LEARNING OR COPYING? A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF STUDENTS' RELIANCE ON CHATGPT IN WRITING TASKS

Syayidati Nurfadillah AL Ramdani[1], Syabrina Reva Luthfiyyah[2], Sri Justika Wulandari[3], Salsa Alifia Utami[4]

syayidatir@gmail.com[1], syabrinareva12@gmail.com[2], srijustikaw@gmail.com[3], alifiautami24@gmail.com[4]

Suryakancana University, Cianjur, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

In recent years, the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has rapidly increased in education, particularly in writing activities. Many students rely on ChatGPT to complete their writing tasks, which raises questions about whether the tool genuinely supports learning or instead fosters dependency. This research aims to explore students' experiences in using ChatGPT for writing and to examine whether it enhances their understanding or reduces their ability to think critically and write independently. This study adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach involving students from the English Department at Suryakancana University. The data are collected through interviews and document analysis, focusing on students' narratives and written works related to the use of ChatGPT in academic writing tasks. The interview data provide insights into students' perceptions, strategies, and challenges when using ChatGPT, while document analysis examines how the tool is reflected in their written assignments. The collected data are analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and meanings in students' experiences. The findings are expected to provide a deeper understanding of how ChatGPT influences students' writing processes, learning autonomy, and critical thinking skills. This study is also expected to contribute to discussions on the responsible and ethical use of AI tools in higher education, particularly in maintaining a balance between receiving technological support and developing independent writing competence.

Keywords: ChatGPT, AI, writing, students' experience.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has rapidly expanded in higher education, particularly in students' academic activities. One prominent AI tool, ChatGPT, has gained widespread attention for its ability to generate text, provide explanations, and assist students in completing academic tasks, including writing assignments. The increasing accessibility of AI-powered tools has transformed how students approach learning, offering efficiency and immediate support in the writing process

Despite its advantages, the use of AI in academic writing has raised critical concerns. While ChatGPT may function as a supportive learning tool, it also risks becoming a shortcut that reduces students' active engagement in the writing process. Excessive reliance on AI has been associated with potential declines in critical thinking, originality, and deep learning, as students may depend on generated responses rather than developing ideas independently (Avello & Aranguren Zurita, 2025). This tension between assistance and dependency highlights the need to examine how AI truly influences students' learning experiences

Previous studies have examined students' use of AI and educational technologies from various perspectives. Research grounded in the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) emphasizes perceived usefulness and ease of use as key factors influencing technology adoption (Davis, 1989). In addition, self-regulated learning theory suggests that students' ability to plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning plays a crucial role in determining whether technology supports or hinders learning outcomes (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2012; Hartley et al., 2020). Furthermore, writing has been widely understood as a socio-cultural process that develops through interaction, feedback, and collaboration (Rahmat & Whanchit, 2024).

However, most existing studies focus on general perceptions of AI use, theoretical discussions, or literature reviews, offering limited insight into students' lived experiences with AI in academic writing contexts. For example, Viorennita et al. (2023) highlight the role of ChatGPT in student learning experiences through a literature review, but do not explore how students personally interpret their reliance on AI tools in writing tasks. Consequently, there remains a lack of phenomenological research that examines whether ChatGPT supports meaningful learning or fosters dependency. Addressing this gap, the present study employs a phenomenological approach to explore English Department students' lived experiences of using ChatGPT in academic writing and to investigate its implications for learning, critical thinking, and engagement.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach. The phenomenological approach was chosen to explore and understand students' lived experiences in using ChatGPT for academic writing. By focusing on participants' personal perspectives, this approach allows the researcher to capture how students perceive, interpret, and make meaning of their reliance on AI tools in the writing process.

Respondents of the Research

The respondents of this research were 6 students from the English Department of Suryakancana University. The participants were selected using non-probability with purposive sampling, based on specific criteria are third-year students of the English Education Study Program who use ChatGPT . This selection was intended to ensure that the participants were able to provide rich and relevant information related to the research focus

Research Variables / Research Focus

As a qualitative study, this research did not employ independent and dependent variables. Instead, the study focused on several key aspects related to students' experiences in using ChatGPT for academic writing. These aspects included students' perceptions of ChatGPT, the ways ChatGPT influenced their writing process, their learning and critical thinking experiences, and the perceived benefits and challenges of using AI tools in completing writing tasks.

Instruments

The primary instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview. The interview guide consisted of 21 open-ended questions designed to explore students' experiences, perceptions, and reflections on using ChatGPT in academic writing. In addition, document analysis were used as supporting data to strengthen the credibility of the findings.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data collected from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. This technique involved several steps, including transcribing the interview data, familiarizing the researcher with the data, generating initial codes, identifying themes, and interpreting the themes in relation to the research questions. To enhance the trustworthiness of the data, with triangulation or member checking was applied during the analysis process.

