

L2 Writing with AI: Perceptions and Engagement of EFL Learners in China

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Abstract

Despite the growing use of artificial intelligence (AI) in foreign language education, research on how learners perceive and engage with AI tools remains limited. This study explores the perceptions and behaviors of Chinese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners regarding AI-assisted second/foreign language (L2) writing. Through qualitative thematic analysis, we examined data from 80 first-year undergraduates at a university in South China. The findings reveal that students perceive AI as significantly enhancing writing quality and efficiency in four key areas: language optimization, literature processing, content generation, and strategic support. While they recognize both the advantages and limitations of AI, these perceptions shape their engagement with these tools. The study also discusses the evolving nature of academic writing skills in the digital age, emphasizing the need for new pedagogical strategies. The results suggest a collaborative model that combines human creativity with AI capabilities to enhance the foreign language learning experience.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, L2 writing, learner cognition, behavioral patterns, collaborative model

1. Introduction

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming language teaching and learning. Tools like ChatGPT, GrammarlyGO, and Kimi.ai provide real-time feedback on grammar, vocabulary, structure, and style, reshaping cognitive and behavioral dynamics in foreign/second language (L2) classrooms (Godwin-Jones et al., 2024). In L2 writing, these AI tools serve as virtual assistants, offering immediate corrective feedback that is particularly beneficial for learners who struggle with fluency and accuracy. By supporting self-directed learning and encouraging self-editing, AI tools like ChatGPT and Kimi also boost learner confidence by suggesting alternative expressions (Marzuki et al., 2023).

AI tools help address surface-level errors, freeing teachers to focus on more complex writing concerns, such as argumentation, coherence, and creativity. For example, Kimi provides structured feedback that is aligned with pedagogical goals, assisting students in refining clarity and strengthening arguments in academic writing. However, growing reliance on AI raises concerns about overdependence, where students may lean too heavily on AI corrections without fully internalizing language structures. In addition, the accuracy and appropriateness of AI feedback, especially regarding nuanced or idiomatic expressions, highlight the need for critical oversight by teachers.

While AI holds significant potential in foreign language teaching, research has largely focused on teachers' perspectives (e.g. Guo Xi et al., 2023; Li, 2024), with limited exploration of students' cognitive and behavioral engagement with AI. This gap limits teachers' understanding of students' needs and challenges, restricting their ability to offer effective guidance in AI-supported learning contexts.

This study investigates learners' perceptions and behavioral engagement with AI tools in academic English writing. It aims to enhance human-computer collaboration in foreign language education and contribute to the broader discourse on AI's role in language learning.

2. Literature Review

2.1 AI Tools in L2 Writing

Early research on AI in language learning focused primarily on automated writing evaluation (AWE) tools, such as Pigai and Grammarly, marking the initial phase of AI integration into writing instruction. Most studies have evaluated the effectiveness of these tools within various instructional models. With the rise of generative AI tools like ChatGPT, research is now expanding to explore a wider range of AI applications in English writing instruction (Cao & Zhong, 2023). Despite advancements in AI-driven feedback, disparities remain in their effectiveness at improving language proficiency, often due to methodological and contextual factors, such as different feedback modes: AI-only, combined teacher and AI feedback, or peer feedback (Zhang & Hyland, 2018; Koltovskaia, 2020).

The rapid evolution of AI technologies has significantly expanded their role in foreign language education. Researchers are now investigating AI's impact on various aspects of English writing, including the writing process, human-AI collaboration, and academic integrity. For instance, Chen and Lv (2024) outlined the writing process in four stages- pre-writing, composing, reviewing, and reflecting- and used Activity Theory to assess ChatGPT's strengths and limitations at each stage. Their findings suggest that ChatGPT can take on roles traditionally filled by teachers, such as designing activities, providing language and cultural input, supervising language use, and reviewing essays. Consequently, teachers may adopt new roles, such as AI trainers, evaluators, risk mitigators, and reflection facilitators. This shift redefines the role of teachers in AI-assisted writing instruction and underscores the need for increased AI literacy among teachers.

In another study, Guo et al. (2023) explored human-AI collaborative writing, suggesting that AI can assist in tasks like identifying research trends, reviewing literature, generating outlines, offering insights, and improving overall writing quality. Similarly, Nguyen et al. (2024) examined doctoral students' collaboration with AI in academic writing. They found that students who engaged in iterative, interactive collaboration with AI tools produced superior writing outcomes compared to those who used AI merely as a supplementary resource. This highlights the importance of further research into human-AI collaboration in higher education to guide the development of tailored educational strategies and solutions.

