

EXPLORING THE USE OF CHATGPT AS A SUPPORTING TOOL IN WRITING RESEARCH PROPOSALS: EFL STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

Writing research proposals is a challenging task for EFL students, who often struggle with aspects such as generating ideas, organizing content, and adhering to academic writing standards. Recognizing these difficulties, this study explores the potential of ChatGPT, an AI-driven tool, to support students in overcoming these challenges. The research aims to analyze how students perceive the use of ChatGPT in their research proposal writing process and to identify the specific challenges they encounter when integrating this technology into their academic work. Employing a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through questionnaires and interviews with 20 eighth-semester students of the English Education Department at Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung. A subset of six students who regularly used ChatGPT in their writing process was selected for in-depth interviews. The data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interaction model to gain insights into the students' experiences. The findings indicate that while students perceive ChatGPT as a valuable tool that aids in idea generation, content refinement, and enhancing the overall quality of their proposals, they also face challenges such as the need for precise prompting and occasional generation of irrelevant or biased information. Despite these issues, students have developed strategies to effectively utilize ChatGPT, demonstrating its potential as a supportive tool in academic writing when used in conjunction with traditional skills and critical thinking.

Keywords: EFL students, ChatGPT, research proposals, academic writing, AI tools

INTRODUCTION

Writing academic research proposals is a crucial but challenging task for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students. Many of them struggle with various aspects of writing, such as generating ideas, organizing content, and following academic writing standards (Banat, 2007; Lindsay, 2000). These difficulties often result in poorly constructed research proposals, which can impact their academic performance and research development. Given the importance of writing in higher education, understanding and addressing these challenges is necessary (Banat, 2007; Lindsay, 2000; Ur, 1996).

Academic writing requires a range of skills that include content development, language use, stylistic abilities, grammatical accuracy, and coherence. EFL students often lack proficiency in these areas due to limited exposure to academic English. Consequently, they face problems in structuring their research questions, defining objectives, and synthesizing literature components that are essential to a strong research proposal. These struggles have led students to seek alternative support systems, including AI tools such as ChatGPT (Heaton, 1975; Fitzmaurice & Ciara, 2013).

ChatGPT, an AI-powered chatbot developed by OpenAI, has been widely used in various educational contexts, especially in language learning. It is capable of generating human-like responses and assisting users in a range of writing tasks, including summarizing, paraphrasing, and generating content. For EFL students, integrating such tools into their writing process

offers promising support. It provides immediate feedback, helps them refine their writing, and reduces their dependency on traditional sources (Taecharunroj, 2023; Meyer et al., 2023).

However, while ChatGPT offers several benefits, it also presents concerns. Some students struggle to utilize the tool effectively, while others report instances of inaccurate or biased output. There is also a risk of over-reliance, which might diminish students' critical thinking and analytical skills. This calls for a balanced approach in integrating AI tools into academic settings—students should be encouraged to use AI critically and ethically (AlAfnan et al., 2023; Baskara, 2020).

The motivation behind this study was based on the observed use of ChatGPT among students in the English Education Department at UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung. Many students had already begun utilizing ChatGPT to aid them in writing their research proposals. This phenomenon aligns with a growing trend across universities in Indonesia and globally, where students increasingly turn to AI for academic writing support. However, a deeper exploration of their perceptions and challenges is still lacking (Iftanti & Izza, 2023).

Therefore, this research aims to investigate how students perceive the use of ChatGPT in their proposal writing process. It also seeks to identify the specific challenges they encounter when using this tool. By understanding students' perspectives, this study can provide meaningful insights into how AI tools can be integrated into academic writing pedagogy, particularly for EFL learners who face unique linguistic and cognitive challenges.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach with a case study design to explore EFL students' perspectives on using ChatGPT in writing their research proposals (Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2009). A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it allows for an in-depth exploration of students' experiences, attitudes, and challenges (Creswell, 2018). The case study design was selected specifically to investigate a bounded system—the eighth-semester students of the English Education Department at UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung—who had experience using ChatGPT in academic writing (Yin, 2003).

The research participants consisted of 20 students who were in the final semester of their undergraduate program. All participants completed a questionnaire designed to capture general insights into their use of ChatGPT. From this group, a smaller sample of six students was selected for in-depth interviews. These students were chosen based on their frequent and consistent use of ChatGPT throughout their proposal writing process. This purposive sampling ensured that the data collected were rich and relevant to the objectives of the study (Sugiyono, 2012).

