Exploring Students' Perceptions on the Use of ChatGPT: A Thematic Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is gaining popularity in the field of education due to contemporary technological advancements. AI learning tools are significant in the current education field as they provide tremendous benefits to educators and students alike and because of their all-around performance. Among these AI systems, ChatGPT stands out as a highly sophisticated AI learning tool that has blown up immensely in the education field as it is programmed with excellent technical, mathematical and computational skills. In the English Language classroom, students use ChatGPT for unlimited tasks like completing assignments, paraphrasing and summarising sentences, searching for information and generating ideas among others. However, there was a need to find out about students' perceptions of its usefulness as well as its limitations as a learning tool for students. Thus, this research aimed to investigate the perceptions of university students in the 21st century on the effectiveness of ChatGPT in their academics. Ten students participated in the research. A convenience sampling method was used to select students from English for Academic Purpose (EAW) course from the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). The study is qualitative in nature and data in the form of a reflective journal were collected using Google form in which students recorded their thoughts. Thematic analysis method was used to analyse students' responses. It is hoped that the insights gained from this study will help language educators understand the benefits and challenges faced by EAW students in their writing classes.

Keywords: ChatGPT, AI, Students' Perception

INTRODUCTION

Technology is seen as an amazing tool, system or process which has been vastly used in our education system today. It cannot be denied that technology has reshaped our teaching and learning experiences especially among language educators. With the advancement in technology, we are able to move from traditional classroom settings to more interactive digital classrooms, particularly in learning the English Language. Students' learning experiences have been more interesting and engaging as online learning platforms and AI-driven educational resources have been used by millions of language teachers and students to gain knowledge.

In this cyberworld, proficiency in the English language has become more crucial than ever, especially among students at tertiary level. The English language is seen as the most common language used in communication, business, education, entertainment and so on. The use of AI platforms such as ChatGPT has enhanced students' ability at a higher level to master the English Language. This allows students to connect with people all around the world, and engage in a wide range of personalised experiences.

ChatGPT, stands for Chat Generative Pre- Trained Transformer, was developed by an AI research company, named Open AI (Zhai, 2022). It is a chatbot that uses artificial intelligence and has a feature that allows people to talk to it in a conversational way. Students at universities find digital tools such as ChatGPT are able to complete a wide range of tasks such as writing essays or emails, generating ideas for projects or assignments, answering queries and providing feedback. They find ChatGPT as user-friendly and gives immediate and

interactive support to them. Hence, that is why the use of ChatGPT can supplement traditional teaching methods in teaching various courses such as English for Academic Course (EAW).

Many specific English Language courses such as EAW demand thorough writing assignments from students which emphasise on students' critical thinking skills. Many universities in Malaysia offer this writing course to students as a requirement. For example, it is compulsory for all International Islamic University (IIUM) undergraduates to pass EAW course as this will help students to achieve their academic success. Today, higher institutions have incorporated technology in the EAW curriculum, particularly online learning platforms and applications such as ChatGPT to make students' learning more personalised and supportive. It is important to ensure that EAW courses taught to tertiary students are always relevant to students by encouraging students to use online learning platforms to diversify their learning experiences. Integration of ChatGPT into English language learning programs such as EAW can offer students a versatile and accessible resource to improve their writing, reading, listening and speaking skills.

However, teachers need to maintain a balance between the use of ChatGPT in their language classrooms with strategies that can introduce problem solving skills and creativity. This is because over dependence on online resources such as ChatGPT may hinder students' critical thinking skills especially in completing their writing tasks. Hence, this study aims to explore the opportunities and problems that can derive from using technology like ChatGPT in acquiring English language skills in classrooms.

To address the objectives of the study, the following research questions were posited:

1. What are the benefits of integrating ChatGPT in EAW students' writing?
2. What problems do EAW students encounter when using ChatGPT?