However, the integration of AI into academic writing has raised concerns about academic integrity, particularly the risk of inadvertent plagiarism. Dale and Viethen (2021) discussed the controversies surrounding AI-assisted writing instruction, emphasizing the need for collaboration between AI developers and educational researchers to prevent explicit and implicit academic misconduct.

2.2 Learner Perceptions in AI-assisted Language Education

AI has transformed the traditional "teacher-student" dynamic into a "teacher-student-AI" triad, enriching the landscape of foreign language education. Research indicates that students generally hold a positive attitude toward AI-powered instruction, appreciating its adaptability to individual learning needs and its capacity to enhance language skills through real-time guidance and instant feedback (Wu et al., 2024). In L2 writing, students recognize AI's role in fostering educational innovation, reporting that AI increases motivation and improves writing skills, particularly in areas like organization, coherence, grammar, and vocabulary (Song & Song, 2023). Furthermore, studies suggest that when used appropriately, AI can provide efficient support, boosting students' motivation, engagement, and confidence in academic tasks, thereby facilitating writing progress (Feng, 2025).

However, despite these positive perceptions, students remain aware of potential challenges associated with AI in language education. Research has identified three main concerns among students using AI for writing support: first, doubts about the credibility and authenticity of AI-generated content; second, fears that over-reliance on AI may undermine their critical thinking skills; and third, concerns that widespread use of AI may exacerbate plagiarism and cheating issues (Zhai et al., 2024). Hartono et al. (2023) highlight two critical considerations for AI-assisted English instruction: (1) whether both teachers and students possess the necessary AI skills for effective use, and (2) whether an over-reliance on AI tools could dehumanize the learning process.

In summary, existing research predominantly offers a broad view of student attitudes toward AI-powered foreign language teaching, reflecting both positive and skeptical perspectives. However, there is a lack of focus on students' specific use of AI and their perceptions within distinct language-learning contexts. This study, therefore, explores learners' cognition and behavioral engagement in AI-assisted academic English writing, addressing the following two questions:

Q1: How do students perceive the role of AI in academic English writing? What are the advantages and limitations of AI across different application areas (e.g., language, content)?

Q2: What typical behavioral patterns emerge when students use AI in academic English writing?

3. Research Design

3.1 Participants

This study was conducted as part of an academic English writing course at a university in South China. The course, aimed at first-year undergraduate students from science and engineering disciplines, focused on equipping students with essential skills for effective academic communication in English. Topics covered included the structure of academic papers (abstract, introduction, methodology, results, conclusion) and the linguistic features of each section, with an emphasis on improving students' research paper writing and scholarly communication abilities.

The participants consisted of 80 first-year undergraduates from two writing classes. Their fields of study included information and communication engineering, electronic information, and electronics science and technology. The diversity of their academic backgrounds provided a relevant context for examining students' perceptions and engagement regarding AI use in academic English writing, especially considering the technical nature of their disciplines, which demand precise and formal language.

3.2 Instruments

Data for this study were collected through student reflective journals, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations.

Classroom observations were conducted over 15 weeks during the semester to observe and analyze students' use of AI in the academic English writing classroom. These observations focused on how students interacted with AI tools for various writing tasks, including incorporating AI-generated feedback into their drafts.

In Week 8 of the semester, students were asked to complete a reflective journal documenting their experiences with AI in academic writing. The journal focused on the methods employed, the challenges encountered, and their evaluation of AI's effectiveness in supporting their writing process.

At the end of the semester, 20 students (S1-S20) volunteered to participate in 30-minute semi-structured interviews. These interviews, conducted in conjunction with the reflection journals, were recorded and transcribed with the student's consent.

3.3 Data Analysis

This study employed qualitative thematic analysis to extract meaningful themes from student reflective journals and interview data. The analysis process involved three levels of coding, as outlined in Table 1, which illustrates the progression from initial codes to central themes.

Open Coding: The textual data were carefully reviewed, with open coding performed line by line and sentence by sentence to identify initial codes that captured key ideas and patterns.

Categorization: Similar codes were grouped to develop preliminary themes. For example, first-level codes such as "reading literature," "collecting literature," and "translating literature" were categorized under the second-level code "literature processing."

