

**ETHICAL ENGAGEMENT WITH GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN
ESL ACADEMIC WRITING: LEARNERS' EXPERIENCES FROM AN ISLAMIC
HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT**

Zarina Ashikin Zakariaⁱ Norhaili Massariⁱⁱ & Normazla Ahmad Mahirⁱⁱⁱ

- ⁱ (*Corresponding author*). Senior Lecturer. Faculty of Major Language Studies, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia. zarina@usim.edu.my
- ⁱⁱ Senior Lecturer. Faculty of Major Language Studies, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia. norhaili@usim.edu.my
- ⁱⁱⁱ Senior Lecturer. Faculty of Major Language Studies, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia. normazla@usim.edu.my

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Abstract	<p><i>The rapid development of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools such as ChatGPT has reshaped academic writing practices in higher education, including among English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. While existing studies have largely focused on the effectiveness of AI-assisted writing, limited attention has been given to learners' lived experiences, emotional engagement, and ethical awareness, particularly within Islamic higher education contexts. Guided by an ethical perspective grounded in Islamic values, this qualitative study explores ESL learners' perceptions and experiences of using ChatGPT to support academic writing at a Malaysian public university. Semi-structured group interviews were conducted with 50 Year 1 undergraduate ESL learners who used ChatGPT after completing their own written drafts. Thematic analysis revealed six interrelated themes: positive emotional engagement, linguistic scaffolding, learning through comparison, enhanced confidence and motivation, ethical awareness and self-regulation, and critical concerns regarding responsible use. The findings indicate that learners perceived ChatGPT as a supportive learning tool rather than a substitute for independent writing, particularly when its use was pedagogically guided and ethically framed. Viewed through an Islamic ethical lens, learners' practices reflected principles of amanah (trust), mas'uliyah (accountability), and adab al-'ilm (ethical conduct in the pursuit of knowledge). This study contributes qualitative insights into the responsible integration of generative AI in ESL writing instruction and highlights pedagogical implications for Islamic higher education institutions seeking to balance technological innovation with ethical responsibility.</i></p> <p>Keywords: <i>Artificial, Intelligence, ChatGPT, ESL, Learners.</i></p>
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INTRODUCTION

Academic writing remains a persistent challenge for English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, particularly at the tertiary level, where students are expected to demonstrate linguistic accuracy, critical engagement, and adherence to academic conventions (Hyland, 2019; Lee & Lee, 2024). In the Malaysian higher education context, these challenges are often intensified by limited opportunities for extended writing practice and delayed

feedback in large classrooms (Yu et al., 2024). Consequently, many ESL learners experience anxiety, low confidence, and difficulty articulating ideas in coherent academic prose.

From an Islamic perspective, the pursuit and communication of knowledge (*'ilm*) are not merely cognitive activities but are deeply rooted in ethical responsibility, intention (*niyyah*), and trust (*amanah*). Writing, especially in academic contexts, is viewed as an act of conveying knowledge responsibly, requiring honesty, accountability, and adherence to moral principles. Within Islamic higher education institutions, academic practices are therefore expected to reflect both intellectual rigour and ethical conduct, ensuring that knowledge production aligns with Islamic values.

Recent advancements in artificial intelligence (AI), particularly generative AI tools such as ChatGPT, have begun to reshape academic writing support in higher education (Zhai, 2022; Zhai & Wang, 2024). These tools are capable of assisting learners through idea generation, paraphrasing, and immediate feedback on grammar and structure (Kasneci et al., 2023; Nhan et al., 2025). While such affordances have attracted considerable interest, concerns have also emerged regarding ethical use, authorship, and academic integrity (Cotton et al., 2023; Dwivedi et al., 2023).

