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THE ROLE OF CHATGPT IN DEVELOPING UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' ACADEMIC WRITING SKILLS

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Abstract

The rapid evolution of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has significantly transformed educational paradigms globally, particularly in foreign language acquisition. This research paper investigates the role of ChatGPT, a prominent generative AI tool, in enhancing the academic writing skills of university students enrolled in English language programs. Academic writing represents one of the most complex tasks for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, requiring a high level of syntactic accuracy, lexical diversity, cohesion, and adherence to formal registers. Through a mixed-methods research design combining surveys from 150 undergraduate students and structured interviews with 5 university educators, this study evaluates the specific areas where ChatGPT serves as an effective pedagogical aid, including brainstorming, outline generation, grammar correction, and vocabulary enrichment. Concurrently, the paper addresses potential pedagogical constraints, such as structural over-reliance, plagiarism risks, and the dilution of authentic student voice. The findings suggest that while ChatGPT offers substantial scaffolded support for drafting and revising, its deployment must be accompanied by explicit AI literacy frameworks to prevent a decline in critical thinking and analytical writing capabilities.

Keywords

ChatGPT, Generative AI, Academic Writing Skills, Higher Education, EFL Learners, Educational Technology.

Introduction

In contemporary higher education, mastering academic writing in English is a core competency required for scholarly achievement, professional mobility, and cognitive development. For university students specializing in English and International Relations, academic writing serves as a benchmark for critical analysis, intellectual expression, and research dissemination. However, producing high-quality academic prose—characterized by structural cohesion, rhetorical precision, and rigorous citation standards—remains a major hurdle for non-native speakers of English. Traditional pedagogical methods, though effective, frequently fail to provide the continuous, personalized feedback necessary to address individual stylistic deficiencies in large classroom settings.

The emergence of large language models (LLMs), particularly OpenAI's ChatGPT, has introduced an unprecedented shift in language learning environments. Capable of generating contextually coherent, grammatically refined, and stylistically varied text based on user prompts, ChatGPT has transitioned from a novel technological application to an omnipresent educational utility. While initial institutional reactions focused heavily on academic dishonesty and the threat of text generation software to conventional assessment metrics, contemporary educational discourse has increasingly leaned toward integration and adaptation.

This paper examines the impact of ChatGPT on university students' academic writing skills. It seeks to answer two fundamental research questions:

1. To what extent does ChatGPT assist EFL students in improving their grammatical precision, lexical choice, and structural clarity?
2. What are the main pedagogical risks associated with the integration of generative AI tools in academic writing courses, and how can educators mitigate them?

Literature Review

The integration of technology in language learning is theoretically grounded in Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, specifically the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and scaffolding. Vygotsky posited that learners achieve higher levels of cognitive and linguistic competence when assisted by a "More Knowledgeable Other" (MKO). In the digital era, generative AI tools act as artificial MKOs, offering

continuous, real-time linguistic scaffolding. When a student interacts with ChatGPT to refine an essay introduction or clarify a transition sentence, the tool provides immediate modifications that allow the learner to bridge the gap between their current writing ability and their targeted academic standard.

Prior to the rise of generative AI, Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) primarily relied on rule-based or static corrective feedback tools, such as basic spell checkers and software like Grammarly. While these platforms successfully identified mechanical errors, they were incapable of engaging in adaptive, conversational discourse or restructuring complex argumentative premises. In contrast, ChatGPT utilizes deep learning architectures to understand semantic nuance and stylistic registers. Recent studies by Warschauer (2024) indicate that generative AI facilitates a more dialogic form of writing assistance, wherein students do not merely accept automated corrections but can query the reasoning behind specific stylistic or syntactical recommendations.

Despite these evident benefits, researchers remain cautious regarding the long-term cognitive implications of AI dependency. Sullivan et al. (2023) argued that excessive reliance on automated text generation platforms can suppress the development of autonomous writing skills, leading to a phenomenon described as "cognitive atrophy." If students consistently use AI to synthesize information and construct academic arguments, they bypass the essential cognitive struggles associated with drafting, revising, and editing. Therefore, identifying the fine line between constructive linguistic scaffolding and counterproductive automation remains a central challenge in modern educational research.

3. Research Methodology

To explore the role of ChatGPT in developing academic writing skills, this study adopted a **mixed-methods research design**, incorporating both quantitative data from student surveys and qualitative insights from faculty interviews. The research was conducted over a single semester at the South Kazakhstan State Pedagogical University, involving participants who frequently engage in academic composition tasks.

Participants

The quantitative phase involved 150 undergraduate students from the group AY(IR)k-25-1h and adjacent English language streams. All participants were non-native English speakers operating at an intermediate to advanced (B2-C1) level of proficiency. The qualitative phase consisted of **5** experienced English language lecturers who possess a minimum of five years of experience teaching academic writing, research methodology, or linguistics.

Instruments and Data Collection

Data collection was executed using two primary instruments:

1. A 5-point Likert scale survey distributed electronically to the students. The survey targeted three main dimensions: the frequency of ChatGPT usage, the perceived utility of the tool across various writing stages (pre-writing, drafting, editing), and the students' awareness of ethical considerations.