Theme Development: Second-level codes were reviewed, compared, and further analyzed to identify central themes forming the study's core findings. For instance, second-level codes such as "literature processing," "content generation," and "strategic support" were synthesized into a primary theme: that AI contributes to writing efficiency.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the findings, the study adopted data triangulation (Creswell, 2020). Reflective journals and interviews served as the primary data sources, with classroom observations providing complementary insights.

Table 1. Code Development Process

First-level coding	Second-level coding	Third-level coding
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Correcting grammar • Enhancing vocabulary • Fixing sentence structure • Reorganizing paragraphs • Improving coherence • Refining tone and style 	Language optimization	Improving writing quality
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading literature • Collecting literature • Translating literature • Summarizing articles • Annotating texts 	Literature processing	Increasing writing efficiency
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing templates • Offering ideas • Inspiring creativity • Generating examples • Suggesting alternative expressions 	Content generation	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing advice • Creating outlines • Offering step-by-step guidance • Providing feedback • Recommending improvement plans 	Strategic support	

4. Findings

4.1 Learner Perceptions

The qualitative thematic analysis indicates that students perceive AI as a supportive tool in academic English writing, focusing on two main themes. One theme is enhancing writing quality: students utilize AI for language optimization. The other is increasing writing efficiency: AI assists in literature processing, content generation, and strategic support, streamlining the writing process.

4.1.1 Improving Writing Quality

Students widely recognize that AI offers comprehensive language optimization, significantly enhancing the readability and quality of their writing. In their reflective journals, students reported using AI to address various language issues, such as "quickly checking and correcting grammatical and spelling errors to make the language more fluent," "incorporating advanced vocabulary, sentence structures, and expressions to make the language more formal," and "improving overall writing accuracy, fluency, and logical coherence." Some students shared, "I used AI to translate parts of writing from Chinese into English" (S5 interview)." These examples demonstrate that students utilize AI to enhance accuracy (e.g., correcting grammar and spelling), appropriateness (e.g., selecting suitable vocabulary and terminology), coherence (e.g., maintaining logical paragraph structure), and adherence to academic standards (e.g., formal style, citation formatting).

Students' understanding of AI's language optimization evolves through their experiences. For example, one student noted, "Previously, I needed multiple tools to complete different tasks like translation and grammar checking... now, a single tool with one command can accomplish it all, such as checking logical coherence" (S12, interview). Initially, students used AI for grammar correction, translation, and word choice; now, they employ AI for more complex, integrated language improvements.

While students acknowledge the benefits of AI in language optimization, they often overlook its limitations. Only 7 out of 80 students (8%) acknowledged potential risks such as data leakage. For example, reflective

journals highlighted concerns like, "Since the article is not published yet, AI may leak it," and "Be careful to protect personal privacy and critical data." This suggests that many students lack awareness of the privacy and data protection issues associated with AI technologies. It highlights the need for educational institutions to develop comprehensive programs that inform students about the ethical and security implications of AI, equipping them to navigate the digital landscape responsibly.

Some students reported an inability to "find faults" (S6 interview) or perceived "no need to find faults" (S11 interview) in AI-optimized language, suggesting potential over-reliance on AI. This lack of critical engagement can inhibit language development and diminish critical thinking skills. Studies suggest that while AI tools can improve decision-making and efficiency, they may also reduce students' analytical abilities (Zhai et al., 2024).

To address these issues, teachers can design assignments that combine AI support with independent writing to help students build their skills while using AI for targeted tasks like grammar checks or vocabulary suggestions. Additionally, incorporating peer review and reflective journaling can encourage students to critically evaluate AI-generated content and reflect on their reliance on AI.

4.1.2 Enhancing Writing Efficiency

The findings reveal three key areas where AI significantly enhances writing efficiency: literature processing, content generation, and strategic support.

(1) Literature Processing: Students found that AI helped them efficiently translate, analyze, and summarize literature, making it easier to read academic texts and understand current research trends. In their reflective journals, 62 students (77%) mentioned using AI for tasks like "collecting resources," "organizing literature," "translating," and "analyzing" literature. One student (S18) noted, "AI helps us quickly understand research trends by organizing and analyzing literature," highlighting its time-saving and efficiency-boosting benefits during literature reviews.

