

AI in Academic Writing: EFL Students' Experiences Across Opportunities and Ethical Boundaries

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Abstract: Artificial intelligence (AI) to write academic papers has become a growing trend in recent times and is increasingly utilized by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students worldwide. This study explored the experiences of a group of EFL students from a variety of backgrounds who use AI to support their writing. The ways in which these students have been able to capitalize from the opportunities that using AI to write provides for were also investigated, as well as the various ethical boundaries that they have encountered along the way. Utilizing a qualitative phenomenological case study approach, the experiences of 12 EFL students from one higher education institution were investigated by means of semi-structured interviews, which were subsequently analyzed using an interactive model of analysis as proposed by Miles and Huberman. The findings from this study revealed that there are a number of opportunities that have been provided by using AI to write, including the ability to provide students with ideas, aid with aspects of grammar and vocabulary as well as assist with the overall organization of a piece of writing and aid in meeting of deadlines. Using AI to write also provided students with a sense of confidence and assisted in independent learning. However, a number of ethical boundaries were also revealed that need to be addressed including potential for plagiarism, over reliance on AI, the provision of inaccurate information and a lack of clear guidelines on the use of AI within educational settings. In order to combat these issues and ensure that original work is being submitted, the participants in this study revealed a number of strategies that they employed on a regular basis including paraphrasing AI generated work, adding their own ideas to work completed by AI, evaluating information obtained from AI on a critical basis and limiting the use of AI to that of support.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, academic writing, EFL students, ethical boundaries, originality.

Introduction

It is already well-documented that much has been altered in terms of education, particularly in academic writing, as a result of the recent advancement of Artificial Intelligence (AI) over the past few years. Quite a lot of students employ AI writing tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, etc. In academic writing to improve their writing. With AI writing tools, students can brainstorm ideas, detect errors in grammar and spelling, correct them, and even organize their

writing more perfectly with better structure and usage of vocabulary. Therefore, students find that their academic writing is facilitated and more expedient. Since EFL learners face difficulties in language usage in their writing tasks and have struggles in articulating their ideas in English in academic writing, AI tools help students so much in academic writing. This paper investigates the way students exploit AI writing tools to help their writing processes in their academic writing in higher education. The findings from the interview data have shown that students utilize AI to start their writing, get inspiration for their writing, and finish their assigned writing tasks more rapidly.

This study is important because many students today heavily rely on AI in their academic lives. The AI helps students in their writing in many ways, including saving time, improving writing quality, and giving confidence to students. However, the use of AI also has several negative effects on students, including how AI use affects students' learning and their level of independence. Research has shown that excessive use of AI by students can cause them to lack critical thinking, to be less original, and to lack personal touch or voice in their academic writing (Rafi & Amjad, 2025; Shidiq, 2023). Some students even admitted that they need to be careful not to over-reliance on the AI and that they must still think independently (Fauziah & Minarti, 2023). Moreover, the use of AI also has to deal with the problem of inaccuracy or irrelevance of information provided by the AI. The information must be reviewed and even revised by students (Widodo et al., 2024). Thus, it can be seen that AI is not only a tool to help students in their academic life but also a complex phenomenon that can affect students' writing. Therefore, this study aims to explore both the benefits and the drawbacks of the use of AI by EFL students in their writing processes. Another important reason why this issue needs to be studied is related to ethical concerns in academic writing. The use of AI raises questions about plagiarism, authorship, and academic integrity. Many students are still confused about how far they can use AI tools in their assignments, especially because clear institutional guidelines are often not available (Malik, 2025).

The findings from the interviews of Respondents reflect that most EFL students have positive views of using AI tools to support their academic writing, and, for the most part, they feel that these tools support their learning and help them to complete assignments in the best way. Also, it was found that although several negative aspects of using AI need to be addressed in terms of ethical use, most students use these tools in responsible ways to produce original and accurate academic written work. For this reason, they often choose to rewrite the AI-generated material and add their own personal ideas and insights to the work. Sometimes they even compare the information provided by AI with other sources before using it in their assignments. In general, therefore, the EFL students in this study consider the use of AI tools to support their academic writing in positive ways and believe these can be very useful when used responsibly and in conjunction with their own writing skills and critical thinking.

