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Students' Perspectives on the Use of ChatGPT in Learning English Writing: A Qualitative Study at STAIN Mandailing Natal

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ABSTRACT

The rapid development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has transformed English language learning, particularly in writing instruction. Among various AI-based applications, ChatGPT has become one of the most widely used tools to assist students in generating ideas, improving grammar, and organizing written texts. This study aims to explore first-semester students' perspectives on the use of ChatGPT in learning English writing at the Tadris Bahasa Inggris (TBI) Department of STAIN Mandailing Natal. The study employed a qualitative descriptive design involving 22 first-semester students selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and documentation, and analyzed using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman. The findings indicate that students generally perceive ChatGPT positively because it improves vocabulary, grammar, idea generation, and writing confidence while reducing writing anxiety. However, participants also expressed concerns regarding dependency, reduced critical thinking, and the tendency to accept AI-generated feedback without sufficient reflection. Furthermore, students demonstrated strong awareness of academic integrity by emphasizing that ChatGPT should function only as a learning assistant rather than a substitute for their own intellectual effort. These findings suggest that ChatGPT can effectively support English writing instruction when integrated with appropriate teacher guidance and ethical awareness. The study contributes to the growing literature on AI-assisted language learning within the context of Islamic higher education.
Keywords: academic integrity, artificial intelligence, ChatGPT, English writing, students' perceptions

Introduction

Writing is one of the most important language skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning because it enables students to communicate ideas, develop

critical thinking, and demonstrate academic competence. Compared with listening, speaking, and reading, writing is often considered the most difficult skill because it requires learners to organize ideas logically while applying appropriate grammar, vocabulary, cohesion, and coherence. Hyland (2020) explains that writing is a cognitive and social process through which learners construct meaning rather than simply produce sentences. Similarly, Richards and Renandya (2002) argue that successful writing requires learners to generate ideas, organize information, and revise their work continuously. Consequently, many EFL students experience difficulties in producing effective academic writing.

In many Indonesian universities, writing remains a challenging subject for English Education students. Learners frequently struggle with grammatical accuracy, limited vocabulary, paragraph organization, and idea development. These challenges often reduce students' confidence and increase writing anxiety. Previous studies reported that EFL learners commonly encounter problems in generating ideas and organizing them into coherent paragraphs (Fareed et al., 2019; Al Fadda, 2020). Rahimi and Zhang (2021) further found that writing anxiety significantly affects students' writing performance because learners become afraid of making mistakes. Traditional writing instruction that emphasizes grammatical accuracy more than idea development also limits students' opportunities to develop independent writing skills.

Recent developments in educational technology have introduced new opportunities to support language learning. Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become increasingly integrated into educational practices, particularly in English language learning. Among AI-powered applications, ChatGPT has attracted considerable attention because it can generate human-like responses, provide grammatical corrections, suggest vocabulary, and assist learners in organizing written texts. Godwin-Jones (2023) describes ChatGPT as one of the most influential AI-assisted language learning tools due to its ability to provide personalized and immediate feedback. Likewise, Zou and Xie (2024) found that AI-assisted writing systems improve students' writing accuracy, vocabulary use, and fluency by providing instant feedback during the writing process.

Despite these educational benefits, the integration of ChatGPT has also generated considerable debate among educators and researchers. Several studies indicate that ChatGPT increases learner motivation, confidence, and autonomy because students can receive immediate assistance without fear of negative evaluation. However, other researchers argue that excessive dependence on AI may reduce creativity, critical thinking, and independent problem-solving abilities (Liu & Wang, 2024). Students may rely on AI-generated responses instead of developing their own ideas, resulting in passive learning. Ethical issues, including plagiarism, originality, and academic integrity, have therefore become important concerns in AI-assisted writing.

Within the context of Islamic higher education, these ethical issues become even more significant because learning is closely connected with moral values such as honesty, responsibility (amanah), and sincerity. Students are expected to use technology responsibly while maintaining academic integrity. Therefore, understanding students' perceptions of ChatGPT is essential for determining whether AI functions primarily as a learning support tool or as a substitute for students' own intellectual effort. Positive and

negative perceptions may influence how students integrate ChatGPT into their writing practices and how educators design appropriate instructional strategies.

