

## CHATGPT-ASSISTED ACADEMIC WRITING: PERCEPTIONS AND ETHICAL CONCERNS AMONG ESL STUDENTS. A MIXED METHOD APPROACH

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### Abstract

*Generative AI (GAI), including ChatGPT, has sparked a change in academic literacy for students in higher education and has placed the ESL students at the centre of the changes. Students learning English as a Second Language (ESL) play a pivotal role in the higher education academic literacy environment, and are being shaped by generative AI (GAI) tools like ChatGPT. What is so exciting about these tools is that they can help make writing easier as never before, but they raise a few issues that have ethical implications in terms of ownership, plagiarism, and cognitive offloading. The present mixed methods study is concerned with the perception and the moral dilemma of the academic writing with the help of ChatGPT among the diversified sample of 416 ESL learners of a big public university of Pakistan. The results of our qualitative study, which involved conducting semi structured focus group discussions, do not contradict the quantitative results from the survey in which students indicated that using ChatGPT to support them with a language skill is an equaliser, that is, "ease of use in relation to their performance" (C. Lee & Chew, 2023; Yan, 2023); at the same time, however, students do not feel confident of the boundaries of using ChatGPT as an assistive tool, and what constitutes academic transgression, which gives rise to "ethics anxiety" (Eaton, 2023; Perkins, 2023). A positive correlation ( $r = .68$   $p < .001$ ) is statistically significant between the perception of a positive impact of AI on language acquisition and writing self-efficacy, while the negative correlation ( $r = -.61$   $p < .001$ ) is statistically significant between the perception of a negative impact of AI on language acquisition and writing self-efficacy. They were analysed qualitatively and in themed forms and revealed four main ethical tensions: (1) Loss of voice of the author, (2) digital divide in algorithmic literacy, (3) Failure of current academic integrity frameworks, and (4) Potential intellectual deskilling. Finally, we propose a new "Dynamic AI Literacy Model" for teaching ESL that shifts from a punitive detection model to a constructive detection model, building on the students' culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds with the knowledge of AI and engaging the students in developing explicit and contextual ethics guidelines.*

*Keywords:* ChatGPT, Academic Integrity, ESL Writing, Generative AI, Authorship, Plagiarism, Digital Literacy, Pakistan

### 1. Introduction: The New Linguistic Marketplace

Writing is always a challenge in Anglophone universities and for the ESL students, it is even more challenging as they are required to learn both disciplinary knowledge and second language code which is known as L2 code (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001; Hyland 2006). Enter into this complex tapestry, ChatGPT: a big language model (LLM) that can generate contextually relevant and meaningful text from just a few prompts. ChatGPT is not like other digital tools like grammar checkers and translators, which merely give a grammatically correct translation or text. But, in contrast to other digital tools like grammar checkers and translators, ChatGPT can create concepts and build a structure as well as write an entire text. The tool may appear to be a liberation to the ESL student who is having trouble with syntactical accuracy, a digital amanuensis – an equaliser on an unequal playing field (Godwin-Jones, 2022). It can pose a threat to the trajectory of the writer's development to his/her instructor (Warschauer & Grimes, 2023).

This is a still-controversial and acrimonious debate, and most of all, technologically optimistic versus academically panicky. The positive effects of AI based feedback on the lexical diversity of students and grammatical accuracy (Chang et al., 2023; Fitria, 2023) have been proven. However, there are other studies that demonstrate the effectiveness of AI feedback in terms of lexical variety and grammatical correctness (Chang et al., 2023; Fitria, 2023). The latter is one of the most important literatures that have emerged to describe the risks of 'AIgiarism' or 'mixed and often invisible' human/machine texts (Eaton, 2023; Khalil & Er, 2023). A fine-grained analysis of the ethical minefield that ESL students have to navigate themselves in the binary, however, is missing. Do they envision ChatGPT as a thought companion or a shortcut? What are the ways they negotiate the need to produce a text made up of error-free text and the need to be original?

