

IS AI EMPOWERING OR CONSTRAINING? LEARNER AGENCY IN ENGLISH ACADEMIC WRITING IN INDONESIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This study explores learners agency in implementing AI tools for English academic writing in higher education in Indonesia. With the increasing need to integrate AI tools into the education system, significant attention must be paid to how learners control their learning process. This study aims to understand how these agentive roles manifest when English language learners use AI assistance in their academic writing. Qualitative methods combined with a narrative literature review and semi-structured interviews were applied in this study. The literature review aimed to collect recent academic journal articles on the use of AI, learners agency, and English academic writing in higher education settings, with a focus on the Indonesian context. Meanwhile, semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data from six undergraduate English students who had taken an academic writing course. The selected learners were invited to share their experiences regarding the application of AI tools in their writing assignments. The results show that while AI can enhance learners' active roles, its potential depends heavily on students' critical digital literacy, their motivation, and how pedagogy encourages learners' reflection on learning practices. This study contributes to the current literature on AI adoption in education by emphasizing the importance of promoting learners' active role in the responsible use of technology in English academic writing.

Keywords: Learner Agency, Artificial Intelligence, English Academic Writing

1) INTRODUCTION

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is no longer something distant or futuristic. It's already here, and students are embracing it, including in their academic writing. Walk into any university classroom today, and you'll likely find several students using tools like ChatGPT or similar AI applications to help them write, revise, or even draft entire paragraphs for their assignments. This reality is hard to ignore and raises an important question: when students rely on AI for their writing, are they really learning?

This question feels especially pressing today because the use of AI in education has grown faster than most major institutions were prepared for. Just a few years ago, discussions about AI

in the classroom were largely theoretical. Today, those discussions are both urgent and practical. Kasneci et al. (2023) noted that tools like ChatGPT have gone from mere novelty to everyday tools for many students, raising serious questions about what learning actually looks like when machines can do most of the heavy cognitive work. These concerns aren't just about the state of affairs or plagiarism, though that is a real issue. A deeper concern is what happens to learning when the struggle, the messy, and laborious process of thinking through a problem and putting it into words, is outsourced to machines.

Despite growing academic interest in AI and education, relatively little research has examined how learner agency is implemented specifically in AI-assisted English academic writing in the Indonesian context. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the perceptions and experiences of undergraduate English students who have used AI in their academic writing. Drawing on a narrative literature perspective and semi-structured interviews with six students from the English Department who have completed an academic writing course, this study asks how learner agency manifests, and is sometimes constrained, when students engage with AI as part of their writing development.

The goal is not to pass a verdict on AI. It is not to say that AI is good or bad, beneficial or harmful. The goal is to try to understand, honestly and carefully, what actually happens when Indonesian undergraduate students use AI to write in English, and what we can learn about how we need to rethink teaching, learning, and assessment in the era of generative AI.

Generative AI in Education

The advent of generative artificial intelligence tools, particularly large-scale language models such as ChatGPT, has incited significant discourse within the educational sector. These tools can generate highly fluent, well-structured text based on patterns learned from vast amounts of data, but it's important to note that they don't understand language like humans. This distinction holds greater significance than it may initially seem. When students perceive AI-generated paragraphs as their own work, they not only undermine academic integrity but also potentially forgo engaging in cognitive processes that are essential for learning.

Kasneci et al. (2023) presented a nuanced perspective on this issue, recognizing that AI tools possess significant potential to personalize learning experiences and deliver immediate feedback. However, they also caution that excessive dependence on these tools may progressively undermine

students' capacity for independent thought. Similarly, (Dwivedi et al., 2023) pointed out that while generative AI opens up new opportunities for educational innovation, the speed and ease of content generation creates a culture of copying shortcuts, particularly in disciplines that require extensive writing.

