

EXPLORING EFL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS: THE ROLE OF AI CHATBOTS IN ENHANCING ENGLISH WRITING SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

This explanatory sequential mixed-methods study investigates how secondary EFL learners perceive and ethically integrate generative AI chatbots into academic writing. Grounded in an expanded Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), it addresses qualitative experiences and spiritual ethical boundaries within Islamic educational environments. Quantitative survey data were gathered from 20 MAN 1 Malang students, followed by semi-structured interviews with five selected participants, analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic framework. Findings reveal high AI adoption; 100% of survey respondents agreed on task efficiency and grammar correction. Qualitatively, students utilize AI as an interactive scaffold to overcome writer's block, structure outlines, and reduce writing anxiety. However, learners maintain critical agency regarding AI "hallucinations," expressing concerns over intellectual dependency, voice loss, and plagiarism. Rather than passive consumers, students display self-regulated agency through rigorous post-generation editing, such as lexical adaptation and structural re-engineering, to safeguard authorship. Crucially, this ethical boundary is deeply anchored in madrasah values emphasizing academic honesty and seeking spiritual blessings (barakah). Theoretically, this study broadens TAM into faith-based digital contexts, practically suggesting educators foster prompt engineering and critical editing over outright technology bans.

Keywords: *AI Chatbots, EFL Academic Writing, Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), Ethical AI Adoption, Islamic Educational Context, Post-Generation Editing*

ABSTRAK

Penelitian metode campuran sekuensial eksplanatori ini menyelidiki bagaimana pembelajar EFL tingkat menengah mempersepsikan dan mengintegrasikan chatbot AI generatif secara etis ke dalam penulisan akademik. Berlandaskan pada perluasan Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), penelitian ini menjawab pengalaman kualitatif dan batasan etis spiritual dalam lingkungan pendidikan Islam. Data survei kuantitatif dikumpulkan dari 20 siswa MAN 1 Malang, diikuti oleh wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan lima partisipan terpilih, yang dianalisis menggunakan kerangka kerja tematik Braun dan Clarke. Temuan menunjukkan adopsi AI yang tinggi; 100% responden survei menyetujui efisiensi tugas dan efektivitas koreksi tata bahasa. Secara kualitatif, siswa memanfaatkan AI sebagai perancah (scaffold) interaktif untuk mengatasi kemacetan menulis (writer's block),

menyusun kerangka karangan, dan mengurangi kecemasan menulis. Namun, pembelajar tetap mempertahankan agensi kritis terkait "halusinasi" AI, dengan menyampaikan kekhawatiran atas ketergantungan intelektual, hilangnya karakter suara tulisan (authorial voice), dan plagiarisme. Alih-alih menjadi konsumen pasif, siswa menunjukkan agensi mandiri melalui penyuntingan pasca-generasi yang ketat, seperti adaptasi leksikal dan rekayasa ulang struktural, untuk melindungi keaslian karya. Yang terpenting, batasan etis ini terpatri kuat dalam nilai-nilai madrasah yang menekankan kejujuran akademik dan pencarian keberkahan spiritual (barakah). Secara teoretis, penelitian ini memperluas TAM ke dalam konteks digital berbasis iman, serta secara praktis menyarankan para pendidik untuk mendorong keterampilan prompt engineering dan penyuntingan kritis dibandingkan menerapkan larangan teknologi secara mutlak.

Kata Kunci: Chatbot AI, Penulisan Akademik EFL, Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), Adopsi AI Etis, Konteks Pendidikan Islam, Penyuntingan Pasca-Generasi

A. INTRODUCTION

Higher education has experienced a paradigm change as a result of the widespread adoption of digital technology, which has significantly altered instructional strategies and promoted increased student independence. This change is especially noticeable in the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), where technology has gone from being an auxiliary instrument to a fundamental component of the learning ecosystems (Majid, 2024). The recent introduction of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI), notably big language models like ChatGPT, represents a watershed moment in this industry, characterized by its capacity to produce human-like text

rather than simply correcting it. These instruments provide unparalleled opportunities for iterative feedback and language creation, which poses both revolutionary opportunities and major challenges for teaching academic writing (Sani et al. , 2024). AI chatbots have quickly gained popularity among EFL learners who frequently struggle with the various facets of academic writing, such as grammatical correctness and logical argumentation as first-line support tool (Pariyanto & Tungka, 2024).

