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## Integrating ChatGPT in EFL writing: Perceptions and challenges of Islamic senior high school students

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### ABSTRACT

#### Keywords:

*AI-assisted writing, ChatGPT, EFL writing, literacy skills, secondary education*

The increasing integration of artificial intelligence tools such as ChatGPT in EFL writing has raised interest in how students experience the use of these tools in learning. This study aims to explore students' experiences of using ChatGPT and to identify the challenges they encountered. Employing a qualitative phenomenological design, the study involved 23 students from eight working groups. Data were collected through classroom observations during writing activities and semi-structured interviews with six students representing different academic levels. The findings indicate that students generally perceive ChatGPT as a supportive tool that facilitates idea generation, improves sentence organization, and enhances language use. Many students reported increased confidence in writing when using ChatGPT as a reference and scaffolding resource. However, several challenges were also identified, including technical issues such as unstable internet access and cognitive challenges such as limited prompt literacy, overreliance on AI-generated responses, reduced creativity, and diminished critical thinking. Students with higher motivation and stronger language proficiency demonstrated more critical and selective use of ChatGPT, while others tended to depend on it as a shortcut. This study highlights that the effectiveness of ChatGPT depends not only on technological access but also on students' readiness and teacher guidance to promote critical, ethical, and reflective use.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Writing is essential for students' academic success since many subjects assess their learning outcomes through written assignments. Students are required to complete a variety of assignments in class, including class notes, reports, essays, and research papers. To complete these assignments successfully, students need to organize their ideas logically, use appropriate academic tone, and maintain academic integrity through original work and proper citations (Street, 2015; Taylor, 2009). However, writing is often considered as a difficult task for senior high school students, especially those in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting. This is usually due to limited language skills, difficulties in idea development, and a lack of confidence in presenting arguments (Fatimah, 2018). In addition, many students struggle with grammar and vocabulary, which make it harder for them to produce clear and effective writing in English, as previous study also found that Indonesian students often experience difficulties in writing descriptive texts due to limited vocabulary and low motivation (Qurrotu'ain & Yuniar, 2025).

The rapid development of technology has led artificial intelligence (AI) to play an increasingly important role in education, particularly in the field of writing. AI-powered tools

like Grammarly, Quillbot, and ChatGPT are now commonly used by students to help in drafting, revising, and editing their academic work. Among these, ChatGPT has gained significant interest due to its generative and interactive features. These capabilities allow students to brainstorm ideas, refine sentence structures, and obtain immediate feedback through natural conversations with the AI (Lund & Wang, 2023). In EFL writing contexts, ChatGPT is frequently viewed as a valuable assistant that improves both writing efficiency and linguistic accuracy. Research suggests that it can assist students in generating ideas, expanding their vocabulary, and fixing grammatical mistakes (Al-Akbar, 2025; Algrin et al., 2025; Thi et al., 2025). Consequently, the use of such tools can increase students' confidence and motivation when they are working on their writing assignments.

Despite its benefits, the integration of ChatGPT into English writing tasks brings about various pedagogical and ethical issues. Over-reliance on AI tools may hinder the development of students' critical thinking, originality, and their ability to write independently (Elkatmı̇s, 2024; Jarrah et al., 2023). Furthermore, ChatGPT sometimes produces inaccurate or overly general information (Gunawan & Susanto, 2025), which can be misleading if students do not evaluate the AI's output critically (Albadarin et al., 2024; Gultom et al., 2024). These limitations could potentially weaken students' grasp of the subject matter and result in the inclusion of incorrect data in their work. Consequently, the use of ChatGPT in writing is not just a technical change, but a cognitive and ethical challenge that requires serious attention. For these reasons, it is essential that students receive proper guidance on how to use ChatGPT in a critical and responsible manner.