It is necessary to conduct research on this topic due to a variety of reasons. First, the advantages of AI use in academic writing were acknowledged by many previous studies. However, the negative effects and challenges that students face when utilizing AI in their writing processes are under-researched. While previous research confirms the variety of ethical issues of using AI in academic writing, students perceive positive impacts they obtain from writing using AI. For instance, using AI leads to the enhancement of the writing quality and frees up students' time for other tasks. Therefore, this study indicates the strategies that students use to mitigate the impacts and challenges that they experience while using AI in the writing process, and it highlights student uncertainty and their decision-making processes in terms of whether to use or not to use AI in their writing process. Otherwise, poor decision-making by students may cause inappropriate use of AI in their writing processes.

Moreover, although many have discussed the benefits and the risks of AI in education, most studies focus on the issues individually. So, there is a dearth of studies that focus on students' real experiences, the advantages of the use of AI in their academic writing, and the

ethical concerns in using AI in academic environments. Studies that focus on EFL students' writing in foreign languages would also be beneficial, as there are certain challenges they face in their writing tasks. Thus, this study will provide more in-depth insights into the use of AI in students' academic writing.

Several studies have investigated AI in a wide range of contexts when writing (Al Afnan, 2025; Emaliana et al., 2023; Nhan et al., 2025; Rafi and Amjad, 2025; Shidiq, 2023). Some researchers studied implementing AI writing tools in the classroom (Es-sarghi and Bounahdi, 2025; bin Mohd Tahir et al., 2026; Quispe-Mamani et al., 2025; Fauziah and Minarti, 2023; Widodo et al., 2024). Besides, research that dealt with the ethical issues related to AI use in writing was conducted (Kotsis, 2025; Dwivedi et al., 2024; Deb et al., 2025; Malik, 2025). Lastly, studies that tackled the impact of AI writing tools upon both students' and teachers' writing and teaching were made (Semel and Uli, 2026; Domingo et al., 2025; Zheldibayet al., 2025; Begum, 2025; Yetik, 2025). While a great number of studies were conducted regarding AI use in writing, an integration gap still existed in the literature, especially when it comes to the realm of EFL and higher education. Hence, this study endeavors to fulfill this gap by providing a full description of AI use in academic writing by integrating challenges, implementation, ethics, and the impact of AI writing. The goal of this study is to examine how EFL students experience the use of AI writing tools when writing academic texts. The study aims to analyze how the use of AI in academic writing brings about opportunities while setting forth limits that have to be followed ethically.

The main goal of this research is to find out how students are supported by AI in their writing in terms of idea generation, language quality, and completion of writing tasks, and at the same time, possible risks of overusing AI, such as overdependence on AI, plagiarism, and lack of awareness of usage limits. Furthermore, the study aims to investigate how students can remain original and responsible when using AI in their writing process. This study will contribute to the body of knowledge about the use of AI in writing by integrating several aspects that have not yet been given sufficient attention in previous studies, namely the opportunities and experiences that students have with AI, as well as the many different ethical considerations that must be taken into account. The findings of this study will be of practical value to students, teachers, and institutions and will highlight the ways in which AI can be used effectively and responsibly in order to support students in their academic writing.

Research Questions

- 1) How do EFL students experience the use of AI tools in academic writing tasks at university?
- 2) What ethical challenges do EFL students face when using AI tools in academic writing?
- 3) How do EFL students maintain originality and honesty while using AI tools?

Methods

This study was qualitative, descriptive, phenomenological research. The phenomenological approach was chosen for the main purpose of this study, which was to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of EFL students while using AI tools for their writing tasks in their academic writings. The researcher was interested in determining the opportunities of AI tools provided for EFL students as well as the ethical issues students encountered while using the tools to complete their writing assignments. The students' perceptions, experiences, and strategies for utilizing AI tools appropriately in their university writing activities were analyzed.

There were 12 EFL students involved in the study from the English Education Study Program at a higher education institution. All of the participants in the study were from two classes of English classes: TBI 4A and TBI 2A. For the assignment, the researcher asked the students to utilize several AI tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, Google Gemini, and Grok to support them in completing their writing tasks. The researcher chose the two classes as the

participants in this study because the students were familiar with several AI tools for their writing process. Hence, they would provide the writer with the useful data needed to answer the research questions of the study. The researcher selected the participants in the study using a purposive sampling technique. The selection criteria of the participants in this study were that students must be aware of and actively use several AI tools to support their writing activities, which include idea generation, grammar check, writing structure organizing, paraphrasing, and writing completion. The researcher chose the students who were selected based on the criteria due to the experiences they had and the varied views they had concerning the use of AI tools to aid their writing.