Two primary methods of data collection were utilized: questionnaires and semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2018). The questionnaire comprised close-ended questions to gather quantifiable data about students' usage patterns, frequency, and general attitudes toward ChatGPT. Meanwhile, the semi-structured interviews provided deeper insight into personal experiences, opinions, and specific challenges. This dual method allowed the researcher to triangulate the data, increasing the validity and depth of the findings (Patton, 1999).

Interviews were conducted via WhatsApp, utilizing both voice and chat formats, depending on the participants' availability and preference. Open-ended questions allowed participants to elaborate on their responses and share their individual experiences. The interview guide included prompts related to their reasons for using ChatGPT, their typical interactions with the tool, and how it impacted their writing process (Sugiyono, 2012). This flexible format ensured that each participant could share their unique perspective while also covering key themes aligned with the study's objectives.

The data collected from both the questionnaires and interviews were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's (1994) Interactive Model, which consists of three steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. In the reduction phase, the researcher categorized and condensed the raw data into manageable segments. The display phase involved organizing the data visually to identify recurring themes and patterns. Finally, conclusions were drawn by interpreting the data within the context of existing literature and theoretical frameworks.

Ethical considerations were also observed throughout the study. Participants were informed of the research's purpose and provided consent before participating. Confidentiality was maintained, and all data were anonymized to protect students' identities. The researcher also ensured neutrality during data collection and analysis, aiming for an objective and unbiased interpretation of the students' responses (Cohen et al., 2007).

This methodological design allowed for a comprehensive understanding of how ChatGPT is perceived and utilized by EFL students. The combination of qualitative tools and theoretical rigor provided a strong foundation for analyzing the benefits and limitations of ChatGPT in academic writing, especially within the context of research proposal development (Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2009).

FINDING AND DISCUSSIONS

Results

The findings of this study revealed that the majority of the participants perceived ChatGPT as a helpful and supportive tool in their academic writing, particularly in composing research proposals. Students reported that ChatGPT aided them in various aspects of the writing process, including brainstorming ideas, paraphrasing, organizing content, and refining grammar (Cronje, 2023; Song & Song, 2023). Many found that ChatGPT helped them overcome initial writing blocks, especially when they were unsure how to begin their proposals or how to phrase their research questions.

From the questionnaire data, it was evident that all 20 participants had used ChatGPT at some point during their writing process. Most students reported using the tool multiple times, with 85% indicating frequent use during the planning and drafting stages. Their use ranged from generating outlines and paraphrasing literature to formulating research questions and rephrasing sentences for better clarity. This suggests that students did not rely on ChatGPT for final writing, but rather as a brainstorming and revision assistant (De La Vall & Araya, 2023).

The interview results supported these quantitative findings, providing deeper insights into students' experiences. Several interviewees emphasized the usefulness of ChatGPT in helping them expand their ideas (Song & Song, 2023; Taecharungroj, 2023). For example, when they provided the tool with a rough topic or key terms, ChatGPT could generate related concepts, questions, or even short paragraphs that the students could then refine. This process helped them develop the content of their proposals more systematically.

In addition, students reported that ChatGPT was particularly valuable for improving language use. Many students admitted struggling with grammar, vocabulary, and academic tone. With ChatGPT, they were able to check sentence structure, rephrase awkward wording, and enhance the formal quality of their writing (Mondal & Mondal, 2023; Kim & Wong, 2023). One participant noted that ChatGPT helped her "sound more academic" when expressing her ideas, which increased her confidence in her writing.

Despite the advantages, students also encountered challenges while using ChatGPT. One of the most frequently mentioned problems was the need to formulate clear and specific prompts. Students observed that vague prompts often led to irrelevant or overly general

responses, which did not meet their expectations. Learning how to “talk” to ChatGPT effectively became a skill in itself, and not all students felt confident in doing so (Giray, 2023).

Another issue raised was the accuracy of the information generated. Although students appreciated the speed and fluency of ChatGPT’s responses, some were cautious about the credibility of the content. A few participants encountered instances where ChatGPT generated incorrect data, misused terminology, or fabricated references. As a result, many students stressed the importance of verifying ChatGPT’s output with academic sources or textbooks.

Some students also expressed concern about becoming too dependent on the tool. They acknowledged that while ChatGPT could help them write faster and more fluently, it might hinder their own critical thinking and creativity if overused. One student remarked that “it’s tempting to just copy what ChatGPT says,” which could weaken his ability to analyze and construct arguments independently. This concern highlights the need for awareness and balance in the use of AI tools.

Interestingly, students developed their own strategies for using ChatGPT more effectively. Some described a trial-and-error process in which they refined their prompts over time to get better responses. Others mentioned using ChatGPT as a “second opinion” after writing their own drafts, checking for clarity and coherence. This strategic use indicates that students were not passive users but actively engaged with the tool to meet their academic goals.

