

A Qualitative Study of EFL Students' Experiences with AI Tools in English Language Learning

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Abstract

The development of artificial intelligence (AI) technology has provided new opportunities in learning English as a foreign language (EFL), particularly in helping students develop vocabulary, academic writing skills, and self-confidence in independent learning. This study aims to explore the experiences of EFL students at Mulawarman University in using AI-based tools, such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, and Copilot, to support English learning. This study used a qualitative approach involving students in semesters 2 through 6 as participants. Data were collected through questionnaires completed by 40 students and in-depth interviews with several informants selected based on their questionnaire responses. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify students' motivations, benefits, challenges, and adaptation strategies in using AI. The results showed that ChatGPT and Grammarly were the most dominant AI tools used because they provided immediate feedback, helped develop ideas, improved sentence structure, and supported vocabulary and writing skills. The use of AI also helped increase students' confidence in understanding and producing English. However, this study identified challenges such as potential dependency, a lack of guidance on technology use, and the need for digital literacy to critically evaluate AI output. This study concludes that the use of AI in EFL learning has great potential if supported by lecturer guidance, strengthening digital literacy, and adaptive usage strategies.

Keywords: AI; ChatGPT; EFL; Language Learning; Thematic Analysis

Abstrak

Perkembangan teknologi kecerdasan buatan atau artificial intelligence (AI) telah memberikan peluang baru dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing English as a Foreign Language (EFL), terutama dalam membantu mahasiswa mengembangkan kosakata, keterampilan menulis akademik, dan kepercayaan diri belajar secara mandiri. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi pengalaman mahasiswa EFL Universitas Mulawarman dalam menggunakan alat berbasis AI, seperti ChatGPT, Grammarly, dan Copilot, untuk mendukung pembelajaran bahasa Inggris. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan melibatkan mahasiswa semester 2 hingga 6 sebagai partisipan. Data dikumpulkan melalui kuesioner yang diisi oleh 40 mahasiswa dan wawancara mendalam terhadap beberapa informan yang dipilih berdasarkan jawaban kuesioner. Data dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik untuk mengidentifikasi motivasi, manfaat, tantangan, dan strategi adaptasi mahasiswa dalam menggunakan AI. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa ChatGPT dan Grammarly merupakan alat AI yang paling dominan digunakan karena mampu memberikan umpan balik langsung, membantu pengembangan ide, memperbaiki struktur kalimat, serta mendukung peningkatan kosakata dan keterampilan menulis. Penggunaan AI juga membantu meningkatkan kepercayaan diri mahasiswa dalam memahami dan memproduksi bahasa Inggris. Namun, penelitian ini menemukan tantangan berupa potensi ketergantungan, kurangnya arahan penggunaan teknologi, dan kebutuhan

literasi digital untuk mengevaluasi keluaran AI secara kritis. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa penggunaan AI dalam pembelajaran EFL memiliki potensi besar apabila didukung oleh bimbingan dosen, penguatan literasi digital, dan strategi penggunaan yang adaptif.

Kata Kunci: AI; ChatGPT; EFL; Pembelajaran Bahasa; Analisis Tematik

Introduction

Language proficiency and vocabulary mastery are essential components in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Adequate language proficiency helps students understand academic texts, express ideas in oral and written communication, and participate more actively in academic learning activities (Lo, Yu, Xu, Ng and Jong, 2024). In the Indonesian EFL context, students often have limited exposure to English outside the classroom. This condition may affect their ability to develop productive skills, especially speaking and writing, as well as receptive skills such as reading comprehension and vocabulary mastery (Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2020).

Limited opportunities to use English in daily and academic contexts may also influence students' confidence, motivation, engagement, and overall learning performance (Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris, 2004). The development of educational technology has encouraged the use of artificial intelligence AI in language learning. AI tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, GitHub Copilot, Elsa Speak, and Perplexity provide students with flexible and personalized learning support. These tools can help students generate ideas, revise written texts, check grammar, expand vocabulary, practice pronunciation, and search for learning materials (Kasneci et al., 2023; Zawacki-Richter, Marín, Bond & Gouverneur, 2019).

For example, ChatGPT can support students by providing sample sentences, grammar explanations, and contextual vocabulary alternatives, while Grammarly helps students improve grammar accuracy, sentence clarity, and writing quality (Kohnke, Moorhouse & Zou, 2023). Previous studies have also shown that AI-assisted language learning may support students' writing development, motivation, and engagement in EFL contexts (Mahapatra, 2024; Song & Song, 2023). However, the use of AI tools in EFL learning also brings several challenges.