The growing use of generative AI, however, raises important ethical questions related to authorship, originality, and responsibility. Within an Islamic framework, AI may be understood as a *wasilah* (means) that can facilitate learning when used appropriately, but it must not undermine the learner's moral agency or academic integrity. Ethical AI use in writing therefore requires self-regulation, guidance, and an awareness of accountability (*mas'uliyah*), particularly in avoiding plagiarism and misrepresentation of authorship.

Although previous studies have explored the effectiveness of AI-assisted writing, much of the existing literature focuses on surface-level outcomes such as grammatical accuracy or overall writing quality. Less attention has been given to learners' lived experiences, emotional engagement, and ethical decision-making when using generative AI tools. Qualitative investigations that foreground learner voices remain limited, particularly within Muslim-majority and Islamic higher education contexts.

Understanding ESL learners' perceptions of ChatGPT is crucial, as learners' beliefs and practices shape whether AI functions as a learning scaffold that supports independent writing or as a substitute that compromises ethical authorship. Without insight into how learners negotiate issues of responsibility, originality, and ethical use, pedagogical responses risk being either overly restrictive or insufficiently guided. Therefore, this study aims to explore ESL learners' perceptions and experiences of using ChatGPT to support academic writing in a Malaysian public university, with particular attention to ethical awareness and responsible use in alignment with Islamic values.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

- i. How do ESL learners perceive their initial experiences of using ChatGPT for academic writing?
- ii. In what ways do learners believe ChatGPT supports their writing development?
- iii. What challenges and ethical concerns do learners associate with using ChatGPT?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes qualitative insights into responsible AI integration in ESL writing instruction and offers pedagogical implications for Islamic higher education contexts seeking to balance technological innovation with ethical and moral considerations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

AI-Assisted Writing in ESL Contexts

Artificial intelligence has been increasingly incorporated into language education through tools such as automated writing evaluation systems, grammar checkers, and feedback platforms. Previous research suggests that AI-assisted writing tools can benefit ESL learners by providing immediate feedback on grammatical accuracy, vocabulary use, and text organisation. When positioned as supplementary resources, these tools have been found to

support writing fluency and reduce learner anxiety, particularly among learners with limited linguistic confidence.

The emergence of generative AI has extended writing support beyond surface-level error correction to include idea generation, sentence reformulation, and discourse-level feedback. Studies indicate that tools such as ChatGPT are particularly useful during the pre-writing and revision stages, where learners require linguistic scaffolding and exposure to alternative expressions.

However, scholars caution that unguided use of generative AI may encourage superficial revision practices or learner dependence if not supported by pedagogical guidance and ethical framing. As such, the educational value of AI-assisted writing depends largely on how learners engage with these tools within structured learning environments.

Previous research suggests that AI-assisted writing tools can benefit ESL learners by providing immediate feedback on grammatical accuracy, vocabulary use, and text organisation (Nhan et al., 2025; Yu et al., 2024). These tools have been shown to support writing fluency and reduce learner anxiety when used as supplementary resources (Ranalli, 2021).

ESL Learners' Perceptions Of Using Chatgpt

Recent studies examining learners' perceptions of ChatGPT in ESL and EFL writing contexts have generally reported positive attitudes towards its accessibility, efficiency, and perceived usefulness. Learners frequently use ChatGPT to brainstorm ideas, check grammar, enhance vocabulary, and rephrase sentences. These affordances are often perceived as reducing cognitive load and increasing learners' confidence in completing academic writing tasks.

Nevertheless, learners have also expressed concerns regarding the accuracy and reliability of AI-generated content. Importantly, emerging research suggests that learners do not necessarily accept AI output uncritically. Instead, many learners engage in evaluative and selective use, modifying or rejecting suggestions based on their own judgement. However, much of the existing research relies on survey-based designs, providing limited qualitative insight into learners' reasoning processes, emotional responses, and ethical considerations when engaging with AI tools in specific educational and cultural contexts.

Recent studies report generally positive learner attitudes towards ChatGPT, particularly in terms of accessibility, efficiency, and usefulness (Lee & Lee, 2024; Zhai, 2022). However, concerns regarding overreliance and accuracy remain (Kasneci et al., 2023).