In collecting data for this study, two research methods were used, namely semi-structured interviews and documentation. The researcher interviewed each of the 12 participants individually. Through interviews, the researcher tried to discover the participants' experiences of using AI tools for their academic writing in detail. The interview tried to explore how the students perceived using AI tools for their academic writing, the benefits the students received, the ethical issues that students encountered, and how they handled them. All the interviews were recorded and later transcribed.

Another technique used was documentation. The researcher gathered some of the students' AI chats, drafts, writing tasks, and sample writing works. Based on the documents analyzed, the writer understood how the students actually applied the AI tools for their writing. All the findings from documentation support the findings gained through interviews. This multiple data source was used to establish the credibility of the researcher's findings.

The collected data were analyzed using the Interactive model of qualitative data analysis developed by Miles and Huberman. There were four stages in the data analysis process, including: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. In the data reduction stage, all interview transcripts were read repeatedly, and the useful data relevant to the research questions were selected and coded. The unwanted data was omitted in the stages of the data reduction process.

Several themes emerged from the coding regarding students' experiences, the ethical challenges encountered, and their strategies to achieve originality when writing with the aid of AI. In the data display phase, the researcher reduced and organized the data findings into thematic tables and written descriptions. By looking through the data, the researcher discovered recurring patterns, similarities, and contrasts within and across the participants' written accounts. Selective quotes from the participants' accounts were used to illustrate the emerging themes. The data from the written accounts were categorized into a set of themes that related to the research questions and answered the questions about how students perceived the utility of using AI for writing, how the technology could support their learning, their level of awareness about plagiarism, their understanding of authorship, their ability to paraphrase, their critical thinking, and how they self-regulated their use of technology.

The final stage of the analysis process was about drawing conclusions and verifying the findings. While constantly reviewing the data, the researcher cross-checked the information that he got from the interviews with the information he got from the documents. He also tried to make sense of the relationships that he found between the different themes that he had identified in his data. As a result, the researcher obtained a comprehensive understanding of how EFL students experience the use of AI tools for academic writing, of the ethical boundaries that they encounter, and of the strategies that they use in order to maintain academic integrity.

Results and Discussion

Results

This chapter describes the findings of this study. In this chapter, the data collected from the in-depth interviews with the EFL students who use AI tools for their academic writing at the university level are presented. The findings were organized around the three research questions

of this study. The data from the interviews were analyzed through coding and categorizing in order to identify the patterns of the experiences, challenges, and strategies of the students who use AI tools for academic writing.

Research Question 1: How do EFL students experience the use of AI tools in academic writing tasks at university?

The findings for the first research question have been grouped into five major themes, which are perceived usefulness, ease of use, learning support, efficiency, and challenges experienced by the participants in their use of AI tools in academic writing for university studies.

Theme 1: Perceived Usefulness

The findings related to Research Question 1 revealed five themes in relation to the ways in which EFL students experienced the use of AI tools to support their completion of various academic writing tasks. In general, the majority of students in the current study perceived AI tools to be very useful when it came to providing support for their writing. As participant 1 explained, AI tools helped him with idea generation, organizing his thoughts, and locating potential references to write in a more organized fashion. The writer of Quote 1 was able to utilize AI tools in order to gain a clear starting point for his writing when he was lost for ideas. His comments further indicate that AI was useful for supporting students when they were struggling to develop their writing ideas and also to organize their written work.

Theme 2: Ease of Use

Another important finding from this data set is the 'ease of use' of AI tools. There were many comments from participants in this data set that stated that they found AI tools to be simple, accessible, and could be applied straight away in their academic assignments. Participant 5 stated, "I find AI tools easy to access and use so I can apply them in my academic assignments whenever I need to." These findings support the view of the use of AI tools in academic writing by students due to the accessibility and user-friendly nature of the applications.

Theme 3: Learning Support

AI as Learning Support for Students. The data also showed that AI tools provided learning support to the students for their academic writing. The tools were able to assist students in improving their grammar, sentence structure, and paragraph structure, as well as their vocabulary. The findings showed that AI tools provided instant feedback to the students, which was essential for their learning. Participant 3 stated, "I use AI to support my learning. The tool provides instant feedback, which helps me to improve my language skills." She further added that she was able to learn new words and use them appropriately in her writing.

