

EXPLORING STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES IN USING AI TO ASSIST THEIR WRITING: A STUDY OF SIXTH-SEMESTER STUDENTS OF THE ENGLISH EDUCATION DEPARTMENT AT UIN ALAUDDIN MAKASSAR

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the experiences of sixth-semester students of the English Education Department at UIN Alauddin Makassar in using Artificial Intelligence (AI) in their academic writing, focusing on its use, benefits, challenges, and impact on writing development. This research employed a qualitative method with a descriptive phenomenological design. The participants consisted of six sixth-semester students selected based on their experience in using AI tools for writing tasks. The data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted in two sessions, namely online interviews through WhatsApp voice notes and face-to-face interviews, and were analyzed using the model of Miles and Huberman, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. The findings revealed that students widely used AI tools in various stages of the writing process, particularly in generating ideas, developing outlines, improving grammar, enriching vocabulary, revising sentence structure, and reducing writer's block. The participants perceived AI as highly useful because it helped them complete writing tasks more efficiently and with better linguistic quality. The study also found that AI improved students' confidence and reduced cognitive burden, although some participants expressed concerns about overdependence and reduced critical thinking. The findings show that AI tools can support students' academic writing as helpful tools while still requiring them to think, evaluate, and develop their own ideas, and they provide useful insights for students, lecturers, and future researchers in using AI in writing.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence (AI), academic writing, EFL students, lived experiences, phenomenological study

1) INTRODUCTION

Writing is widely recognized as one of the most essential skills in language learning, particularly in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). It functions not only as a means of communication but also as a tool for expressing ideas, constructing knowledge, and demonstrating academic competence (Harmer, 2004; Hyland, 2003).

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In academic contexts, writing plays a crucial role in enabling students to convey their understanding, develop arguments, and engage critically with various topics. However, despite its importance, writing is often perceived as one of the most difficult language skills to master. Many EFL learners experience difficulties in generating ideas, organizing their thoughts coherently, applying appropriate grammatical structures, and selecting suitable vocabulary (Fareed, Ashraf, & Bilal, 2016). These challenges frequently result in students' low confidence, anxiety, and lack of motivation in writing activities, which ultimately affect their overall academic performance.

The complexity of writing becomes even more evident in academic writing contexts, where students are required to produce structured, coherent, and well-developed texts. Academic writing demands not only linguistic competence but also higher-order thinking skills, such as critical analysis, argumentation, and synthesis of information. For many students, particularly those in higher education, meeting these expectations can be overwhelming. Traditional teaching approaches, which often rely heavily on teacher feedback, are sometimes insufficient to fully support students' writing development due to limited time and resources. As a result, students often seek alternative tools and strategies to assist them in improving their writing skills.

In recent years, the rapid development of technology has significantly transformed educational practices, including the way students learn and develop writing skills. One of the most influential advancements is the emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI)-based tools, which have become increasingly integrated into academic environments. Tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, and Quillbot offer various features that support writing activities, including grammar checking, paraphrasing, vocabulary enhancement, idea generation, and text organization (Chen & Gong, 2025). These technologies provide immediate feedback and assistance, allowing students to revise and improve their writing more efficiently compared to traditional methods. Consequently, AI has gained popularity among students as a practical and accessible solution to address their writing difficulties.

A growing body of research has examined the role of AI in supporting students' writing development. Previous studies suggest that AI-assisted tools can significantly improve students' writing performance by enhancing grammatical accuracy, expanding vocabulary usage, and facilitating idea generation (Zhang, 2023; Chen & Gong, 2025). Furthermore, AI is often perceived as a supportive learning partner that provides instant feedback, enabling students to identify and

correct their mistakes independently. This immediate feedback is particularly beneficial in EFL contexts, where students may have limited opportunities to receive personalized guidance from instructors. In addition, AI tools can help students become more autonomous learners by encouraging self-directed revision and continuous improvement.