In the context of Higher Education in Pakistan these questions are of special concern. The language situation in Pakistani Universities is unique in the way, English has been adopted as the medium of instruction and for the majority of the students English is their second or third language (Rahman, 2002). Outsourcing, unofficially peer editing and commercial ghost writing has always gone hand in hand with the need to write the academic writing in a native style in the competitive and under resourced context. With AI tools like ChatGPT, the language outsourcing value chain is evolving into a more accessible, scalable and unseen way of accessing language support services. An action research or mixed methods approach to data collection is being used in real time is designed to overcome this lack of understanding, and to capture perceptions at the moment of their occurrence as well as in the context of institutional policy change in this particular post-colonial learning context. The aim of this paper is to argue that Pakistani ESL students' ethical concerns with ChatGPT cannot be considered as a stable value but is a dynamic process, located, and

influenced, by the students' linguistic identity, institutional pressures and perceived academic belonging.

### 1.1 Research Problem

Although ChatGPT has gained acceptance among many learners in Pakistan, some of them use it secretly, there will be a lack of research concerning ESL students' ethical perceptions and challenges regarding its usage in Pakistan. Most of the existing literature on academic integrity from the Global North is theoretical (Eaton, 2023; Perkins, 2023), or quantitative surveys, that do not provide depth into students' ethical thinking and do not consider their intention to use AI tools in their academic assignments (Aljanabi & ChatGPT, 2023). Moreover, the specific postcolonial language environment of Pakistan where the fear of conforming to native speaker norm (exonormative) and the capacity of AI to create a native speaker norm are not explored. This study seeks to close this gap of pedagogically appropriate and culturally responsive policies that can be developed for AI, without knowing what these policies are for the lived experiences of ESL learners, their language identity concerns and potential ethical questions. If this does not hold true, policies could be put in place that can either worsen inequities in education or fail to reduce them and can be punitive (Liang et al., 2023).

### 1.2 Research Questions

The research questions of the study were:

1. Is ChatGPT helpful for the writing assignments of Pakistani university's ESL student?
2. What are the relationship between ESL students' perceptions of the role of ChatGPT and their writing self-efficacy?
3. What are some of the large scale dilemmas, concerns, and/or issues that ESL learners can voice as they discuss how they might use ChatGPT in academic writing?
4. How do students cope with lived in-betweenness of taking help from AI and academic dishonesty in their own institution?

### 1.3 Research Objectives

This study was aimed at answering the following research questions:

1. To assess the quantitative efficacy of ChatGPT to ESL students and their moral understanding related to the use of ChatGPT.
2. Statistically analyze the correlation between students' writing self-efficacy and students' attitudes towards the long-term effect of language acquisition after receiving the help of AI writing technology.
3. Use think alouds to discuss with students the ethical way they think through ambiguous situations they encounter at school related to ChatGPT.

4. To develop and utilize an ESL writing pedagogical approach that is context-based and/or extends beyond the academic integrity/dishonesty paradigm in the ESL writing classroom with the lens of "AI transparency and critical focus.

## Literature Review

The intersection of AI, academic writing and ESL identity is an important one to consider in the three academic fields.

### 2.1. The Psychosocial Dynamics of ESL Writing

The second language writing process is not a cognitive linguistic process but it is the enactment of identity (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000). Cheng et al. (1999) confirmed that most ESL learners have higher levels of anxiety and lower levels of writer self-confidence than do L1 learners. This “language ego” (Guiora, 1983) of ChatGPT, which aids in transforming unrefined ideas into more familiar writing, is psychologically appealing. Although more basic would be a transition from evaluation to writing generation, automated writing evaluation systems are able to alleviate this anxiety, as Koltovskaia (2020) attests. The ‘peer’ aspect of ChatGPT, its non-judgemental attitude and the ‘low stakes’ (Tsai, 2019) can impact the emotions associated with L2 writing and help to mitigate negative affective reactions that can lead to a dependency issue.