AI, Knowledge, And Ethics From An Islamic Perspective

From an Islamic epistemological perspective, knowledge (*'ilm*) is viewed as a trust (*amanah*) that must be sought, produced, and communicated with sincerity, responsibility, and ethical awareness. The process of learning and teaching is governed by *adab al-'ilm*, which emphasises proper conduct, humility, honesty, and accountability in the pursuit of knowledge. Within this framework, tools and technologies are considered *wasilah* (means) that may facilitate learning, provided they do not compromise ethical principles or human agency.

The use of generative AI in academic writing therefore raises important ethical considerations related to authorship, originality, and moral responsibility (*mas'uliyah*). While AI tools may support learners by offering linguistic input or alternative expressions, the ultimate responsibility for knowledge production remains with the learner. From an Islamic standpoint, uncritical reliance on AI-generated text, particularly through direct copying, conflicts with the principles of honesty and trust that underpin academic integrity.

Recent discussions in Islamic education highlight the need to engage with emerging technologies through an ethical lens that balances innovation with moral accountability. Rather than rejecting AI outright or adopting it uncritically, Islamic scholarship advocates guided, reflective, and value-driven engagement. In this sense, ethical AI use aligns with the

concept of *niyyah* (intention), where learners are encouraged to reflect on the purpose and consequences of their actions. Investigating learners' ethical awareness and self-regulation when using AI-assisted writing tools is therefore essential, particularly within Islamic higher education contexts.

Ethical concerns surrounding AI-assisted writing, including plagiarism and authorship, have been widely discussed in recent literature (Cotton et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2023). Scholars emphasise that responsible AI use depends on learners' ethical awareness and self-regulation (Dwivedi et al., 2023).

Ethical Awareness And Responsible Ai Use In Writing Instruction

Ethical considerations, including plagiarism, authorship, and misuse of AI-generated content, have become central to discussions of AI-assisted academic writing. While AI tools are sometimes portrayed as threats to academic integrity, recent scholarship emphasises learner agency and ethical reasoning as critical mediating factors. When learners are guided to use AI tools for reference, comparison, or language support rather than content substitution, AI-assisted writing can function as an effective learning scaffold.

In Islamic educational contexts, responsible technology use is closely linked to moral self-regulation and accountability. Educators play a crucial role in cultivating ethical awareness by providing explicit guidance on acceptable AI practices and by reinforcing values such as honesty, responsibility, and respect for intellectual effort. Understanding how learners interpret and apply these ethical principles in their actual writing practices is therefore essential for developing pedagogically sound and ethically grounded approaches to AI integration in ESL writing instruction.

From an Islamic epistemological perspective, knowledge is viewed as a trust (*amanah*) that must be pursued with ethical responsibility (Al-Attas, 1999; Ramadan, 2017). Despite the growing body of research on AI-assisted writing, several gaps remain. Much of the existing literature focuses on measurable outcomes such as writing performance, with limited attention to learners' lived experiences and emotional engagement.

Additionally, qualitative studies exploring how learners critically and ethically engage with generative AI tools are still scarce (Kasneji et al., 2023; Dwivedi et al., 2023). Furthermore, research situated within Islamic higher education contexts remains underexplored, particularly in relation to ethical values such as *amanah* and *mas'uliyah*. Therefore, this study addresses these gaps by providing a qualitative exploration of ESL learners' experiences with ChatGPT within an *اسلامى* ethical framework.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore ESL learners' perceptions and experiences of using ChatGPT for academic writing. A qualitative approach was appropriate as it allowed for in-depth exploration of learners' emotions, beliefs, and ethical decision-making processes.

Participants And Context

The participants were 50 Year 1 undergraduate ESL learners enrolled in an academic writing-related course at a Malaysian public university. All participants had intermediate English proficiency and prior experience using ChatGPT during drafting or revision stages of their coursework. Participation was voluntary, and ethical considerations were observed.