Students may become overly dependent on AI generated responses, accept inaccurate answers without sufficient evaluation, or struggle to determine whether AI output is culturally and academically appropriate. These issues show that the use of AI in language learning cannot be understood only from the perspective of technological benefits. It also needs to be examined from students' actual learning experiences, including how they use AI tools, how they respond to AI-generated feedback, and how they develop strategies to use AI critically and responsibly (Kohnke et al., 2023).

Although studies on AI in language education have increased, many previous studies still focus on general perceptions, writing related tasks, or the technical potential of AI tools. Song & Song (2023) found that ChatGPT could support EFL students' academic writing skills and writing motivation, while Mahapatra (2024) showed that ChatGPT could function as a formative feedback tool for improving students' academic writing. Teng (2024) also highlighted EFL learners' perceptions and experiences in using ChatGPT for writing feedback. However, these studies mainly focus on writing and feedback practices, while students' broader experiences in using various AI tools across different semester levels and language learning needs remain underexplored.

In the Indonesian higher education context, empirical studies that specifically explore EFL students' lived experiences with AI tools remain limited. Previous studies

have not sufficiently explained how Indonesian EFL students use different types of AI tools across semester levels, what pedagogical benefits they perceive, what challenges they encounter, and what strategies they develop to adapt AI tools to their learning needs. This gap is important because students from different semester levels may have different learning priorities.

Students in earlier semesters may use AI tools to support vocabulary mastery, grammar understanding, and reading comprehension, while students in higher semesters may use them more frequently for academic writing, speaking practice, presentation preparation, and independent learning tasks. Therefore, the research gap addressed in this study lies in the limited understanding of how Indonesian EFL students from different semester levels experience the use of various AI tools, including the benefits, challenges, and adaptive strategies that shape their language learning process.

Based on this gap, the present study aims to explore the experiences of 40 EFL students from semesters 2-6 at Universitas Mulawarman in using AI tools to support their English learning. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, this study investigates the types of AI tools used by students, their motivations for using these tools, the perceived pedagogical benefits, the challenges they face, and the strategies they use to adapt AI tools in their learning process. By focusing on students' lived experiences, this study is expected to provide a contextual understanding of how AI tools contribute to EFL learning in Indonesian higher education and how students negotiate the opportunities and limitations of AI assisted language learning.

Method

This study used a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore EFL students' experiences in using AI tools for English language learning. The participants were 40 second to sixth semester students at Universitas Mulawarman who had used AI tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, Copilot, and Perplexity for vocabulary learning, grammar checking, writing assistance, reading comprehension, translation, pronunciation practice, and idea generation. Data were collected through open-ended questionnaires and semi structured interviews with three purposively selected key informants. The questionnaire served as initial qualitative mapping, while the interviews provided deeper insights into students' motivations, benefits, challenges, ethical concerns, dependency issues, and adaptation strategies. The data were analyzed thematically through familiarization, coding, theme development, theme review, and interpretation. To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied triangulation between questionnaire and interview data, as well as member checking with the interview informants.

Results and Discussions

1. Variations in the Use of AI Tools

Mulawarman University students use a range of AI technologies with varying goals and intensities. Forty EFL students from various semester levels were given the questionnaire, and three of them were chosen as interview informants to give more in depth accounts of their experiences utilizing AI tools for English language learning. According to the survey results, ChatGPT was the most popular tool because students thought it was adaptable and useful for learning vocabulary, translating, reading comprehension, coming up with ideas, and practicing writing.

The interview data corroborated this conclusion as well. "I frequently use ChatGPT when I do not understand certain English words or when I need examples of sentences," one informant said. I learn more quickly since the explanation is straightforward and easy to understand. This demonstrates that ChatGPT was utilized not

only to finish projects but also to facilitate self-directed learning by providing prompt feedback and easily understandable explanations (Abbas, Jam & Khan, 2024; Apriani et al., 2024). Although their use was more restricted and task-specific, students also reported utilizing Grammarly, Copilot, Elsa Speak, and Perplexity in addition to ChatGPT. Grammarly was primarily used to edit academic writing's grammar, sentence construction, spelling, and word choice. Grammarly helps me check my writing, especially grammar mistakes that I usually do not notice when I revise by myself, one informant said. This suggests that Grammarly was mostly utilized as a writing assistance tool rather than as a platform for general education.