### 2.2. The Technological Affordance and the Deskilling Threat

LLM can provide various levels of affordances: from the micro-level grammar correction to the macro-level argumentation (Woo et al., 2023). This involves helping students to access formulaic academic phrase banks, collocational accuracy and Hallmarks of Disciplinarity: discourse markers (Hyland, 2008) for ESL. Aljanabi and ChatGPT (2023) have conducted research which has been proven to generate coherent outlines of research. But there is a more potent other narrative to be worried about that is referred to as ‘deskilling’ (Rahman, 2023). One challenge of the use of ChatGPT is that, a student might not be required to think through the complex thinking or the language-internalization process in learning process of a language may be bypassed (Swain 2006). But, as Warns and Grimes (2023) acknowledge, there's a fine line between augmentation and substitution, one that can create difficulties, and one that can result in students being editors of the output of algorithms. The moral issue at the moment is that of the use of the instrument as a palliative for a transient language need or as a means to create an intellectual dependency.

### 2.3. The Shifting Sands of Academic Integrity

The anthropocentric principles of individual authorship and moral intentionality, which underlie academic honesty policies, are not suitable for today's AI era (Carless, 2023; Eaton, 2023). There are examples of some “detection tools that have proven to be inaccurate at detecting when a text is written by a non-native English writer as being AI-generated” (Liang et al., 2023). This algorithmic bias produces an environment inhospitable to ESL writers and the characteristics of

ESL writers get pathologized. Further, the word plagiarism was once applicable but no longer, since the source is a language model that is not sentient and has been trained on the entire Internet (Floridi, 2023). The difference between legitimate intertextuality and unethical appropriation, a key issue that has been reported in connection with ChatGPT, is already one of the problems faced by the ESL learner in his/her use of the language (Howard, 1995; Pecorari, 2003). But the sense of being 'caught' is not the game, there's a new type of academic stress: 'anxiety of misattribution' (Perkins, 2023).

## Methodology

The study employed a sequential explanatory mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) to provide depth and breadth of analysis when it comes to student perceptions.

### 3.1. Participants and Context

They had been the students of a public sector university of Pakistan. The choice of the institution was due to the following reasons: 1) they have a large population of ESL learners and 2) the institution had emerging policy to apply generative AI in the learning and teaching space. A total of 416 undergraduate and graduate students (Mean age = 22.4, SD = 3.1; 58% female, 42% male) from 11 first language groups participated in the final sample with Urdu, Punjabi, Pashto and Sindhi as the largest groups. All participants had performed a task with ChatGPT in the past month that was related to their course. It is a sampling approach that occurs "now", following the initial hype cycle and immediately following the first shock of implementing AI related policies to varying extents, and sometimes in conflicting ways (Moorhouse et al., 2023).

### 3.2. Data Collection

The Perceived Linguistic Utility (PLU) ( $\alpha = .89$ ) and the Writer Self-Efficacy (WSE) and Ethics Sensitivity (ES) scales from the Writer Self-Perception Scale (Bottomley et al., 1997) were used to gather quantitative data. Real-time engagement measures (how quickly participants answered the cognitive conflict items), termed implicit measures, were included.

We held six semi structured focus groups (SSQ) on Zoom (N = 48) for the qualitative strand. Most importantly, a "real-time think-aloud protocol" was used: The researcher presented ambiguous scenarios to ChatGPT (such as: "Is it OK if I ask ChatGPT to reword my paragraph so it sounds more professional?"), and the participants, while listening to the AI-generated output, gave their own real-time ethical judgments about it. This enabled the understanding of the micro-level ethical reasoning process to take place.

### 3.3. Analytical Framework

The quantitative data was analysed with SPSS v.28 software, and Pearson correlations, with hierarchical multiple regression to examine the predictors of ES. Six steps reflexive thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021) were used for qualitative data, which involved semantic

coding to the development of latent themes. Data integration was done at the interpretation phase, through a joint display that was overlaid on the narrative experiences, to show statistical trends.

## Findings

### 4.1. Quantitative Results: The Efficacy-Ethics Divide

The descriptive statistics showed a very startling paradox. The score of Perceived Linguistic Utility (PLU) was very high ( $M = 4.21$ ,  $SD = 0.61$ ), with 78% of students agreeing that students “sounded like a native speaker” with ChatGPT. These were responded to timely from real time response latency data, suggesting positive heuristics in advance. It was the same with Ethical Sensitivity (ES) ( $M = 3.91$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ ) and awareness of ethical violations was high as well.