Current research consistently indicates that ChatGPT can significantly enhance students' writing performance. Various experimental and quasi-experimental studies show that students using ChatGPT often achieve better results in grammar, organization, and general writing quality compared to those receiving only traditional instruction (Listianingsih, 2024; Maghamil & Sieras, 2024). Additionally, some studies comparing AI-generated feedback with teacher feedback suggest that ChatGPT can effectively support writing development when paired with proper pedagogical guidance (Nurjati, et al., 2025). Despite these positive findings, most existing literature focuses on learning outcomes rather than students' personal experiences. There is still a research gap concerning how students perceive the use of ChatGPT in English writing, especially at the senior high school level. Understanding these perceptions is crucial because they influence students' attitudes and how they accept or respond to learning tools. By examining students' perspectives, researchers can gain valuable insights into the practical application of ChatGPT, including the specific benefits and challenges encountered during the writing process.

This study aims to investigate the perceptions of Islamic Senior High School students regarding the use of ChatGPT as a tool for assisting English writing, as well as to identify the challenges they face when using this AI technology. By exploring students' perspectives, this research contributes to the ongoing discussion about the responsible integration of AI in education. Furthermore, it offers practical insights for teachers and policymakers to help them develop guidelines for the ethical and effective use of ChatGPT in EFL writing contexts.

## **2. METHODS**

### **2.1. Research Design**

This research employs a qualitative research method using a transcendental phenomenological design, also known as psychological phenomenology. This design is selected

because the primary aim of the research is to explore students' perceptions and lived experiences regarding the use of ChatGPT in English writing rather than to measure learning outcomes quantitatively. Phenomenological research is appropriate when a research seeks to understand how individuals experience and interpret a particular phenomenon from their own perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

## **2.2. Subjects of the Research**

The research was carried out at an Islamic Senior High School in Nganjuk Regency, East Java, Indonesia. This setting was chosen because eleventh grade students are required to complete a research paper as part of their academic assessment, and the use of AI-assisted tools, including ChatGPT, are allowed during the writing process. The participants of this research consisted of 23 eleventh grade students from the "Excellent (A)" class. This class was selected because it is the only excellent class among the eleventh grade classes and represents students with relatively high academic engagement. Students engaged in collaborative work within small groups of two to three members, organized by the homeroom teacher to ensure an equitable distribution of academic abilities. For in depth data collection, six students were then selected as interview participants using purposive sampling. Three students were categorized as high achieving students and three as low achieving students based on their summative assessment scores in English subject.

## **2.3. Research Instruments**

This research utilized observation and semi structured interviews as the main research instruments. Observation was conducted using an observation sheet designed to record students' actual behavior during the academic writing process. The observation focused on several aspects, including the frequency of ChatGPT use, the parts of academic writing assisted by ChatGPT, the way students constructed prompts, and their responses to the outputs generated.

Semi structured interviews were conducted to gain deeper insights into students' perceptions, benefits, challenges, and concerns related to using ChatGPT in assisting English writing. The interview guide consisted of ten open ended questions that allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences while maintaining consistency across interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). To ensure clarity, relevance, and methodological appropriateness, all instruments were subjected to validation by an expert.

## **2.4. Data Collection**

Observation was conducted first to understand how students used ChatGPT during the academic writing process. The researchers applied participatory observation, being present in the classroom while students worked on writing their research paper assignments. Observations were conducted twice, on May 20 and May 22, 2025, and were documented using observation sheets and field notes. Following the observation, semi structured interviews was conducted with six selected students. Each interview lasted approximately 10-15 minutes and was conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to ensure that participants could express their ideas comfortably. The interviews took place in a quiet room to create a neutral and supportive environment. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

## **2.5. Data Analysis**

Data analysis followed the transcendental phenomenological approach proposed by Moustakas (1994). The process began with data organization and horizontalization, followed by phenomenological reduction through epoche. The researchers then developed textural descriptions to identify what students experienced and structural descriptions to explain how those experiences occurred (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, an essence synthesis was conducted to capture the core meaning of students' perceptions. To enhance the credibility of the results, triangulation was applied by comparing data from observations and interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