However, despite the numerous benefits of AI in writing, several studies have also raised critical concerns regarding its use. One of the main issues is the potential overreliance on AI tools, which may reduce students' critical thinking abilities and limit their capacity to generate original ideas (Dwivedi et al., 2023). When students depend too heavily on AI-generated suggestions, they may become passive users rather than active learners, which can hinder their cognitive development. Moreover, there are concerns related to academic integrity, as the use of AI tools may blur the boundaries between assistance and plagiarism. These contrasting perspectives highlight the need for a more balanced understanding of AI integration in writing practices, particularly in terms of how students actually experience and utilize these tools in real learning contexts.

Although previous research has provided valuable insights into the effectiveness of AI in improving writing skills, most studies tend to focus on measurable outcomes, such as writing scores, performance improvements, or experimental comparisons. While these findings are important, they often overlook the subjective experiences of students who use AI in their writing processes. There is still limited research that explores how students perceive AI, how they interact with these tools, and how AI influences their learning experiences from a personal and contextual perspective. This gap is particularly evident in the context of EFL learners in higher education, where the integration of AI is becoming increasingly common but not yet fully understood.

To address this gap, it is important to adopt an approach that captures students' lived experiences in a more comprehensive and in-depth manner. Therefore, this study employs a phenomenological approach to explore students' experiences in using AI tools for academic writing. By focusing on students' perspectives, this research aims to uncover how AI influences their writing processes, including the benefits they perceive, the challenges they encounter, and the ways in which AI shapes their learning practices. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of the role of AI beyond its technical functions, emphasizing its impact on students' cognitive and emotional engagement in writing.

Ultimately, this study is expected to contribute both theoretically and practically to the field of language education. Theoretically, it provides new insights into the integration of AI in EFL writing from a socio-cognitive and experiential perspective. Practically, the findings can inform students, lecturers, and educational institutions about the effective and responsible use of AI tools in academic writing. By highlighting both the opportunities and challenges associated with AI, this study aims to support the development of more balanced and meaningful writing practices in the digital era.

2) METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design using a descriptive phenomenological approach to explore students' lived experiences in utilizing Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools for academic writing. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate as it allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives, interpretations, and meanings toward a particular phenomenon. Specifically, phenomenology was chosen because it focuses on describing how individuals experience and make sense of their real-life situations. In this study, the phenomenon under investigation was the use of AI tools in supporting students' academic writing processes.

The research was conducted at the English Education Department of UIN Alauddin Makassar. Six sixth-semester students were selected as the subjects of this study based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. The participants were chosen because they had prior experience in using Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools for academic writing. This criterion ensured that the participants were able to provide in-depth and meaningful insights into their experiences in utilizing AI to support their writing activities.

The participants were selected based on several criteria. First, they were active sixth-semester students in the English Education Department. Second, they had experience using AI tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, or QuillBot in their academic writing activities. Third, they were willing to participate voluntarily and share their experiences. Although the number of participants was relatively small, it was considered sufficient for qualitative research, particularly phenomenological studies, which emphasize depth and richness of data rather than the number of participants. Data collection was continued until data saturation was achieved, meaning that no new significant information emerged from additional interviews.

The primary data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews. This method was chosen because it allows participants to express their experiences freely while still enabling the researcher to focus on specific issues related to the study. The interviews were conducted in two modes, namely face-to-face meetings and online communication through WhatsApp voice notes, depending on the participants' availability and convenience. An interview guideline consisting of open-ended questions was developed to ensure that the data collected were relevant to the research objectives. The questions explored how students used AI tools in their writing processes, including aspects such as perceived usefulness, ease of use, benefits, challenges, and their overall experiences.

During the data collection process, all interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent to ensure the accuracy of the data. In addition, field notes were taken to capture important contextual information during the interviews. The recorded data were then transcribed verbatim to maintain the authenticity of participants' responses and to facilitate systematic analysis.

In addition to the primary data, supporting data were obtained from a preliminary survey conducted using Google Forms. The survey aimed to identify students' initial experiences with AI tools, the types of AI tools they used, and the frequency of their usage. The results of this survey provided an overview of the research context and supported the selection of participants.