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this post drastic era, it is a mandatory skill to be exemplary in using AI in order to succeed and flourish in the current diversified fields and industries. As stressed by Rusmiyanto et al. (2023), AI is able to mimic human intelligence and has presented extraordinary developments, saturating through society. The integration of AI into education has also gained popularity, offering promising opportunities to improve language learning and address students' individual needs. In academic settings as well as in both personal and professional domains, students need to keep pace with emerging trends and adopt innovative methods to optimize their learning experiences (Sari, 2023). As advanced technologies continue to develop and offer new possibilities, traditional teaching methods and conventional classrooms could soon become outdated, leading to a growing reliance on AI for learning and interaction (Jones et al., 2018).

This is because AI has the potential to benefit and motivate students as well as boost their interest in L2 speaking and interaction as it provides opportunities needed by them (Kim et al., 2019). Students are engaged with a unique learning experience tailored to their needs providing them support to overcome challenges that they encounter daily. Porter and Grippa (2020) meanwhile stressed that students receive immediate feedback when they use AI-powered tools which assist them in identifying their strengths and weaknesses and progress in their language learning journey. Research on AI translators indicates that EFL students' drafts contain fewer errors when using these tools. AI translation also offers benefits like time savings and easy accessibility (Porter & Grippa, 2020). In addition, in research by Tho (2023), it was found that students believe AI tools save their time, provide information, provide personalised tutoring and feedback as well as clarify ideas. In this fast-paced world, it is important to be efficient and the use of quick, responsive and easily accessible tools is paramount. AI provides various functions that make lives easier and workflows smoother thus saving time and energy for more creative work.

Among the AI systems, ChatGPT stands out as a highly sophisticated AI tool which helps generate publications that are systematic, cohesive and mostly accurate (Zhai, 2022). It generates responses that mimic human-like quality. According to Hasanein and Sobaih (2023), higher education students use ChatGPT for homework, to assist them to write, solve problems, prepare for tests, analyse data, clarify concepts, support research and provide supplementary learning materials. ChatGPT is one of the AI-powered tools that students use to assess their language proficiency and learning style and to personalise learning experiences to meet their daily learning needs (Chen et al., 2021).

However, one of the biggest worries about the artificial intelligence-based Chatbot is its impact on education. There were some concerns that involved the quality and reliability of the sources as well as a lack of accurate source citation. This is supported by Das and J.V. (2024) as they stressed that even though ChatGPT provides access to knowledge, promotes individualised learning and reduces students' workload, there is a limited depth of understanding, lack of quality of information and absence of higher-order cognitive capabilities. In addition, Raman (2023) raised ethical concerns, such as a decline in creativity and potential violations of academic integrity related to the usage of ChatGPT. Furthermore, even though ChatGPT might seem like a miraculous solution to students' endeavours, it can hinder growth and can lead to a decline in thinking ability and could rob students of the crucial skill sets.

According to Chauhan (2023), the process in which students grapple with challenges and brainstorm ideas without using AI tools like ChatGPT could actually hone their problem-solving skills and strengthen their mental ability. He added that relying completely on Chat GPT without understanding the underlying concepts may cause unexpected issues in comprehension in the long term as overdependence on Chat GPT could inhibit growth and stifle the ability to make informed decisions. Researchers are concerned if there is actually learning potential with the use of AI and if students' writing skills actually get enhanced (Garcia & Pena, 2011; Lee, 2019; Navidinia, Aka & Hendevalan, 2019). Nayab et al. (2022) reported that many universities are apprehensive towards the usage of Chat GPT as it leads to plagiarism and allows cheating to be rampant. In fact, students are also concerned about matters related to plagiarism, over reliance on ChatGPT and inequitable evaluations and grading.

