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Investigating Students' Perceptions of AI-Powered Language Learning Tools in Academic Writing

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Abstract

This study examines the perceptions of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students regarding AI-powered language learning tools for academic writing. Academic writing is crucial for Indonesian EFL students, who often struggle with grammar, vocabulary, organization, and coherence. The rise of AI tools offers a promising solution, providing personalized learning and automated feedback to enhance writing skills. Understanding student perceptions is therefore vital to assess the effectiveness and improve these tools. This research identifies the perceived benefits and drawbacks among students in the English Education Study Program at Ahmad Dahlan University. Employing a qualitative method, the study gathered data through semi-structured interviews with six fourteenth-semester students, and documentation. Using thematic data analysis, focusing on understanding the unique meanings from the participants' perspectives. Findings reveal mostly positive perceptions, with students citing ease of use, improved writing quality, and time efficiency as key benefits. AI tools offer immediate feedback, enabling students to correct errors and refine their language skills independently. However, the study also highlights the critical need for digital literacy to evaluate AI-generated suggestions, as the accuracy of feedback can vary. Concerns included potential technology dependence, AI failures in complex academic contexts, and the need for developers to improve algorithms for contextual relevance. In conclusion, AI-powered tools can significantly enhance academic writing when used thoughtfully, provided they are supported by strong digital literacy and faculty guidance, thereby maintaining human cognitive engagement. This encourages adaptive learning environments and opens avenues for future AI development research.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The ability to communicate effectively through writing is an essential component of academic achievement, particularly for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in Indonesia. Academic writing involves more than just conveying information; it requires precision, clarity, structure, and adherence to linguistic conventions. Indonesian EFL learners are expected to produce various types of academic texts such as essays, research papers, reports, and journal articles, which demand not only linguistic proficiency but also critical thinking and organizational skills. Proficiency in academic writing enables students to express ideas more effectively and contributes significantly to both academic performance and future professional success.

However, writing in English poses considerable challenges for many Indonesian EFL learners. Mastery of grammar, vocabulary, coherence, and cohesion remains difficult for students, even at the university level. Ariyanti and Fitriana (2017) found that students often struggle with key writing components such as grammar accuracy, paragraph organization, and vocabulary selection. In a similar vein, Sadik (2009) noted that although students are introduced to the stages of the writing process—including pre-writing, planning, drafting, revising, and editing—many continue to face difficulties due to limited understanding of writing techniques, lack of motivation, and insufficient mastery of grammar. These challenges highlight the need for additional support systems that can scaffold students' writing development and enhance their learning experience.

At the same time, the rapid advancement of internet communication technologies has transformed the educational landscape. The widespread use of digital tools and mobile devices has reshaped how students access information, communicate, and engage in learning activities. According to Boy and Motteram (2013) as cited in Bansal and Joshi (2014), mobile technologies hold significant potential to enhance learner autonomy and provide more flexible, student-centered approaches to higher education. These technological shifts open new possibilities for integrating innovative tools into EFL instruction, especially in the domain of writing.

One such innovation is the use of artificial intelligence (AI)-powered language learning tools. These tools utilize AI algorithms to support language acquisition by offering real-time feedback, personalized instruction, and automatic text generation. Common examples include grammar checkers, machine translation systems, and intelligent writing assistants capable of analyzing text for structure, coherence, and accuracy. Research by Wang et al. (2013) demonstrated that AI feedback tools can assist learners in identifying and correcting errors efficiently, thereby contributing to improved writing performance. Similarly, Link et al. (2022) emphasized that automated feedback enhances students' revision strategies and overall writing competence.

Given the increasing use of AI in educational settings, understanding students' perceptions of these tools is crucial. Students' attitudes—whether positive or negative—can influence their willingness to engage with technology and their overall learning outcomes. Evaluating learners' perceptions provides insights into how AI-powered tools are received, whether they are perceived as helpful or burdensome, and how they impact students' motivation and confidence in academic writing. Such evaluations can inform educators and developers in optimizing the use of AI technologies to meet learners' needs more effectively.

Therefore, this study aims to explore students' perceptions and experiences in using AI-powered language learning tools to assist with academic writing. By focusing on learners' viewpoints, this research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the role AI plays in supporting EFL writing instruction and how it can be harnessed to improve language education in the Indonesian context.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore students' perceptions of AI-powered language learning tools in the context of academic writing. A qualitative approach was chosen to facilitate a deeper understanding of how students interpret and experience the use of such tools, especially in relation to their writing development. As Creswell (2013) notes, qualitative research emphasizes understanding social phenomena from the perspectives of participants, using inductive reasoning and flexible inquiry methods. It allows researchers to explore meaning in context, relying on rich, descriptive data gathered directly from participants in natural settings. Similarly, Sugiyono (2022) explains that qualitative research is rooted in post-positivistic thinking, where the researcher acts as the primary instrument, gathering data through triangulation techniques such as interviews and documentation to understand meaning, context, and lived experiences.

