

Research Article

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# Influence of GenAI on Higher Education ESL Students' Writing Confidence

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**Abstract:** The rise of Generative Artificial Intelligence (genAI) has raised debates about: What is the future of writing? These debates become more solicitous in higher education contexts. Writing becomes frustrating for English as a Second Language (ESL) students, and the release of ChatGPT has sparked tension in ESL classrooms. To examine this gap, this paper conducted a semi-structured interview study with university students to examine the influence of ChatGPT on their writing confidence. Following the synthetic data, this paper discovered that students perceived ChatGPT as a supportive learning tool, that improves grammar, eases writer's block, and provides personalized feedback. This paper presents a positive perspective regarding ChatGPT's outputs to reduce writing anxiety and boost language proficiency. These findings indicate that ChatGPT acts as a catalyst for those who encounter language barriers while taking ethical considerations into account.

**Key Words:** ChatGPT, Higher Education, English as a Second Language, Academic Writing, Generative Artificial Intelligence

## Introduction

Generative AI (genAI) has been the subject of increasing academic and public interest in recent years, with significant advances in language models like GPT (Bengio et al., 2003; Radford et al., 2018), however, the accessibility and user-friendliness of ChatGPT has sparked the widespread discussions in higher education, particularly within the realm of second language acquisition. On the one hand, the scholarly literature offers the potential for enhancing English writing skills via genAI (Bibi & Atta, 2024), personalized learning, tailored feedback, brainstorming research ideas, assistance with writing tasks (Halaweh, 2023), and producing good essays (Bernabei et al., 2023). On the other hand, scholars are concerned about the ethical implications of using ChatGPT in higher education. Issues such as academic integrity (Huallpa, 2023), the potential for plagiarism (Zeb et al., 2024), and the risk of students becoming overly reliant on ChatGPT may affect their critical thinking and problem-solving capacity (Gupta et al., 2023; Harunasari, 2023; Irzawati et al., 2024; Sánchez-Ruiz et al., 2023).

For higher education ESL students, the complexities of mastering a language, particularly in written form, might be impacted by genAI. Writing is a cognitive and metacognitive activity that demands brainstorming, planning, organizing, drafting, and revising the text (Alisha et al., 2019). ESL Students often struggle with vocabulary, grammar, and punctuation to organize ideas coherently, ensure paragraph cohesion (Barrot, 2023; Ingley & Pack, 2023), and fear of making mistakes in the writing process (Sasmita & Setyowati, 2021; Bisriyah, 2022; Ahmed, 2019). Likewise, the scholarly literature underscores the necessity of supplemental writing instruction and affirmative reinforcement to promote students' confidence in their writing abilities (Ahmed, 2019; Sasmita & Setyowati, 2021) and teacher feedback is widely acknowledged by both students and instructors for effective writing pedagogy (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2023; Hyland, 2015; Palanisamy & Abdul Aziz, 2021). As posited by Hidayati (2018), effectively teaching English writing is crucial for enhancing the language skills of ESL students. Here, ChatGPT presents a potential solution for writers at all levels seeking to engage in literary writing. Preliminary research

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indicates that ChatGPT possesses the potential to enhance student learning. According to Tlili et al. (2023), ChatGPT has the capability of brainstorming, outlining, improving vocabulary and grammar, and exposure to diverse writing styles; additionally, it provides interactive language practice and increases student engagement (Ali et al., 2023). While the quality and complexity of ChatGPT feedback can pose challenges for certain learners, as noted by Carlson et al. (2023), addressing these challenges demands a balanced approach that involves the establishment of clearly defined ethics for the use of genAI, strategies to mitigate over-reliance on genAI, privacy concerns, and potential biases inherent in ChatGPT's responses to guarantee its responsible integration within the higher education ESL context.

The influence of ChatGPT on the writing abilities of higher education ESL discourse has ignited a debate, where "boosters" predicted the transformative revolution of genAI and "doomsters" claimed that it would ruin educational practices (Selwyn, 2014). The former, optimistic literature claims ChatGPT can boost ESL students' writing confidence by increasing lexical diversity (Owada, 2024), cognitive benefits coupled with critical analysis (Kartal, 2024), and aids in idea organization and drafting (Sudrajad et al., 2024). Furthermore, Kim et al. (2024) and Bibi and Atta (2024) found ChatGPT as a valuable tool among students, while Hasanah and Muamaroh (2024) and Alsaedi (2024) reported a mixed response, with 80% perceiving a positive impact and 20% citing concerns regarding creativity and dependency. Thus, this qualitative paper outlines the influence of ChatGPT on Higher Education ESL students' confidence in their writing abilities, recognizing how these early interactions continue to shape their confidence levels and their evolving relationship with the easily accessible genAI writing tool, ChatGPT. To address this, I investigated the following question: *What is the influence of ChatGPT on Higher Education ESL students' confidence in their writing abilities?* I conducted an interview study with twelve female and five male ESL students enrolled in higher education.