(Birhane et al., 2022) contend that AI systems are not neutral, as they embody the prevailing values, biases, and perspectives inherent in the data utilized for their training. This raises further questions about whose knowledge and whose academic voice are actually being amplified when students rely heavily on AI-generated text. For educators, this means that discussions about AI in education cannot stop at whether to allow or ban these tools. They must delve deeper into how students interact with these tools, and whether those interactions support or engage with genuine learning. Gonsalves (2025) offered a valuable distinction between employing AI as a collaborative learning partner and utilizing it as a replacement for cognitive engagement. The former approach can effectively enhance the learning process, whereas the latter may subtly undermine it. The challenge for educators lies in fostering an environment where the former is more prevalent than the latter.

Learner Agency

Learner agency is not a new concept, but it has taken on fresh urgency in the context of AI-supported learning. At its core, learner agency refers to the sense of ownership and control that students exercise over their own learning process (Larsen-Freeman & Todeva, 2021). It is about more than just motivation or effort, it involves students actively making decisions about how they learn, setting their own goals, reflecting on their progress, and taking responsibility for their outcomes.

Mercer and Murillo-Miranda (2025) described agentic learners as those who do not wait to be told what to do, they seek out opportunities, take risks, learn from failure, and persist even when things get difficult. This kind of learner is not passive in the face of a tool like AI; they interrogate it, question it, and use it strategically rather than blindly. In the context of AI-supported academic writing, this kind of agency looks like a student who uses AI to generate initial ideas, then critically interrogates those ideas, rewrites them in their own words, and uses the process to deepen their own understanding, rather than a student who simply accepts whatever AI produces and submits it as their own work.

Tao and Gao (2021) made an important point that agency does not develop in a vacuum. It emerges through interactions, with teachers, with peers, with tasks, and increasingly, with the tools and technologies that surround learning. This relational dimension of agency is significant because it means that how students use AI is not purely a matter of individual character or motivation. It is also shaped by the pedagogical environment, by whether teachers encourage critical reflection, whether institutional policies provide clear guidance, and whether students are genuinely given the space to make decisions about their learning. In other words, the same AI tool can either enhance or undermine learner agency depending on the conditions in which it is used.

It is also worth noting, as Larsen-Freeman et al. (2021) clarified that promoting learner agency does not mean removing teacher guidance or letting students do whatever they want. Teacher agency is equally important. Educators who are themselves reflective, adaptive, and intentional about how they integrate AI into their teaching are far more likely to create conditions where students can develop genuine agency in their learning. This is a collaborative process, not a hands-off one.

AI and English Academic Writing

Academic writing is arguably where the tension between AI and learner agency is most visible and most consequential. Writing is not just a means of communication, it is fundamentally a thinking process. When students write, they are forced to organize their thoughts, build arguments, consider different perspectives, and gradually develop their own academic voice. AI, if used carelessly, can short-circuit all of that.

Zhai, (2022) noted that AI tools have shown genuine promise in supporting the writing process, particularly in helping students overcome writer's block, generate initial ideas, and get feedback on grammar and clarity. These are not trivial benefits, especially for students writing in a second language who may feel paralyzed by the blank page. However, (Popenici, 2023) cautioned that fluency is not the same as understanding, and structure is not the same as thinking. A piece of writing can look academically polished and yet reflect very little of the student's own reasoning or knowledge. This is a problem that traditional assessment methods are often not well-equipped to detect or address.

Perkins et al. (2025) argued that the rise of generative AI demands a fundamental rethinking of how writing is assessed in higher education, moving away from product-focused evaluation

toward approaches that capture the process of writing and the development of student thinking over time. This is a significant pedagogical shift, and one that has direct implications for how learner agency is both developed and measured in academic writing courses. If assessment only looks at the final product, it cannot distinguish between a student who wrestled genuinely with ideas and one who let AI do the wrestling for them.

EFL Students and the Challenges of Academic Writing

For students writing in English as a Foreign Language (EFL), the challenges of academic writing are compounded by the additional demands of working in a second language. Research consistently shows that EFL students face particular difficulties not only with grammar and vocabulary, but also with academic conventions, disciplinary ways of thinking, and the expectation to construct original arguments rather than simply reproduce what others have said (Dwivedi et al., 2023). In this context, it is perhaps unsurprising that AI tools have been adopted so readily, they offer an accessible way to bridge the gap between what students want to say and what they are currently able to express in English.

