

BETWEEN ASSISTANCE AND CHEATING: EFL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF CHATGPT USE IN THESIS WRITING

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ABSTRACT

This study examines EFL students' perceptions of ChatGPT use in thesis writing, particularly in negotiating the boundary between academic assistance and cheating. Using a qualitative narrative inquiry design, data were collected through in-depth interviews to explore students' experiences. The findings show that ChatGPT is perceived as a valuable academic tool that enhances linguistic accuracy, supports idea generation, and improves writing efficiency, especially for overcoming language barriers. However, its use also creates ethical ambiguity, as students often struggle to distinguish acceptable assistance from academic misconduct. Although students attempt to regulate their use of ChatGPT, their self-regulation is frequently inconsistent and influenced by contextual factors such as academic pressure. These findings highlight the need for clear institutional guidelines and the integration of AI literacy in academic writing instruction to promote responsible and ethical use of generative AI in higher education.

Keywords: ChatGPT, EFL students, thesis writing, academic integrity, ethical ambiguity

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji persepsi mahasiswa EFL terhadap penggunaan ChatGPT dalam penulisan skripsi, khususnya dalam menegosiasikan batas antara bantuan akademik dan kecurangan. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain kualitatif dengan pendekatan narrative inquiry, dengan data yang dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam untuk mengeksplorasi pengalaman mahasiswa. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa ChatGPT dipersepsikan sebagai alat akademik yang bermanfaat dalam meningkatkan akurasi bahasa, mendukung pengembangan ide, dan meningkatkan efisiensi penulisan, terutama dalam mengatasi hambatan bahasa. Namun, penggunaannya juga menimbulkan ambiguitas etis, karena mahasiswa sering kesulitan membedakan antara bantuan yang dapat diterima dan potensi pelanggaran akademik. Meskipun mahasiswa berupaya mengatur penggunaan ChatGPT, regulasi diri mereka cenderung tidak konsisten dan dipengaruhi oleh faktor kontekstual seperti tekanan akademik. Temuan ini menekankan pentingnya pedoman institusional yang jelas serta integrasi literasi AI

dalam pembelajaran penulisan akademik untuk mendorong penggunaan yang bertanggung jawab dan etis.

Kata Kunci: ChatGPT, mahasiswa EFL, penulisan skripsi, integritas akademik, ambiguitas etis

A. Introduction

The rapid development of technology has significantly transformed various aspects of human life, including education (Bonfield et al., 2020). In recent years, artificial intelligence (AI) has emerged as one of the most influential innovations, offering new possibilities in teaching and learning processes (Almufarreh & Arshad, 2023; Popenici & Kerr, 2017). One of the most widely discussed AI tools is ChatGPT, a generative AI developed to assist users in producing human-like text. Its ability to generate ideas, correct grammar, and provide instant feedback has made it increasingly popular among students in academic context (Polakova & Ivenz, 2024).

In the field of academic writing, ChatGPT has been widely adopted as a supportive tool (Imran, 2023). Many students use it to improve their writing quality, develop arguments, and organize their ideas more effectively (Levine et al., 2025). Previous studies

indicate that AI-powered tools can enhance students' writing performance by assisting with language accuracy, coherence, and vocabulary development (Zhao, 2025). Furthermore, ChatGPT is often perceived as increasing productivity, especially in demanding tasks such as thesis writing (Anik et al., 2025).

In the context of English as Foreign Language (EFL) students, academic writing presents even greater challenges. EFL students often struggle with various aspects of writing, including grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, and coherence. These difficulties become more complex when students are required to write a thesis, which demands a high level of academic proficiency and critical thinking. As a result, many EFL students turn to tools like ChatGPT to support their writing process.