Copilot was mostly used for technology-based or academic coding assignments, and fewer students used it. Elsa Speak and Perplexity, on the other hand, were rarely utilized since their features did not adequately meet students' everyday academic requirements. Although Elsa Speak was seen to be helpful for practicing pronunciation, students rarely used it because speaking practice was not necessarily necessary for their assignments. Students tended to favor ChatGPT because it offered more straightforward and intelligible explanations, but Perplexity was occasionally used to look up information or references.

I know Perplexity can be used to search for information, but I still use ChatGPT more often because it is easier to understand, said one informant. These results imply that rather than being used uniformly across all learning activities, each AI tool was utilized in accordance with students' unique learning objectives (Dwivedi et al., 2023; Faisal & Carabella, 2023; Lubis, Ichsanda & Hz, 2024). Students' semester levels also had an impact on the difference in AI tool utilization. Students in the early semesters tended to utilize AI tools for basic learning help, such as word translation, comprehension of reading texts, and vocabulary improvement, according to the questionnaire and interview data. Since they were still developing their trust in their ability to comprehend English information, their use of AI was primarily tied to receptive skills. In the middle semesters, students started using AI tools for sentence construction, grammar checking, and brief writing assignments in addition to vocabulary and reading. On the other hand, students in the upper semesters particularly those in semesters 5 and 6 used AI tools more frequently for useful academic tasks including essay writing, presentation preparation, speaking script practice, and academic text revision.

I use AI more for writing assignments and presentation preparation in the higher semester because the tasks are more complex than before, said one informant from the higher semester. This graph demonstrates how students' use of AI changes in tandem with their academic obligations. While higher-semester students utilize AI to generate more sophisticated academic work, early-semester students mostly use it to comprehend English-language content. This supports Ellis (2015) theory that language acquisition progressively shifts from comprehension to more active and fruitful language usage.

Overall, the results demonstrate that the academic needs, semester levels, and learning objectives of Mulawarman University EFL students influence the integration of AI. Grammarly helps students write more accurately, Copilot serves particular technical-academic demands, Elsa Speak and Perplexity are used more sparingly, and ChatGPT is the most popular tool for flexible learning support. The conclusion that students use AI tools differently is reinforced by the participation of three interview informants and forty questionnaire respondents. Rather, students choose certain tools according to the academic assignments they must do and the abilities they wish to develop. Although their efficacy still depends on students' capacity to utilize the tools critically and appropriately, our findings suggest that AI tools assist students in customizing their EFL learning process and progressively promote independent learning.

2. Motivation and Benefits

Students at Mulawarman University stated that AI technologies improved their language proficiency and motivated them to learn more. The use of AI tools, especially ChatGPT and Grammarly, was perceived not only as a practical way to complete assignments, but also as a learning support system that helped students practice English more independently. The findings show that AI tools provided several benefits in EFL learning, particularly in terms of affective, cognitive, and academic development.

Table 1. Student Motivation and benefits

Theme	Description	Quote
Motivation	AI tools increased students' learning engagement, reduced anxiety, and encouraged confidence in practicing English independently.	I use ChatGPT when I want to write in English because it makes me more confident. I am not afraid to make mistake because I can revise my sentence first.
Affective Benefits	AI tools helped students feel more relaxed, confident, and motivated when practicing English.	When I do not understand something, I ask ChatGPT first. It makes me feel less nervous because I can learn by myself before asking the lecturer.
Cognitive Benefits	AI tools supported vocabulary mastery, grammar awareness, sentence construction and reading comprehension.	ChatGPT gives examples of words in sentences, so I can understand the meaning better and remember the vocabulary.
Academic Cognitive	AI tools helped students revise writing, organize ideas, improve sentence accuracy, and complete academic tasks more effectively.	Grammarly helps me check grammar and word choice, while ChatGPT helps me develop ideas for writing.

In terms of affective benefits, AI tools help students feel less anxious when practicing English. Several students explained that they felt more comfortable using ChatGPT because they could ask questions, check sentences, and practice writing without feeling embarrassed or afraid of being judged. This created a safer learning space where students could explore English at their own pace. The immediate feedback provided by AI tools also encouraged students to continue learning because they could immediately identify errors and receive suggestions for improvement. These findings suggest that AI assisted learning can increase students' confidence, engagement, and intrinsic motivation, especially when the tools are used for self paced practice (Fredricks et al., 2004; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

In terms of cognitive benefits, AI tools supported students' understanding of vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure. ChatGPT was commonly used to explain unfamiliar words, provide sentence examples, translate difficult expressions, and simplify reading materials. Through these features, students were able to understand vocabulary in context rather than only memorizing word meanings. Grammarly also helped students notice grammar mistakes, spelling errors, and inappropriate word choices. These repeated corrections allowed students to become more aware of language forms and sentence patterns.