According to Khanzode and Sarode (2020), the main deterrent of using AI tools for language learning is associated with the absence of human interaction. Even though some AI tools yield favourable circumstances for live conversation with native speakers or language tutors, they lack direct human interaction. This will impact learning experiences that prioritize customization and real-life scenarios. Meanwhile, Banovac (2023) in an experiment found that students who used ChatGPT for essay writing yielded unfavourable scores as quality and authentic content could not be generated compared to essays that were written manually. Banovac concludes that ChatGPT can be used to aid in assignments and written reports but students should not completely depend on it. The literature review demonstrates that the use of ChatGPT is pivotal to aid in the enhancement of educational experiences, generating ideas, developing writing styles and minimizing errors instead of just expediting work and completing tasks that are assigned to them. Hence, if used appropriately, exploration and growth with the use of ChatGPT could pave the way for radiating immense success, ensuring a prominent future and providing impactful learning advancements.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore students' perceptions and experiences of using ChatGPT in English as a Second Language (ESL) writing classrooms. A qualitative approach enables in-depth engagement with participants' subjective experiences, providing rich and nuanced insights that quantitative methods may not capture. Qualitative research also offers flexibility to identify emergent themes through iterative interpretation, allowing researchers to construct meaning from participants' narratives within their authentic contexts.

Participants

The sample for the study consisted of undergraduate students enrolled in the compulsory English for Academic Writing (EAW) course at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) main campus. The study was conducted during a short semester comprising seven weeks of instruction. All participants were Malaysian students in their third or fourth year of study across various faculties. Recruitment was voluntary, and students were informed that participation was anonymous and would not affect their course grades. A total of ten out of 20 students consented to participate and submitted reflective essays for analysis.

Data Collection

The study utilised reflective essays as the primary data collection instrument. In higher education, reflective writing is widely recognised as a pedagogical tool that promotes metacognitive awareness and critical

engagement with learning processes (Cho, 2017; Ryan, 2012). Writing a reflective essay encourages students to transition from unconscious to conscious decision-making, fostering a deeper understanding of their academic practices. Reflective essays are also considered student-centred and transformative, offering opportunities for learners to articulate their identities and educational goals (Badley, 2009; Hosein & Rao, 2017). Upon completion of the EAW course, participants were invited to submit a 300-word reflective essay detailing their experiences using ChatGPT for writing assignments. To guide their reflections, six prompt questions were provided via Google Forms. These prompts encouraged students to discuss the perceived benefits, challenges, and strategies associated with ChatGPT use. The submission process was open for a specified period, and participants were reminded that their involvement was voluntary and confidential. In total, ten reflective essays were collected and prepared for thematic analysis.

Data Analysis

The study employed thematic analysis guided by Braun and Clarke's (2020) six-phase framework to systematically analyse and interpret the reflective essays. To enhance rigour and trustworthiness, an intercoder reliability process for qualitative research was incorporated. The process began with a thorough familiarisation phase, where two coders independently read and reread three (3) selected reflective essays to gain an in-depth understanding of the content. Initial notes were taken, allowing identification of initial patterns and trends relevant to the research questions. Next, descriptive codes were developed inductively, remaining close to participants' language to preserve meaning. After independent coding, coders discussed the code list and resolved discrepancies. A shared codebook was created detailing code names, definitions and illustrative excerpts. During the discussion, new codes were added to the codebook until a reasonable code saturation was achieved. Both coders then applied the agreed codebook to analyse the remaining essays. Final themes were constructed through an iterative review and consensus process, supported by representative quotes. This rigorous, iterative approach effectively captured the complexity of participant experiences, enabling a comprehensive analysis that was both transparent and grounded in the data.