RESULT

This section presents the findings of the study obtained from interview data and document analysis. The thematic analysis revealed four main themes representing students' experiences in using ChatGPT for academic writing tasks, as summarized in Table 1 below.

No	Theme	Key Interview Findings	Document Analysis Observations
1	Writing Support Tool	Brainstorming ideas and creating outlines to overcome blocks.	Highly systematic and logical chapter structures.
2	Self-Regulated Learning	Range from active paraphrasing to occasional copy-pasting.	Presence of "human voice" vs. repetitive AI patterns.
3	Perceived Impact	Technical improvement but concerns over less deep thinking.	Sophisticated grammar but generic/cliché arguments.
4	Ethical Concerns	Awareness of plagiarism and reference manipulation.	Identical textual redundancy in unedited drafts.

Theme 1: ChatGPT as a Writing Support Tool

As summarized in Table 1, participants predominantly used ChatGPT as a foundational support tool during the pre-writing and drafting stages. Students relied on the AI to overcome "writer's block" and simplify complex tasks. Participant 1 shared that the tool is a lifesaver: *"ChatGPT helps me get ideas when I don't know how to start my essay."* Similarly, Participant 2 used it to manage heavy reading loads: *"I was confused about the task... I used ChatGPT to summarize journals because reading them one by one is just too hard."*

Document analysis corroborated these claims. Proposals from Participant 3 and Particpant 4 exhibited a highly systematic structure. The theoretical foundations were divided into logical sub-headings (e.g., *Definition, Process, Types*), which align with the "framework" and "outlining" assistance mentioned by the participants in their interviews.

Theme 2: Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) in Using ChatGPT

The results revealed varying levels of SRL among students. Fitriyah demonstrated active regulation, stating: *"I usually check the answer first and*

rewrite it in my own words." On the other hand, some students like Participant 5 admitted to the temptation of skipping the hard work: *"Sometimes I just copy-paste if I'm feeling lazy... but we should actually check other sources to be sure."*

The document analysis reflected this divergence. Participant 1's paper felt more "human" because it contained minor, natural grammatical slips (e.g., *"humans and technology are tend to live coexist"*), indicating an effort to process the AI output. Conversely, in Participant 5's document, several definitions appeared redundant, suggesting a "copy-paste" approach without thorough editing when facing time constraints.

Theme 3: Perceived Impact on Learning and Writing Ability

Participants expressed mixed perceptions regarding their skill development. Participant 6 admitted that the improvement felt a bit superficial: *"I feel there's a slight improvement... but for writing, it's just helpful because I don't have to think too hard about how to make it sound good."* Participant 1 expressed a similar worry: *"Sometimes I feel I don't think deeply because ChatGPT already gives the answer."*

Evidence of this "surface-level" polish was found in the analyzed documents. Many papers especially Participant 6's and Participant 2's started with generic, AI-style openings such as *"In the 21st century..."* or *"Technology plays a crucial role in..."*. While the writing was technically correct, it lacked a unique "student voice," confirming the students' fears that the AI might be doing the analytical thinking for them.

Theme 4: Ethical Concerns and Dependency

Ethical issues and dependency emerged as prominent themes. Participant 3 pointed out the technical risks: *"The risk is regarding reference manipulation, like years or sources that don't match."* Participant 5 admitted to the ethical slippery slope: *"There's a high risk... sometimes I don't cross-check, I just copy-paste. I know that's not really allowed."*

Document analysis supported these concerns, revealing clear "AI fingerprints." In the drafts by Participant 5 and Participant 4, the researcher found instances of textual redundancy—where identical sentences appeared twice in the same section. Furthermore, the constant use of formal connectors like *"Notably,"* *"Furthermore,"* and *"Moreover"* across all analyzed documents confirms a heavy dependency on AI-suggested connectors rather than the students' organic writing styles.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide a nuanced look at how ChatGPT has integrated into the academic writing process of EFL students. A generalization of the research results indicates that while ChatGPT is an undeniable asset for overcoming structural hurdles and linguistic barriers, its usage creates a complex tension between efficiency and authentic learning. Most students perceive the tool as a "digital scaffold" that simplifies the early stages of writing, such as brainstorming and outlining, but this ease of use often leads to a diminished sense of critical engagement during the actual drafting process.

This phenomenon can be analyzed through the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) proposed by Davis (1989). The data shows that the high adoption of ChatGPT among students is driven by its *perceived usefulness* and *perceived ease of use*. Students like Participant 5 and Participant 3 find the tool indispensable because it reduces the cognitive load of summarizing journals and creating frameworks. However, as Karisma and Gui (2023) suggested, when the perceived ease of use is too high, students may prioritize task completion over deep learning, which explains the "copy-paste" tendencies found in the document analysis when students face time constraints.