Therefore, AI tools functioned as digital scaffolding that helped students build language knowledge through feedback, examples, and revision (Lo et al., 2024; Tlili et al., 2023). In terms of academic benefits, AI tools helped students complete academic tasks more effectively, especially in writing-related activities. Students used ChatGPT to generate ideas, organize sentences, understand assignment instructions, and improve paragraph development. Grammarly was mainly used to revise academic writing so that the final text became clearer, more accurate, and more readable. However, the benefits of AI were not limited to producing better assignments.

Students also learned to evaluate AI suggestions, decide which corrections were suitable, and revise their work based on their own understanding. This process shows that AI tools can support learner autonomy and self-regulated learning when students use them critically rather than simply copying AI-generated responses (Dwivedi et al., 2023; Song & Song, 2023). This study has practical implications for the integration of AI tools as supportive learning media in EFL instruction. Instructors can encourage students to use AI for reading comprehension, concept generation, writing revision, and vocabulary practice.

To assist students in assessing the appropriateness, relevance, and accuracy of AI-generated responses, professor supervision is still crucial. Students must realize that AI technologies should enhance learning rather than take the place of their own critical thinking. When utilized properly, AI tools can assist students in becoming more self-reliant, introspective, and self-assured in their English language development. Therefore, in order for students to utilize AI ethically and successfully, AI integration in EFL classrooms should be accompanied with digital literacy training, ethical awareness, and lecturer supervision.

3. Challenges, Adaptation Strategies, And Semester Variations

Although AI tools provide various benefits for EFL students, their use also presents several challenges that need to be critically addressed. One of the main challenges experienced by students is dependence on AI generated output. Some students tend to rely on AI tools to generate ideas, translate sentences, correct grammar, and complete writing tasks more quickly. This dependence may reduce students' effort to think independently, evaluate language choices, and develop their own academic writing skills. When students accept AI responses without careful checking, they may also risk using inaccurate information, unsuitable vocabulary, or sentences that do not fully match the academic purpose of their assignments.

Therefore, the use of AI in EFL learning requires critical awareness so that students do not simply accept AI generated content as the final answer. The accuracy and appropriateness of AI output for scholarly and cultural contexts present another difficulty. According to student reports, AI technologies occasionally offer explanations, examples, or idioms that are excessively generic, culturally foreign, or irrelevant to the Indonesian EFL learning setting. For example, ChatGPT might generate phrases that are grammatically correct but not entirely suitable for the subject, classroom instruction, or academic writing standards that instructors demand. Because AI technologies may confidently give answers even when the content is missing or wrong, AI generated information sometimes requires additional verification. This result is consistent with Zhai, Wibowo & Li (2024) who stress that students must critically assess AI generated solutions and contrast them with credible academic sources. In a similar vein, Holmes, Bialik & Fadel (2019) contend that rather than merely accepting automated output, AI literacy is crucial for assisting students in using AI technologies responsibly.

Students create a number of adaption techniques to get past these obstacles. Cross referencing AI generated responses with scholarly sources, including journal articles, textbooks, dictionaries, and lecturer provided learning materials, is one popular tactic. In order to get more precise and thorough explanations, students also compare responses from various AI systems. Additionally, some students debate AI generated responses with their peers to determine whether the information is clear, pertinent, and suitable for their tasks. When others are unclear whether the AI output satisfies academic standards, they seek clarification from professors. These tactics demonstrate that students attempt to portray AI as a supplementary learning tool that enhances their learning process rather than just using it as a quick fix.

Additionally, the utilization of AI technologies differs by semester. AI is typically used by first-semester students to help with basic language learning, particularly with regard to vocabulary growth, sentence construction, translation, and reading comprehension. Students in the middle semester are more likely to utilize AI for academic writing practice, paragraph construction, and grammar correction. Higher semester students, on the other hand, use AI for more useful and fruitful academic tasks including creating research ideas, preparing presentations, editing academic materials, and enhancing speaking or writing abilities. This variety implies that as students' academic needs grow, so does the complexity of their use of AI.