The study was conducted at Universitas Ahmad Dahlan Yogyakarta, located on Ring Road Selatan Street, Kragilan, Tamanan, Banguntapan, Bantul, Yogyakarta. Data collection took place over a one-month period, from April 21 to May 21, 2025. The research participants were six students in their final semester (14th semester) of the English Education Study Program. These students were purposefully selected to provide insights into the use of AI tools for academic writing, particularly because of their advanced standing and prior exposure to various writing-related assignments. The main objective was to uncover students' perceptions, experiences, and critical reflections regarding both the benefits and challenges of using AI-powered language tools in their academic writing processes

To gather data, the researcher utilized semi-structured interviews as the primary research instrument. The interview guide was designed based on previous research by Marito and Ashari (2017) and refined with expert input. It consisted of ten open-ended questions addressing various themes, such as the types of AI tools students used, the advantages they experienced, the limitations they encountered, and the strategies they employed to overcome challenges. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their balance of structure and flexibility, allowing the researcher to explore participants' responses in depth while maintaining consistency across interviews (Bernard, 1988; Kabir, 2016). According to Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik (2021), this format is particularly effective when the researcher needs to obtain detailed and contextual data within limited time constraints.

The interviews were conducted both offline and online, depending on participant availability. Responses were recorded in written, audio, or audiovisual formats to ensure the completeness and accuracy of the data. The interviews were then transcribed, summarized, and organized into extended textual formats for analysis. Notes were also taken during interviews to document non-verbal cues and contextual elements that might enrich the interpretation of data. This method allowed the researcher to capture not only what participants said but also how they expressed their opinions, providing deeper insights into their perceptions of AI-powered learning tools.

In addressing the trustworthiness of the research, the study adopted Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was ensured through triangulation of data sources (interviews and field notes), member checking (where participants verified the accuracy of interpretations), and detailed field observations. Transferability was supported by providing thick descriptions of the research context, including participants' demographic details, the types of AI tools they used, and how these tools were integrated into their writing practices. Dependability was achieved by maintaining a comprehensive audit trail of methodological decisions, interview protocols, transcript verification, and data analysis procedures. Lastly, confirmability was strengthened by expert validation of the interview guide, reflexivity in interpretation, and a systematic audit trail showing how conclusions were grounded in the data.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which is suitable for identifying patterns and themes related to students' experiences. Following the steps outlined by Attride-Stirling (2001), the analysis began with data recording and transcription, followed by coding to categorize responses into thematic clusters. Anecdotal descriptions were created to contextualize student experiences, and thematic networks were constructed to explore relationships among emerging themes. Sketches or interpretive narratives were also developed to describe how participants understood and interacted with AI tools. This analytical process enabled the researcher to synthesize large volumes of qualitative data into coherent themes that address the study's research questions.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the key findings of the research and discusses them considering students'

perceptions, benefits, and challenges associated with using AI-powered language learning tools in academic writing. The findings are thematically organized to reflect the core issues that emerged from the interview data: (1) students' perceptions and emotional responses, (2) perceived benefits and usefulness, and (3) perceived challenges and ethical concerns.

RESULTS

3.1. Students' Perceptions of Using AI-Powered Language Learning Tools in Academic Writing

The study found that all six participants had used at least two AI-powered language learning tools, including ChatGPT, Grammarly, Gemini, DeepL, and Quillbot. Their exposure to these tools was often linked to both academic requirements and personal interests in utilizing technology for educational purposes. As illustrated in the table below, participants expressed familiarity and active engagement with AI-based writing aids:

Table 3.1 Participant's interview quotes

Participant	Interview Quote	Translation
P1	"I am quite familiar with AI-based learning tools, because I also use some of them such as DeepL and ChatGPT."	*"Saya cukup familiar dengan alat pembelajaran berbasis AI, karena saya juga menggunakan beberapa alat seperti DeepL dan ChatGPT."*
P2	"I am familiar with AI tools like Grammarly, ChatGPT, Gemini, and Quillbot. I often use them to check grammar or find ideas."	*"Saya familiar dengan alat seperti Grammarly, ChatGPT, Gemini, dan Quillbot. Saya sering memakainya untuk memeriksa tata bahasa dan mencari ide."*
		"Saya familiar dengan alat seperti Grammarly, ChatGPT, Gemini, dan Quillbot. Saya sering memakainya untuk memeriksa tata bahasa dan mencari ide."

As seen in the quotes, students generally held a positive outlook on AI tools, especially regarding their accessibility and assistance during writing tasks. Several students described the tools as intuitive and helpful in facilitating various stages of the writing process—from pre-writing to editing. For instance, P4 emphasized the comprehensive use of AI in multiple writing phases, while P5 and P6 highlighted emotional satisfaction and enhanced comprehension when using AI tools for research purposes.

Despite these positives, there were also cautious reflections. Participant 3 voiced concern about overreliance, warning that continuous dependence on AI might reduce independent critical thinking. This duality in perception—appreciation for support, yet awareness of potential pitfalls—suggests that students largely perceive AI tools as empowering, but still requiring thoughtful and intentional use.

3.2 Benefits and Usefulness of AI Tools in Academic Writing

Participants identified several clear benefits from using AI-powered tools, ranging from improvements in grammar and vocabulary to increased writing efficiency and enhanced idea generation. These findings align with existing literature suggesting that automated tools can support students by acting as supplemental guides or writing assistants.