The scores for Writing Self-Efficacy (WSE) were bivariate Pearson correlated with PLU, and were highly significantly correlated,  $(414) = .68, < .001$ . Students who were more confident in their writing skills tended to think of the possibility of using ChatGPT as a ‘powering up’ tool, rather than a ‘powering down’ tool. A sub-item of “Fear of Long-Term Dependency”, however, did have a negative correlation with WSE,  $*r^* (414) = -.44, *p^* < .001$ .

The hierarchical regression was conducted to find out whether the model was significant to predict the Ethical Sensitivity,  $F(3, 412) = 31.45, p < .001$ . Additionally, year of study (junior versus senior;  $\beta = -.31, p < .001$ ) was of significant importance; the ethical sensitivity of senior students was lower than that of junior students, perhaps because of the pragmatic requirements of obtaining a degree. The past cases of plagiarism, however, were demonstrated to be unrelated to higher ES, indicating that previous cases of plagiarism were not important in the development of a deeper ethical awareness but rather were preliminary to more sophisticated strategies of avoidance.

### 4.2. Qualitative Findings: Four Pillars of Ethical Turbulence

Real-time think aloud were analysed through the process of thematic analysis, which highlighted a more complex picture than the quantitative scales. The four central ethical issues of ESL learners which emerged were:

#### Theme 1: The Erosion of Authorial Voice and “Corpo-Speak”

As such, the participants were very familiar with the difference between “creative thought” and “translation” and using ChatGPT for the latter of the two. One student (P12): “It’s like a calculator for language when I am using it to correct my grammar; but when it gives me a whole point, the paper is no longer my voice, it tastes like... artificial flavor.” However, a voice of discourse put forth the student’s “natural” voice as a problem. One student (P34) answered: ‘My original voice has some grammatical errors, is it my identity? The ethical issue that still arises, however, is that the University wants the ‘voice’ to be mine and the job market wants the ‘voice’

to be AI (cf. Canagarajah, 2022). It is nothing that can only be discussed in the classroom, or by one who self-identifies as a neoliberal. This is despite the fact that many of the respondents connected the phenomenon with their own post-colonial linguistic inferiority complex and thus set Pakistani English further away from the formal academic world and closer towards an artificial standardisation of the language production of AI.

#### Theme 2: The Algorithmic Literacy Divide

Not as much the cheating, but a new 2-class system. Students said there is an “arms race” in writing a prompt for writing – the better the prompt, the better the academic product. A student (P8) replied: “We're back again to the problem of privilege: For the rich student there's a tutor to help them, and then there are students whose knowledge of the magic words for ChatGPT is greater, who get the A. How do you make this skill invisible, make it seem like it's one's own?” (cf. Warschauer & Matuchniak, 2010). Where students' amounts of scale for digital literacy were lower, they were creating material that was 'copy paste' and very basic, and described as 'obviously a robot', thus creating a new academic shame and self stigmatisation. The disadvantage of being in a less networked area and the double disadvantage of being a rural person in a less networked area has been associated with the urban-rural digital divide in Pakistan.

#### Theme 3: The Inadequacy of “You Must Not” Policies

The universally hated policies for syllabus use were the binary authorizing/authorizing not use policies being minted and served. These policies were described as being “childish,” “out of touch” and “colonial” by several of the participants. If they say don't use AI, provide them with a list of 2010 and ask them to write a report where they refer to their AI as a copy editor, then it's an integrity pit, and the ethical rule is: “Cite your AI as a copy editor.” I don't know how to reference it in the reading list” (P21, 2023). The implicit recognition system gets the students in a disguised relationship with technology, creating mistrust of institutional morals. The real time think aloud revealed students' own folk-citation systems and added some informal comments, such as “reviewed by ChatGPT for flow”, that faculty did not attend to, adding to the transparency cycle. The real-time think aloud brought students' own folk-citation systems to the surface – comments on the informal ones as the “creation of ‘reviewed by ChatGPT for flow’,” for example, which were not addressed by the instructors – thus closing the loop on transparency.