The data were analyzed using the interactive model consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles & Huberman, 2014). In the data reduction stage, the interview transcripts were reviewed, coded, and categorized into meaningful themes. In the data display stage, the organized data were presented in a descriptive form to identify patterns and relationships. Finally, conclusions were drawn and continuously verified by comparing them with the original data to ensure consistency and accuracy.

To ensure the credibility of the findings, the researcher applied several strategies, such as data triangulation and careful documentation of the research process. Ethical considerations were also strictly maintained throughout the study. Participants' consent was obtained prior to data collection, and their identities were kept confidential. They were also informed that their participation was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. This ensured that the research was conducted in an ethical and responsible manner.

3) RESULTS

This section presents the findings of the research based on data collected through semi-structured interviews with six sixth-semester students of the English Education Department at UIN Alauddin Makassar. The purpose of this study is to explore students' experiences in using Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools to support their academic writing process.

The findings focus on how students use AI tools in writing, as well as their experiences in terms of benefits, ease of use, clarity of AI responses, cognitive impact, challenges, and personal responses. AI tools mentioned by participants include OpenAI ChatGPT, Grammarly, and other similar platforms. All interview data were transcribed and analyzed systematically.

The data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. In the data reduction stage, relevant data from the interview transcripts were selected, coded, and categorized. The data were then presented in a descriptive narrative form to identify patterns and relationships. Finally, conclusions were drawn and verified to ensure the validity and trustworthiness of the findings.

The coding process revealed several recurring codes, such as idea generation, brainstorming, outline development, grammar correction, vocabulary enhancement, paraphrasing, sentence organization, paragraph development, time efficiency, ease of use, clarity of AI responses, cognitive support, emotional relief, and dependency on AI tools.

These codes were grouped into broader themes, which are presented in the following sections. Each theme is supported by direct quotations from participants to ensure credibility and to reflect their actual experiences. All interview questions (1–8) were fully addressed and systematically integrated into thematic findings through the coding process, rather than being presented in a question-and-answer format.

The Use of AI Tools in Students' Writing Process

The findings reveal that students use AI tools in various stages of the writing process, including planning, drafting, revising, and editing. This indicates that AI plays a comprehensive role in supporting students' writing activities.

At the planning stage, AI is mainly used for generating ideas, brainstorming, and developing outlines. This is particularly helpful when students experience difficulty starting their writing.

P1 stated:

“AI membantu memberikan gambaran atau contoh sehingga saya punya bayangan untuk memulai tulisan.”

“AI helps provide an overview or example, so I have an idea of how to start writing.”

Similarly, P3 explained:

“Pada tahap awal AI membantu memunculkan ide dan menyusun outline.”

“At the initial stage, AI helps generate ideas and create an outline.”

These responses show that AI helps students initiate their writing and organize their ideas effectively.

At the drafting stage, students use AI to develop paragraphs and construct clearer sentences.

P6 mentioned:

“AI bantu kasih contoh paragraf awal, jadi tinggal dikembangkan lagi pakai bahasaku sendiri.”

“AI helps by giving an example of an opening paragraph, so I just need to develop it using my own words.”

This suggests that AI is used as a guide, while students still actively develop the content.

At the revising and editing stages, AI is widely used for grammar checking, paraphrasing, vocabulary enhancement, and sentence restructuring.

P2 stated:

“Saya biasanya pakai AI buat grammar checking, paraphrasing kalimat biar tidak kaku.”

“I usually use AI for grammar checking and paraphrasing sentences so they don’t sound stiff.”

P4 also explained:

“AI sangat membantu saya pada saat memperbaiki grammarnya atau memperjelas kalimatnya.”

“AI really helps me when correcting grammar or making sentences clearer.”

Overall, the findings indicate that students use AI as a supporting tool throughout the writing process.

Students' Experiences in Using AI Tools

Benefits (Perceived Usefulness)

The findings show that students experience several benefits when using AI tools in writing assignments.