Despite its benefits, the use of ChatGPT in academic writing raises significant ethical concerns. One of

the most critical issues is the blurred boundary between assistance and academic cheating (Kotsis, 2024). AI-generated content may challenge traditional notions of originality, authorship, and academic integrity, potentially leading to over-reliance and reduced critical thinking among students. Furthermore, students often experience uncertainty regarding the acceptable use of AI tools, particularly in the absence of clear institutional guidelines, placing them in a “grey area” of ethical decision-making.

Previous research has explored students’ perceptions of ChatGPT and its impact on academic writing practices (Abdullah, 2025). However, most studies focus on general academic writing contexts and do not specifically address thesis writing, which involves higher academic stakes and stricter standards. Moreover, while existing studies highlight perceived benefits and ethical concerns, they often fail to examine how students interpret the boundary between acceptable assistance and academic misconduct in depth.

In addition, studies grounded in the Technology Acceptance Model

(TAM) suggest that students’ adoption of AI tools is largely influenced by perceived usefulness and ease of use. However, such perspectives may not fully capture the complexity of AI use in academic contexts, which also involves ethical reflection, self-regulation, and contextual factors such as academic pressure and institutional policies. Recent research further emphasizes the importance of institutional frameworks in guiding responsible AI use and reducing ethical ambiguity among students (Gustilo et al., 2024; Nguyen, 2025).

Based on these gaps, this study aims to explore EFL students’ perceptions of using ChatGPT in thesis writing, particularly in understanding its role as both an academic support tool and an ethically complex technology. This study focuses on how students perceive its benefits, how they respond to ethical challenges, and how they interpret the boundary between assistance and academic cheating. By integrating technological, ethical, and contextual perspectives, this research is expected to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of AI use in higher education and provide

insights for developing appropriate guidelines for responsible academic practice.

B. Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach using a narrative inquiry design to explore ethical issues in the use of ChatGPT among EFL students during thesis writing. A qualitative approach was appropriate as it enables an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and decision-making processes (Creswell, J.W. and Poth, 2018). Narrative inquiry was selected because it focuses on individuals' stories and experiences, allowing the researcher to examine how students interpret their use of ChatGPT and negotiate ethical boundaries over time (Riessman, 2008).

Data were collected through semi-structured narrative interviews, which provided flexibility for participants to share their experiences, motivations, and reflections. This approach emphasizes the experiential and process-oriented nature of ethical decision-making, particularly in distinguishing between acceptable

academic assistance and potential academic dishonesty.

Participants

This study was conducted at the English Education Department of Nurul Jadid University. The participants consisted of three eighth-semester students who were currently writing or had completed their theses. Purposive sampling was used to select participants with relevant experience related to the research focus (Patton, 2015).

The selection criteria included: (1) active students in the English Education Department, (2) involvement in thesis writing, (3) experience using ChatGPT in academic writing, and (4) willingness to reflect on ethical aspects of AI use. The small number of participants is appropriate for narrative inquiry, which prioritizes depth of understanding over generalization (Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, 2000). All participants were assigned pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to construct detailed accounts of their experiences (Kvale,

S., & Brinkmann, 2015). The interviews explored students' use of ChatGPT, their perceptions of academic integrity, and the influence of academic pressure.

Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and was conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to ensure clarity and depth of responses. All interviews were audio-recorded and supported by reflective notes. Follow-up interviews were conducted when necessary to clarify participants' responses, consistent with narrative interviewing principles (Riessman, 2008).

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic narrative analysis, focusing on both the content of participants' stories and their meaning-making processes (Riessman, 2008).

The analysis involved: (1) familiarization through repeated reading of transcripts, (2) initial coding to identify key experiences and ethical issues, (3) grouping codes into broader themes, and (4) cross-narrative interpretation to identify patterns across participants.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness, several strategies were applied. Credibility was achieved through in-depth and follow-up interviews. Dependability was ensured by maintaining a systematic research process. Conformability was supported through reflexive journaling to minimize researcher bias. In addition, peer debriefing was conducted to validate the findings. These strategies align with the criteria of trustworthiness in qualitative research (Lincoln, Y.S. and Guba, n.d.).