Although many previous studies have investigated ChatGPT in language learning, several research gaps remain. Most existing studies focus on measuring improvements in writing performance, grammatical accuracy, or technological acceptance in general university settings. Relatively few studies examine students' perspectives using a qualitative approach that explores both pedagogical and ethical dimensions simultaneously. Furthermore, limited research has investigated ChatGPT within Islamic higher education institutions, where technological innovation must be balanced with religious and moral values. This gap indicates the need for further investigation into how students perceive the benefits, challenges, and ethical implications of AI-assisted writing in such educational contexts.

This study is grounded in Process Writing Theory proposed by Seow (2002), which emphasizes that writing develops through recursive stages of planning, drafting, revising, and editing. ChatGPT supports these stages by providing immediate suggestions and language feedback throughout the writing process. In addition, the AI-Assisted Language Learning Framework proposed by Godwin-Jones (2023) explains how artificial intelligence enhances learner autonomy through personalized learning experiences and interactive feedback. These theoretical perspectives provide an appropriate framework for understanding students' experiences while using ChatGPT in English writing activities.

Therefore, this study aims to explore first-semester students' perspectives on the use of ChatGPT in learning English writing at the Tadris Bahasa Inggris Department of STAIN Mandailing Natal. Specifically, the study investigates students' positive perceptions, negative perceptions, and ethical awareness regarding AI-assisted writing. The findings are expected to contribute to the growing body of literature on artificial intelligence in English language education while providing practical recommendations for integrating ChatGPT into writing instruction responsibly and ethically. Such findings may also assist educators in designing learning environments that maximize the educational benefits of artificial intelligence while maintaining students' autonomy, critical thinking, creativity, and academic integrity.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore students' perspectives on the use of ChatGPT in learning English writing. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it allows researchers to understand participants' experiences, opinions, and interpretations in their natural learning context rather than measuring relationships among variables. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative research aims to investigate how individuals construct meaning from their experiences. In this study, the design enabled the researcher to obtain an in-depth understanding of students' perceptions regarding both the advantages and challenges of using ChatGPT as an AI-assisted writing tool.

The research was conducted at the Tadris Bahasa Inggris (TBI) Department of STAIN Mandailing Natal during the first semester of the 2025/2026 academic year. The participants consisted of 22 first-semester students selected through purposive sampling because they had direct experience using ChatGPT in English writing

assignments. The participants included four male students and eighteen female students with varying levels of English writing proficiency. This sampling strategy allowed the researcher to obtain rich information from students who were actively engaged with AI-assisted writing.

Data were collected using three techniques: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and documentation. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data source because they allowed participants to explain their experiences freely while ensuring that all research objectives were addressed. The interview questions focused on students' frequency of ChatGPT use, perceived benefits, perceived challenges, and ethical awareness regarding AI-assisted writing. Classroom observations were conducted to examine students' interactions with ChatGPT during writing activities, while documentation included students' writing assignments, observation notes, and screenshots illustrating how ChatGPT was used throughout the writing process.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the study applied Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for qualitative research, including credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was strengthened through methodological triangulation by comparing information obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation. Member checking was also conducted by confirming interview interpretations with selected participants. Furthermore, the researcher maintained reflective notes throughout the research process to minimize personal bias and enhance confirmability.

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman (2014), consisting of three interconnected stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. During data reduction, interview transcripts and observation notes were coded to identify recurring patterns and themes. The categorized data were then presented descriptively to facilitate interpretation. Finally, conclusions were continuously verified by comparing evidence across different data sources to ensure consistency and credibility. Through this analytical process, three major themes emerged: positive perceptions of ChatGPT, negative perceptions related to dependency and passive learning, and students' moral and ethical awareness regarding the responsible use of artificial intelligence in English writing.