However, this accessibility is a double-edged sword. Gonsalves (2024) observed that when EFL students rely heavily on AI-generated text, they may produce work that sounds fluent but does not reflect their actual language development. The writing looks competent on the surface, but the student has not necessarily grown. There is also a deeper issue here that connects back to what Birhane et al. (2022) raised about bias in AI systems. AI-generated academic English tends to reflect dominant Western academic norms and conventions. For Indonesian EFL students, whose intellectual traditions and ways of expressing knowledge may differ significantly, heavy reliance on AI-generated text could gradually push them away from their own voice and perspective, replacing it with a kind of generic academic English that does not truly represent how they think or what they know.

This raises a fundamental question that this study keeps returning to: what is academic writing actually for? If it is about producing polished text, then AI is a remarkably efficient solution. But if it is about developing writers, people who can think clearly, argue convincingly, and communicate their ideas with confidence, then the way AI is used in the writing classroom matters enormously.

AI in Indonesian Higher Education

In the Indonesian higher education context specifically, the integration of AI into academic practices is still relatively new and largely unregulated. While students have embraced AI tools with considerable enthusiasm, institutional responses have been slow and inconsistent, some universities have issued blanket bans, while others have offered little or no guidance at all (Yunus, 2021; Yunus & Latief, 2023). This regulatory uncertainty creates a difficult environment for both students and lecturers. Students are left to make their own judgments about how to use AI, often without the critical digital literacy skills needed to do so thoughtfully. Lecturers, meanwhile, are caught between concerns about academic integrity and a growing recognition that AI is not going away, and that simply banning it may not be the most educationally productive response.

What makes the Indonesian context particularly worth studying is the intersection of language, culture, and technology that shapes how students experience AI-assisted writing. English academic writing is already a high-stakes and anxiety-inducing activity for many Indonesian students, and AI tools offer a kind of relief from that anxiety, a way to produce acceptable English text without the full weight of the struggle. But as this study will show, that relief can come at a real cost. When students use AI to avoid the difficulty of writing rather than to support their genuine engagement with it, the potential for learning is significantly diminished.

Perkins et al. (2025) argued that what is needed is not more restriction, but more intentional integration, designing learning environments and assessment practices that encourage students to engage with AI critically and reflectively rather than passively and uncritically. This means rethinking not just how writing is assessed, but how it is taught. If learner agency is the goal, then the conditions that support that agency need to be deliberately and carefully built, through teachers who model critical thinking about AI, curricula that treat AI literacy as a genuine component of academic development, and institutional policies that guide rather than simply police how students use these tools.

It is against this backdrop that this study was conducted. The following sections describe the methodology used to explore these questions, present the findings from the literature review and student interviews, and discuss what those findings mean for how we understand and support learner agency in the age of AI.

2) METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore how learner agency is enacted when undergraduate English students engage with AI tools in their academic writing. Qualitative research was considered the most appropriate approach here because the study is not trying to measure or quantify anything, it is trying to understand experiences, perceptions, and meanings from the students' own perspectives. Poth, (2018) explained qualitative inquiry is particularly valuable when the goal is to explore complex human experiences in depth rather than to generate generalizable statistical findings. Given that learner agency is a deeply personal and contextual phenomenon, a qualitative design felt like the most honest and sensible fit for the questions this study is asking.

Research Design

This study combines two complementary approaches: a narrative literature review and semi-structured interviews. The narrative literature review was conducted first, serving as a way to map out what has already been written about AI in education, learner agency, and English academic writing, particularly in the Indonesian higher education context. Unlike a systematic review, a narrative review allows for a more interpretive and thematic engagement with the literature, which felt appropriate given the exploratory nature of this study. It helped identify not just what is known, but where the gaps are, and it is in one of those gaps that this study is positioned.