C. Findings and Discussions

1. Findings

The findings are presented narratively to reflect students' lived experiences in using ChatGPT during their thesis writing process. The results are organized into two main themes: (1) students' perceptions of ChatGPT in thesis writing and (2) students' understanding of ethical boundaries in using ChatGPT.

Students' Perceptions of ChatGPT in Thesis Writing

Overall, participants perceived ChatGPT as a supportive tool that assists both linguistic and cognitive aspects of academic writing. As EFL

students, they commonly face difficulties in grammar, vocabulary, and understanding complex academic texts. ChatGPT helps them address these challenges without replacing their own ideas.

One participant explained how ChatGPT supports comprehension:

"Sometimes I ask ChatGPT to explain theories in simpler language so that I can understand them before writing." (Student 2)

Another participant described its role in improving language:

"I usually write first in my own language, and then I ask ChatGPT to check my grammar to make it more academic." (Student 1)

These responses indicate that ChatGPT is primarily used as a support tool for understanding content and improving language accuracy, rather than generating full content.

In addition, ChatGPT helps students manage academic pressure and improve efficiency, particularly when facing deadlines or writer's block. One participant stated:

"When I'm stuck and the deadline is approaching, ChatGPT is very helpful so that I can continue writing." (Student 1)

Students also reported that ChatGPT increases writing efficiency by providing quick suggestions, allowing them to revise their work more effectively.

Furthermore, the findings reveal variations in how students use ChatGPT. Some students use it only in the early stages for brainstorming:

"I usually use ChatGPT at the beginning to find an overview and ideas, but after that I try to develop it by myself." (Student 2)

Others use it more extensively but still maintain control:

"I use it in almost all sections, especially when I'm pressed for time, but I still edit it again." (Student 3)

These findings suggest that ChatGPT use is flexible and evolves over time, depending on students' needs and experiences.

Students' Understanding of Ethical Boundaries in Using ChatGPT

Despite its benefits, students expressed uncertainty about the ethical use of ChatGPT. Many participants were unsure whether their use of the tool could be considered acceptable or categorized as cheating.

One participant stated:

"Sometimes I get confused, is this still a help or already cheating?"
(Student 3)

Another added:

"If you use it often, it feels like you're not thinking by yourself anymore." (Student 1)

These responses indicate ongoing ethical ambiguity, where students continuously negotiate the boundary between assistance and academic misconduct.

To address this uncertainty, students developed personal strategies to maintain ethical use. For example:

"I usually write my own version first, and then I use ChatGPT to correct it." (Student 1)

However, these strategies are not always consistent, particularly under time pressure:

"Sometimes, the rules become more relaxed when deadlines are approaching." (Student 2)

In addition, all participants highlighted the absence of clear institutional guidelines regarding the use of ChatGPT. One participant stated:

"There are no official rules from the university regarding the use of AI."
(Student 2)

This lack of guidance contributes to uncertainty and variability in students' practices. Overall, the findings suggest that ethical use of ChatGPT is largely self-regulated and influenced by situational factors.

Discussions

The findings of this study highlight that the use of ChatGPT among EFL students in thesis writing cannot be understood solely from a technological perspective. Instead, it reflects a complex interaction between perceived usefulness, ethical considerations, self-regulation, and contextual academic pressures.

From the perspective of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), students' engagement with ChatGPT is strongly influenced by its perceived usefulness in supporting academic writing (Davis, 1989). The tool is viewed as effective in improving linguistic accuracy, facilitating idea development, and enhancing writing efficiency. This confirms that when technology is perceived as beneficial, it is more readily adopted in academic contexts. However, this study extends

TAM by showing that acceptance is not purely functional but also intertwined with ethical reflection and situational constraints.

