academic writing. Participants generally agreed that AI tools significantly facilitated their writing tasks, particularly when working under tight deadlines. Tools such as ChatGPT, Claude, and DeepL were frequently mentioned as effective aids for generating ideas, improving clarity, and enhancing the overall quality of their writing. This aligns with (Campbell & Cox, 2024) findings, which highlighted the role of generative AI in streamlining the research writing process. Additionally, the ability to obtain immediate feedback and corrections was praised for its role in simplifying complex tasks, reflecting insights by (Utami et al., 2023) on the utility of AI for academic writing among Indonesian students.

However, several challenges emerged in the participants' use of AI tools. Some students mentioned the limitations of free versions, such as restricted word counts and access to premium features, which hindered their ability to fully utilize these tools. Others expressed difficulties in understanding and applying the feedback provided by AI, noting that the language or suggestions were sometimes too complex. These challenges resonate with the observations of (Joseph et al., 2024), who emphasized the importance of digital literacy in maximizing the benefits of AI tools, and (Greene Nolan & Vang, 2023), who noted similar issues in understanding AI-generated scores and feedback in academic writing.

When examining the impact of AI tools on writing skills development, the responses were mixed. While some students reported improvements in idea generation and essay structuring, others expressed concerns about over-reliance on AI, which they felt hindered their motivation to learn independently. This aligns with (Burkhard, 2023) assertion that excessive dependency on AI-powered writing tools can diminish students' ability to develop self-reliance. Nevertheless, certain participants noted that AI stimulated their critical and creative thinking, serving as a useful starting point for developing ideas. Such findings echo (Ho, 2018) reflections on the effectiveness of AI in fostering students' English writing abilities when integrated thoughtfully into the learning process.

Participants also suggested strategies for optimizing AI use in academic writing. One common recommendation was to write drafts independently before using AI tools for refinement, ensuring that students could develop their skills while leveraging AI as a supportive resource. This perspective aligns with Joseph et al. (2024) and (Ho, 2018), who advocate for a

balanced approach to integrating AI tools in education to foster autonomy and skill enhancement among learners.

In summary, the results of this study highlight both the potential benefits and limitations of AI tools in EFL academic writing. While these tools provide invaluable support in enhancing efficiency and accessibility, challenges such as understanding AI feedback and the risk of dependency underscore the need for guided and strategic usage. These findings contribute to the growing discourse on the role of AI in education, particularly in EFL contexts, by emphasizing the importance of digital literacy and balanced integration to optimize learning outcomes.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

This study highlights the dual nature of AI-powered tools in the context of EFL academic writing. On the one hand, these tools offer substantial benefits, such as facilitating idea generation, providing immediate feedback, and enhancing overall writing quality. On the other hand, challenges such as understanding complex AI feedback, dependency on technology, and accessibility limitations underscore the need for a balanced and guided approach. These findings align with existing literature, including (Campbell & Cox, 2024), (Joseph et al., 2024), and (Ho, 2018), which emphasize the importance of integrating AI tools effectively into educational contexts to maximize their potential benefits.

While AI tools undeniably serve as valuable resources for EFL learners, the risk of over-reliance highlights the importance of fostering students' independent writing skills. Encouraging learners to draft independently before refining their work with AI tools can strike a balance between leveraging technology and developing autonomy. This balanced approach, as recommended by (Joseph et al., 2024), ensures that students gain the necessary skills to succeed both with and without technological assistance.

To further optimize the use of AI tools in academic writing, educators should focus on increasing students' digital literacy and critical thinking skills. Providing training on how to effectively use these tools, coupled with guidelines on ethical AI usage, can empower students to harness AI as a supportive rather than a substitutive resource. Additionally, institutions should consider offering access to premium AI tools or alternatives to bridge the gap in accessibility experienced by students.

Future research could explore the long-term impacts of AI tools on students' academic writing performance and investigate their role in other language learning skills, such as

speaking and reading. By continuing to examine the evolving role of AI in education, stakeholders can better understand how to integrate these technologies in a way that fosters meaningful and sustainable learning outcomes for EFL students.

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