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## AI in the Essay Classroom: Perceptions, Practices, and Plagiarism among Pre-Service English Teachers

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### Abstract

This study explores the integration of Chat-based Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools, particularly ChatGPT, into the academic writing practices of English Language Education students at Universitas Negeri Makassar. Employing a qualitative single case study design, this research investigates how students leverage AI tools for vocabulary enrichment, grammar correction, maintaining originality, and avoiding plagiarism during essay writing. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 11 students enrolled in the Essay Writing course. Thematic analysis revealed that students generally perceived Chat-based AI as a supportive mechanism for improving vocabulary and sentence structure. Most participants reported enhanced learning through iterative engagement with AI-generated suggestions. However, concerns about originality and unintentional plagiarism were prevalent, prompting strategies such as paraphrasing and content modification. While AI tools facilitated more structured and coherent essays, students emphasized the importance of integrating their own ideas to maintain authenticity. The findings underscore the dual role of AI in both empowering and challenging students' writing autonomy. The study concludes by advocating for ethical AI use guidelines and pedagogical frameworks that emphasize critical engagement over content dependence.

**Keywords:** *ChatGPT, essay writing, AI in education, originality, plagiarism, English language education*

### Introduction

In recent years, the field of education has witnessed a dynamic transformation brought about by the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies. Among the most influential innovations are Chat-based AI tools such as ChatGPT, which leverage natural language processing to simulate human-like interactions. As educators and learners embrace these technologies, the implications for traditional

academic practices, particularly in writing pedagogy, have become a subject of critical inquiry. Writing, especially essay writing, remains a core component of academic success, serving as a medium for knowledge construction, expression, and critical thinking. However, students, particularly those in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, often grapple with fundamental challenges in vocabulary, grammar, and idea development. The emergence of AI tools presents both opportunities and concerns in addressing these issues.

This study is situated within the context of pre-service English teachers enrolled in the English Education program at Universitas Negeri Makassar, where essay writing is a vital skill cultivated through formal coursework. Here, the challenges of mastering academic writing are compounded by limited exposure to English outside the classroom and a lack of confidence in producing original, well-structured essays. Previous studies have identified persistent issues such as restricted vocabulary, ineffective word choice, and the temptation to commit plagiarism, either intentionally or inadvertently, as obstacles to academic writing proficiency (Bakhtiar, 2023; Suparsa et al., 2023).

At the same time, the accessibility and versatility of Chat-based AI tools like ChatGPT offer students a digital assistant that can provide real-time suggestions on grammar, vocabulary enhancement, and even content structure. Research by Herbold et al. (2023) has shown that AI-generated essays often demonstrate greater grammatical complexity and lexical richness than those produced by high school or undergraduate students. This has led some educators to explore the potential of such tools as scaffolding mechanisms in the learning process, offering support without diminishing students' cognitive engagement (Rahma & Fithriani, 2024). Yet, there remains a prevailing tension between using AI as a learning aid and the risk of students becoming overly reliant on it, thereby undermining the development of independent writing skills (Shidiq, 2023).

The dual nature of AI in writing pedagogy raises ethical and pedagogical questions. Onyemelukwe (2019) warns that AI-assisted writing can blur the line between authorship and assistance, particularly when students copy large sections of AI-generated text without proper citation. Meanwhile, Qazan and Mashhadany (2023) emphasize that traditional plagiarism detection tools may struggle to identify AI-generated content, complicating institutional efforts to ensure academic integrity. In light of these developments, educators and researchers are now tasked with rethinking assessment models, teaching strategies, and ethical guidelines to align with the evolving technological landscape.

In Indonesia, where English is taught as a foreign language, the integration of AI in education is still nascent but rapidly growing. The present study addresses this emerging trend by focusing specifically on English education students who are expected to develop not only proficiency in academic writing but

also pedagogical competence for teaching English in the future. As such, their engagement with AI tools carries broader implications for classroom practices and educational standards. Understanding how these students perceive and utilize AI in their writing processes can inform the development of responsible AI integration strategies tailored to the needs of EFL learners.

This research investigates four critical dimensions of Chat-based AI usage in essay writing: vocabulary enrichment, grammar correction, originality preservation, and plagiarism avoidance. Each of these aspects plays a pivotal role in shaping the students' writing performance and ethical awareness. The study adopts a qualitative case study design, allowing for an in-depth exploration of individual experiences, strategies, and perceptions. Semi-structured interviews serve as the primary data collection method, providing rich insights into the nuanced ways students interact with AI tools in their academic writing endeavors.