Table 1 Example of Codebook for Thematic Analysis

Theme	Definition	Code & Description	Participant's Quotation
Benefits of ChatGPT as a valuable writing tool	Perceived advantages of using ChatGPT in ESL writing	Idea Generation ChatGPT is used to brainstorm topics or generate new ideas in writing tasks.	"It gives me new ideas…. (Participant A)
		Language Support ChatGPT offers help with grammar, vocabulary, etc.	"It helps me paraphrase some articles and brainstorm topics to ensure my writing is well-organised and coherent." (Participant C)
		Language structure guidance ChatGPT helps with organising the	"It [ChatGPT] assists me to figure out how to structure my paragraphs." (Participant G)
Challenges and Concerns	Perceived worries or apprehensions about risks of using ChatGPT in writing tasks.	ChatGPT provides incorrect or unreliable information	"Sometimes it [ChatGPT]gives inaccurate answers." (Participant B)
		Missing or inaccurate references or citations in ChatGPT outputs.	"The material provided by ChatGPT does not always include citations or references that I may utilize in academic settings." (Participant F)

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis of the participants' reflective essays yielded four main themes. The themes are presented and discussed in the following paragraphs. Quotations from the participants' essays will be included to ensure trustworthiness of the findings, as well as to maintain a better understanding of the analysis.

Benefits of ChatGPT as a Valuable Writing Tool

A majority of the participants described ChatGPT as an instrumental resource in their academic writing process. ChatGPT is lauded for its role in idea generation, linguistic accuracy and structural organisation in writing tasks. Several participants highlighted ChatGPT's capacity to assist with brainstorming and paraphrasing, which they perceived as particularly useful for overcoming writer's block during the initial writing process. For instance, one participant noted, "It's a great resource for me! It gives me new ideas and insight about certain subjects that I might not know yet," (Participant A). Another participant remarked on ChatGPT's features to enhance language structure and its clarity, "ChatGPT helps me with assignments by generating ideas, offering suggestions for final projects, and providing feedback on grammar, style, and clarity. It helps me paraphrase some articles and brainstorm topics to ensure my writing is well-organised and coherent" (Participant C).

Participants also valued the immediacy of feedback and the intuitive interface of ChatGPT, which allows them to better focus on content development. The efficient interface contributes to the participants' confidence, as they felt empowered to produce more coherent and well-structured language. This sense of efficiency was frequently associated with improved confidence and productivity, as students felt empowered to produce more coherent and well-structured texts. "It helps me to word my assignments better. Other than that, it assists me to figure out how to structure my paragraphs," [Participant G]. In sum, these reflections suggest that ChatGPT is perceived beyond convenience but rather as a strategic writing tool that facilitates cognitive engagement and optimises participants' writing process.

These findings resonate with existing scholarships on digital writing tools, which underscores their potential to scaffold language learning and enhance academic performance when integrated thoughtfully into pedagogical practices. Participants emphasised that ChatGPT was particularly helpful in overcoming writer's block, improving grammatical accuracy, and enhancing clarity and coherence in their writing process. These observations align with the findings of Kim et al., (2019), who reported that AI-based tools can foster motivation and sustain learners' interest by presenting diverse opportunities for engagement. Similarly, Hasanein and Sobaih (2023) demonstrated the effectiveness of ChatGPT in improving university students' writing skills, particularly in academic contexts. Collectively, these findings underscore the growing acceptance of the role of AI tools as pedagogical supports in higher education, particularly in language learning environments where students seek strategies to enhance both the quality and efficiency of their writing.

Challenges and Concerns of Using ChatGPT in Writing Tasks

While participants acknowledged the benefits of ChatGPT, they also expressed significant concerns regarding its risks or limitations, particularly in relation to academic integrity and reliability. Several participants expressed apprehension about plagiarism issues. noting that ideas generated or reformulated by ChatGPT sometimes resulted in high similarity scores when checked through plagiarism detection tools. One participant wrote:

'For me, the plagiarism part. Sometimes I will ask ChatGPT about the idea that originally came from my own journal reading, and they respond to it. Later when I checked the percentage for plagiarism for my original idea, the plagiarism website said the percentage was high. So, I am kind of frustrated about that (Participant A).'