## 2.6. Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to ethical standards for research involving human participants. Prior to data collection, all participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study, and their voluntary participation was obtained through informed consent. Participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential and used solely for research purposes. To protect anonymity, all names were replaced with codes (e.g., S1, S2). Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Students' perceptions of ChatGPT in assisting Writing

This study explored Islamic Senior High School students' perceptions of using ChatGPT in English academic writing through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal that student perceptions are multidimensional, consisting of both positive and negative perspectives influenced by internal factors (e.g., writing ability, motivation, and self-discipline) and external factors (e.g., peer interaction, teacher guidance, and learning environment).

#### 3.1.1 Positive Perceptions

The findings indicate that students generally perceive ChatGPT as a supportive tool that facilitates the writing process. A dominant perception emerging from the data is the role of ChatGPT in reducing cognitive load and simplifying task completion. For instance, one student noted, "*If I use ChatGPT, it's simpler, I don't have to think too much... it's usually used to carry out tasks so that they are simpler*" (S1). This suggests that ChatGPT functions as a practical assistant that enables students to complete assignments more efficiently, particularly under time constraints.

In addition, students highlighted ChatGPT's role in providing references and supporting language use. As expressed by S2, "*Help answer and gives some references... it is being helped in terms of writing and language.*" This indicates that ChatGPT contributes to improving students' confidence in writing, especially when they face difficulties in generating ideas or expressing their thought in English. However, it is important to note that some students demonstrated selective use, treating ChatGPT as a supplementary resource rather than a primary source of knowledge.

Another key perception is related to the structural clarity of ChatGPT-generated responses. S3 stated, "*The words are more structured, so they are easier to understand.*" This reflects the function of ChatGPT as a scaffolding tool, particularly in the early stages of writing. Students relied on AI-generated content to initiate their writing and organize their ideas more coherently. Furthermore, students perceived ChatGPT as a source of input that could be reprocessed into

their own words. As S4 explained, “*We get material from it, so automatically we can process our own words.*” This indicates that some students maintained a sense of authorship by transforming AI-generated content rather than copying it directly.

Classroom observations support these findings. Several groups demonstrated active engagement with ChatGPT by using it to generate ideas, organize paragraphs, and clarify concepts. Students who formulated more specific prompts and critically evaluated the output tended to perceive ChatGPT as a valuable academic assistant. Collaborative interactions further strengthened these positive perceptions, as students discussed and refined AI-generated responses collectively. Overall, these findings suggest that ChatGPT is perceived as a complementary learning tool that enhances productivity, supports language development, and facilitates idea generation when used critically and selectively.

### 3.1.2 Negative Perceptions

Despite its perceived benefits, students also expressed several concerns regarding the use of ChatGPT in academic writing. One major issue relates to the accuracy of AI-generated content. As S1 stated, “*Usually it’s been answered, but it’s still wrong, so I don’t trust AI too much.*” This perception reflects a lack of trust due to inconsistencies and inaccuracies in the responses, which may lead to misinformation if not critically evaluated. Technical issues also emerged as a source of negative perception. S2 reported, “*Sometimes we ask for answers, but what appears is like codes.*” Such experiences disrupted the writing process and reduced the perceived reliability of ChatGPT as an academic tool.

Another concern is the potential reduction in students’ engagement with authentic academic sources. S4 noted, “*Automatically we will be lacking in literacy in existing journals.*” This highlights the risk of overdependence on AI-generated content, which may limit students’ exposure to scholarly reading practices essential for developing academic literacy. Moreover, students acknowledged the potential for decreased motivation and increased academic laziness. As S6 explained, “*Sometimes when you’re feeling lazy to think, there’s something easy.*” This indicates that ChatGPT may encourage surface-level learning behaviors, particularly when students lack self-discipline.