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on pre-service English teachers, a population uniquely positioned at the intersection of learning and future teaching responsibilities. By examining their practices and perceptions, the research aims to shed light on both the pedagogical potential and the ethical complexities of AI in academic writing. While existing literature has largely concentrated on either the technological capabilities of AI or general student perspectives, this study fills a critical gap by contextualizing AI use within a specific academic discipline and cultural setting.

Ultimately, this study contributes to a growing body of knowledge on AI-assisted learning, with implications for curriculum development, teacher training, and institutional policy. By articulating the benefits and limitations of Chat-based AI in essay writing, the research seeks to promote a balanced approach that empowers students while safeguarding academic integrity. The findings aim to support educators and policymakers in crafting informed responses to the opportunities and challenges posed by AI in higher education.

## **Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative approach with a single case study design to explore how Chat-based AI tools influence the essay writing practices of students in the English Education Department at Universitas Negeri Makassar. A qualitative method was chosen to gain deep insights into students' lived experiences, strategies, and reflections when using AI tools like ChatGPT during the essay writing process. According to Creswell (2009), qualitative research is particularly suitable for exploring complex social phenomena where understanding context and meaning is essential. In this study, the central phenomenon under

investigation was the use of AI tools in developing vocabulary, improving grammar, maintaining originality, and avoiding plagiarism.

The case study design enabled an intensive and holistic examination of students' perceptions and practices within a real-life academic context. As Yin (2018) suggests, a case study is appropriate when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident and when researchers aim to answer "how" and "why" questions. This design was especially suitable for analyzing students' use of AI in a specific course setting, namely, the Essay Writing class, at the Faculty of Languages and Literature.

### **Research Setting and Participants**

The study was conducted at Universitas Negeri Makassar, a major public university in Indonesia. Specifically, it focused on students in the English Language Education program who were enrolled in the Essay Writing course during the even semester of the academic year. The course is a critical component of the curriculum, aiming to equip students with the skills needed to write coherent and well-structured academic essays in English.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique in which individuals are chosen for their knowledge and experience relevant to the research topic (Airasian, 2012). Eleven students were selected based on the following criteria: (1) active enrollment in the Essay Writing course, (2) prior experience using Chat-based AI tools for academic writing, and (3) willingness to share their experiences in a recorded interview. The sample was diverse in terms of gender and academic performance, ensuring a wide range of perspectives.

### **Data Collection Techniques**

The primary data collection method was semi-structured interviews. This technique allowed for a balance between structured questions and the flexibility to explore emerging themes in depth. Each interview was conducted in person and recorded with the participant's consent. The interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and were conducted in Indonesian to ensure participants felt comfortable expressing themselves fully.

The interview guide included questions on general awareness of AI tools, specific experiences using AI for essay writing, perceived benefits and drawbacks, and ethical concerns related to originality and plagiarism. For example, questions included: *"How do you evaluate the effectiveness of AI tools in helping you write essays?"* *"How does AI help you improve vocabulary and grammar?"*, and *"What concerns do you have about plagiarism or originality when using AI?"*

To improve the trustworthiness of the data, follow-up questions and probes were used to elicit detailed narratives. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual information during the interviews.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data. This method involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis was guided by the steps outlined by Liamputtong (2009): familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up the results.

The transcripts were read multiple times to gain a holistic understanding of participants' perspectives. Coding was done manually, focusing on repeated ideas and patterns related to the use of AI tools in the essay writing process. Codes were grouped into four major themes that aligned with the research questions: vocabulary enrichment, grammar correction, originality maintenance, and plagiarism avoidance.

To enhance credibility, triangulation was applied by comparing responses across participants and validating recurring themes. Peer debriefing was conducted with two faculty colleagues who reviewed the codes and emerging themes to ensure they accurately represented the data.

### **Research Instruments**

The main research instrument was the interview protocol, which consisted of open-ended questions designed to capture both the cognitive and affective dimensions of students' AI tool usage. Audio recorders were used to capture complete responses, while field notes provided supplementary insights. The instrument was piloted with two students to ensure clarity and appropriateness of questions, and minor revisions were made accordingly.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The research adhered to ethical standards for studies involving human participants. All participants were informed of the purpose of the study, their rights to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality of their responses. Written informed consent was obtained before each interview. The identities of participants were anonymized using pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

Ethical approval was secured from the Departmental Research Ethics Committee before the commencement of data collection. The study also addressed concerns about sensitive topics such as plagiarism and academic misconduct by framing questions in a non-judgmental and exploratory tone.