While AI tools can improve efficiency in literature processing, some students expressed concerns about the reliability and accuracy of AI-generated summaries. 15 students (18%) described these summaries as "incomplete," "inaccurate," or even "fabricated." For instance, one student (S3) noted, "Although I haven't experienced it firsthand, studies show that AI-generated reference lists can include fabricated entries and may not include the latest literature." These observations suggest that while AI can aid in processing literature, its outputs need to be verified. As such, students must develop critical skills to assess AI-generated content. Educational strategies promoting critical engagement and evaluation can help students effectively analyze and verify AI outputs.

(2) Content generation: AI enhances writing efficiency by generating relevant content for academic papers and providing writing ideas and templates. For example, students used prompts like "Write an introduction outlining the research background and problem" (reflective journal). They viewed AI-generated content as a source of inspiration, helping them "generate ideas," "broaden perspectives," "offer templates," and "stimulate creativity" (reflective journal). The data suggest that students do not simply copy and paste AI-generated content; instead, they engage in cognitive processing while interacting with it. This cognitive engagement, which is crucial for effective learning, deepens the human-AI interaction (Lu et al., 2021).

However, students also recognized limitations to AI-assisted content generation, citing concerns over the lack of originality and depth, as well as the risk of academic misconduct. Some noted, "AI relies on existing databases to analyze and reorganize content, lacking creativity," and "AI-generated content may incorporate others' ideas without proper citation, raising academic integrity concerns" (reflective journal). Three students (4%) explicitly stated that using AI for content generation contradicts academic ethics, with comments like, "We must uphold academic ethics and avoid using AI for content generation" (reflective journal). Interviews further revealed that 85% of students preferred drafting their work independently, using AI primarily for polishing and enhancement. This cautious stance reflects skepticism toward AI-generated content, underlining the need for teachers to guide students in critically evaluating the appropriateness of AI outputs.

(3) Strategic support: AI's ability to provide writing strategies is a key feature that addresses a crucial aspect of academic writing instruction. These strategies often include detailed methods, step-by-step guidance, and tailored recommendations, complementing and extending beyond traditional classroom instruction. Some students described these strategies as "more in-depth than class explanations" (S17, interview). Students frequently used prompts starting with "How" (e.g., "How to present research findings") to seek AI-generated writing advice, as noted in their reflective journals. Compared to general online searches, AI offers more precise, customized suggestions. S19 observed that "AI-generated writing advice is representative because it is based on

big data, and specific prompts yield more relevant, personalized guidance." This reflects the growing emphasis on personalized learning, a core goal of AI-enhanced language instruction.

Some students view the use of AI-generated writing strategies as relatively risk-free. Participant S8 remarked, "The quality of AI-generated strategies depends on the prompts, and writing strategies do not involve ethical issues, so they are safe to use." This perspective stresses AI's potential to enhance academic writing by providing precise, customizable, and ethically secure support.

However, the effectiveness of AI-generated strategies is limited by the quality of user input, or "prompts." To optimize the relevance and utility of AI-provided strategies, students must accurately identify their specific writing challenges and formulate precise prompts. Developing prompt literacy is essential, as it empowers learners to effectively harness AI tools for their writing needs.

In short, while AI enhances writing quality and efficiency, concerns about over-reliance and data security persist. To promote balanced and responsible AI utilization in writing development, students should be trained to craft clear, targeted prompts and critically evaluate AI-generated content.

4.2 Learner Behavioral Patterns

In exploring learners' cognition in AI-assisted academic English writing, several common behavioral patterns emerged. These patterns reflect diverse approaches to AI "support" and highlight critical considerations for effective AI use.

4.2.1 AI-dominated: Copy and Paste

A common pattern in using AI to optimize language was the direct adoption of AI-generated suggestions. In interviews, all 20 respondents reported that they "would not" or "rarely" reconsider or modify AI-suggested language recommendations, often opting to "copy and paste" and "use as it is." The "direct use" pattern suggests potential drawbacks for language development. Without critical engagement, students miss opportunities for deeper cognitive processing, such as comparison, analysis, and evaluation. This limits language acquisition and the development of key language skills. Although AI enhances language and improves writing quality, students' abilities in word accuracy, sentence structure variety, and logical coherence have not substantially improved. Additionally, students often overlook disciplinary differences in language expression, as AI's language optimization is generally tailored to broad academic contexts. Thus, students need guidance in assessing the disciplinary relevance of AI's language suggestions.