Students also reflected on how using ChatGPT affected their motivation. Several participants shared that the tool made the writing process feel less stressful and more manageable. Instead of spending hours stuck on a paragraph, they could use ChatGPT to get unstuck and continue writing. This sense of progress boosted their confidence and encouraged them to keep working on their proposals.

In summary, the results demonstrate that ChatGPT served as both a facilitator and a challenge in students’ research proposal writing. While it provided practical support in generating content and improving language, it also demanded critical use, precise prompting, and ethical awareness. The students’ experiences suggest that ChatGPT can be a valuable academic aid when used wisely and in combination with human effort and critical thinking.

Discussion

1. Students Perceive the Use of ChatGPT as A Supporting Tool in Writing Research Proposals

The findings indicate that students generally view ChatGPT as a beneficial and supportive tool in their academic writing journey, particularly in composing research proposals. Many of them appreciated how the tool provided instant feedback and allowed them to explore various ideas quickly. ChatGPT helped them in tasks such as paraphrasing, checking grammar, improving sentence structure, and brainstorming. This perception reflects an increased acceptance of AI in academic settings, especially when traditional support systems like writing centers or direct mentorship are limited (Cronje, 2023; Song & Song, 2023).

Students valued the flexibility and accessibility that ChatGPT offered. They described how they could consult ChatGPT at any time, unlike human tutors who have time constraints. This availability gave them a sense of control and independence in managing their academic writing tasks (De La Vall & Araya, 2023; Taecharunroj, 2023). Furthermore, they appreciated the speed with which ChatGPT responded to their queries, which helped them maintain momentum during the writing process, reducing anxiety and frustration commonly associated with writing in a second language.

Another significant aspect of students’ positive perception was the role ChatGPT played in enhancing their confidence. When students felt unsure about their grammar, vocabulary, or structure, ChatGPT acted as a reassurance tool. By offering suggestions and alternatives, the AI helped students craft more polished drafts and see how their ideas could be efficiently

presented. This kind of support appeared to increase students' willingness to revise and experiment with their writing, contributing positively to their learning experience (Mondal & Mondal, 2023; Kim & Wong, 2023).

However, this favorable perception came with a degree of caution. While students acknowledged the advantages of using ChatGPT, they also recognized the potential risks. They were aware that not all the content generated by ChatGPT was accurate or appropriate for academic use. This self-awareness was an encouraging sign, showing that students were not blindly dependent on the tool but instead saw it as a complement to their own skills (Kim et al., 2024; Alkaissi & McFarlane, 2023). Some used ChatGPT to confirm ideas they already had or to refine what they had written, rather than to create content from scratch.

Overall, students' perceptions of ChatGPT were largely positive. They viewed it as a helpful writing assistant rather than a replacement for their own thinking (Imran & Almusharraf, 2023; Giray, 2023). The tool was appreciated for its role in supporting idea development, improving clarity, and saving time. Importantly, students who gained the most benefit were those who used ChatGPT critically—asking it specific questions, verifying its output, and integrating it meaningfully into their writing process.

2. The Challenges Faced by Students in the Process of Writing Research Proposals Using Chatgpt as A Supporting Tool

Despite the supportive role of ChatGPT, students encountered several challenges when using the tool in their research proposal writing. A major issue was prompt formulation (Giray, 2023). Many students struggled to generate specific and clear instructions for ChatGPT, which often led to vague or irrelevant outputs. Since ChatGPT relies heavily on the clarity of the prompt, students had to learn through trial and error how to frame their questions or requests. This created frustration, especially among students with limited digital literacy or language proficiency.

Another challenge is related to the credibility of the information provided. Students reported that ChatGPT sometimes generated content that appeared academically correct but was, in fact, inaccurate or misleading. In several cases, the tool offered fabricated references or incorrect definitions of research terms. This posed a risk to academic integrity and required students to verify every output through external, trusted academic sources. While this verification process can enhance critical thinking, it also adds another layer of complexity for students unfamiliar with cross-checking academic content.

A further concern was the ethical and academic implications of using AI tools. Students worried about becoming too dependent on ChatGPT, to the point where it might limit their growth as independent writers and thinkers (Mondal & Mondal, 2023; Imran & Almusharraf, 2023). Some admitted that it was tempting to rely on the tool to rewrite entire sections of their proposal, especially when facing time constraints. This concern was reinforced by the fear that overuse of AI might blur the line between assistance and plagiarism. It suggests a need for clearer academic guidelines on how tools like ChatGPT should be used in higher education.