Data Collection

Data were collected through eight semi-structured group interviews, each consisting of six to seven participants. Interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes and focused on learners' experiences, perceived benefits, confidence, motivation, and ethical concerns. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis And Trustworthiness

The data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis. Transcripts were repeatedly reviewed, coded, and organised into themes. Trustworthiness was ensured through prolonged engagement, an audit trail of analytic decisions, and grounding interpretations in participants' responses.

FINDINGS

This section reports the findings derived from thematic analysis of the semi-structured group interviews conducted with Year 1 ESL undergraduates. The analysis revealed six interrelated themes that capture learners' emotional responses, perceived learning benefits, confidence development, and ethical awareness in relation to the use of ChatGPT for academic writing. Selected excerpts are included to foreground participants' voices and to illustrate each theme.

Positive Emotional Engagement With Chatgpt

Participants reported predominantly positive emotional responses when they were first introduced to ChatGPT for academic writing. Feelings of excitement, enjoyment, and reduced anxiety were frequently expressed, as learners perceived ChatGPT as a form of guidance rather than evaluation.

One participant explained:

"First of all, I felt happy because I received guidance from ChatGPT to help me write my essay." (GP4)

Another participant similarly shared:

"I also felt happy when I asked ChatGPT to help me complete my work and get ideas for my assignments." (GP4)

Learners further expressed excitement when AI use was introduced in a guided and transparent manner:

"I felt very excited because our lecturer encouraged us to use AI properly for learning." (GP5)

These responses suggest that ChatGPT contributed to a more positive emotional orientation towards academic writing tasks.

ChatGPT As Linguistic Scaffolding

Participants consistently described ChatGPT as a tool that supported their linguistic development rather than as a substitute for their own writing. Learners commonly used ChatGPT during the revision stage to improve grammar, sentence construction, vocabulary choice, and paragraph organisation.

One participant reflected:

"I learned how to write proper paragraphs and use better language." (GP4)

Another participant highlighted the usefulness of the feedback provided:

"ChatGPT makes my work easier and clearly shows me what I did wrong. It helps correct my mistakes." (GP5)

Some learners also mentioned receiving guidance on sentence length and clarity:

"Sometimes ChatGPT tells me that my sentences are too long and suggests that I shorten them." (GP4)

Overall, these accounts indicate that ChatGPT functioned as linguistic scaffolding that supported learners' independent writing development.

Learning Through Comparison

Learning through comparison emerged as a salient theme in the data. Participants reported actively comparing their own drafts with ChatGPT's suggested revisions in order to identify areas for improvement.

One participant noted:

"I can compare my work with ChatGPT's version to see what I need to improve in my essay." (GP4)

Another participant explained how this comparison enhanced clarity:

"ChatGPT shows me clearly which sentences sound awkward or are incorrect." (GP5)

This reflective practice suggests that learners engaged critically with AI-generated feedback rather than accepting it uncritically, thereby supporting metalinguistic awareness and self-monitoring.

Enhanced Confidence And Motivation

Most participants reported increased confidence and motivation in relation to academic writing after using ChatGPT. Learners felt more confident revising their drafts and more willing to engage in writing tasks.

One participant stated:

"My essays became better. Before this, I only used simple words, but ChatGPT provided more developed vocabulary." (GP5)

Another participant added:

"Using ChatGPT helped me feel more confident when writing and revising my essays." (GP4)

These findings indicate that ChatGPT contributed positively to learners' affective engagement with writing.

Ethical Awareness And Self-Regulation

Participants demonstrated awareness of ethical issues related to plagiarism and originality. Learners consistently emphasised that ChatGPT should be used as a reference or support tool rather than as a source for direct copying.