Observational data reinforce these concerns. Some students relied on vague prompts and directly copied AI-generated content without revision, treating ChatGPT as a shortcut rather than a learning aid. Additionally, technical constraints such as unstable internet connections further contributed to frustration and disengagement. Taken together, these findings indicate that while ChatGPT offers practical benefits, it also presents risks related to accuracy, overreliance, reduced critical thinking, and limited engagement with academic sources. These negative perceptions highlight the importance of guided and reflective use in educational settings.

## 3.2 Challenges in using ChatGPT for assisting writing

The second research question examined the challenges encountered by students when using ChatGPT for assisting academic writing. The findings reveal that these challenges are both cognitive and technical in nature, reflecting limitations in students’ digital literacy, prompt construction skills, and critical engagement.

### 3.2.1 Cognitive and Behavioral Challenges

One of the primary challenges identified is the reduction of critical thinking. As stated by S1, “*It hinders critical thinking, because ChatGPT immediately produces answers without studying them first.*” This suggests that the instant availability of answers may discourage students from engaging in deeper analysis and independent reasoning. Similarly, reduced creativity emerged as a significant concern. S3 noted, “*It really reduces creativity, because I rarely think by myself.*” This indicates that excessive reliance on AI-generated content may limit students’ ability to develop original ideas and personal writing styles.

Another challenge relates to the mismatch between AI-generated output and academic expectations. S4 explained, “*Sometimes the answer does not match what I mean, so I have to change a lot of it.*” This highlights the limitations of ChatGPT in understanding specific contexts, requiring students to invest additional effort in revising and adapting the content.

Observations further revealed that many students struggled with prompt construction. The use of vague commands such as “make a paragraph” or “explain this” often resulted in unfocused responses. This demonstrates a lack of prompt literacy, which is essential for effective interaction with AI tools.

### 3.2.2 Technical and Contextual Challenges

Technical issues were also frequently reported. Students experienced unstable internet connections and limited access to advanced features, which disrupted the writing process and reduced efficiency. These external constraints significantly influenced students’ perceptions of ChatGPT as an inconsistent tool. In addition, overreliance on ChatGPT was observed as a major behavioral challenge. Some students copied AI-generated text directly into their assignments without critical evaluation, prioritizing task completion over learning. This behavior reflects a lack of self-regulation and academic integrity.

Despite these challenges, some students demonstrated adaptive strategies. For example, students with higher academic ability reformulated prompts and engaged in peer discussions to improve the quality of AI-generated responses. This suggests that the challenges associated with ChatGPT can be mitigated through proper guidance, collaborative learning, and the development of digital literacy skills.

## 3.3 Discussion

The findings indicate that students generally hold positive perceptions of ChatGPT as a supportive tool in EFL writing. ChatGPT was perceived as effective in facilitating idea generation, improving sentence structure, and assisting grammatical accuracy. These findings are consistent with previous studies (Listianingsih, 2024; Maghamil, 2024), which reported that the integration of ChatGPT in writing instruction enhances students’ writing quality in terms of organization, clarity, and linguistic accuracy. From a theoretical perspective, this supports the concept of Artificial Intelligence in Education (AIEd), which emphasizes the role of AI in enhancing learning efficiency through immediate feedback and adaptive support (Luckin & Holmes, 2016). In this study, ChatGPT functioned as an intelligent assistant that enabled students to write more effectively and productively.

Students’ perceptions were shaped by both internal and external factors. Internally, motivation, language proficiency, and self-discipline influenced how effectively students utilized ChatGPT. Students with higher motivation and stronger language competence demonstrated more critical and reflective use of the tool. This finding aligns with perception

theory, which suggests that learners' interpretations are shaped by cognitive readiness, prior experience, and motivation, ultimately influencing their engagement and academic achievement (Greene et al., 2004). In this context, students who were cognitively and emotionally prepared tended to perceive ChatGPT as a meaningful learning aid rather than merely a shortcut.