Students also noted that ChatGPT, although advanced, lacked context-specific understanding. It could not always grasp the nuances of their research topics, especially if the subject matter was highly specialized or culturally specific. This limitation reduced the usefulness of ChatGPT in more complex sections of the research proposal, such as explaining theoretical frameworks or local case studies (Dergaa et al., 2023). In such situations, students found that the tool required substantial modification and human input to be useful.

In conclusion, while ChatGPT offers significant support in writing research proposals, it also presents real challenges that EFL students must navigate. Issues such as prompt clarity, verification of information, ethical considerations, and limited contextual understanding require students to engage critically and responsibly with the tool. Success with ChatGPT,

therefore, depends not just on access, but on how effectively students can balance its use with their own judgment, skills, and academic responsibilities (Giray, 2023; Kim et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the perceptions and experiences of EFL students in using ChatGPT as a supporting tool in writing their research proposals. The findings demonstrate that the integration of AI into academic writing, particularly through ChatGPT, has introduced new opportunities and challenges in the learning process. Students generally held positive views regarding the utility of ChatGPT, appreciating its role in assisting them with content generation, grammar correction, paraphrasing, and organizing ideas. These findings underscore the growing importance of AI tools in assisting academic writing among non-native English speakers in higher education.

Throughout the research, it became evident that ChatGPT served as a productive writing assistant for students who were struggling with confidence, motivation, and language proficiency. It allowed them to work more efficiently, offering guidance during various stages of the writing process—from brainstorming and outlining to editing and polishing. In particular, ChatGPT empowered students to overcome writer's block, manage their time better, and improve the overall coherence and fluency of their proposals. This support proved to be especially beneficial for those who lacked easy access to conventional academic support systems like writing centers or frequent lecturer consultation.

At the same time, the study found that students' positive experiences with ChatGPT were not without limitations. Many expressed that using the tool required practice and strategic thinking, particularly in crafting effective prompts. The quality of output depended largely on the clarity of input, pushing students to develop new skills in digital literacy and communication. This process of prompt refinement and iterative use reflects an evolving interaction between human cognition and machine learning, where both parties play a role in knowledge production.

Another significant insight from the study was students' concern about the validity and reliability of the information generated by ChatGPT. While the tool could quickly produce convincing, academically sounding content, it occasionally delivered inaccurate or biased results, including fabricated citations. As a result, students were compelled to verify and cross-check outputs against credible sources. This behavior, although time-consuming, encouraged students to maintain critical thinking and analytical reading skills, which are essential for academic development.

The ethical dimension of using AI tools also emerged as a crucial concern. Students recognized the risk of over-reliance on ChatGPT, fearing that it might hinder their ability to think independently and develop original content. Some students reported a temptation to rely too heavily on the tool during periods of stress or time pressure. These reflections reveal the need for clear institutional guidelines on the acceptable and ethical use of AI tools in academic writing, as well as an emphasis on building students' self-regulation and integrity.

Despite these challenges, the findings suggest that when used responsibly, ChatGPT can function as a highly effective support system. Students who approached the tool with curiosity, critical thinking, and academic purpose reported the most benefits. They were able to integrate ChatGPT into their writing process in a way that enhanced rather than replaced their academic efforts. This points to the potential of AI tools to act as collaborative partners in learning, provided that students are equipped with the right skills and understanding.

The study also uncovered a growing awareness among students of the evolving role of technology in education. Their reflections demonstrated a balanced understanding of both the opportunities and risks presented by AI. They were aware that while ChatGPT can be a powerful ally in learning, it should not be seen as a substitute for deep engagement with course materials, academic texts, and human feedback. Such awareness is encouraging and suggests

that students are capable of using technology with discernment when given the appropriate training and support.

From an educational standpoint, these findings carry important implications for teachers and institutions. Educators must recognize the changing landscape of academic writing and consider integrating AI literacy into writing instruction. This includes teaching students how to evaluate AI-generated content, refine their prompts, and maintain academic honesty. Institutions, in turn, should develop policies that support ethical AI use while fostering environments that promote both innovation and critical thinking.

Furthermore, the study emphasizes the need for inclusive access to AI tools and training. Not all students may have the same level of access to technology or digital competence. Addressing this gap is crucial to ensuring that AI tools do not inadvertently widen educational inequalities. Providing workshops, resources, and support systems for responsible AI use will help all students engage more effectively with academic writing and research.

In conclusion, ChatGPT presents both promise and pitfalls for EFL students in academic writing. It can empower students to write with greater fluency, organization, and confidence—especially when they face linguistic or motivational barriers. However, its effectiveness depends on how critically and ethically it is used. As the role of AI in education continues to expand, it is essential for students, educators, and institutions to collaborate in shaping responsible, thoughtful, and meaningful practices for integrating such tools into the academic experience.

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