One participant explained:

"I only take the ideas from ChatGPT and then write using my own words." (GP4)

Another participant highlighted the importance of ethical guidance:

"There must be clear guidance so that we do not misuse ChatGPT. We cannot copy and paste; ethics are important." (GP5)

These responses suggest that learners exercised ethical self-regulation when engaging with AI tools.

Critical Concerns And Responsible Use

Despite largely positive perceptions, learners also raised concerns regarding practical and technical limitations. Common challenges included unstable internet access and usage restrictions.

One participant shared:

"Sometimes I have internet problems, especially when I return to my hometown where the connection is very poor." (GP4)

Another participant noted:

"ChatGPT has daily limits, and when we reach them, we have to wait until the next day." (GP5)

Learners also expressed the need for institutional support to ensure equitable and responsible AI use. Analysis revealed six interrelated themes describing learners' emotional, cognitive, and ethical engagement with ChatGPT.

DISCUSSION

This study explored ESL learners' perceptions and experiences of using ChatGPT to support academic writing within a Malaysian higher education context. The findings indicate that learners generally perceived ChatGPT as a supportive learning scaffold that enhanced emotional engagement, linguistic development, confidence, and ethical awareness, rather than as a replacement for independent writing. When examined through an Islamic ethical framework, these findings offer important insights into how emerging technologies may be integrated responsibly into academic practices grounded in moral accountability.

The positive emotional engagement reported by learners suggests that ChatGPT may help alleviate writing anxiety, a challenge commonly experienced by ESL learners at the tertiary level. From an Islamic perspective, reducing unnecessary anxiety in the pursuit of knowledge aligns with the principle of facilitating learning in ways that nurture confidence and perseverance. The immediate and non-judgmental feedback provided by ChatGPT appeared to create a more supportive environment for learners, encouraging them to approach writing tasks with greater motivation and openness to improvement.

The findings further demonstrate that ChatGPT functioned primarily as a form of linguistic scaffolding. Learners used the tool to refine grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, and organisation after producing their own drafts, indicating that authorship and intellectual effort remained central to the writing process. This aligns with the Islamic view that tools and technologies serve as *wasilah* (means) to assist learning, while responsibility for knowledge production remains with the individual. The learners' practices in this study suggest an awareness that AI is not a substitute for personal effort but a support mechanism when used appropriately.

A particularly significant contribution of this study is the identification of learning through comparison as a key mechanism supporting writing development. Learners actively compared their own writing with AI-generated suggestions, reflecting critically on differences in language use and clarity. This evaluative engagement challenges concerns that generative AI promotes passive learning and instead highlights learners' active role in negotiating meaning and improving expression. From the perspective of *adab al-'ilm*, such reflective practice reflects ethical engagement with knowledge, where learners take responsibility for understanding rather than merely reproducing information.

Increased confidence and motivation also emerged as important outcomes of ChatGPT use. Learners reported feeling more capable of revising their work and more willing to engage in writing tasks. Within Islamic educational thought, confidence rooted in effort and guided support is essential for sustained learning, as it encourages learners to persist in developing their abilities while maintaining humility and awareness of personal limitations.

Notably, learners in this study demonstrated a clear awareness of ethical considerations related to plagiarism and originality. Participants consistently emphasised that ChatGPT should be used as a reference or support tool rather than as a source for direct copying. This ethical self-regulation reflects the principles of *amanah* (trust) and *mas'uliyah* (accountability), which are central to Islamic conceptions of academic integrity. Rather than perceiving AI as an ethical threat, learners articulated boundaries for acceptable use, particularly when guided by explicit instruction and institutional norms.

Despite these positive perceptions, learners also identified practical challenges related to internet connectivity and usage limitations. These constraints highlight the importance of institutional support in ensuring equitable access to AI technologies. From an Islamic perspective, equitable access to learning resources is essential to avoid widening educational disparities. Institutions therefore bear a responsibility not only to regulate AI

use ethically but also to provide the necessary infrastructure and guidance to support responsible and inclusive implementation.