The semi-structured interviews were then conducted to gather firsthand accounts from students about their actual experiences using AI in academic writing. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they offer a balance between consistency and flexibility. Having a set of guiding questions ensured that all participants were asked about the same broad topics, while the open-ended nature of the format allowed conversations to go in unexpected directions when something interesting or important came up. This flexibility turned out to be genuinely valuable, as some of the most insightful moments in the interviews emerged from follow-up questions that were not planned in advance.

Participants

Six undergraduate students from the English Department of a public university in Makassar, Indonesia, participated in this study. They were selected through purposive sampling, which means

they were not chosen randomly, they were chosen deliberately because they met specific criteria relevant to the research questions. To be included in this study, participants had to have completed an Academic Writing subject as part of their degree program, and they had to have prior experience using AI tools in their writing tasks. These two criteria were considered essential because the study is specifically interested in students who have both formal exposure to academic writing conventions and practical experience navigating AI within that context.

Six participants may seem like a small number, but in qualitative research this is not unusual or problematic. The goal here is not statistical representation, it is depth of understanding. As Patton (2002) noted, the logic of purposive sampling is about selecting information-rich cases that can illuminate the questions being studied, not about selecting a large or random sample. Six participants who have directly relevant experience can offer far more meaningful insight into the phenomenon being studied than a larger group selected without those criteria.

All six participants were in their third or fourth year of study, which meant they had enough academic experience to reflect meaningfully on their writing development and their use of AI. They were given pseudonyms to protect their identities, and all identifying details have been removed from the data presented in this study.

Data Collection

Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews conducted in English. The decision to conduct interviews in English was deliberate, since the study focuses on English academic writing and learner agency within that specific context, it felt important that participants engage with the interview questions in the same language they use for their academic writing. It also provided a small but meaningful window into how comfortably and confidently participants could express their thoughts and experiences in English, which added an additional layer of relevance to the data.

Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and was conducted in a quiet, comfortable setting to help participants feel at ease. The interviews were guided by a set of open-ended questions focusing on two broad areas: participants' experiences using AI tools in their academic writing tasks, and how they felt about using AI, including any tensions, doubts, or ethical concerns they had encountered. Some of the questions explored, for instance, how participants

decided when to use AI and when not to, whether they felt their writing was genuinely their own when AI was involved, and what their lecturers' attitudes toward AI use had been.

All interviews were recorded using a mobile phone with the participants' full knowledge and consent. The recordings were then transcribed manually by the researcher, which, while time-consuming, proved to be a valuable part of the analytical process. Going through the recordings carefully and converting them into written text gave the researcher an early and intimate familiarity with the data, and certain patterns and themes began to emerge even during the transcription process itself.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase process outlined by (Braun & Clarke, 2006): familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Thematic analysis was chosen because it is flexible enough to work across different theoretical frameworks and research questions, and because it is particularly well-suited to studies that are interested in identifying patterns of meaning across a dataset rather than providing a detailed analysis of a single case.

The analysis began with repeated reading of the transcripts to get a strong sense of the data as a whole. Initial codes were then generated by going through the transcripts line by line and noting anything that seemed relevant to the research questions, a word, a phrase, a recurring idea, or even a moment of hesitation or contradiction in what a participant said. These initial codes were then grouped and gradually organized into broader themes that captured something meaningful about how learner agency was being expressed or constrained in participants' experiences with AI.

It is worth being transparent about the fact that thematic analysis is an interpretive process, the themes that emerge are not simply sitting in the data waiting to be discovered. They are constructed through the researcher's engagement with the data, shaped by theoretical knowledge, research questions, and inevitably, the researcher's own positionality. Being aware of this does not make the analysis less valid, but it does mean that the findings presented in this study represent one careful and considered interpretation of the data rather than a definitive or objective truth.

Trustworthiness

Ensuring the trustworthiness of qualitative research is important, and this study took several steps to address this. First, prolonged engagement with the data was maintained throughout the research process. Rather than rushing through the analysis, the researcher returned to the transcripts multiple times over an extended period, which helped deepen understanding and allowed for earlier interpretations to be refined or questioned as familiarity with the data grew.