First, AI helps students in multiple ways, including generating ideas, organizing content, improving grammar, enhancing vocabulary, and constructing sentences.

P1 stated:

“AI membantu memberikan gambaran atau contoh sehingga saya punya bayangan untuk memulai tulisan.”

“AI helps provide an overview or example, so I have an idea of how to start writing.”

P2 stated:

“Saya pakai AI untuk grammar checking, paraphrasing, dan memilih kata yang lebih tepat.”

“I use AI for grammar checking, paraphrasing, and choosing more appropriate words.”

Second, AI improves time efficiency and makes writing tasks easier and faster.

P5 stated:

“Kalau pakai AI lebih cepat selesai.”

“If I use AI, I can finish faster.”

P4 also mentioned:

“Lebih mudah dan lebih cepat.”

“It becomes easier and faster.”

Third, AI improves writing quality, particularly in grammar, vocabulary, and organization.

P6 explained:

“Kosakata jadi tidak monoton, susunan tulisan jadi lebih terstruktur.”

“The vocabulary becomes less monotonous, and the writing structure becomes more organized.”

Fourth, AI helps students develop their ideas without replacing their thinking.

P3 stated:

“AI membantu mengembangkan ide... tetapi tetap digunakan secara bijak.”

“AI helps develop ideas, but it still needs to be used wisely.”

P2 explained:

“AI tetap hanya sebagai alat bantu... saya yang menentukan isi dan arah tulisan.”

“AI is only a supporting tool; I still determine the content and direction of the writing.”

P6 added:

“AI membantu, tapi saya tetap menyesuaikan dengan gaya saya sendiri.”

“AI helps, but I still adjust it to my own style.”

Finally, AI also provides cognitive and emotional support.

P3 stated:

“Saya merasa lebih ringan karena terbantu dalam menyusun tulisan.”

“I feel lighter because AI helps me in organizing my writing.”

Ease of Use and Clarity

The findings reveal that AI tools are generally easy to use.

P2 stated:

“Gampang banget kak.”

“It’s very easy to use.”

P6 added:

“Tinggal ketik pertanyaan atau perintah, langsung keluar jawabannya.”

“You just type a question or command, and the answer appears immediately.”

However, some participants mentioned initial difficulty.

P2 stated:

“Awalnya agak sulit karena belum terbiasa, tapi lama-lama jadi gampang.”

“At first it was a bit difficult because I wasn’t used to it, but over time it became easy.”

In terms of clarity, most participants found AI responses easy to understand.

P1 stated:

“Jawabannya mudah dipahami karena biasanya disampaikan dengan bahasa yang jelas dan terstruktur.”

“The answers are easy to understand because they are usually delivered in clear and structured language.”

P1 also gave an example:

“Misalnya saat saya minta penjelasan, AI menjelaskan dengan langkah-langkah yang jelas jadi mudah dipahami.”

“For example, when I ask for an explanation, AI explains it step by step, so it’s easy to understand.”

P4 added:

“Kadang harus disederhanakan lagi supaya lebih mudah dipahami.”

“Sometimes it needs to be simplified again to make it easier to understand.”

Cognitive Impact

The findings show that AI affects students’ thinking processes.

Most participants reported that AI makes thinking lighter.

P3 stated:

“Berpikir jadi lebih ringan karena AI membantu mengurangi kebingungan.”

“Thinking becomes lighter because AI helps reduce confusion.”

P2 added:

“Lebih ringan karena tidak perlu terlalu banyak berpikir dari awal.”

“It’s lighter because I don’t have to think too much from the beginning.”

P6 also mentioned:

“AI membantu mengurangi beban awal saat menulis.”

“AI helps reduce the initial burden when writing.”

Challenges

The findings reveal several challenges.

The most common challenge is dependency.

P4 stated:

“Sudah mulai kak ketergantungan.”

“I’ve started to become dependent.”

P5 added:

“Saya lebih tergantungka sama AI.”

“I rely more on AI.”