Findings and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore first-semester students' perspectives on the use of ChatGPT in learning English writing. Based on the qualitative analysis of interview transcripts, classroom observations, and supporting documentation, three major themes emerged. These themes include (1) positive perceptions of ChatGPT as a writing support tool, (2) negative perceptions related to dependency and passive learning, and (3) students' moral and ethical awareness regarding AI-assisted writing. These findings demonstrate that students simultaneously appreciate the educational benefits of ChatGPT while recognizing the importance of using the technology responsibly.

Positive Perceptions: ChatGPT as a Writing Support Tool

Most participants described ChatGPT as an effective learning companion that helped them complete writing tasks more efficiently. Students explained that the

application provided immediate assistance when they encountered difficulties with vocabulary, grammar, sentence construction, and paragraph organization. Unlike traditional classroom feedback, which often requires students to wait until the next meeting, ChatGPT allowed them to receive corrections instantly. Consequently, students became more confident during the writing process and were more willing to revise their work independently.

One participant stated:

> "ChatGPT helps me find better vocabulary and corrects my grammar instantly, which makes me feel less anxious when starting an essay." (Participant S4)

Several participants also explained that ChatGPT supported the brainstorming process by suggesting relevant ideas and organizing them into logical paragraph structures. Students believed that this feature was particularly useful because they often experienced difficulty generating ideas before writing. As a result, they felt more motivated to begin writing assignments and spent less time worrying about grammatical mistakes. Classroom observations supported these interview findings. During writing activities, students frequently consulted ChatGPT to verify sentence structures, search for appropriate vocabulary, and review grammatical accuracy before submitting their assignments. Rather than replacing the writing process, the application functioned as a supplementary learning resource that encouraged students to revise their work several times.

These findings are consistent with Process Writing Theory proposed by Seow (2002), which emphasizes that writing develops through recursive stages of planning, drafting, revising, and editing. ChatGPT supported each of these stages by providing continuous language assistance throughout the writing process. Likewise, Godwin-Jones (2023) argues that AI-assisted language learning promotes learner autonomy because students receive personalized feedback that enables them to improve independently. Similar results were reported by Zou and Xie (2024), who found that AI-assisted writing applications significantly improve learners' grammatical accuracy, vocabulary development, and writing confidence through real-time feedback.

Negative Perceptions: Dependency and Passive Learning

Although students acknowledged the educational benefits of ChatGPT, many participants expressed concern regarding excessive dependence on artificial intelligence. Several students admitted that they often accepted ChatGPT's corrections without carefully analyzing the explanations or attempting to understand the grammatical rules behind the revisions. Consequently, some participants worried that they were improving the quality of their assignments without necessarily improving their own writing competence.

One participant commented:

> "Sometimes I just copy the corrections because they look correct. I do not always understand why the sentence is changed." (Participant S11)

Another participant stated:

> "If I use ChatGPT too often, I become lazy to think of my own ideas." (Participant S9)

These statements indicate that while ChatGPT simplifies the writing process, it may also reduce opportunities for critical thinking and independent problem solving. Students acknowledged that they occasionally relied on AI-generated suggestions instead of exploring their own vocabulary or developing original ideas.

Observation data further confirmed this tendency. Some students immediately copied ChatGPT's responses into their assignments without modifying or evaluating the suggestions. Although this behavior increased writing efficiency, it limited opportunities for reflection and self-correction. Such passive learning may weaken long-term language development because students become consumers of AI-generated information rather than active language learners.

These findings support Liu and Wang (2024), who introduced the concept of automation dependency, describing learners' excessive reliance on AI-generated feedback. Similarly, Lim and Lee (2023) found that students frequently accepted AI corrections without fully understanding the linguistic explanations, limiting meaningful learning. Therefore, teachers should encourage students to evaluate AI-generated feedback critically instead of accepting every suggestion automatically.

Moral and Ethical Awareness

The third theme concerns students' awareness of ethical issues related to the use of ChatGPT in academic writing. Nearly all participants agreed that ChatGPT should function as a learning assistant rather than a replacement for students' own intellectual effort. Participants emphasized that copying AI-generated essays without revision or acknowledgment would violate academic honesty.