## **Materials and Methods**

This study employed a qualitative research approach to investigate the influence of genAI, ChatGPT, on the writing confidence of Higher Education students. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews to understand the participants' perceptions and experiences of using ChatGPT for academic writing.

### **Participant Recruitment**

A convenience sampling technique was used to recruit participants readily accessible to the researcher. Inclusion criteria included: (1) current enrollment in a Higher Education institution in Pakistani universities (2) familiarity with ChatGPT, and (3) active use of ChatGPT for academic writing tasks. Exclusion criteria included participants who had not used or were unaware of ChatGPT.

### **Data Collection**

Initially, 26 undergraduate ESL students agreed to participate. Seven participants were excluded as they did not use ChatGPT for academic writing, and two were unaware of ChatGPT. After screening for eligibility, 17 participants (5 male, 12 female) were included in the study. Interviews were conducted via Zoom application and each interview lasted for approximately 40–45 minutes. Open-ended questions were used to explore participants' experiences with ChatGPT, focusing on their perceptions of its impact on their English writing confidence. Follow-up and probing questions were used to clarify responses and gain deeper insights. Prior to each interview, informed consent was obtained, and participants were informed about the study's purpose, their rights, and the confidentiality of their data.

### **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the interview transcripts. This method involved systematically identifying, examining, and interpreting key themes and patterns within the qualitative data to understand the participants' perceptions of ChatGPT's impact on their writing confidence.

## **Results**

This section presents the findings drawn from the synthetic data gathered from the interviews. Below, I described each of the themes followed by verbatims from the participants.



### Enhanced Writing Assurance

While talking, participants mentioned that they feel more assured regarding the quality of content generated with ChatGPT. Participants agreed that ChatGPT can enhance writing assurance, for example:

*“ChatGPT has helped me become more sure in my writing.”* (Student 2)

This finding aligns with the observation that ChatGPT provides writing assurance with valuable feedback, helping to identify grammatical errors and stylistic inconsistencies. Additionally, they acknowledged ChatGPT as their English tutor, particularly in the structure of sentences. As one participant noted:

*“It boosts my understanding, mainly when I see how sentences can be better structured.”* (Student 6)

By generating well-structured sentences, ChatGPT helps them to improve their sophisticated syntactic structures in their own writing. Beyond syntactic structures, participants considered ChatGPT for their grammatical accuracy. For instance:

*“I feel more sure about my grammar after using ChatGPT.”* (Student 11)

This observation suggests that ChatGPT not only assists with writing tasks but also helps students in language learning with effective writing techniques and provides constructive feedback that enhances student confidence and understanding of syntax.

### Better Grammar and Writing Quality

Proficiency in structured grammar and writing quality is crucial for the academic success of higher education ESL students:

“Improved grammar and writing quality” was another theme reported by students where they used ChatGPT to identify and correct grammatical errors.

*“It (ChatGPT) helps me fix grammar issues I didn’t notice in my writing.”* (Student 2, 5, 10)

*“I use it to check errors and rewrite sentences.”* (Student 4)

Students found ChatGPT as an identifier of their grammatical errors. When they input their writing samples into ChatGPT, it improves their grammar and generates more refined and accurate content. Hence, students perceive ChatGPT’s output as “really useful”.

*“The suggestions it gives are really useful... It improves my writing by correcting my mistakes.”* (Student 3, 7, 8, 11)

### ChatGPT as a Kick-starter

Students, most frequently, mentioned ChatGPT as a kick-starter to complete writing tasks, with many of them mentioned as a brainstormer and ideas generator. This approach is worth seeing when students encounter any new subject matter.

*“It helps me come up with new ideas... helps me think of new topics and provide outlines... when I’m stuck.”* (Student 3, 8, 12, 16, 17)

ChatGPT overcomes writer's block and assists students in brainstorming when they have sufficient ideas and shapes their creative thinking.

### Assist in Content Planning

Students expressed their perceptions about how ChatGPT can “assist in content planning” and demonstrated a positive attitude towards ChatGPT’s support in structuring and enhancing the coherence of their academic tasks.

*“It helps me structure my essays better. I also use it to get ideas for my assignments when I do not understand my assignment.”* (Student 9, 13, 14)

Students' responses indicate that genAI is advantageous within the higher education context. ChatGPT assists ESL students in generating ideas, content organization, and building coherent writing.