In addition to plagiarism concerns, some participants highlighted issues of factual inaccuracy and the absence of proper citations, which limited the academic utility of ChatGPT outputs. As one student reflected in the essay, "The main issue for me is that the material provided by ChatGPT does not always include citations or references that I may utilise in academic settings. So even if the information is good, it is useless without citations" (Participant F). Another participant reflected a similar issue, "Sometimes it gives inaccurate answers" (Participant B). These reflections underscore the tension between the participants perceived challenges of ChatGPT and its threat to the rigorous standards of academic writing.

The challenges identified by participants reveal critical gaps in the integration of AI tools within academic contexts. While ChatGPT offers efficiency and linguistic support, its inability to guarantee originality, empirical accuracy, and proper reference raises concerns about academic integrity. These findings echo broader debates on the ethical and practical implications of AI-assisted writing, particularly in higher education settings where originality and evidence-based argumentation are paramount. (Vaccino-Salvadore, 2023) In a nutshell, it is crucial to address the concerns or limitations to ensure that AI technologies such as ChatGPT can complement students' progress in language learning contexts instead of compromising academic standards.

Balancing Act: ChatGPT and the Writer's Voice

Many participants emphasised the necessity of maintaining autonomy and creativity when incorporating ChatGPT into their writing practices. While acknowledging its usefulness for generating ideas and providing linguistic support, the participants wrote that ChatGPT should serve as a complement rather than a substitute for their own intellectual engagement. One participant explained, "I use ChatGPT as a guide, not a replacement for my own thinking. I double-check its suggestions against legitimate sources and make sure to add my own ideas" (Participant C). Another participant reflected a similar notion on the importance of adopting ChatGPT in a balanced way without being overly dependent on it: "ChatGPT, in my opinion, can be used to help and guide people through the process of writing tasks and assignments. However, this is not an excuse for me to be lazy or ineffective in my search for deeper knowledge (Participant F). Others expressed concern that excessive reliance on ChatGPT could erode critical and creative thinking skills: "I think it is important not to rely on it too heavily because when you use it for every minor detail and point elaboration, you lose your creative and critical thinking skills" (Participant D). These reflections suggest a deliberate effort among participants to strike a balance between leveraging AI-generated input and preserving their individual voice, originality, and analytical rigour.

The emphasis on sustaining writers' voices or autonomy among participants in their reflective essays resonates with broader scholarly discourse on human-AI collaboration in educational contexts. Han (2025) argues that while generative AI tools can enhance technical accuracy and efficiency, uncritical dependence on AI risks creating "cognitive crutches" that undermine originality and higher-order thinking. Similarly, Nguyen et al. (2024) highlight that iterative, interactive engagement with AI can promote better writing outcomes and foster self-regulated learning. These perspectives underscore the need for pedagogical frameworks that position AI as a complementary resource rather than a replacement for human creativity. To conclude, language educators should encourage students to critically evaluate and adapt AI-generated content in writing classrooms to optimise their cognitive skills alongside digital proficiency, thereby achieving a balanced integration of human-AI in academic landscapes.

Navigating AI challenges in ChatGPT

In their reflection, some participants demonstrated a proactive approach in addressing the limitations of ChatGPT by adopting strategies to ensure the credibility and relevance of its outputs. Rather than accepting generated content uncritically, the participants engaged in strategies such as verification practices whereby they cross-checked information against reputable sources. The participants also supplemented ideas or content generated by ChatGPT with their own ideas or insights. One participant explained, "I double-check its suggestions against legitimate sources and make sure to add my own ideas. I also edit the content to fit my writing style" (Participant C). Others reported using alternative platforms like Google to validate information and locate scholarly references, "With the information provided by ChatGPT, I am going to try and find myself on any website such as Google. This is because Google covers a wide range of topics, including news, journals, books, and many more" (Participant F). These reflections indicate that the participants perceive ChatGPT as an initial resource rather than a definitive authority, emphasising the importance of analytical scrutiny in academic writing.