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), a foundational model for comprehending how users embrace new technologies, serves as the theoretical foundation for this work. According to the TAM model, a

person's behavioral intention to utilize a system is influenced by two main attitudes: Perceived Usefulness (PU) and Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU) (Davis, 1989). When studying student acceptance of AI-powered language learning platforms, TAM offers a powerful lens in modern educational research (Fauzi et al. , 2024). In this study's context, Perceived Usefulness is defined as a student's perception that employing an AI chatbot will really enhance the caliber of their writing and speed up task completion. At the same time, Perceived Ease of Use refers to the student's belief that the technology is simple to use and doesn't need in-depth technical skills, which makes it a frictionless resource in their academic workflow (Imran & Mursidin, 2024).

Current literature on the topic paints a nuanced and frequently contradictory picture of student attitudes. A large body of research, on the other hand, demonstrates an overwhelming favorable response. According to a study conducted by Artiana and Fakhurriana (2024), the majority of Indonesian EFL learners believe that ChatGPT is a very useful tool for brainstorming ideas, organizing essays, and improving grammatical

precision. Hayadi (2024) supports this view by discovering that employing AI greatly increases students' confidence and drive, enabling them to play around with more sophisticated sentence patterns. Together, these studies imply that AI chatbots are seen as potent scaffolds that democratize access to linguistic support by offering instant, customized feedback that helps reduce Typical concerns about writing (Adiguzel et al. , 2023).

However, this optimistic view is not without its critics, and a growing body of literature urges caution. Research by Widyasari et al. (2024) identified significant apprehension among students regarding intellectual dependency, fearing that long-term use could atrophy their own analytical and problem-solving skills. This concern is further elaborated by Wu (2023), who noted a prevalent anxiety among learners about the potential for AI to homogenize their writing style and diminish their unique academic voice. These findings underscore that AI integration is not a simple matter of technological adoption, but a complex process fraught with pedagogical risks. These risks include the potential erosion of core academic skills like critical thinking and originality, which

are the cornerstones of education (Hall & Ellis, 2023).

Despite the importance of these research, there is still a significant gap, particularly in the unique social and academic environment of Madrasah Aliyah Negeri. Many current studies employ a quantitative methodology to gauge general acceptance (Lubis et al., 2024; Silalahi & Agusrina, 2024; Fauzi et al., 2024) which frequently falls short of reflecting the qualitative depth of students' real-world experiences. To better comprehend the subtleties of how students use this technology, many literature reviews specifically ask for additional context-specific qualitative research (e. g. , Al-Sofi, 2024). A deeper understanding of the student viewpoint becomes a practical requirement as Indonesian educational institutions struggle to develop institutional regulations regarding the use of AI. The urgent need for thorough qualitative research that goes beyond whether pupils utilize AI to determine how and why they do so cannot be overstated. their decisions, and how they maneuver the complicated ethical ground between providing genuine support and committing academic dishonesty. By

offering a comprehensive account of Madrasah Aliyah Negeri students' views, this research seeks to close this crucial gap while also capturing the subtleties of how they interact with AI in their own words.

This study aims to provide a detailed, qualitative account of how students interact with AI in order to fill this gap. In the age of AI, comprehending student viewpoints is not just an intellectual endeavor but an essential prerequisite for creating successful and ethical instructional methods (Herawati, 2024). Thus, the goal of this research is to explain how Indonesian EFL learners view the advantages of utilizing AI chatbots to improve their English writing abilities. Additionally, it aims to investigate the emotions, views, and moral concerns that come up while students utilize these resources for their coursework. The ultimate goal is to ascertain their main issues and worries so that a more student-centered strategy can be used to incorporate technology into the EFL writing classroom.

B. METHOD

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Creswell,

2018) to investigate secondary EFL learners' perceptions and ethical integration of AI chatbots within their academic writing process. Conducted at Madrasah Aliyah Negeri (MAN) 1 Malang, an Islamic secondary school in Indonesia, the research captured both quantitative adoption patterns and qualitative underlying experiences. A total of 20 active EFL students (N=20) were recruited via purposeful sampling to complete an online questionnaire adapted from the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) framework by Davis (1989). The instrument utilized a 5-point Likert scale alongside open-ended items to assess Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU), Perceived Usefulness (PU), affective responses, and perceived ethical challenges. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection to ensure ethical research standards.

To explain and contextualize the quantitative baseline trends, qualitative data were subsequently gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews with five purposively selected key participants representing diverse writing levels and AI usage habits. Data analysis proceeded sequentially: quantitative

survey responses were processed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages), while qualitative interview transcripts and open-ended survey entries were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, involving iterative data familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, and thematic refinement. Methodological rigor and trustworthiness were ensured through data triangulation between quantitative survey distributions and qualitative narrative accounts, providing a comprehensive understanding of students' post-generation editing workflows and faith-based ethical boundaries.

C. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that EFL students at MAN 1 Malang do not interact with AI chatbots as a simple shortcut to avoid learning. Instead, they utilize them as an interactive digital scaffold that requires continuous cognitive negotiation and critical reflection. By integrating quantitative questionnaire data and qualitative in-depth interview accounts, this section presents each empirical finding along with its theoretical discussion.

1. Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU)

In terms of basic operational usability, all respondents (100%) agreed that AI chatbots are easy to operate, with 65% strongly agreeing and 35% agreeing. Additionally, all students (55% strongly agreed and 45% agreed) reported that it did not take them a long time to learn how to use the tool effectively. In interviews, participants confirmed that their initial engagement was driven by practical needs. Ahmad Raihan (AR) shared that he uses AI to brainstorm outline ideas and fix messy sentence structures for descriptive or argumentative essays. Nadya Herawati (NH) relies on it for Review Texts or formal letters to refine vocabulary choices so her writing looks polite and academic, while Meutia Zahra (MZ) utilizes AI as a discussion partner to broaden her perspectives during expository essay composition.

This seamless interaction highlights that modern conversational AI interfaces effectively eliminate technical friction for secondary language learners. This unanimous consensus regarding operational usability directly aligns with the foundational Technology Acceptance

Model (TAM) by Davis (1989), which posits that system adoption is heavily driven by user-perceived operational ease. Furthermore, this rapid adaptation reinforces the findings of Artiana and Fakhurriana (2024) and Hayadi (2024) regarding high digital familiarity among Indonesian secondary learners, while supporting Pariyanto and Tungka (2024), who confirmed that intuitive prompt-based AI interfaces lower initial user reluctance in language learning contexts.

2. Perceived Usefulness (PU)

Students strategically delineate AI functionality, treating it strictly as an evaluative scaffold rather than a replacement for personal writing agency. Regarding general writing quality enhancement, 10% of students strongly agreed, 70% agreed, and 20% maintained a neutral stance. Concerning task completion efficiency, 100% of students (60% strongly agreed and 40% agreed) confirmed that AI chatbots significantly speed up their writing workflow. Grammatical and structural correction yielded the highest consensus, where 100% of students (65% strongly agreed and 35% agreed) relied on this capability. For expression and ideation

assistance, 10% strongly agreed, 65% agreed, and 25% remained neutral. Interview accounts further clarified this role: AR generated three logical arguments in seconds when facing an acute cognitive block, NH obtained a formal opening line template for an application letter, and MZ acquired counter-arguments regarding the pros and cons of AI in education.

Instant mechanical feedback serves as the primary practical utility for EFL learners who struggle with syntactic accuracy. This supports Sani et al. (2024) and Pariyanto & Tungka (2024) regarding AI's role in resolving grammatical ambiguity and accelerating initial drafting. Conversely, the neutral stances regarding overall quality improvement and ideation reflect students' critical awareness that AI functions strictly as a supporting assistant rather than an automatic guarantor of writing excellence, reinforcing the distinction between technological assistance and independent writing agency highlighted by Artiana and Fakhurriana (2024).

3. Critical Scaffolding Incident

In-depth interviews highlighted critical moments where AI served as a temporary scaffolding mechanism

during acute cognitive blocks or strict submission constraints. AR, NH, and MZ all recalled specific incidents where instant templates or argument suggestions generated by AI allowed them to overcome panic and writer's block when working on complex assignments.

Generative AI serves as an emergency anti-paralysis buffer that assists learners in resuming their cognitive processes rather than abandoning tasks. This finding supports Hayadi (2024), who noted that instant structural templates provided by AI serve as temporary scaffolding during acute cognitive stalls. Furthermore, this corroborates Adiguzel et al. (2023) on AI reducing task paralysis under pressure, while echoing Widyasari et al. (2024) regarding how strategic technological interventions prevent complete academic drop-off during deadline crises.

4. Operational Integration Workflow

Far from popular assumptions of passive copy-pasting, participants demonstrated high agency by establishing multi-phase writing workflows. AR outlined a process of asking AI for an outline, writing an independent draft, submitting the draft

to AI for grammar checks, and manually rewriting adjustments. NH wrote complete drafts independently before using specific prompts to check grammar and study her errors. MZ gathered data independently, used AI solely for opposing arguments, wrote the essay in her own words, and only used AI at the final stage for punctuation checks.