Several students noted that AI serves as a "virtual mentor" during the writing process. For instance, P2 and P3 explained how AI corrections had helped them become more aware of their own mistakes, thereby promoting self-editing and independence. P5 and P6 praised the time-saving potential of AI, especially in terms of editing and focusing on content. These reflections demonstrate that students not only use AI as a corrective tool but also as a learning partner that improves their writing confidence and efficiency.

Additionally, the capacity of AI tools to help students overcome writer's block and structure their ideas

show how digital assistance has evolved from static correction to dynamic support. This benefit has pedagogical value, suggesting that when integrated appropriately, AI can bridge gaps in writing fluency and conceptual organization.

3.3 Drawbacks, Challenges, and Limitations

While AI tools were largely praised, students also highlighted several challenges and ethical concerns. One key issue was the relevance and reliability of AI-generated feedback. As noted by P3:

Participant	Interview Quote	Translation
P3	"Not all AI suggestions have to be followed; sometimes the context is also different."	*"Nggak semua saran AI harus diikuti, kadang-kadang konteksnya juga berbeda."*

This response suggests that while AI can provide automated suggestions, it sometimes lacks contextual sensitivity, which can mislead users if not critically evaluated. Other practical barriers included limited access to premium features and technical disruptions, such as unexpected logouts and internet connectivity problems (as noted by P6 and P4). The economic limitation of freemium models reduces access to high-quality features and can create a digital divide among students with different financial capacities.

More significantly, ethical concerns were raised regarding dependency and plagiarism. Participants feared that AI might diminish students' intellectual engagement and encourage copy-paste habits. P1 and P2 specifically pointed out the potential for students to rely on AI-generated content without evaluating or adapting it, increasing the risk of plagiarism.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study align with and extend existing theoretical frameworks, particularly the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), Vygotsky's Scaffolding, and Jonassen's concept of computers as cognitive tools. Students' frequent and varied use of AI-powered language learning tools reflects high Perceived Usefulness and Perceived Ease of Use as outlined in TAM, where tools like Grammarly, ChatGPT, and Quillbot were consistently seen as efficient, intuitive, and supportive in completing academic writing tasks. These perceptions directly influenced students' willingness to integrate AI across all writing stages—from ideation to final editing. Moreover, SCT explains how AI usage enhances students' self-efficacy, self-regulation, and observational learning, as they begin to recognize, internalize, and replicate grammatical structures and lexical choices modeled by the tools. Feedback received from AI not only boosted confidence but also encouraged metacognitive awareness in writing practices, as seen in participants' growing ability to monitor their own errors and improve through corrective suggestions. In this sense, students moved beyond mere consumption of automated outputs and engaged actively with the tools to refine their writing.

Furthermore, Vygotsky's Scaffolding theory and Jonassen's framework of cognitive tools provide additional depth to understanding the pedagogical implications of AI usage. AI tools functioned as temporary support mechanisms, operating within students' Zone of Proximal Development by offering grammar checks, paraphrasing features, and content suggestions—guiding students toward greater independence. While some viewed AI as a "semi-supervisor," others consciously chose to deviate from AI suggestions to maintain originality, showing a healthy transition away from scaffolding. This balance also resonates with Jonassen's notion that technology should enhance higher-order thinking rather than replace it. Several students reported using AI for planning, organizing, and evaluating their writing, which illustrates the role of AI in facilitating knowledge construction. At the same time, ethical concerns—such as the risks of plagiarism and over-reliance—emerged as cognitive challenges. These findings affirm that while AI offers clear cognitive and practical benefits, its effective use requires critical thinking, ethical awareness, and digital literacy to ensure that it remains a tool for intellectual empowerment rather than substitution.

5. CONCLUSION

This study investigated students' perceptions of AI-powered language learning tools in the context of academic writing among EFL students. The results revealed that students generally hold positive views toward the integration of AI tools, perceiving them as useful, accessible, and supportive in enhancing their writing quality and efficiency. The participants utilized a range of AI tools such as Grammarly, ChatGPT, Quillbot, DeepL, and Gemini across various stages of the writing process—from idea generation to editing and evaluating. These tools were appreciated for their ability to simplify complex tasks, assist in grammar correction, reduce writer's

block, and offer suggestions that helped students structure their ideas more clearly. The tools not only enhanced technical accuracy but also built students' confidence and autonomy in writing.

However, the findings also highlight several challenges and ethical concerns. Students noted technical limitations, paywall restrictions, context-insensitive suggestions, and the potential risks of over-reliance and plagiarism. These issues signal the need for digital literacy and critical awareness in using AI tools responsibly. The discussion shows that students' experiences align with theoretical frameworks such as the Technology Acceptance Model, Social Cognitive Theory, Scaffolding, and Computers as Cognitive Tools. These frameworks help explain how students adopt, interact with, and learn from AI tools—not as passive users, but as active participants in their learning process. In conclusion, while AI-powered language tools can serve as effective scaffolding and cognitive aids, their optimal impact depends on students' ability to use them critically, ethically, and reflectively in support of their academic growth.

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