Externally, factors such as teacher guidance, peer collaboration, and access to digital infrastructure significantly shaped students' perceptions. A supportive classroom environment and stable internet access contributed to more positive engagement with ChatGPT. This is consistent with Bauer and El-Sayed (2025) and Fraser and Killen (2005), who emphasize that classroom climate and teachers' supports play a crucial role in shaping students' academic experiences. Conversely, limited access to technology and lack of instructional guidance led to scepticism regarding the reliability and relevance of AI-generated outputs.

However, the findings also reveal some inconsistencies with prior research. While previous studies (e.g., Maghamil, 2024) highlight predominantly positive impacts of ChatGPT, this study found that some students questioned the accuracy and relevance of AI-generated responses. This discrepancy may be attributed to contextual factors, particularly the varied levels of digital literacy among students in a religious-based school setting. Limited experience with AI tools and inadequate prompt construction skills likely contributed to these concerns, suggesting that effective use of ChatGPT requires not only access but also sufficient digital and academic literacy.

Importantly, the study also identified students' emerging ethical awareness in using ChatGPT. Most participants acknowledged the importance of revising, paraphrasing, and critically evaluating AI-generated content before submission. This reflects key principles of academic writing, particularly originality and integrity (Fatimah, 2018; Taylor, 2009). Furthermore, it aligns with Wang (2024), who argues that AI should function as a complementary tool rather than a replacement for human instruction. Thus, positive perceptions of ChatGPT are meaningful only when accompanied by critical awareness and responsible use.

Despite these benefits, several challenges were identified. Technical issues, such as unstable internet connections and limited access to advanced features, were frequently reported and negatively affected students' learning experiences. This finding supports Holmes et al. (2019), who emphasize that the effectiveness of AI in education depends on the availability of reliable digital infrastructure. In this study, external constraints significantly influenced students' ability to engage consistently with ChatGPT. Another major challenge relates to students' limited prompt literacy and pre-writing skills. Many students struggled to formulate clear and specific prompts, resulting in vague or irrelevant AI-generated responses. This finding corroborates Listianingsih (2024), who found that the effectiveness of ChatGPT depends heavily on students' initial writing competence and task interpretation skills. From the perspective of academic writing theory (Street, 2015), this issue reflects weaknesses in planning and organization, two essential components of effective writing.

Furthermore, the lack of structured teacher guidance emerged as a critical issue. Without clear instructions and pedagogical frameworks, students tended to use ChatGPT without fully understanding its academic and ethical implications. This finding contrasts with Wang (2024), who demonstrates that combining AI feedback with teacher guidance leads to more meaningful learning outcomes. The limited role of teachers in this context may be associated with insufficient digital literacy and the absence of institutional policies regulating AI use in education.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that ChatGPT has the potential to support EFL students' academic writing by facilitating idea generation, improving language structure, and enhancing writing efficiency when used critically. However, several challenges were identified, including overreliance on AI-generated content, limited prompt literacy, reduced creativity, and technical constraints such as unstable internet access. These findings indicate that the effectiveness of ChatGPT is not solely determined by the technology itself but also by students' readiness, digital literacy, and the availability of pedagogical support.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the relatively small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings. Second, the study was conducted in a specific context, an Islamic Senior High School, which may not fully represent other educational settings with different levels of digital access and learning cultures. Therefore, future research is recommended to involve larger and more diverse samples across different educational contexts.

Based on these findings, several practical recommendations can be proposed. Teachers are encouraged to provide explicit instruction on prompt construction and guide students in critically evaluating AI-generated content. Integrating ChatGPT into writing instruction should be accompanied by clear ethical guidelines to prevent overdependence and promote academic integrity. For policymakers, it is important to develop institutional frameworks and training programs that support both teachers and students in using AI tools effectively and responsibly. By combining technological integration with pedagogical guidance, ChatGPT can be utilized as a meaningful tool to enhance students' academic writing development.

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