## **Limitations of the Study**

Although the case study design provides rich, contextualized insights, its findings are not intended to be generalizable to all student populations. The sample size was small and focused on a single institution and academic program. Moreover, reliance on self-reported data may introduce bias, as participants might underreport unethical practices or overemphasize positive outcomes. Nonetheless, the study offers a valuable snapshot of how pre-service English teachers navigate the challenges and opportunities of AI in academic writing.

## **Results**

This section presents the thematic findings derived from semi-structured interviews with 11 English Education students. The analysis yielded four major themes that align with the research questions: (1) vocabulary enrichment and word choice improvement, (2) grammar correction and learning, (3) maintaining originality, and (4) avoiding plagiarism. Each theme is discussed in depth with representative excerpts to illustrate the experiences and perceptions of participants.

### **Vocabulary Enrichment and Word Choice Improvement**

Participants widely acknowledged the utility of Chat-based AI tools, particularly ChatGPT, in enriching their vocabulary and refining their word choice. The majority described how the tools introduced new words and alternative expressions that enhanced the clarity, precision, and academic tone of their essays.

For instance, Participant AY remarked, *“After reading the AI-generated responses, I found many new vocabulary items, and I immediately searched their meanings and continued learning like that until my vocabulary improved.”* This iterative engagement with the AI tool not only expanded lexical knowledge but also encouraged active learning and critical reflection on language use.

Similarly, Participant FR highlighted the tool’s stylistic value: *“AI is very helpful in improving grammar and word choice, especially when I have to write in a more formal or academic style.”* The data reveal that students utilized AI-generated outputs as models for lexical sophistication, mimicking and adapting formal structures into their own writing.

Moreover, several participants viewed AI as a springboard for idea development. NH stated, *“AI helps me develop ideas after analyzing some of the words provided.”* This connection between vocabulary

exposure and ideational elaboration suggests that AI tools serve not just as lexical resources but also as cognitive enhancers during the pre-writing and drafting stages.

However, a few participants noted limitations in over-relying on the suggestions provided. While they found the vocabulary improvements beneficial, they emphasized the importance of critically selecting words that fit the context of their essays.

### **Grammar Correction and Learning**

The second major theme centered on grammar accuracy and error correction. Many participants reported using ChatGPT as a grammar checker by pasting draft paragraphs and requesting feedback. This practice served dual purposes: correcting errors and learning grammar rules in context.

Participant FA shared, *“I usually input my original writing into ChatGPT and ask it to provide feedback. It often helps me correct grammar mistakes, and I also learn from those suggestions.”* Likewise, NF explained, *“AI always gives me suggestions when there is a grammar mistake.”*

Over time, students developed self-awareness of their common grammatical mistakes. Participant DRS noted a progression: *“Eventually, it greatly helped and improved my vocabulary, grammar, and word choice in essay writing.”* This reflective learning process transformed AI tools from passive editors to interactive tutors.

Notably, the students appreciated the immediacy of feedback and the opportunity to revise their texts in real time. Unlike traditional peer review, which is limited by time and human subjectivity, AI tools provide accessible and non-judgmental feedback that could be revisited at any stage of the writing process.

Despite these advantages, students recognized the need to verify the accuracy of grammar corrections. A few participants reported inconsistencies in AI outputs, reinforcing the value of human oversight.

### **Maintaining Originality While Using AI**

Maintaining originality emerged as a recurring concern among participants, especially as AI-generated content became more prevalent in their writing routines. Several students developed strategies to ensure their work remained original while benefiting from AI assistance.

Participant SNS stated, *“I always use my own ideas as a foundation, and if needed, I use AI to add details. I choose simple and manageable ideas to make them look more original.”* This comment illustrates the deliberate effort to retain authorship while leveraging AI for elaboration.

Others reported using AI-generated content as drafts or outlines to guide their own writing. Participant MAP explained, *“I used to feel worried, but I overcame it by paraphrasing AI-generated results independently.”* This process not only preserved originality but also required cognitive engagement in restructuring and interpreting ideas.

Participant RA recounted a scenario in which students gave identical prompts to AI and received nearly identical outputs. *“I was worried that the results would be the same and considered unoriginal,”* they said, emphasizing the need for personalization and critical input.

Overall, participants showed a strong ethical awareness of the risks posed by over-dependence on AI. Their strategies to preserve originality included modifying instructions, paraphrasing, integrating personal experiences, and selectively incorporating AI suggestions.

### **Avoiding Plagiarism When Using Chat-based AI**

Closely tied to originality was the theme of plagiarism avoidance. Students acknowledged that while AI tools were helpful, they could unintentionally lead to academic dishonesty if not used carefully.