The strategies employed by participants align with emerging scholarship on critical AI literacy, which advocates active engagement and evaluative practices when integrating generative tools into learning environments. Raman (2023) warns that over-reliance on AI can lead to diminished creativity and intellectual autonomy, underscoring the need for learners to maintain control over their writing processes. Similarly, Selwyn (2023) argues that responsible use of AI in education requires a balance between technological assistance and human agency, ensuring that students develop essential skills in critical thinking and independent research. These findings suggest that pedagogical interventions should prioritize fostering evaluative competencies, enabling students to discern the reliability of AI-generated content and adapt it to their academic needs. By promoting reflective and

informed use of ChatGPT, educators can harness its benefits while safeguarding originality, creativity, and academic integrity in language learning contexts.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study involved only a specific cohort of undergraduates from one university, which restricts the extent to which the findings can be generalised. Students from different faculties, institutions, or geographical backgrounds may hold different experiences and perspectives. Furthermore, the study relied primarily on self-reported data, which may be affected by social desirability bias or limited self-awareness, meaning students might have misrepresented the extent of their ChatGPT use. The investigation also centred solely on students' viewpoints; without contributions from EAW instructors, it may not fully reflect the pedagogical challenges teachers encounter or the strategies they adopt to address AI use in writing classes. In addition, because no classroom observations were conducted, the study could not capture how students engage with ChatGPT in real time. Such observational evidence might have provided deeper insight into actual behaviours, usage patterns, and difficulties. Finally, the sample was limited to learners enrolled in EAW courses, even though students taking other English modules may interact with AI tools differently.

CONCLUSION

This study has implications that are beneficial for EAW instructors. The findings help instructors understand students' problems and teach them to maintain their own academic voice when using ChatGPT. The findings suggest that students benefit most when ChatGPT is used for brainstorming, vocabulary enhancement, and idea organisation. Therefore, instructors can integrate guided activities that allow students to use ChatGPT responsibly during pre-writing and drafting stages. This study also provides awareness for instructors to provide clearer institutional guidelines and explicit instruction on ethical AI use. Instructors may also need to redesign writing assignments to encourage process-orientedness so that students' authentic writing skills are assessed alongside their ability to use AI tools ethically. Since students recognise the importance of asserting their own voice, assessments can emphasise originality, creativity, and critical reasoning, ensuring ChatGPT becomes a support tool rather than a substitute.

For future research, teachers' views should be taken into consideration in studying the use of ChatGPT among students in EAW classes. Classroom observations and interviews with students and EAW instructors could also be carried out to identify common problems faced by students in using ChatGPT in classrooms. Additionally, the samples could be expanded to all other IIUM students from various English courses. Students from other universities can be the participants in expanding this research as a more holistic perception of students in using ChatGPT can be identified. Meanwhile, including international students would provide a more exhaustive understanding of this topic and promote inclusivity in research efforts. In conclusion, this study sheds light on the multifaceted perceptions of undergraduates regarding the use of ChatGPT in EAW classrooms, highlighting both its benefits and challenges. While ChatGPT proves to be a valuable tool in enhancing students' writing, it also raises important concerns about maintaining academic integrity.

In short, it is important to study undergraduates' perceptions of the use of ChatGPT in EAW classrooms, particularly in writing assignments and the challenges they encounter. The findings highlighted a variety of positive aspects of ChatGPT concerning its valuable role in assisting the participants from generating ideas and improving terminology usage and contexts to organising written material. Nonetheless, crucial concerns like dishonesty, inaccurate information, and plagiarism have been noted by the participants as part of the downsides of utilising AI programs like ChatGPT. Interestingly, the participants disclosed good self-awareness and writer's independence towards AI applications, and the most frequently mentioned one is the need for asserting one's voice, enhancing creativity and carrying out the critical evaluation while utilising ChatGPT. Thus, the current study reveals that students' interactions with ChatGPT not only support their writing process but also raise their understanding of the significance of upholding the academic integrity of their work, which runs counter to the widespread negative view surrounding AI applications on students.

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