Furthermore, the study highlights a significant gap in Self-Regulated Learning (SRL). According to Zimmerman (2000), SRL involves the active and systematic orientation of a learner's cognition toward their goals. The results show that students like Participant 1, who use the AI for paraphrasing and feedback, are successfully applying SRL strategies to maintain their agency. Conversely, the repetitive language patterns and lack of a "human voice" in other drafts suggest a failure in the self-monitoring phase of SRL. This aligns with the work of Hartley et al. (2020), who noted that technology can either support or hinder learning depending on the student's ability to regulate their reliance on it.

The emergence of a standardized "AI voice" in student assignments also raises concerns regarding AI Literacy and Academic Integrity. As argued by Wang and Lester (2023), true AI literacy involves the ethical and effective use of technology. While students are proficient in prompting the AI, their heavy reliance on AI-suggested connectors (e.g. Furthermore, In addition, and Moreover) suggests a decline in original authorial identity. Avello and Aranguren Zurita (2025) warned that such challenges to academic integrity are inevitable unless students are taught to treat AI as a collaborator rather than a replacement. In summary, the study generalizes that ChatGPT improves the "product" of writing in terms of structure and grammar, but without strong self-regulation and AI literacy, it risks hollowing out the "process" of genuine intellectual development.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that ChatGPT has become a significant digital collaborator for EFL students, particularly in alleviating the cognitive burden of structural organization and initial drafting. The main findings show that while the tool is highly effective for "scaffolding" the writing process—such as brainstorming and summarizing complex academic texts—it also presents a significant challenge to the development of independent critical thinking. The research highlights a clear gap in how students regulate their use of AI; those with higher self-regulated learning (SRL) abilities use ChatGPT as a tutor to enhance their work, while others risk falling into a cycle of dependency and academic dishonesty through uncritical copy-pasting.

From the authors' point of view, the integration of ChatGPT in English education is inevitable, but it must be managed with caution. We believe that the primary value of AI in writing should be to support the *process*, not just to polish the *product*. The prevalence of "AI-standardized" language and repetitive patterns found in student assignments suggests that without proper AI literacy, students may lose their unique authorial voice. Therefore, we argue that educational institutions should not simply ban these tools, but rather focus on teaching "critical AI literacy" and ethical usage. This approach will ensure that students can harness the efficiency of AI without compromising their genuine intellectual growth and academic integrity.

REFERENCES

Avello, D., & Aranguren Zurita, S. (2025). Exploring the nexus of academic integrity and artificial intelligence in higher education: A bibliometric analysis. *International Journal for Educational Integrity*, *21*(1), 24. https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-024-00462-y

Brown, H. D. (2001). *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy* (2nd ed.). New York: Addison Wesley Longman, Inc.

Davis, F. D. (1989). Perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and user acceptance of information technology. *MIS Quarterly*, *13*(3), 319—340. https://doi.org/10.2307/249008

Hartley, K., Bendixen, L. D., Gianoutsos, D., & Shreve, E. (2020). The smartphone in self-regulated learning and student success: Clarifying relationships and testing an intervention. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, *17*(1), 52. https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-020-00227-3

Naatonis, R. N., Snae, M., Latuan, Y. J., & Anggraini, D. (2025). Modelling user acceptance of personalised learning apps in high schools using the SEM

approach. *Indonesian Journal of Educational Development (IJED)*, *6*(3), 971—984.

Rahmat, N. H., & Whanchit, S. (2024). Writing is a sociocultural process: Exploring interactions in pair work through social constructivism. *Journal of English Language Teaching*, *12*(2), 45—58.

Sukhodolov, Y. A. (2019). The notion, essence, and peculiarities of industry 4.0 as a sphere of industry. In Popkova, E. G., Ragulina, Y. V., & Bogoviz, A. V. (eds.), *Industry 4.0: Industrial Revolution of the 21st Century* (pp. 3—10), Studies in Systems, Decision and Control 169. Switzerland: Springer.

Viorennita, A., Dewi, L., & Riyana, C. (2023). The role of ChatGPT AI in student learning experience. *Indonesian Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, *3*(2), 445—452.

Wang, N., & Lester, J. (2023). K-12 education in the age of AI: A call to action for K-12 AI literacy. *International Journal of Artificial Intelligence in Education*, *33*(2), 228—232.

Zimmerman, B. J., & Schunk, D. H. (2012). Motivation: An essential dimension of self-regulated learning. In *Motivation and Self-Regulated Learning* (pp. 1—30). New York: Routledge.