Participant FR voiced a common concern: *“My biggest fear is plagiarism. I fear my writing will be considered plagiarized, especially now that plagiarism detection technology can identify AI-generated texts.”* This anxiety prompted several participants to adopt proactive measures.

One such measure was paraphrasing. SN explained, *“I usually paraphrase using different AI platforms or better yet, use my own language.”* Others, like MA, requested citations from the AI tool or fact-checked AI outputs before integrating them into their essays.

These practices reflect an emerging digital literacy in managing AI tools ethically. Participants viewed AI not as a shortcut to bypass effort but as a supplementary resource that must be handled with discretion. They consistently distinguished between acceptable and unacceptable uses, echoing the findings of scholars such as Onyemelukwe (2019) and Hidayatullah (2024).

Moreover, participants emphasized the importance of keeping the core ideas their own. *“I make sure that the main ideas come from me,”* FR reiterated. This perspective reinforces the role of AI as a facilitator rather than a generator of academic content.

### **Summary of Themes**

The findings highlight both the empowering and constraining aspects of Chat-based AI use in essay writing. Students benefit from improved lexical variety, grammatical accuracy, and feedback mechanisms. Yet, they

remain cautious of ethical pitfalls, particularly regarding originality and plagiarism. Most importantly, participants articulated a clear understanding of the role of AI tools as assistants, not authors, in their academic writing journey.

These themes set the stage for the next section, where we interpret the implications of these findings in light of existing literature and the broader discourse on AI integration in education.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study contribute to the growing discourse on the role of Chat-based AI tools in supporting academic writing within English Language Education programs. Drawing from student experiences at Universitas Negeri Makassar, the discussion unpacks the complex interplay between AI-enhanced learning and the ethical, pedagogical, and cognitive implications that emerge in the essay writing process.

### **Vocabulary Development and Lexical Awareness**

The data revealed that Chat-based AI tools significantly contributed to vocabulary expansion and improved lexical awareness among participants. Students frequently used AI-generated suggestions to discover alternative vocabulary and enhance clarity in expression. This finding aligns with Herbold et al. (2023), who demonstrated that AI-generated essays exhibit higher lexical richness compared to student-written texts.

More importantly, participants in this study engaged in a recursive learning process; encountering unfamiliar words, researching their meanings, and integrating them contextually into their writing. This echoes Swales and Feak's (2004) emphasis on academic vocabulary shift, where students transition from informal to formal expression by adopting precise terminology. Chat-based AI tools appeared to serve as informal vocabulary tutors, facilitating this lexical transition.

However, this benefit is contingent upon the students' willingness to critically engage with the AI output. Without proper reflection, there is a risk of superficial adoption that may not translate into long-term vocabulary acquisition. Thus, AI can serve as a tool to enhance lexical development, but only when coupled with metacognitive strategies and guided instruction.

### **Grammar Support as Embedded Feedback**

AI tools were also widely perceived as effective grammar checkers. The real-time feedback provided by ChatGPT helped students identify and correct sentence-level errors, improve syntax, and reinforce grammatical rules. These findings are consistent with prior studies (Fitria, 2023; Suparsa et al., 2023), which highlight how AI can function as a virtual writing assistant that supports self-editing and language refinement.

What stands out in this study is the transformation of AI tools from passive correctors to active learning partners. Participants used the AI feedback not only to edit their current drafts but also to understand the underlying grammar principles, thereby improving future writing performance. This mirrors Vygotsky's notion of the Zone of Proximal Development, where learners, with the aid of external scaffolds (in this case, AI), perform tasks beyond their immediate capabilities.

Nevertheless, a few students noted inaccuracies in AI-generated feedback, highlighting the limitations of depending solely on algorithmic evaluations. This reinforces Dergaa et al.'s (2023) caution that while AI can supplement instruction, it should not replace human oversight. Educators must, therefore, equip students with critical digital literacy skills to evaluate the reliability and appropriateness of AI-generated suggestions.

### **Struggles with Originality and the Ethics of Assistance**

A central theme emerging from the data was the tension between benefiting from AI assistance and maintaining the authenticity of one's work. Students were deeply aware of the potential ethical pitfalls, including unintentional plagiarism and the erosion of original thought. This finding corroborates previous research by Hidayatullah (2024) and Shidiq (2023), who argue that overreliance on AI can stifle independent thinking and compromise academic integrity.