4.2.2 AI-inspired: Referencing and Processing

Considering the strengths and limitations of AI in managing literature and generating content, students often adopt a referencing and processing approach to AI outputs, reflecting an AI-inspired assistance model. Many students noted: "AI-generated literature lists need to be checked, corrected, and supplemented" (S10, interview); "AI-written content should not be directly copied and pasted; it is just for reference"; "Based on AI-generated content, I modify it by incorporating my insights and thoughts" (reflective journal).

While students acknowledge the importance of referencing AI-generated content, few elaborate on their specific methods, leaving the depth of their engagement ambiguous. Questions arise about how effectively they apply critical thinking to analyze, evaluate, and selectively integrate AI-generated material. Additionally, for some, this "referencing and processing" behavior appears more aspirational than practiced, driven by others' experiences rather than their own. Such indirect experiences, being more abstract, exert a limited impact on students' cognition, knowledge acquisition, and learning behaviors (Andresen et al., 2020). As a result, students may not consistently apply these "referencing and processing" practices in their future use of AI tools.

4.2.3 AI-guided: Transfer and Application

Students frequently exhibit a transfer and application behavior pattern toward AI-generated writing strategies, reflecting an AI-guided assistance model characterized by active engagement. For example, some students noted: "I flexibly apply AI-generated writing strategies in my writing" (S13, interview); "I implement AI's guidance and suggested steps progressively in my writing" (S9, interview).

This approach involves transforming and transferring knowledge, where students adapt AI-generated strategies to specific writing contexts. This demonstrates a deep understanding of AI outputs and an ability to integrate and apply information effectively. In AI-assisted writing instruction, teachers should support students in applying learned strategies to real-world situations, fostering their human-AI collaboration and knowledge transfer skills.

Students' cognitive engagement with AI-generated content varies, and their perceptions of AI influence their behaviors. When students adopt AI-generated results directly, AI's dominance is stronger. Conversely, when

students deeply process AI outputs, their involvement and decision-making become more prominent. By thoughtfully integrating AI into writing instruction, teachers can encourage students to apply knowledge in practical contexts, enhancing their ability to transfer and adapt skills across diverse scenarios.

Overall, students demonstrate diverse behavioral patterns in their use of AI, ranging from passive reliance on AI to more active engagement. These patterns reinforce the importance of teachers guiding students to critically assess AI outputs, apply effective strategies, and cultivate deeper cognitive engagement to maximize the potential of AI use in academic writing.

4.3 Implications

This study offers valuable insights for pedagogical practice in L2 writing instruction. Students' use of AI at various stages of the writing process—to gather information, clarify concepts, correct errors, and generate suggestions—illustrates the role of AI as both a learning assistant and an active collaborator. This practice exemplifies human-machine collaboration (HMC), where AI handles routine, repetitive tasks, allowing humans to focus on more complex, creative aspects of writing.

In human-AI collaborative teaching practices, both teachers and students should take the lead in integrating AI as a supportive tool, rather than a mere shortcut. This approach ensures authentic learning experiences while effectively enhancing students' skills. AI integration in L2 writing courses also requires training students to design effective prompts to elicit desired results from AI tools. Meanwhile, teachers must be equipped with strategies for incorporating AI effectively into their instruction.

By fostering AI literacy and promoting meaningful human-AI collaboration, teachers can create more engaging and impactful L2 writing instruction, leveraging the complementary strengths of both human and machine intelligence.

5. Conclusion

This study, through qualitative thematic analysis of students' reflective journals and interviews from an academic English writing course, reveals their perceptions of AI's strengths and limitations. It also identifies typical behavioral patterns that students adopt when engaging with AI during their writing process.

The findings suggest that effective AI integration in L2 writing instruction requires attention to learners' perceptions, existing practices, and contextual factors. Teachers need targeted training to incorporate AI effectively into instruction, while educational systems should provide relevant policies, resources, and support. Positive perceptions of AI can lead to improved learning outcomes when both students and teachers are adequately supported and guided.

Despite its contributions, the study has limitations in scope and methodology. Future research could expand the sample to include students from various disciplines, educational stages, and levels of English proficiency. Moreover, investigating how different factors influence learner perceptions and engagement with AI, and examining its impact on EFL learners' writing performance, would provide further valuable insights.

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