Another issue is mismatched outputs.

P4 stated:

“Terkadang juga AI tidak sesuai apa yang kita harapkan.”

“Sometimes AI does not match what we expect.”

Personal Responses

Overall, students show positive responses toward AI.

They perceive AI as helpful and practical, but they also emphasize that AI should not replace their own thinking.

Students believe that AI should be used as a supporting tool while they remain responsible for their writing.

The findings show that AI is used across all stages of the writing process and provides significant benefits in terms of idea development, writing quality, efficiency, ease of use, clarity, and cognitive support. However, challenges such as dependency and mismatched outputs remain. Therefore, AI should be used as a complementary tool rather than a replacement for students’ own thinking and writing processes.

4) DISCUSSION

The Use of AI Tools in Students' Academic Writing Process

The findings of this study reveal that students actively integrate Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools into all stages of the academic writing process, including planning, drafting, revising, and editing. This finding strongly aligns with the Writing Process Theory, which conceptualizes writing as a recursive and dynamic activity rather than a linear process. As proposed by Linda Flower and John R. Hayes (1981), writing involves continuous movement between planning, translating ideas into text, and reviewing. The integration of AI across all these stages in this study confirms that students follow a similar recursive pattern, with AI functioning as a supporting tool throughout the process.

At the planning stage, students reported using AI to generate ideas, explore topics, and develop outlines. This finding supports previous research by Zhai Xiaoqing (2022), who found that AI tools significantly assist learners in brainstorming and idea generation, particularly in overcoming writer's block. Similarly, Lee Hye-Jin (2023) argues that AI can function as a cognitive scaffold that supports learners during the pre-writing stage. The results of this study are consistent with these findings, indicating that AI serves as external cognitive support that facilitates idea development.

During the drafting stage, participants used AI to transform ideas into structured paragraphs and coherent sentences. This supports the argument of Hyland Ken (2003), who emphasizes that writing is not only about generating ideas but also about organizing them effectively into meaningful discourse. In line with this, recent studies such as Khalil Mohammad (2023) found that AI tools like ChatGPT help students produce more organized drafts and improve textual coherence. The findings of this study support this claim, as students used AI to guide their paragraph development rather than replacing their own writing.

At the revising and editing stages, AI was most frequently used for grammar correction, paraphrasing, and vocabulary enhancement. This aligns with Donald Murray (1980), who highlights revision as a critical stage in improving writing quality. Furthermore, studies by AlAfnan Mohammad (2023) indicate that AI tools significantly improve linguistic accuracy in students' writing, particularly in grammar and lexical choice. The findings of this study strongly support this perspective, as students consistently relied on AI to refine their writing at the language level.

Another important finding is that AI helps students overcome writer's block. This is supported by research from Dwivedi Yogesh (2023), which highlights that generative AI tools can reduce cognitive barriers in creative tasks. However, unlike some studies that suggest AI may replace human input, this study found that students still actively engage in developing their own ideas, indicating a balanced use of AI.

Overall, this study supports existing theories and research by demonstrating that AI functions as an integrated academic support tool across all writing stages.

Students' Perceived Usefulness of AI Tools

The findings demonstrate that students perceive AI tools as highly useful in supporting their academic writing tasks. This is strongly aligned with the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) proposed by Fred Davis (1989), particularly the concept of Perceived Usefulness, which refers to the extent to which a person believes that using a system enhances their performance.

One of the most prominent aspects of usefulness identified in this study is time efficiency. Students reported that AI helps them complete tasks faster, especially under time constraints. This finding is consistent with research by Kasneci Enkelejda et al. (2023), which found that AI tools significantly improve students' productivity by reducing the time needed for writing tasks.

In addition to efficiency, students reported improvements in writing quality, including grammar accuracy, vocabulary variation, and organization. This supports findings from Cotton Debby et al. (2023), who argue that AI tools can enhance the linguistic and structural quality of students' academic writing. The results of this study align with these findings, indicating that students perceive AI as a tool that enhances their academic performance.