The strategies students employed, paraphrasing, modifying instructions, and using AI outputs as inspiration rather than final content, demonstrate a high level of ethical awareness and digital responsibility. These practices reflect the shift from passive tool usage to active content mediation, whereby students retain creative control over their writing process.

In this context, the use of ChatGPT mirrors what Tossell et al. (2024) termed a "collaborative AI model," where the user and the tool co-construct knowledge rather than the tool dictating the content. Participants in this study positioned themselves as authors, not consumers, of AI-generated text; a significant pedagogical insight for educators looking to foster responsible AI use in academic settings.

### **Plagiarism Concerns and Responsible Use of AI**

The concern for academic integrity was particularly strong among participants. Students were acutely aware of how AI-generated content could lead to both intentional and unintentional plagiarism. Their responses echo the typology of AI-related plagiarism risks discussed by Onyemelukwe (2019) and Qazan and Mashhadany (2023), including verbatim copying, inadequate paraphrasing, and lack of source attribution.

To navigate these risks, students adopted several mitigation strategies. These included paraphrasing AI-generated texts, cross-referencing with reliable sources, and intentionally modifying output to preserve originality. This suggests an emerging AI literacy among students, one that extends beyond technical proficiency to ethical judgment.

However, the fear of detection by advanced plagiarism tools that identify AI-generated content also indicates the need for institutional clarity. Universities must provide transparent guidelines on acceptable AI use and integrate these into academic integrity policies. Instructors should foster open discussions about AI usage in classrooms, helping students distinguish between ethical support and academic misconduct.

### **Implications for Teacher Education**

As pre-service English teachers, the students in this study represent a unique demographic whose experiences with AI will inevitably shape their future instructional practices. Their cautious yet exploratory engagement with ChatGPT suggests that they are developing pedagogical as well as academic perspectives on AI integration.

This study, therefore, holds important implications for teacher education programs. Training modules should include not only academic writing and research but also the pedagogical use of AI in language instruction. By equipping future teachers with both practical skills and ethical frameworks, institutions can ensure responsible AI diffusion into broader educational settings.

Moreover, the study reinforces the idea that AI should not be viewed as a threat to human learning but as a partner in cognitive development when used judiciously. As suggested by Misnawati (2023), the wise use of AI requires critical thinking, digital ethics, and an awareness of the boundaries between assistance and authorship.

### **Balancing Support and Autonomy**

Overall, the findings suggest that Chat-based AI tools like ChatGPT have the potential to empower students' writing skills, particularly in areas of vocabulary and grammar, while simultaneously posing risks to originality and academic integrity. The challenge lies in achieving a balance between support and autonomy.

This balance requires deliberate pedagogical strategies. Instructors should encourage students to document their use of AI tools, reflect on their revisions, and justify the inclusion of AI-suggested content. Assignment designs should emphasize process over product, integrating checkpoints that assess idea development, drafting, and revision.

As AI technologies continue to evolve, educators must stay ahead of the curve by embedding AI literacy into curricula and assessment frameworks. Doing so will not only ensure ethical use but also cultivate a generation of learners who can critically and creatively navigate the digital landscape.

## **Conclusion**

This study examined how English Education students at Universitas Negeri Makassar engage with Chat-based AI tools, particularly ChatGPT, in the context of academic essay writing. It focused on four key areas: vocabulary enrichment, grammar correction, maintaining originality, and avoiding plagiarism. Findings show that students utilize AI tools to improve their lexical range and grammatical accuracy, often engaging in active learning processes such as iterative editing and vocabulary analysis. These tools serve not only as corrective mechanisms but also as scaffolding for idea development and language refinement.

Students demonstrated an awareness of the ethical implications of AI usage. Many reported adopting strategies such as paraphrasing, modifying AI-generated outputs, and maintaining the originality of core ideas to avoid academic dishonesty. This reflects a growing literacy in navigating digital tools responsibly within academic contexts. Moreover, the study revealed that students view ChatGPT as a supportive but not definitive authority, recognizing its value while maintaining authorial control.

The implications of these findings are far-reaching. For educators, this study underscores the need to integrate AI literacy into writing instruction, encouraging responsible and reflective use of AI. Institutions should consider revising academic integrity guidelines to address AI-assisted writing explicitly. As pre-service teachers, the students' experiences also inform future classroom practices, highlighting the importance of fostering ethical technology use in education.

Ultimately, the study affirms that AI can be a valuable ally in developing academic writing skills when used critically, ethically, and in balance with human creativity and judgment. Future research may explore longitudinal impacts of AI-assisted writing and examine similar dynamics across other disciplines or educational contexts.

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