One participant explained:

> "ChatGPT is useful, but submitting its answers directly would not be honest because the work should still represent our own understanding." (Participant S18)

Another participant stated:

> "We should use ChatGPT only to help us learn, not to complete the whole assignment." (Participant S15)

Interestingly, students frequently connected these ethical concerns with Islamic values taught within the university. Participants mentioned that honesty, responsibility (amanah), and sincerity should guide their use of artificial intelligence. They believed that technology should support learning rather than replace personal effort and critical thinking. These findings demonstrate that students do not reject ChatGPT because of ethical concerns. Instead, they support responsible and balanced use of artificial intelligence in academic writing. Students recognized that AI can improve writing quality while simultaneously understanding that genuine learning requires active participation and independent thinking.

The findings correspond with Nurhayati (2023), who argues that digital literacy in Islamic higher education should be integrated with moral literacy. Likewise, Rahman (2024) emphasizes that responsible AI use depends on students' ethical awareness rather than technological ability alone. Therefore, educational institutions should develop clear guidelines regarding appropriate AI use while encouraging students to maintain academic integrity.

No	Category	Main Findings
1	Positive Perceptions	ChatGPT improves vocabulary, grammar, idea generation, paragraph organization, confidence, and reduces writing anxiety.
2	Negative Perceptions	Students become dependent on AI, accept feedback passively, and show reduced critical thinking and originality.
3	Moral and Ethical Awareness	Students emphasize responsible AI use, academic honesty, avoidance of plagiarism, and maintaining amanah in academic writing.

Overall Discussion

Overall, the findings demonstrate that first-semester TBI students perceive ChatGPT as a valuable educational technology that offers immediate assistance throughout the writing process. The application supports vocabulary development, grammatical accuracy, and writing confidence while reducing anxiety commonly experienced by EFL learners. Nevertheless, students also recognize the risks associated with excessive dependence on artificial intelligence, particularly the possibility of weakened critical thinking and diminished originality.

The coexistence of positive and negative perceptions indicates that ChatGPT should not replace conventional writing instruction. Instead, it should complement teacher guidance within a balanced learning environment that promotes reflection, creativity, and ethical responsibility. Instructors should encourage students to analyze AI-generated feedback critically, revise suggestions independently, and maintain academic integrity throughout the writing process. Such an approach enables students to benefit from technological innovation while continuing to develop independent writing competence.

Conclusion

This study explored first-semester students' perspectives on the use of ChatGPT in learning English writing at the Tadris Bahasa Inggris (TBI) Department of STAIN Mandailing Natal. The findings indicate that students generally hold balanced perceptions toward the integration of artificial intelligence in writing instruction. On the one hand, ChatGPT was perceived as a valuable learning assistant that helped students improve vocabulary, grammar, idea generation, paragraph organization, and writing confidence. The availability of immediate feedback also reduced writing anxiety and encouraged students to revise their work more independently.

On the other hand, the participants also recognized several challenges associated with the use of ChatGPT. Excessive reliance on AI-generated suggestions may reduce students' critical thinking, creativity, and independent writing ability. Several participants admitted that they sometimes accepted AI feedback without fully understanding the grammatical explanations or evaluating the suggested revisions. These findings indicate that ChatGPT should complement, rather than replace, students' own learning process.

Another important finding concerns students' ethical awareness. As students studying in an Islamic higher education institution, participants emphasized the importance of honesty, responsibility (amanah), and academic integrity when using

artificial intelligence. They believed that ChatGPT should function as a learning partner instead of becoming a shortcut for completing academic assignments. This awareness demonstrates that technological competence should be accompanied by moral responsibility to ensure meaningful learning.

This study implies that educators should integrate ChatGPT into English writing instruction through guided and reflective learning activities. Teachers should encourage students to analyze AI-generated feedback critically, revise their own writing independently, and maintain academic honesty throughout the writing process. Such an approach enables learners to maximize the educational benefits of artificial intelligence while preserving originality, creativity, and ethical responsibility.

This study is limited by its relatively small number of participants and its focus on a single higher education institution. Therefore, future researchers are encouraged to investigate students' perceptions across different universities, educational levels, or cultural contexts. Further studies may also employ mixed-methods or experimental designs to examine the long-term impact of ChatGPT on students' writing performance, critical thinking, and learner autonomy.

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