These structured workflows stand in sharp contrast to concerns raised by some scholars (e.g., Lubis et al., 2024; Hall & Ellis, 2023) regarding uncritical copy-pasting among secondary students. Instead, these patterns align closely with Sani et al. (2024) and Artiana & Fakhurriana (2024), proving that high school learners exercise active agency by confining AI to peripheral pre- and post-writing boundaries while retaining full ownership over core composition.

5. Technical Errors & Disappointment

Interview accounts revealed that students routinely encounter technical limitations, such as contextual misalignments, factual hallucinations, and generic, repetitive discourse styles. AR encountered AI-generated idioms that clashed with text context, NH discovered incorrect

historical facts given by AI during historical narrative writing, and MZ noted that raw AI prose felt monotonous and repetitive.

Encounters with automated factual and contextual errors force students to adopt evaluative verification routines, cross-referencing output via Google Search and digital dictionaries. As emphasized by Al-Sofi (2024), encountering system errors acts as a vital catalyst for developing critical digital literacy and a healthy skepticism toward machine-generated information. These practices also support Sani et al. (2024) and Widyasari et al. (2024) regarding the development of self-regulated evaluation skills when navigating AI limitations.

6. Attitude & Affective Domain

In the affective domain, survey data indicated that 90% of students (25% strongly agreed and 65% agreed) felt heightened submission confidence knowing their manuscripts were reviewed by AI, while 10% felt neutral. Regarding learning motivation, 70% of students (10% strongly agreed and 60% agreed) felt more motivated, while 30% remained neutral. Qualitatively, confidence split into two dimensions: AR associated

confidence with affective relief and grade security knowing his writing was error-free, whereas NH and MZ emphasized confidence in internal cognitive growth, explaining that seeing direct comparisons between original drafts and AI corrections enhanced their actual understanding of correct sentence structures.

Automated feedback serves a primary psychological function by acting as an affective shield that mitigates evaluation anxiety during submission, echoing Adiguzel et al. (2023) and Al-Sofi (2024). Furthermore, differentiating between submission confidence and internal cognitive growth expands upon Wu (2023) and reinforces Pariyanto & Tungka (2024) on the importance of internalizing grammar rules rather than passively accepting automated corrections.

7. Perceived Challenges & Ethical Concerns

Despite recognizing its benefits, students expressed significant ethical and cognitive concerns. A total of 90% of students (25% strongly agreed and 65% agreed) worried about intellectual dependency. Concerning creativity loss, 65% of students (5% strongly

agreed and 60% agreed) expressed concern. Issues of originality and plagiarism were raised by 90% of students (15% strongly agreed and 75% agreed), while 100% of respondents (70% agreed and 30% felt neutral) recognized the risk of output inaccuracies or hallucinations. In interviews, participants conceptualized dependency as "brain laziness." AR expressed fear of long-term skill atrophy, NH defined dependency as drawing a complete blank without AI, and MZ feared losing her unique identity to generic AI prose. This heightened student awareness aligns with warnings raised by Widyasari et al. (2024) regarding cognitive skill atrophy, Wu (2023) concerning voice homogenization, and Silalahi & Agusrina (2024) regarding ethical boundaries. However, in contrast to Hall & Ellis (2023), students' acute awareness of dependency triggered proactive metacognitive vigilance and self-regulated boundaries. Fear of cognitive dependency drives students to intentionally regulate their technology use, corroborating the findings of Sani et al. (2024).

8. Advantage and Disadvantage

Through open-ended survey responses, students summarized instant feedback, vocabulary refinement, and time efficiency as primary advantages (as stated by AR, NH, LH, MZ, and FI). Conversely, concerns surrounding intellectual reliance, robotic tone, copy-pasting temptation, and technical hallucinations dominated perceived disadvantages.

Secondary language learners demonstrate an evaluative dual-agency, systematically balancing immediate functional benefits against long-term cognitive risks. These dual perceptions confirm the balanced, ambivalent stance of Indonesian EFL learners reported by Sani et al. (2024) and Artiana & Fakhurriana (2024), while reinforcing Al-Sofi's (2024) emphasis on user vigilance when filtering machine outputs.

9. Academic Integrity Boundaries

Students established a sharp dichotomy between legitimate tool usage and academic dishonesty. Smart tool usage was defined as utilizing AI as an auxiliary tool for language refinement and ideation while retaining intellectual ownership. Conversely, cheating was equated with uncritical submission of raw AI

output. AR stated that cheating occurs when raw output is submitted without editing, NH emphasized that core ideas must come from the student's brain, and MZ noted that using AI smartly means knowing the meaning of every word submitted.