Second, member checking was conducted by sharing key interpretations and emerging themes with participants and inviting their feedback. This step was important for ensuring that the findings accurately reflected participants' experiences and that nothing had been misunderstood or misrepresented. In most cases, participants confirmed that the interpretations felt accurate, though a few offered small clarifications that helped sharpen the analysis.

Third, the study maintained a commitment to transparency throughout, being honest about the limitations of the methodology, the size of the sample, and the interpretive nature of the analysis. Qualitative research does not claim to produce findings that are universally generalizable, and this study does not make that claim. What it does offer is a carefully constructed, participant-centered account of how learner agency plays out in a specific and underexplored context.

Ethical Considerations

Before any interviews were conducted, all participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, how their data would be used, and their right to withdraw at any point without consequence. Written consent was obtained from each participant prior to the interviews. To protect participants' privacy, all names were replaced with pseudonyms and any details that could potentially identify individuals were removed from the data. Participants were also assured that their responses would have no bearing on their academic standing or their relationship with their lecturers. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process, from data collection through to writing up and reporting the findings.

3) RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings and discussion from the thematic analysis of six semi-structured interviews with undergraduate English students who had experience using AI tools in their academic writing. The data were organized into five interconnected themes: AI as an

empowering writing tool, the risk of overreliance and passive use, critical digital literacy and responsible use, pedagogical conditions and teacher support, and academic integrity and ethical concerns. Each theme is discussed in relation to relevant literature to situate the findings within broader scholarly conversations about AI, learner agency, and English academic writing.

AI as an Empowering Writing Tool

Perhaps the most consistent finding across all six interviews was that students genuinely felt empowered by AI. This was not a superficial or uncritical enthusiasm, students articulated quite specifically how AI had changed their writing experience in ways that felt meaningful to them. Several participants described AI as something that gave them a sense of control over their writing process that they had not always felt before, particularly during the early stages of a task when the blank page can feel overwhelming.

One participant captured this feeling directly, saying that using AI makes them feel more in control of their writing process, especially when generating ideas and organizing thoughts. Another described AI as helping them become a more independent learner, while still recognizing the need to think critically about what it produces. These responses are significant because they suggest that for these students, AI did not feel like something that was doing the writing for them, it felt like something that was helping them do the writing themselves. That distinction is at the heart of what learner agency looks like in an AI-supported context.

This finding aligns with what Zhai (2022) and Kasneci et al. (2023) had argued about AI's potential to support rather than replace student thinking, particularly when students use it to generate initial ideas, overcome writer's block, and receive feedback on their drafts. What is encouraging about the responses from these participants is that they seemed to be using AI in broadly this way, as a starting point rather than an endpoint. One student put it clearly: AI gives a starting point, but the content still needs to be rewritten and adapted so it reflects their own voice. This kind of engagement reflects a reasonably high degree of learner agency, where the student remains the author and decision-maker even when AI is involved in the process.

It is worth noting, however, that this sense of empowerment was not uniform or uncomplicated. Even within this broadly positive theme, students acknowledged tensions and limits, suggesting that their relationship with AI was more nuanced than simple enthusiasm. These tensions are explored in the themes that follow.

Risk of Overreliance and Passive Use

Despite the generally empowering experience students described, a recurring concern across the interviews was the risk of becoming too dependent on AI, of crossing the line from using AI as a support tool to relying on it as a substitute for genuine thinking and writing effort. This tension was something students seemed genuinely aware of and personally concerned about, which is itself an interesting finding.

One participant noted that while AI helps with faster and more confident revision, there is still a need to make sure not to rely on it too much. Another acknowledged that AI is a support tool that guides the writing process, but that final decisions still need to belong to the writer. The fact that students themselves are identifying and articulating this risk, rather than having it pointed out to them by a teacher or researcher, suggests a degree of self-awareness and reflective capacity that is encouraging from a learner agency perspective.