*"I find it helpful in creating well-structured paragraphs... and it makes my content more organized and clearer."* (Student 17)

Furthermore, students claimed that ChatGPT accelerates the writing process, and they finish tasks more quickly.

*"...save time when I need to complete writing tasks at the last minute."* (Student 6)

### **Supportive Learning Tool**

Talking about writing in English, ESL students credited ChatGPT as a "supportive learning tool" and their personal tutor for personalized writing. They use ChatGPT as a supportive tool, not as a replacement for human intellect. One participant stated:

*"I see it as a guide for learning... It is helpful for my regular studies... I use it to improve drafts..."* (Student 16)

Students use ChatGPT with greater responsibility, not just because they totally rely on it. Besides that, they were vigilant of its excessive use for their writing tasks, and they responded:

*"It's easy to spend too much time on it but I try not to use it for everything because I still need to learn."* (Student 10)

*"I remind myself to write without it."* (Students 1, 2, 4, 8)

*"It's good, but I shouldn't rely on it too much."* (Student 13)

Thus, higher education ESL students use ChatGPT as a learning tool, though they have an awareness of the pitfalls of genAI tools.

### **Reduced Writing Anxiety**

As higher education ESL students, writing in English increases anxiety and fear of making grammatical and spelling mistakes. Students reported a decrease in writing anxiety when leveraging ChatGPT for this purpose. For instance:

*"Knowing I can check my grammar with ChatGPT... I feel relieved."* (Student 8)

*"It reduces the nervousness I... most of the time... have with writing in the English language... Now I make fewer mistakes."* (Student 4, 5, 9, 12, 14)

This emphasizes the potential of ChatGPT to alleviate writing anxiety and create a more positive and supportive writing environment for ESL students.

### **Discussion**

The analysis illustrates a thematic representation of the responses made by the sample, which comprehends the influence of ChatGPT, and how it increases confidence in the writing abilities of Higher Education ESL students. In response to my research question, I have identified a range of components that contribute to the higher education ESL students' writing skills, such as improved grammar, writing quality, support in learning, kick-starter, and reduced writing anxiety. While this is the primary contribution of this paper, below, I have discussed these components by turning to the literature and my findings.

To put together, the first and surprising outcome is, that students were optimistic about the use of ChatGPT for their writing tasks, supporting this belief that genAI can play a significant role in higher education (Biaou, [2023](#); Breen, [2023](#); Kovanovic, [2022](#); Saunders, [2023](#)). Additionally, students claimed that ChatGPT provides writing assurance with valuable feedback and corrects syntactic and stylistic errors. This means students can use ChatGPT to revise their writing by improving grammar (Thaker, [2023](#)), get comments on their own written drafts, and even make specific changes (Liu et al., [2023](#)). Moreover, students considered ChatGPT as their tutor. As higher education ESL students, they require strong English language skills, and when ChatGPT provides suggestions, they feel more sure about their written drafts. Liu et al. ([2023](#)) point out that ChatGPT can help students study in a non-native language, allowing them to engage with texts and arguments without worrying about spelling or grammar (Watkins, [2022](#)). The findings by Ali et al. ([2023](#)) endorsed such claims that ChatGPT enhances ESL students' engagement and





interest in writing. Consequently, higher education ESL students can improve their writing skills, which are attributed to various factors, like limited resources and less writing practice (Aldabbus & Almansouri, 2022; Selvaraj & Aziz, 2019). Another study claimed that ChatGPT can improve vocabulary, grammar, and exposure to diverse writing styles (Tlili et al., 2023). Likewise, during the interviews, I observed a shared perspective of students regarding ChatGPT's proficiency in structured grammar and writing quality. Overall, the findings indicate that ChatGPT acts as a personal tutor to enhance students' writing skills, by offering personalized and instant feedback, which helps in improving ESL students' writing skills and boosting confidence (Ali et al., 2023; Ahmed, 2019; Ferris & Hedgcock, 2023; Sasmita & Setyowati, 2021).