Another key finding is the reduction of cognitive burden. Students reported feeling mentally lighter when using AI, which aligns with cognitive load theory. According to John Sweller (1988), reducing cognitive load can improve learning performance. In this context, AI functions as a cognitive support system that reduces the mental effort required for writing tasks.

However, unlike some studies that warn about over-reliance on AI, this study shows that students are still aware of their role in controlling and evaluating AI output. This indicates a more critical and responsible use of AI.

Students' Perceived Ease of Use of AI Tools

The findings indicate that students perceive AI tools as easy to use, which corresponds to the Perceived Ease of Use component of TAM (Fred Davis, 1989).

Students reported that AI tools are simple, practical, and require minimal effort to operate. This finding is supported by research from Sallam Malik (2023), which found that the simplicity of AI interfaces contributes significantly to their widespread adoption among students.

The ease of interaction—where users only need to input prompts and receive immediate responses—makes AI highly accessible. This aligns with Venkatesh Viswanath et al. (2003), who emphasize that ease of use directly influences users' intention to adopt technology.

However, this study also found that some students initially experienced difficulty in using AI effectively. This suggests that although AI is generally easy to use, users still need a certain level of digital literacy to maximize its benefits. This finding slightly contrasts with studies that assume AI is universally easy to use, highlighting the importance of user experience and familiarity.

Benefits and Challenges of Using AI in Academic Writing

While the findings highlight many benefits, they also reveal important challenges. The most significant issue is dependency on AI tools.

This finding raises concerns about learner autonomy, as discussed by Henri Holec (1981), who defines autonomy as the ability to take responsibility for one's own learning. Excessive reliance on AI may weaken students' independent thinking skills.

This concern is also supported by Baidoo-Anu David (2023), who argues that overdependence on AI tools may reduce critical thinking and creativity. The findings of this study align with this perspective, as some students admitted becoming dependent on AI.

Another challenge is the mismatch between AI-generated outputs and students' expectations. This indicates that AI still lacks contextual understanding in certain academic tasks. Similar findings were reported by Bender Emily (2021), who argues that AI systems do not truly understand meaning but generate responses based on patterns.

Therefore, this study reinforces the idea that AI should be used as a supportive tool rather than a replacement for human thinking.

Students' Emotional and Cognitive Responses toward AI Use

The findings show that students develop positive emotional responses toward AI use, such as reduced stress and increased confidence.

This finding aligns with research by Pekrun Reinhard (2006), which highlights the importance of positive emotions in learning processes. By reducing anxiety, AI helps create a more comfortable learning environment.

In addition, AI contributes to students' confidence by providing immediate feedback. This is supported by Nicol David (2006), who emphasizes that timely feedback enhances student confidence and learning outcomes.

However, this study also suggests that emotional comfort may lead to dependency if not balanced with critical thinking. Therefore, while AI provides emotional and cognitive support, students must still maintain active engagement in their learning process

5) CONCLUSION

This study concludes that sixth-semester students of the English Education Department at UIN Alauddin Makassar use Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools across all stages of the academic writing process, including planning, drafting, revising, and editing. AI tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, QuillBot, and similar platforms are utilized to generate ideas, develop outlines, construct paragraphs, improve grammar, enhance vocabulary, and refine overall text organization. These findings indicate that AI has become an integrated and essential supporting tool in students' writing practices, assisting them not only in initiating their writing but also in developing and improving their academic texts throughout the entire writing process.

Furthermore, the study reveals that students' experiences in using AI tools are generally positive, as AI provides significant benefits in terms of writing efficiency, quality improvement, ease of use, clarity of responses, and reduction of cognitive burden. Students reported that AI helps them complete tasks faster, produce more structured and accurate writing, and feel less stressed during the writing process. However, challenges such as dependency on AI and occasional mismatches between AI-generated outputs and students' intentions were also identified. Therefore, AI should be used as a complementary tool that supports, rather than replaces, students' critical thinking, creativity, and active engagement in academic writing.

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