However, self-awareness alone does not always translate into changed behavior. Gonsalves (2024) made the important observation that knowing something is a risk and successfully managing that risk are two very different things, particularly for students who are still developing their academic writing skills and their confidence in English. For EFL students especially, the temptation to accept AI-generated text without significant revision can be strong precisely because the AI often produces more fluent English than the student feels capable of producing independently. This creates a difficult dynamic where the tool that is supposed to support language development may inadvertently discourage it.

This finding also connects to what Larsen-Freeman et al. (2021) described as the difference between high-agency and low-agency engagement with learning tools. A high-agency student uses AI deliberately and critically, making conscious decisions about what to keep, what to change, and what to discard. A low-agency student accepts whatever the tool produces with minimal interrogation. The risk, as several participants seemed to recognize, is that it is very easy to slip from the former into the latter, especially under time pressure or when confidence is low.

Critical Digital Literacy and Responsible Use

A third theme that emerged strongly from the interviews was the importance of critical digital literacy, the ability to evaluate, question, and make informed judgments about AI-generated content rather than accepting it at face value. Several participants demonstrated a relatively

sophisticated awareness of AI's limitations, and described active strategies they had developed for managing those limitations in their writing practice.

One student explained that AI can sometimes be misleading, and described learning to double-check information rather than trusting it completely. Another described a practice of rewriting and adapting AI-generated content so that it reflects their own voice, rather than simply using what the AI produces. These are not trivial skills, they represent a kind of critical engagement with technology that goes beyond basic digital literacy and into what might be called AI literacy: the capacity to understand how AI works, what its limitations are, and how to use it in a way that serves rather than undermines one's own learning.

This finding is particularly relevant in the Indonesian context, where Dwivedi et al. (2023) noted that digital literacy levels among students vary considerably, and where institutional support for developing AI-specific literacy skills has so far been limited. The students in this study appeared to have developed these critical strategies largely through their own experience and reflection rather than through explicit instruction, which raises an important question about what might be possible if AI literacy were more deliberately integrated into academic writing curricula.

Birhane et al. (2022) reminded us that AI systems carry embedded biases and do not represent all ways of knowing equally. For Indonesian EFL students, this means that critically evaluating AI output is not just about checking for factual errors, it is also about recognizing when AI-generated text does not reflect their own perspective, experience, or intellectual tradition, and having the confidence and skill to reclaim their own voice in the writing. The students in this study showed early signs of this kind of critical awareness, which is a promising foundation to build on.

Pedagogical Conditions and Teacher Support

One of the more revealing themes to emerge from the interviews concerned the role of teachers and institutional context in shaping how students engage with AI. While students generally described positive experiences with AI, several expressed a clear desire for more structured guidance from their lecturers about how to use it appropriately. This was not a complaint about AI itself, it was a reflection of the uncertainty that many students felt about the boundaries and expectations around AI use in their academic work.

One participant was quite direct about this, saying that clearer guidance from lecturers is needed on how to use AI properly, so students can benefit from it without crossing academic

boundaries. This is a significant finding because it suggests that even students who feel empowered by AI and use it with a degree of critical awareness are still navigating the experience without a clear map. They are making their own judgments about what is acceptable, which reflects a kind of agency, certainly, but also a kind of vulnerability that better institutional support could address.

This connects directly to what Perkins et al. (2025) argued about the need for more intentional pedagogical integration of AI, rather than reactive restriction or silence. When lecturers do not address AI use explicitly, either because they are uncertain themselves or because institutional policy is unclear, students are left to fill that gap on their own. Some manage this well, as the participants in this study largely seemed to. But others may not have the same level of critical awareness or self-regulation, and for them the absence of clear guidance can lead to patterns of use that undermine rather than support their learning.

Tao and Gao (2021) argued that learner agency is relational, it develops through interactions with teachers, peers, and institutional structures, not in isolation. This finding supports that view. The students who demonstrated the most reflective and agentive engagement with AI were also those who described having at least some exposure to discussions about responsible AI use, whether in class or through their own research. The implication is clear: teacher support and institutional guidance are not optional extras in the age of AI, they are essential conditions for meaningful and responsible student engagement.