Overall, the findings suggest that when generative AI tools such as ChatGPT are embedded within pedagogical practices that emphasise ethical responsibility, learner agency, and reflective engagement, they can support academic writing development without undermining moral or scholarly values. These insights are particularly relevant for Islamic higher education institutions seeking to navigate the opportunities and challenges of educational technologies in a manner consistent with Islamic ethics.

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research indicating that AI tools can enhance learners' confidence and writing performance (Lee & Lee, 2024; Nhan et al., 2025). Additionally, the role of AI as a learning scaffold aligns with broader discussions on technology-mediated writing instruction (Ranalli, 2021; Kasneci et al., 2023).

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study offer several pedagogical implications for ESL writing instruction, particularly within Islamic higher education contexts where ethical considerations are integral to teaching and learning. First, educators are encouraged to position generative AI tools such as ChatGPT as supportive learning aids rather than substitutes for independent writing. Requiring students to produce initial drafts prior to AI consultation can help maintain authorship responsibility while allowing learners to benefit from linguistic scaffolding during the revision stage.

Second, writing instruction should incorporate guided and reflective AI use. Structured activities that require learners to compare their own writing with AI-generated suggestions can promote critical thinking, metalinguistic awareness, and deeper engagement with language form and meaning. Such reflective practices align with the Islamic principle of *adab al-'ilm*, which emphasises thoughtful and responsible engagement with knowledge.

Third, ethical guidance should be explicitly integrated into ESL writing pedagogy. Rather than treating AI use solely as a policy issue, educators should engage learners in discussions on academic integrity, originality, and accountability. Within Islamic educational settings, these discussions can be framed around values such as *amanah* (trust), *mas'uliyah* (responsibility), and *niyyah* (intention), reinforcing ethical self-regulation rather than mere compliance.

Fourth, the findings highlight the role of educators as *murabbi*, who guide learners in balancing technological affordances with moral discernment. Clear instructional guidelines, modelling of ethical AI practices, and continuous feedback are essential in cultivating responsible learners who can navigate emerging technologies with confidence and integrity.

Finally, institutions should provide adequate infrastructure, professional development, and policy support to ensure equitable and ethical AI integration. Addressing issues of access, connectivity, and digital literacy is necessary to prevent disparities and to uphold fairness in learning opportunities across student populations.

CONCLUSION

This study examined ESL learners' perceptions and experiences of using ChatGPT to support academic writing in a Malaysian higher education context. The findings indicate that learners generally viewed ChatGPT as a beneficial and motivating tool when its use was pedagogically guided and ethically framed. Rather than replacing independent writing, the tool functioned as linguistic and affective support that enhanced learners' confidence, awareness, and engagement with the writing process.

Viewed through an Islamic ethical framework, the study highlights the importance of responsibility, trust, and moral agency in the use of generative AI. Learners demonstrated awareness of ethical boundaries, particularly with regard to originality and avoidance of direct copying, reflecting principles of *amanah* and *mas'uliyah* in academic practice. When

guided by clear intention (niyyah) and reflective engagement, AI tools such as ChatGPT may serve as a *wasilah* that supports learning without compromising academic integrity.

The findings further emphasise the crucial role of educators and institutions in shaping responsible AI practices. Within Islamic higher education, educators are not only instructors but also *murabbi* who nurture ethical reasoning alongside cognitive development. Explicit guidance, reflective pedagogical strategies, and institutional support are therefore essential for ensuring that technological innovation aligns with educational and moral objectives.

By foregrounding learners' voices, this study contributes qualitative insights into the ethical integration of generative AI in ESL writing instruction within Islamic higher education contexts. Future research may explore longitudinal impacts, comparative institutional settings, and the development of Islamic ethical frameworks to guide educational technology use. Such efforts are necessary to ensure that advancements in educational technology continue to support both academic excellence and moral responsibility.

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