Theme 4: Efficiency

Efficiency was another theme that emerged in this study. Most of the participants felt that using AI in their academic writing increased their productivity. Participant 1 stated that "AI helps me complete my assignments faster because it saves time needed to organize and check for mistakes in written work." These findings support the view that using AI in academic writing increases students' writing productivity and makes their academic writing easier to manage.

Theme 5: Challenges Experienced

On the other hand, there were some challenges expressed by the participants. One of them was the risk of becoming too dependent on the AI applications. The challenges that the students faced when they were using the applications for academic writing were mostly related to the technical issues of the AI applications, how to use them properly, and how to evaluate the information provided by them.

Research Question 2: What ethical challenges do EFL students face when using AI tools in academic writing?

The findings of Research Question 2 also formed five major themes, namely plagiarism awareness, authorship responsibility, ethical decision-making, dependence management, and understanding of guidelines.

Theme 1: Plagiarism Awareness

Most of the ethical concerns identified from the study's findings focused on plagiarism awareness. There were concerns about whether copying and pasting AI-generated text after certain modifications could still be considered plagiarism. While the majority of the participants agreed that directly copying and pasting AI-generated content would be considered as academic fraud or plagiarism, they also agreed that they should not copy and paste AI-generated content, as they would be committing academic fraud. Participant 1 stated that he understands that directly copying and pasting AI-generated text or content into a work would lead to academic fraud or plagiarism.

Theme 2: Authorship Responsibility

Students who use AI in their academic writing still regard themselves as authors of the work they produce. While they utilize AI to support their writing process, the ultimate responsibility of the completed work still rests on the student who wrote it. Participant 3 opines that, "as students, we must be responsible for our academic writing whether we utilize AI or not." These findings have implications for the manner in which AI should be used by students in their academic writing so that they are able to develop their academic writing skills.

Theme 3: Ethical Decision-Making

The findings of this study also attempt to unravel how students attempt to make decisions in relation to the use of AI in academic writing. Most of the participants in this study admitted to using AI for generating ideas or for creating outlines of their essays. Then they would go on to write the body of the essay in their own words. Participant 1 pointed out, "I use AI for generating ideas and for making outlines for my essays. Then I proceed to write the rest of the essay in my own words." These findings demonstrate the ways in which students attempt to use AI in academic writing in an ethical manner.

Theme 4: Dependence Management

Another theme that emerged from the data is that of students' dependence on technology and how they manage this. Some students admitted that they could become a problem for students who overuse AI during their writing. However, other students were aware of the potential problems and were actively managing their use of technology. Participant 3 commented, "The biggest problem for me with AI is overdependence on it. I have to be careful not to rely too much on technology for my academic work." These comments by the participants show that they are aware of the need to manage their dependence on technology.

Theme 5: Understanding of Guidelines

Students also experienced confusion and uncertainty with regard to institutional rules and guidelines surrounding the use of AI in academic writing. The lack of clear rules and guidelines often leaves students unsure of the limits of AI use in writing. Participant 2 wrote, "I still need clearer guidelines because sometimes I am unsure about how far I can use AI in my assignments." These findings support the need for clearer institutional guidelines for the ethical use of AI.

Research Question 3: How do EFL students maintain originality and honesty while using AI tools?

The findings for Research Question 3 were categorized into five major themes, namely: (a) paraphrasing ability, (b) critical evaluation, (c) personal contribution, (d) transparency, and (e) self-regulation.

Theme 1: Paraphrasing Ability

The findings from Research Question 3 revealed five major themes, namely paraphrasing ability, critical evaluation, personal contribution, transparency, and self-regulation. Most dominant findings from the themes were discussed in detail below. The findings indicated that the majority of students in this study maintained originality of their writing by using paraphrasing in order to rewrite AI-generated content into their own writing using their own personal language style. Participant 1 said, "I paraphrase AI-generated content by rewriting it in my own words so that they become more original."

Theme 2: Critical Evaluation

In critical evaluation, students were aware that they could not simply rely on information generated by AI programs and therefore had to verify the accuracy of the information. This meant that students checked the relevance of information as well as cross-checked the information with other credible sources, including journals and academic books. Participant 1 stated that he 'thinks carefully and checks the information whether it is relevant and accurate' when he uses AI to support his writing.