Academic Integrity and Ethical Concerns

The final theme concerns academic integrity and the ethical dimensions of AI use in academic writing. This was perhaps the most emotionally complex theme to emerge from the interviews, with students expressing a mixture of confidence, uncertainty, and genuine concern about where the ethical boundaries of AI use lie. What was particularly interesting was that students did not frame this primarily as a fear of getting caught, they framed it as a genuine personal concern about doing the right thing and maintaining the authenticity of their own work.

One participant reflected that while they feel more confident using AI, they also recognize the importance of using it ethically and responsibly. Another described seeing AI as a support tool rather than a replacement, a framing that carries clear ethical implications about authorship, ownership, and academic honesty. These responses suggest that students are not simply looking for permission to use AI without consequences, they are genuinely grappling with questions about

what honest and responsible AI use looks like, and they want support in navigating those questions.

This finding resonates with Perkins et al. (2025), who argued that academic integrity in the age of AI is not simply a matter of detecting and punishing misuse, it requires a more fundamental rethinking of what we mean by authorship, originality, and honest academic work in a context where AI is a readily available and increasingly normalized tool. For the students in this study, the ethical concerns they raised were not obstacles to AI use, they were signs of a developing moral and academic maturity that, with the right support, could form the basis for genuinely responsible engagement with AI in their writing.

What this theme ultimately points to is the need for institutions and educators to move beyond a purely punitive or restrictive approach to AI and academic integrity, toward one that takes students' genuine ethical concerns seriously and supports them in developing their own principled framework for AI use. The students in this study are clearly ready for that conversation, the question is whether their institutions are.

4) CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

This study set out to explore a question that feels increasingly urgent in higher education today: when students use AI in their academic writing, are they learning, or are they simply producing? The answer, based on the findings of this study, is that it depends. It depends on the student, on how they use AI, on what their teachers have told them, and on the broader institutional environment in which their learning takes place. There is no simple answer, and perhaps that is the most honest and important thing this study can offer.

What the findings do show, fairly consistently, is that the six undergraduate English students who participated in this study were not passive or uncritical users of AI. They were, for the most part, genuinely reflective about their AI use, aware of its benefits, alert to its risks, and concerned about using it in a way that felt honest and responsible. They described AI as a tool that helped them feel more in control of their writing, more confident in approaching difficult tasks, and more capable of expressing their ideas in English. At the same time, they acknowledged the temptation of overreliance, the problem of inaccurate or biased AI output, and the absence of clear institutional guidance about what responsible AI use actually looks like in practice.

This study argues that what makes the difference between AI empowering a learner and AI constraining one is learner agency, the degree to which students remain active, critical, and intentional in their engagement with the tool rather than becoming passive recipients of whatever it produces. A student who uses AI to generate a starting point, then rewrites, questions, and adapts that output to reflect their own thinking and voice, is exercising genuine agency. A student who accepts and submits AI output with minimal engagement is not, regardless of how polished the final product looks. The distinction matters enormously, both for learning outcomes and for the deeper purposes of academic education.

It is also worth acknowledging what this study cannot claim. With six participants from a single English Department, the findings are not generalizable to all Indonesian undergraduate students or to all EFL contexts. This study does not pretend to offer a comprehensive picture of how AI is being used across Indonesian higher education. What it does offer is a carefully constructed, participant-centered account of how learner agency plays out in one specific and underexplored context, and it is hoped that this account is useful precisely because of its depth and specificity rather than in spite of its limited scale.

Implications for Teaching and Learning

The findings of this study carry several practical implications for how academic writing is taught in Indonesian higher education, and more broadly in EFL contexts where AI is becoming an increasingly normal part of students' writing lives.