Furthermore, the findings can be interpreted through the framework of Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) (Zimmerman, 2002), which emphasizes learners' ability to control and manage their own learning processes. Students in this study demonstrate attempts to regulate their use of ChatGPT by positioning it as a supportive tool rather than a primary source of content. This indicates that students are not passive users of technology but active agents who negotiate how the tool is integrated into their academic practices.

However, the study also reveals that self-regulation is not always stable. Under conditions of academic pressure, such as tight deadlines and high expectations, students tend to rely more heavily on ChatGPT. This suggests that self-regulation is context-dependent and can weaken when external demands intensify. Such findings align with cognitive psychology perspectives, which argue that reliance on external tools may reduce independent cognitive

engagement (M. Kimberly MacLin & Solso, 2007).

In addition to its pedagogical implications, the use of ChatGPT raises significant ethical concerns. The study shows that students experience ambiguity in distinguishing between acceptable academic assistance and academic cheating. This reflects the emergence of ethical "grey areas" in the use of generative artificial intelligence, as also discussed in previous studies (Bretag & Green, 2014; Cotton et al., 2024). The blurred boundary between assistance and misconduct indicates that existing academic integrity frameworks may not be fully equipped to address the challenges posed by AI-based tools.

Despite this ambiguity, students also demonstrate a degree of ethical awareness by attempting to establish personal boundaries in their use of ChatGPT. This reinforces the idea that ethical decision-making is not solely dictated by institutional rules but is also shaped by individual judgment and self-regulatory processes. However, the inconsistency of these practices suggests that personal

regulation alone is insufficient to ensure ethical use.

A critical factor contributing to this issue is the lack of clear institutional guidelines regarding the use of AI in academic writing. In the absence of formal policies, students rely on subjective interpretations, leading to variability and uncertainty in ethical practices. This finding supports previous research emphasizing the importance of institutional frameworks in guiding responsible AI use in education (Gustilo et al., 2024; Nguyen, 2025). Without such frameworks, ethical responsibility becomes individualized, which may weaken consistency and accountability.

Therefore, this study argues that the ethical use of ChatGPT should be understood as a shared responsibility between students and institutions. While students need to develop self-regulation and ethical awareness, educational institutions must provide clear policies, guidelines, and pedagogical support to ensure responsible use of AI technologies.

Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of literature by demonstrating that the use of

ChatGPT in academic writing involves a multidimensional process, integrating technological acceptance, ethical reflection, self-regulated learning, and contextual academic factors. It suggests that future research and educational practices should adopt a more holistic approach that considers not only the benefits of AI tools but also their ethical and pedagogical implications.

D. Conclusion

This study concludes that the use of ChatGPT among EFL students in thesis writing represents a complex and context-dependent practice that goes beyond mere technological adoption. While ChatGPT is perceived as a valuable tool for enhancing linguistic accuracy, idea generation, and writing efficiency, its use simultaneously introduces significant ethical challenges, particularly in distinguishing acceptable assistance from academic misconduct. The findings indicate that students' self-regulation is often unstable and highly influenced by contextual pressures, suggesting that individual control alone is insufficient. Therefore, the responsible use of generative AI in

academic writing should be understood as a shared responsibility, requiring not only students' ethical awareness but also clear institutional policies, guidelines, and AI literacy support to ensure consistent and ethical academic practices.

This study contributes to the growing body of research on AI in education by providing a more nuanced understanding of how students negotiate the use of generative AI in academic writing. It integrates perspectives from technology acceptance, self-regulated learning, and academic integrity, highlighting that the use of ChatGPT involves not only functional benefits but also ethical reflection and contextual decision-making. The study also emphasizes that responsible AI use should be viewed as a shared responsibility between students and institutions.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. It is based on a limited number of participants within a specific educational context, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the study relies on self-reported data, which may be

influenced by participants' subjective perspectives. Therefore, future research is recommended to involve a broader sample and employ multiple data sources to gain a more comprehensive understanding of AI use in academic writing.

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