Learners internalize moral definitions of integrity beyond mere institutional compliance, establishing personal ethical boundaries against unearned submission. This self-imposed ethical distinction aligns with Sani et al. (2024) and Silalahi & Agusrina (2024), while extending Herawati (2024) regarding how secondary students conceptualize academic integrity in the digital era.

10. Authorial Identity & Voice Ownership

To preserve authorial voice and authenticity, participants exercised active control over generated outputs. AR routinely downgraded overly advanced, college-level AI vocabulary to match his authentic secondary school register so teachers would not get suspicious. NH insisted that core arguments purely represent her own thoughts, and MZ actively protected her personal emotional voice from being obscured by synthetic prose.

These stylistic adjustment techniques demonstrate students' active resistance against voice homogenization, a phenomenon previously cautioned by Wu (2023). Intentional vocabulary adjustment to maintain personal authenticity supports Sani et al. (2024) and Artiana & Fakhurriana (2024) regarding student rejection of overly synthetic prose in EFL compositions.

11. Post-Generation Editing Strategies

Process-oriented writing behavior manifested through systematic post-generation editing strategies. Students engaged in manual proofreading, selective integration of corrective feedback, lexical adaptation, and structural re-engineering to match their organic writing flow. AR proofread manually to match natural sentence rhythm, NH cut down convoluted AI sentences, and MZ selectively integrated corrections without ruining her writing's original feel.

These rigorous editing protocols position generative tools as catalysts for critical revision within process-oriented writing frameworks. Rather than acting as passive submitters (as critiqued by Lubis et al.,

2024), students actively "humanize" raw technological outputs prior to submission, reflecting a transformative process highlighted by Al-Sofi (2024).

12. Islamic Values & Barakah

The most novel finding elucidates broader socio-cultural and spiritual dimensions specific to the madrasah context. Participants articulated a value-driven approach balancing technological utility with moral integrity (barakah). AR acknowledged an internal moral dilemma between technological convenience and seeking knowledge that carries spiritual blessings (barakah). NH advocated for explicit instruction in prompt engineering rather than technology bans, while MZ emphasized that madrasah values around academic honesty require controlling AI usage from the heart to keep learning blessed (barakah).

Internalized religious values operate as a powerful self-regulating moral filter that governs student ethics in technology-assisted environments. This extends prior literature (e.g., Adiguzel et al., 2023; Silalahi & Agusrina, 2024; Herawati, 2024). While existing research primarily emphasizes external software

detection or institutional sanctions, this study proves that in a madrasah context, spiritual self-regulation (barakah) serves as a foundational moral filter alongside cognitive and affective factors.

E. CONCLUSIONS

This study reveals that generative AI chatbots function primarily as cognitive scaffolds and evaluative assistants for high school EFL learners, rather than automated text replacements. While students demonstrate high acceptance due to operational ease and immediate linguistic feedback, their engagement is marked by strong self-regulation, active voice preservation, and a clear conceptual distinction between technological assistance and academic dishonesty. Ultimately, the integration of critical verification habits and internal moral filters particularly spiritual values such as barakah further ensures that AI utilization remains ethically bounded, preserving independent writing agency while optimizing pedagogical outcomes.

To effectively act upon these empirical insights, practical recommendations are established for both educators and learners. For

teachers, the focus should shift from blanket AI prohibition to structured pedagogical integration by positioning AI as a pre-writing ideational co-pilot and post-writing editing assistant. Educators are encouraged to design process-oriented writing assessments requiring students to submit initial independent drafts alongside track-changed revisions following AI feedback while explicitly embedding critical digital literacy tasks to teach students how to verify machine hallucinations. For students, AI usage must remain strictly bounded to outline generation, vocabulary expansion, and grammatical checking, while retaining complete authorial ownership over core arguments and voice. Furthermore, learners should practice active post-editing to adjust overly synthetic registers to their authentic writing tone, implement routine cross-verification using reliable dictionaries, and engage in periodic unassisted writing to prevent intellectual dependency and safeguard their independent linguistic development.

By fostering this balanced synergy between technological affordances and human agency, language education can effectively

embrace generative AI as an empowering tool for learning rather than a threat to academic integrity. Ultimately, cultivating critical literacy and value-based self-regulation ensures that secondary learners evolve not into passive consumers of automated output, but into empowered, independent, and ethically conscious writers in the digital age.

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