Theme 3: Personal Contribution

The findings also showed that the participants added their own personal ideas, experience, and thoughts in their academic writing that had been assisted by AI. The majority of the participants felt that personal contribution was very important for them to show their own understanding in their academic writing. Participant 2 stated that "I put in my own opinions and experiences in my academic writing to make sure that my writing is personal and has my own ideas and thoughts in it."

Theme 4: Transparency

Students who used AI tools in writing maintained their integrity by being honest and not claiming written work that was generated by AI entirely as their own. Instead, they ensured that written work contained their own ideas and contributions primarily. This was evident from participant 3's statement that students should be honest by not relying completely on AI-generated content to complete their written work.

Theme 5: Self-Regulation

The findings in this theme reveal that the students in this study have attempted to regulate their use of the technology in their writing for academic purposes. Participant 1, he explained how he limits his use of AI by only using it after he has attempted to complete a task or write a piece of work himself.

Discussion

This is a qualitative phenomenological study. In this study, the researcher examined EFL students' experiences of using AI tools for academic writing. Researchers tried to reveal how EFL students experienced and perceived, as well as realized their awareness about the usage of the AI tools.

Most of the participants had a positive perception of the AI tools, and they saw that the tools were beneficial for academic writing, in terms of the participants' learning perceptions. Participants reported that they saw the use of AI tools to help with their academic writing as

helpful, and they explained that the existence of the AI tools, such as grammar checker, idea suggestion, and idea generation, helped them to produce a better academic paper. Moreover, this finding of study 1 supported by previous researches, e.g. Munawaroh (2024), Werdiningsih et al. (2024) and Alkamel (2024) found that AI tools is capable to improve writing quality, reduce writing difficulties and increased the writing productivity when the EFL students produce academic paper and writing assignment, and they can be conclude that AI is likely to work as a learning companion as well as a writing productivity tool for EFL students.

Study 2 reveals that while students perceive AI tools positively, there are several ethical issues involved with using AI-assisted writing tools in academic writing, such as plagiarism, authorship, and over-reliance on tools. Previously mentioned, Putri et al. (2025), Werdiningsih et al. (2024), and Hossain et al. (2025) had mentioned that AI for academic writing generated ethical concerns regarding originality and authorship. The second research question of the current study demonstrates that not only are ethical issues presented, but the students also seem to lack awareness of how to utilize the tools properly, and are unaware of the consequences if used in a dishonest manner.

As a result, students feel confused when they receive different treatment from the lecturers for the same assignment, although they both use the AI tool for their writing. According to Munawaroh (2024) and Putri et al. (2025), these issues exist because most academic policies are unclear; as a result, students are uncertain of the appropriate behaviors when using AI for academic writing. In addition, students identified negative aspects such as overuse leading to decreased critical thinking and increasing dependency on technology when under pressure or deadline, in addition to that.

Total observations show that artificial intelligence gives great chances for EFL learners during the act of writing, specifically for making work faster, helping with grammar, generating new thoughts, and increasing personal belief in writing skills. Hardships regarding stealing words, relying too much on tools, and the lack of clear rules are also created by artificial intelligence. Even though these difficulties exist, individuals in educational institutions generally try to use technology in a moral way by keeping their own style and thinking during writing time. Academic professionals suggest that artificial intelligence works as a helping partner that supports the growth of learning and writing while the student takes responsibility. Responsibility and deep thinking are still required from learners in academic environments when they use these tools.

Conclusion

Finally, it was concluded that AI may be a very beneficial writing tool for EFL learners doing academic writing as long as it is used critically, responsibly, and ethically. Learning support and development of independent writers should be the purpose of an AI writing tool, rather than using AI tool to replace students' thinking process. The purposes of this study were to find out the opportunities and challenges that EFL learners encounter when using AI for academic writing, and what the students are trying to do to keep the writing original and honest. All findings from the current study were combined into one framework and were to be used as the base for the subsequent research on the current issue. However, due to the limitations of participant number and the context of this study, there were further studies that should be done. The research should be conducted on the number of participants in different educational settings. Teachers' opinions toward the issue of using AI for writing, and the current status and problems of policies of using AI tools for writing in institutions, as well as the long-term effects of using AI tools for writing on EFL learners' critical thinking and writing ability, should also be investigated in further research.

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