2. Semi-structured interviews conducted with the 5 lecturers. These interviews focused on changes observed in student writing profiles since the adoption of ChatGPT, strategies used to handle plagiarism, and the restructuring of writing assignments.

Results and Discussion

Quantitative Findings: Student Perspectives

The survey data revealed an overwhelming integration of generative AI into the student writing workflow. Approximately 78% of respondents reported using ChatGPT at least once a week for academic assignments. When asked to evaluate the effectiveness of ChatGPT in specific domains of writing, the responses varied significantly depending on the task complexity:

Writing Dimension	**High Utility (%)**	**Moderate Utility (%)**	**Low Utility (%)**
Grammar Correction & Proofreading	84%	12%	4%
Vocabulary & Lexical Diversity	72%	20%	8%
Idea Generation & Brainstorming	65%	22%	13%
Structuring & Paragraph Logic	41%	38%	21%

Synthesizing Literature & Arguments	23%	45%	32%

As illustrated by the data, students perceive ChatGPT as highly effective for low-stakes linguistic mechanics, such as grammar correction (84%) and vocabulary expansion (72%). The tool provides instant alternatives to repetitive phrases and rectifies subtle structural errors that standard spell-checkers miss. However, for higher-order cognitive tasks—such as logical paragraph sequencing (41%) and synthesizing complex literature arguments (23%)—the perceived utility declines sharply, indicating that students still recognize the limitations of AI in executing deep critical analysis.

Qualitative Findings: Faculty Insights

The interviews with the university lecturers provided a nuanced counter-narrative to the students' enthusiasm. All five educators acknowledged that the overall grammatical cleanliness of submitted student essays had improved markedly over the past two years. Mechanical errors, dangling modifiers, and severe punctuation mistakes have decreased significantly.

However, the lecturers highlighted three major pedagogical concerns:

1. Homogenization of Student Voice. Four out of five instructors noted that essays edited heavily by ChatGPT tend to lose their individual stylistic characteristics. The prose becomes overly stylized, repetitive in its transitions (e.g., an over-reliance on phrases like "Furthermore," "In conclusion," "It is crucial to note"), and emotionally detached.

2. The "Hallucination" Factor. Lecturers reported instances where students included fabricated academic citations generated by ChatGPT. Because the model operates on probabilistic text prediction rather than live database cross-referencing, it regularly invents convincing but entirely non-existent book titles and journal articles.

3. Superficial Comprehension. An instructor observed that during oral defenses of written papers, some students struggled to explain the advanced vocabulary and complex syntactical structures present in their own submitted essays, confirming that automated corrections do not always translate into internalized linguistic knowledge.

Pedagogical Recommendations

To maximize the benefits of ChatGPT while preserving the integrity of higher education academic writing, institutions must transition from a policy of prohibition to a framework of guided AI literacy. The following three-tiered pedagogical approach is recommended for university writing programs:

The "AI-as-a-Tutor" Protocol

Educators should explicitly train students to use ChatGPT as an interactive writing coach rather than a text generator. Instead of inputting a prompt and copying the output, students should be instructed to use metalinguistic prompts, such as:

- "Review this paragraph for stylistic clarity but do not rewrite it. Highlight the weak verbs and suggest rules for improvement."

This ensures that the cognitive labor of restructuring remains with the student.

Redesigning Assessment Metrics

Traditional take-home essays are highly susceptible to unreflective AI generation. Higher education institutions should incorporate more diversified assessment methods, including:

- In-class diagnostic writing sessions without digital access to establish a baseline student voice.
- Process-oriented grading, where students receive marks for their initial outlines, reflection logs detailing how they used AI to edit their work, and sequential draft revisions.
- Viva voce (oral defenses) of major research papers to verify that the student understands the underlying concepts and vocabulary utilized in the text.

Establishing Ethical AI Guidelines

Universities must develop transparent policies regarding AI documentation. Students should be required to include an "AI Acknowledgement Statement" at the end of their research papers, detailing exactly which generative tools were used and for what specific purposes (e.g., brainstorming, translating, or stylistic polishing). This aligns with emerging international publication standards and instills a culture of academic honesty.

Conclusion

The integration of ChatGPT into higher education marks a permanent shift in how academic writing is taught, practiced, and evaluated. As demonstrated by this study involving EFL learners and faculty, generative AI serves as an incredibly powerful tool for democratizing language support, offering instant grammatical refinement, and expanding lexical options. When used correctly, it functions as an efficient scaffolding mechanism that elevates the mechanical quality of student prose.

However, ChatGPT cannot replicate the authentic human cognitive processes required for deep analytical argumentation, critical synthesis, and the expression of a unique intellectual identity. Over-reliance on generative models poses a real risk of producing a generation of writers who rely on software to do their thinking. The future of academic writing pedagogy lies not in banning AI, but in developing robust pedagogical frameworks that teach students to critique, control, and collaborate with these technologies ethically and effectively.

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