Table 2. Challenges, Adaptation Strategies, and Semester Variations for Students

Theme	Description	Quote
Challenges	Students experienced dependence on AI generated output, inaccurate information, and responses that were sometimes inappropriate for academic or cultural contexts.	Sometimes ChatGPT provides example that are out of context, so I still need to check whether the answer is suitable for my assignment.
Adaptation Strategy	Students adapted by cross checking AI responses with academic sources, discussing answers with friends, asking lecturers for clarification, and combining several tools according to their learning needs.	I usually cross check ChatGPT answers with my friends or other sources because not all answers are correct.
Semester Variation	Students' AI use differed across semester levels. Early semester students focused more on vocabulary and reading, middle semester students used AI for grammar and writing, while higher semester students used it for academic writing, presentations, and research related tasks	In the first semester, I used ChatGPT mostly for vocabulary practice, but now I also use it to help revise my writing and prepare presentations.

4. Particular Academic Advantages

Students at Mulawarman University reported that AI tools provided several academic advantages in supporting their EFL learning. Based on the findings, Grammarly was mainly used to improve the accuracy of academic writing, especially in grammar, spelling, punctuation, word choice, and sentence structure. Students considered Grammarly helpful because it enabled them to revise their writing more independently before submitting assignments. This indicates that Grammarly functioned not only as a correction tool, but also as a learning aid that helped students become more aware of common language errors in English writing.

ChatGPT was also perceived as useful because it supported students in developing ideas, understanding unfamiliar vocabulary, translating difficult expressions, and practicing writing through immediate responses. Unlike Grammarly, which was mostly used for text correction, ChatGPT helped students explore language use more broadly through examples, explanations, and self-paced practice. These findings show that ChatGPT contributed to vocabulary development, idea generation, and students' confidence in completing English-related academic tasks.

This finding is supported by Jin, Jin, Im, Yoo, Roll & Seo (2023) and Song & Song (2023) who suggest that AI-assisted learning can help students develop independent learning habits, self-regulated learning, and critical awareness in evaluating AI-generated output. In contrast, Copilot was not identified as the main tool for EFL learning because its function is more closely related to coding and technology-based tasks. However, it was still included in the analysis because some students used it in academic contexts that involved English instructions, digital literacy, or programming-related assignments.

Therefore, Copilot's relevance in this study is limited and task-specific, rather than directly connected to general English language learning. This distinction is important to show that each AI tool has different academic functions. Grammarly supports writing accuracy, ChatGPT supports vocabulary learning and idea development, while Copilot is only relevant when students' academic activities involve technology-based tasks in English. Overall, the findings suggest that the academic advantages of AI tools depend on how students use them critically, independently, and according to their learning needs (Dwivedi et al., 2023; Song & Song, 2023).

5. Consequences of Using AI

Mulawarman University's use of AI tools has important pedagogical implications for EFL teaching because it fosters students' motivation, self-directed learning, productivity, and language skill development. According to the questionnaire and interview findings, students stated that ChatGPT and Grammarly helped them learn at their own pace by providing vocabulary support, idea development, grammar correction, and writing practice. This finding supports Kasneci et al. (2023) who argue that AI tools can enable personalized learning and provide students with immediate assistance.

In the EFL context, Lo et al. (2024) also emphasize that AI tools can support students' language learning processes when they are used as learning aids rather than as a replacement for students' own work. However, AI use also creates educational risks, especially when students depend too much on AI-generated responses without checking their accuracy, relevance, originality, and academic appropriateness. Dwivedi et al. (2023) state that the use of generative AI in education requires ethical awareness and critical evaluation to prevent inappropriate use.

Therefore, lecturers play a critical role in assisting students in using AI responsibly by promoting digital literacy, academic integrity, and the ability to evaluate AI-generated output. The variation in AI use across semester levels further highlights the need for an adaptive and flexible EFL curriculum. Lower semester students can be guided to use AI for vocabulary, reading, and comprehension, while higher semester students can be encouraged to use AI for academic writing, speaking practice, presentation preparation, and idea development. Therefore, clear classroom guidelines, reflective tasks, responsible paraphrasing practices, and activities requiring students to compare, revise, and justify AI-generated output are necessary for AI-based EFL instruction to enhance learning while reducing dependency and inappropriate use.

Conclusion

This study concludes that AI tools support EFL students at Universitas Mulawarman in improving their English learning experiences, particularly in vocabulary development, writing revision, idea generation, grammar correction, motivation, confidence, and independent learning. ChatGPT and Grammarly were found to be the most frequently used tools because they provide immediate feedback and flexible learning support according to students' needs. However, the use of AI also requires critical awareness because students may become dependent on AI generated responses if they do not evaluate the accuracy, relevance, and academic appropriateness of the output. Therefore, AI should be integrated into EFL learning as a supportive tool rather than a substitute for students' own thinking and language development. This study suggests that lecturers provide digital literacy training, ethical guidelines, and learning supervision so that students can use AI tools responsibly, critically, and effectively.

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