Next, students regarded ChatGPT as a kick-starter, brainstormer, and ideas generator. The findings revealed that ChatGPT overcomes writer's block while assisting students when they have insufficient ideas and shapes their creative thinking. Use of genAI to create initial drafts view it as a solution to writer's block (Grobe, 2023). According to Liu et al. (2023), this support can be topic sentences, structural, or outline suggestions to help organize the text. Tlili et al. (2023) reported an optimistic view about ChatGPT, students can get assistance to brainstorm writing ideas and create outlines. Hence, ChatGPT can assist students in their writing with novel ideas and structuring content. From a pessimist perspective, learners might become overly dependent on ChatGPT, which can affect their critical thinking and human creativity (Harunasari, 2023; Irzawati et al., 2024). Conversely, students appreciated the diverse ideas of ChatGPT, when they used it for initial content planning. Additionally, it can facilitate shaping their creative thinking. To support this, Grobe (2023) maintained that when students generate drafts with ChatGPT, human intelligence still remains. Meaning, students have to craft effective prompts, provide their unique ideas, critically evaluate the genAI output, and refine the text to align with their writing objectives (Grobe, 2023).

My next observation is that many students regarded ChatGPT as their supportive learning tool for personalized writing. This observation indicates that students use genAI with greater responsibility and do not merely rely on it. This observation coupled with prior literature, ChatGPT is neither bad nor good, it depends on the user how uses it (Sarofan-Butin, 2023). Like other AI tools, it can simplify time-consuming tasks and enhance human capabilities (Byrnes, 2023). Eke (2023) and Halaweh (2023) emphasized the need to provide ethical guidelines and training for students and teachers to maximize the benefits of ChatGPT. They further stressed promoting ethical integrity. With this, students will be able to maintain their interest in learning, and critical and creative thinking, while simultaneously addressing concerns about academic integrity and the originality of students' work. Byrnes (2023) proposed, for higher education, that ChatGPT is valuable for ESL students and students with learning disabilities. Prior findings proved that ChatGPT can work as a supportive tool, by improving grammar (Thaker, 2023), providing feedback and specific modifications (Liu et al., 2023), increasing vocabulary (Owada, 2024), offering critical analysis (Kartal, 2024), and aiding in ideas, content planning, and drafting (Sudrajad et al., 2024). These findings are in favor of my next observation, ChatGPT can reduce the writing anxiety of ESL students. Many students reported a decrease in writing anxiety when they used ChatGPT to generate text. The findings indicate that supplementary writing can boost students' confidence in writing (Ahmed, 2019; Sasmita & Setyowati, 2021), plus feedback can increase their confidence (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2023; Hyland, 2015; Palanisamy & Abdul Aziz, 2021). When students face challenges such as idea generation, difficulties in constructing grammatically correct sentences, or finding appropriate English equivalents for words known in their native language, students use ChatGPT, and this AI assistance correlates with an increase in student writing confidence regarding their ideas and their ability to express them effectively in English. Hence, the use of ChatGPT for language learning and teaching is valuable, however, its successful integration depends on a balanced approach. This paper ends with an optimistic view regarding the use of genAI in higher education contexts. I believe ChatGPT serves as a useful tool for students, particularly in supporting their writing development, enhancing idea generation, and providing instant feedback. However, the integration of genAI tools into educational settings, especially in the ESL context, requires more than just technological adoption. It calls for a thoughtful and collaborative approach. I strongly encourage an ongoing dialogue among educators, researchers, and policymakers to establish clear ethical standards, promote responsible use, and uphold academic integrity. By engaging all stakeholders, we can develop pedagogical frameworks that guide the appropriate use of ChatGPT and similar tools, ensuring they complement rather than replace essential cognitive and linguistic skills. Ultimately, responsible integration of genAI in language learning can lead to more inclusive, innovative, and effective educational experiences that empower learners rather

than create dependency. Therefore, future policies and practices should aim to strike a balance between leveraging AI's potential and fostering students' independent learning abilities.

### **Strengths and limitations**

The method employed in this paper allowed for in-depth subjective experiences and perceptions of higher education ESL students regarding ChatGPT's impact on their writing. The main limitations to consider are the convenience sampling technique and small sample size, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to a wider population. The purpose of this paper was to prioritize the voices of higher education ESL students, including teachers who can provide a more in-depth perspective on the use of ChatGPT by their students and in the classroom context. Additionally, students may have been inclined to provide socially desirable responses, further research is needed to investigate the objective impact of ChatGPT on student writing skills, such as through pre- and post-tests or by analyzing student writing samples, for more mature perspectives.

### **Conclusion**

This qualitative paper offers the perceived benefits of ChatGPT for ESL students in higher education. The findings reveal that students experienced a change in their writing confidence, which shows ChatGPT's ability to assist in effective writing skills. Furthermore, they agreed that ChatGPT can improve grammatical accuracy, facilitate idea generation, and help in writer's block. However, it is crucial to admit the challenges and ethical considerations of genAI in education. This paper helps maximize the benefits of genAI in ESL classrooms while ensuring that genAI tools are used responsibly to support the academic success of ESL students.



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