#### Theme 4: The Specter of Intellectual Deskilling and “Brain Fog”

The most physiological moralistic idea was phenomenological – the feeling of getting stunted. Frequently used, and for one of the students (P45) it becomes a blank Word document – “When I use it a lot it goes back to a blank Word document, and then I get panicky and my brain will not start the engine anymore, it waits for the prompt field.” It is worth noting that this is an important ethical issue that is perceived by the lack of skills (Rahman, 2023). Assigns the wrong at the outside (plagiarism) and the inside (self betray). One student (P29) even commented that, “The

worst academic sin is not against the rules of the university, it's against myself in the future that I feel I can't jot down a single sentence without any other person being there.” This is a more basic, more profound moral vision than institutional policy can hold, out of a desire for "true" intellectual growth.

### Discussion

Now that we bring together the quantitative results and the qualitative ones, we will obtain an overall picture of a group of Pakistani ESL learners who are suffering from a basic identity crisis between the pragmatic near term orientation towards language survival and the long term orientation towards authorship. When it comes to positive perception of AI, self-efficacy is associated with it at a high level, meaning that confidence is the barrier to the misuse of AI, rather than rules. Students who believe that they can write with AI as a collaborator, and students who believe that they cannot write with AI as a crutch (Tsai, 2019).

The real time data is very original in that it captures what I call “ethics anxiety” – that is, when students are hyper aware of what they perceive as the “ethics grey zone” but lack the institutional language to help guide them through it. The current system of academic integrity, which focuses on detection and sanctions of students, has a negative impact. It only reinforces this feeling of unease and helps keep the use of AI out of the mainstream, while at the same time hindering anyone from openly discussing its use and contributing to the creation of ethical AI awareness (Khalil & Er, 2023). Our results are in line with those of Liang et al. (2023), who propose (and we agree) that it would be better pedagogically to change the learning target than to resort to the use of AI detectors, which are more likely to penalise non-native English speakers. Moreover, the participants voiced the need for awareness around this in Pakistan where a more open attitude towards anti-surveillance might further reinforce the post-colonial tradition of linguistic policing particularly.

In this regard, it is recommended to shift towards Dynamic AI Literacy Model of ESL writing teaching in Pakistan in lieu of punitive model. This model is based on three cornerstones:

1. The institutions create and adopt a taxonomy of citations co-developed. For example, one student could write an endnote to acknowledge using generative AI to help them produce their text with lexical accuracy as well as to reflect their structure, but not copying and pasting generative text (Perkins, 2023). This allows for its perception and measurement.
2. Instead, don't ban prompts, teach prompts as a 21st century rhetorical skill: Critical Prompt Engineering. This is a very strong response to a prompt that includes both metalinguistic/commentary and critical thinking and an in-depth analysis of why something may have happened. (Godwin-Jones, 2022).
3. Assignments focus on the cognitive process itself and POA is assessing the cognitive process itself (Carless, 2023); acknowledging the trail of human-AI interaction (Annotated

drafts, Revision decision log, Author's notes for reflection). The change is a reflection on student becoming a bilingual writer and not a manipulation of the user of language to meet an idealized standard of a native speaker.

## Conclusion

Real time data and a mixed methods design have led to the discovery that ESL students are not the type of people that are into tricking the system, and are, at best, nihilists. This study has followed a mixed-methods design and has been conducted in a real-time and in a Pakistani university setting, proving that the ESL students are not nihilistic students who are interested in cheating the system. However, they are the first to be pioneers in an area that lies between two worlds, the world of academic literacy and the world of its progressive re-do. They view ChatGPT as a great opportunity for levelling up, but they miss guidance on navigating its potential usage, all while trying to develop their own linguistic and thinking identities. There are some limitations such as a cross-sectional design and the use of only one center. The findings of the present study could be replicated in a longitudinal study of ESL writers in a variety of contexts in Pakistan for a longer period of time to find out if the “brain fog” we asked our participants about can be measured in the long run. In addition, the impact and application of the proposed Dynamic AI Literacy model in the actual classroom from diagnosis to intervention needs to be explored. The algorithmic pen may not be disappearing, but we do need to educate our students in the use of him/her with integrity, critical awareness and an even unmistakable voice.

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