First, and perhaps most importantly, AI literacy needs to become an explicit part of academic writing curricula rather than something students are left to develop on their own through trial and error. The students in this study had largely figured out strategies for critically evaluating AI output through their own experience, which is admirable, but also somewhat accidental. Not all students will arrive at those strategies independently, and those who do not may develop patterns of AI use that quietly undermine their learning without anyone, including themselves, fully realizing it. Building AI literacy deliberately into writing courses, as a component of broader critical thinking and digital literacy development, would help ensure that all students have the tools they need to engage with AI in a way that genuinely supports their development as writers and thinkers.

Second, teachers play a crucial role in shaping how students engage with AI, and that role needs to be taken seriously. Several participants in this study expressed a clear desire for more

guidance from their lecturers about how to use AI appropriately. This is not an unreasonable request, it is a reflection of the fact that students are navigating genuinely complex ethical and pedagogical territory, often without a map. Lecturers who address AI use explicitly, who model critical engagement with AI tools, and who create space for honest conversations about the tensions and challenges of AI-assisted writing, are far more likely to foster the kind of learner agency that this study identifies as essential. This requires professional development and institutional support for lecturers as well, many of whom are themselves navigating unfamiliar territory when it comes to AI.

Third, assessment practices need to evolve. If the goal of academic writing courses is to develop writers, not just to produce polished texts, then assessment methods that only evaluate the final product are no longer sufficient in an age where AI can generate a competent final product with minimal student effort. Moving toward process-oriented assessment approaches, such as reflective journals, writing portfolios, in-class writing tasks, or staged drafting processes, would make it much harder for AI to substitute for genuine student thinking, and much easier for teachers to see and reward the kind of agentic, reflective engagement that this study identifies as the hallmark of meaningful AI use.

Implications for Institutional Policy

Beyond the classroom, this study has implications for how universities and higher education institutions think about and respond to AI at an institutional level. The findings suggest that the current situation, in which many students are using AI regularly but without clear or consistent institutional guidance, is not serving students well. Even students who are motivated to use AI responsibly are left to define what responsible use means for themselves, which is both unfair and educationally counterproductive.

What is needed is not a blanket ban on AI use, which the findings of this study, and a growing body of international research, suggest is neither realistic nor particularly helpful. What is needed instead is a thoughtful, evidence-based institutional policy that acknowledges the reality of AI in students' academic lives, articulates clear expectations about what constitutes responsible and acceptable AI use in different assessment contexts, and provides both students and lecturers with the guidance and support they need to navigate that landscape with confidence and integrity.

Such a policy would ideally be developed collaboratively, involving students, lecturers, and academic leadership, and would be revisited regularly as AI technology and its educational implications continue to evolve. It would also be accompanied by genuine investment in AI literacy education, professional development for academic staff, and ongoing research into how AI is actually being used and experienced in Indonesian higher education contexts.

Directions for Future Research

This study opens up several avenues for future research that would deepen and extend its findings. First, larger-scale studies involving more participants across multiple institutions and disciplines would help build a more comprehensive picture of how Indonesian undergraduate students are engaging with AI in their academic writing, and how learner agency varies across different contexts and student profiles.

Second, longitudinal research that follows students over the course of an academic writing course, or across multiple semesters, would shed important light on how AI use and learner agency develop over time. Do students become more critical and reflective in their AI use as they gain experience? Or do patterns of overreliance become more entrenched? These are questions that a cross-sectional study like this one cannot answer.

Third, research that examines the lecturer perspective in more depth would complement the student-centered focus of this study. Understanding how lecturers think about AI, how they are responding to it in their teaching, and what support they feel they need, would provide a more complete picture of the pedagogical landscape and help identify more targeted and effective responses at both classroom and institutional levels.

Finally, there is a need for more research that takes seriously the specific cultural and linguistic context of Indonesian EFL students, including the ways in which AI's embedded biases and dominant academic norms may interact with Indonesian students' own intellectual traditions and ways of expressing knowledge. This is a relatively unexplored area that has significant implications not just for AI in education, but for broader questions about whose knowledge counts and whose voice is heard in the global academic landscape.

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